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The Secret, Cultural Property and the Construction of the Spiritual Commodity

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According to John Frow, 'Every society draws a line between those things that can be privately owned and freely exchanged, and those whose circulation is restricted'.[1] Religion is one domain conventionally considered inimical to market exchange. Items deemed sacred may be seen as paradigmatic of goods that are inalienable from the group that holds them dear. Special provisions are often made to restrict their circulation and control their significance. Historically in the West this has involved the regulation of religious ideation and practice by Christian churches. Even while the formal influence of churches over the polity has waned, their institutional direction of matters of the spirit has been maintained.

However, numerous commentators have observed the increased commercialisation of religion over recent years.[2] This includes both the literal market exchange of religious goods and the ingression of market-like rationalities into established religions that seek to sustain their contemporary relevance by embracing marketing strategies, elements of popular culture and consumer lifestyle expectations. There are numerous questions about the nature and extent of such

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changes, and how they may be indicative of broader societal issues. The rise of market-oriented religiosity has been attributed to the emergence of postwar consumer culture and to other secularising tendencies—such as the social influence of science—that diminish the previous authority of religion and spur religious organisations to recast their appeal.[3] It is now common for religious practice to be thought of as sharing affinities with secular forms of consumption in offering participants opportunities to pursue personal identity.[4]

The commodification of religious goods is less often conceptualised as a production process. My focus here is extending from the consumer culture framework to consider how particular resources are shaped into the forms through which they are distributed and consumed in spiritual marketplaces. In the context of its marketisation, the 'traditional' status of religion as a shared cultural resource is of key significance. As Iannoccone notes, from the producer point of view religion is easy to enter, competitive and 'virtually devoid of intellectual property rights'.[5] Its traditions are largely in the public domain, meaning that there are few barriers to the commodification of pre-existing forms of knowledge and practice. Yet this apparent ease of transfer into the market raises multiple critical issues about ownership, control and the terms upon which the sacred becomes reshaped for sale.

In this article I am specifically interested in the social relations that may be entailed by commodification. I consider the commercial logic that permeates the most market-oriented of all contemporary religious formations—the New Age. In particular, insofar as it exemplifies tendencies of the broader movement, I examine the case of the best-selling book and DVD, *The Secret*.

Such New Age media are informational commodities that draw upon existing discourses and modify them in particular ways so as to appeal to their target consumers. Rather than simply being a straightforward matter of distribution—selling what was previously transmitted differently—this constitutes a complex process involving the convergence of economic, social, legal and cultural factors. The New Age movement itself is mobilised around the buying and selling of a shared lingua franca and practices that are rationalised in its terms. In ways at odds with conventional understandings of religion, it is characterised by liberal, collaborative relations between providers, the diversity of ideological products available and

cultural traditions included within the loose discursive framework, and the elective, multiple affiliations of participants.

After tracing how such a spiritual marketplace functions I analyse the *The Secret*, showing how it involves typical collaboration between New Age teachers who vary shared themes and construct the appeal of the informational commodity through the self-help language of consumer benefit. However, several legal disputes involving the makers and featured teachers highlight tensions surrounding ownership of collaborative informational commodities and the branded product ranges they generate. The final section examines the conflict between religion as private and public good and, in particular, asks how the transition of ideas from public domain to private property bears upon the cultural property of communities whose traditional knowledges inspire much New Age teaching.

—THE SPIRITUAL SUPERMARKET

Over recent decades millions of people have become involved in the gamut of metaphysical, spiritual, and psychological ideas that have become known as 'New Age'. Determining the exact reach of the phenomenon is difficult, as it comprises not a single organisation, but an array of like-minded people, the loosely associated groupings that they form and the mediasphere through which they share their interests. Its scale can only be glimpsed by occasional quantitative research, such as a 1998 randomised telephone survey in Texas which found that 22 percent of 911 respondents answered 'yes' to the question 'In the past year, have you purchased, read or listened to any 'New Age' materials (books, magazines, audio or videotapes)?'[6]

In basic terms, the New Age is an extensive alternative lifestyle milieu in which an array of teachings and practices are aimed at transformation of the person in areas including spirituality, healing, affluence, relationships and the environment. The common denominator is the promotion of change in people and culture towards more positive states of being than those supposedly predominant in contemporary society.[7] New Agers argue for dropping beliefs that 'no longer serve us or the planet', and instead valorise a range of alternative qualities and practices that are thought to bring improvement. As Hanegraaff notes, while the movement is diverse, '*all* New Age trends, without exception, are intended as alternatives to currently dominant

religious and cultural trends'.[8] Claims to be able to transform are based upon alternative metaphysical theorisations that underlie New Age accounts of the world, persons and action. Among the general orientations are: a holistic, vitalistic view of creation, in which all beings and things are seen as interrelated; belief in the epistemological superiority of intuition over rationality, and of the inner authentic 'higher' self over the outer socialised or 'lower' self; the ideas that the individual, when liberated, determines his or her reality and that human consciousness has greater causal power than is often assumed by materialists; and the assumption that creation and consciousness are capable of evolving.

Yet amid these continuities the New Age lacks definitive texts—and therefore also any strong institutional compulsion to privilege doctrinal truth and advance practices concordant with a certain cultural provenance. Catherine Albanese captures this language of lack, which arises from the failure of the movement to exhibit many of the features often associated with religion: 'The New Age has no central church or organization. It possesses no authoritative denominational officialdom, no creedal platform, no sectarian tests for inclusion or exclusion … its identity is elusive.'[9] Most conceptualisations emphasise family resemblances between its many manifestations, rather than seeking to establish sharp boundaries.[10]

So if the New Age lacks qualities conventionally associated with religious organisation and ideological regulation, how may its distinctive form be understood in social terms? The most common answer is that it is attributable, in part at least, to the adoption of religious consumerism in a 'spiritual marketplace'.[11] The New Age is largely reticulated by events and media ephemera presented in what can be called 'intermediary spaces': shared fora (both spatial and textual) through which separate providers of spiritual products, tolerant of each other's teachings, share the costs of cross-promotion.[12] Such networking through bookshops, fairs, flyers, magazines, catalogues, notice boards, mailing lists, classes, retreats and centres, ensures that the lingua franca is continually modulated in terms that may attract consumers and provide the multiple pathways from which their spiritual trajectories may be assembled. The non-proprietary nature of New Age discourse means that, for providers, it can be a commercial asset. As an informational resource its general conventions are easily reproducible, while, through trademark and copyright,

providers are able to assert ownership of the unique elements that differentiate their products.

In other words, the term 'New Age' is a rubric covering a range of affined belief options that rarely demand the exclusive loyalty of participants. Indeed, proactive syncretism—deliberately exposing oneself to various sources of wisdom, and forging a personal philosophy from multiple influences—is often seen as the route to growth. New Agers are eclectic consumers. As Possamai puts it, one might perhaps 'visit a "New Age" healing centre for a few days, participate in a "vision quest"' and be 'initiated in shamanism, buy crystals and indigenous paraphernalia, and learn astrology'.[13] In her ethnographic study of the facilitators of New Age groups, Maxine Birch found that they all selected knowledge from various sources (on the basis of their own involvement in multiple groups and traditions) to build frameworks for their own particular ways of working.[14] This suggests that syncretism goes all the way down. Not only do participants tend to select and combine belief/practice options from different sources, so do many of those who provide the options.

The main linkages that create the social networks of such a community come in the form of continual opportunities for consumption. There is not simply a cultural inclination for New Agers to be open to many alternatives. Exposure to multiple consumption options is a basic institutional condition of possibility of the movement, referral from commodity to commodity being the principal means through which mobilisation is effected. This involves a range of agents both freely drawing from and adding innovations to available cultural resources. As Bednarowski suggests, many of the texts, practices and concepts that have become associated with the movement might not be exclusively New Age, but signify as New Age under the circumstances in which they are grafted into the discourse. Meditating or reading Sufi texts are activities not necessarily conducted in New Age contexts. Rather, the New Age borrows from and reinterprets various sources, resulting in the existence of New Age versions of a range of otherwise separate traditions and practices.

Inevitably this is a process in which meaning is changed through the recontextualisation of existing cultural heritage. In terms of its substantive cultural content there is little new about the New Age. It draws almost entirely upon existing

traditions whether Western esotericism, self-help and new thought, spiritual traditions from around the world, or fringe interpretations of science.[15] The common thread is that whatever their provenance such cultural sources are seen to signify those qualities New Agers identify as deficient in mainstream society. In Mark Bevir's words 'New Age groups continue to show a predilection for equating their beliefs with an ancient wisdom associated with the religious traditions of cultures other than their own'.[16] Repackaged Eastern and Indigenous disciplines are accompanied by rhetorical trappings of naturalness, agelessness and wisdom when presented in New Age forms. Kimberley Lau uses the term 'ethnomimesis' to describe paths of personal transformation based on selective imitation of another culture.[17] Spiritual teachings are infused with the promise that repressed authentic knowledge of a higher self in tune with the cosmos, but occluded by modernity, is to be revealed by the return of true knowledge. José Argüelles, for example, proposes that the cryptic art of the ancient Mayans holds the key to 'retrieval of the galactic information' necessary for future evolution.[18]

New Age constructions of non-European cultures have led to much controversy, as shall be considered later. However, for present purposes we must note that the tendency to valorise cultural others plays a significant role in the New Age counter-cultural politics of knowledge, adding the authority of cultural precedents to its bids to construct alternatives to the mistaken norms of the mainstream. In this monistic syncretism 'non-modern' wisdom traditions are seen to support a holistic, vitalistic view of reality. Their value is therapeutic. They allow the vicissitudes of modern lifestyles to be symbolically resolved through the rediscovery of authentic human potential. New Age rhetoric is applied in pursuit of a galaxy of positive self-help outcomes.[19] As Bruce puts it, 'Insights and practices are marketed as ways to feel better, to get the better job, to improve your marriage'.[20] The underlying principle is neatly captured by best-selling author Stephen Covey: 'To the degree to which we align ourselves with correct principles, divine endowments will be released within our nature enabling us to fulfil the measure of our creation.'[21]

—Revealing The Secret

To summarise so far, the market dynamics of the New Age are consistent with the characteristics that make it an unusual, if not somewhat 'secularised' kind of

religious formation. It is averse to stable, mainstream tradition while embracing diverse alternative traditions that can add value to life of the participant. As Nigel Thrift states, the New Age circuit 'depends upon a constant throughflow of ideas'.[22] The plurality of angles allows for product differentiation and renewal of promotional appeal through entrepreneurial activity. This is incompatible with collective preservation of a single truth and demands for exclusive loyalty to it among followers, as is conventionally associated with religion.

The best-selling 2006 DVD *The Secret*, and the related family of products serves to illustrate how New Age knowledge is fashioned as a commodity along these lines—but also how tensions over property rights are generated as knowledge becomes private property over which individuals assert authority.

The first version of *The Secret* was released in 2006 and it was followed by an extended version and a book of the same name in 2007.[23] It features twenty-four New Age teachers who speak in short sound bites about the beneficence of the universe to those in tune with it. The narrative starts in Australia with a vignette about how the originator of the project, Rhonda Byrne, glimpsed 'the secret' during the worst period in her life, only to find through her research that it is a universal principle lost to the world. As the main cover blurb claims 'Fragments of a Great Secret have been found in the oral traditions, in literature, in religions and philosophies throughout the centuries.' And it is the role of the film to see that 'For the first time, all the pieces of The Secret come together in an incredible revelation that will be life-transforming for all who experience it.'

We learn from the first teacher to appear, Bob Proctor, that 'the secret is the law of attraction. You attract everything into your life', and that it is 'The most powerful law' of the universe. That Oprah Winfrey was one of those people attracted by the message was, by the logic of the film itself, proof of concept. Her special episode featured Byrne and several of the teachers, helping boost sales into the multimillions.[24] The law of attraction is a common trope of the New Age. Deepak Chopra is one of the most prominent of numerous teachers who continually apply a set of general 'cosmic' principles regarding the empowerment of self through changing one's thought patterns. His *Unconditional Life: Mastering the Forces that Shape Personal Reality*, presents the basic philosophy.[25] It posits limitless personal power, with explanation of inner forces and techniques for how to master them

being intertwined with concrete examples of how named individuals have succeeded in such mastery. His work exemplifies what is a familiar ideological pattern in New Age rhetoric. The authentic self, which is pitted against the false socialised self, is aligned with natural, vital and cosmic forces, and can be tapped intuitively to bring success in all spheres of life.

As well as being a principle that is expounded in various ways in New Age teaching, the Law of Attraction has a particular history as a phrase. Its first published use was in William Walker Atkinson's *Thought Vibration or the Law of Attraction in the Thought World*. Released in 1906 this was an early example of US self-help of the kind that articulated an idea most famously set out by Samuel Smiles, namely that 'Heaven helps those who help themselves'.[26] The New Thought movement of which Atkinson was part drew upon occultism, Eastern philosophy and heterodox vitalist science such as Mesmerism to theorise the idea that the universe is a form of intelligent energy that can be harnessed by the power of positive thinking.[27] Today the Law of Attraction phrase is most closely associated with Esther Hicks, who claims to channel several spirits known collectively as 'Abraham' and whose teachings about the 'most powerful law of the universe' are couched in similar terms to those of Atkinson and *The Secret*.[28] Indeed, Hicks is one of the featured teachers of the first version of the film and is accorded a special acknowledgement screen at the end, having played a more prominent role in the formation of the project than others.

The body of the film is an iteration of the principle of *The Secret* in various ways, but with the focus less on development of the theory than on repetition of the core language with a particular spin by each of the teachers. For mystic James Arthur Ray:

> You've got the genie. The universe at large and traditions have called it so many things, you know, the holy guardian angel, the higher self. I mean you can put any label on it and you can choose the one that works best for you … Every great tradition has told you that you were created in the image of the creative source.

Hicks focuses on our 'emotional guidance system': the way that our thoughts create our emotions, while quantum physicists and psychologists attest to the power of mind over matter, and entrepreneurs, relationship experts and doctors to the results

of realising this in practice. The teachers' own personal stories of transformation and references to those of others are the main form of testamentary evidence throughout. The rationale of 'sharing' the secret is related to a kind of quest narrative that is familiar through other New Age bestsellers such as Redfield's *Celestine Prophecy* or Coelho's *The Alchemist*.[29] The knowledge offered is depicted as socially repressed, as the unleashing of an otherwise hidden magical force that contrasts with restrictive rationalist understandings of causality that supposedly restrict the ordinary person. This potential deserves to be made universal, available to anyone. Towards the end the viewer is reminded, against a montage of people from around the world, to 'go back and study the wise ones; all religious texts, leaders, say the same thing'.

The depiction of the scarcity of the knowledge legitimates the intermediary role of the teachers as those who can guide the general public towards its discovery. The fact that they do so without making claims to the exclusivity of their own knowledge serves as an example of coefficient New Age mobilisation around the shared lingua franca. It is a project presenting the common denominator in the philosophies outlined. Although the participants were not paid under the terms of their agreement with Byrne, they garnered free exposure for their own services and used their role in the film in their own publicity. While Byrne went on to release a range of products with The Secret brand, the cross promotion afforded to the teachers apparently extended to products using the phrase, such as the online course 'Masters of the Secret' featuring eight of the teachers.[30] However, on the back of the success of the film and book a number of other unofficial spin-offs resembling the secret or law of attraction cropped up, such as *The Greatest Secret*, *The Greatest Secret of All, The Secret Law of Attraction, The Secret Laws of Attraction*, *Secrets to the Law of Attraction* and *The Secret Behind the Secret Laws of Attraction*.[31] Just like the project itself, and staying just on the right side of copyright and trademark law, these tributes to a winning but generic idea were based on varying language that is freely available in the public sphere.

However, this picture of collaboration was also beset by particular tensions caused precisely by the ways in which value is derived from public discourse under a model of entrepreneurship. The first of these concerns how the line may be drawn between teachers' tolerance of each other's modifications of shared discourses and

cases when knowledge distinctively generated by a given teacher is grounds for their assertion of exclusionary property rights. As Frow notes, a key quality of informational (including cultural) commodities is that they are based on a resource that can be copied without causing its diminution.[32] Whereas tangible commodities are of finite quantity, information is easily reproducible. Yet business logic requires that rights over its reproduction be restricted so that economic value derived from it can be monopolised.

Intellectual property law provides the framework in which certain patterns of information can be differentiated from others for purposes of private ownership. The Secret brand and related iconography are trademarks of Prime Time Productions Holdings Pty Ltd and have afforded the project sufficient commercial salience despite the imitators. However, copyright ownership has been contested on three occasions. The first of these was the claim by the director of the film, Drew Heriot, that he was the coauthor of the screenplay and that he was entitled to up to half the estimated $300 million revenue earned by 2008. Heriot's attempt failed and being a straightforward claim of co-authorship it sheds little light on the commodification of spirituality *per se*.[33] However, the other two cases more directly concern Byrne's use of ideas already in circulation, and their resolution in out-of-court settlements indicates the ambiguities of ownership.

As Byrne herself acknowledges in the film and on her website, the idea for *The Secret* came out of her personal search, and specifically listening to and reading books by other authors. Some of these are in the public domain and bear strong resemblance to the New Thought–inspired rhetoric of *The Secret*.[34] The claims by Australian Vanessa J. Bonnette that parts of *The Secret* are taken from her 2003 book *Empowered for the New Era* indicate the problems inherent in establishing the difference between being influenced by and copying a source when the form of words has changed. Legally speaking the basic materials of all language are *res communis* that cannot be claimed as the product of a particular author, while distinctive combinations of words and ideas can be.[35] Bonnette alleged that up to a hundred instances of plagiarism included use of metaphors and analogies so specific as to be seen as her own even amid the generic conventions of New Age and self-help discourses.[36]

The final case involves one of the film's featured teachers. While most of the teachers were talking to selected points, the preexisting work of Esther Hicks more clearly focused around the overall themes of the film. Byrne's website and all *Secret* media after the first version of the DVD no longer mention Hicks, but in an open letter on the internet and clips posted on YouTube (that attest to the authenticity of the open letter) Hicks explains the differences that led to her withdrawal on intellectual property grounds, though without disclosing details of her subsequent agreement with Byrne. In the rather unusual video interview with followers—the channelled spirits of Abraham tell the audience Hicks' thoughts about the affair speaking through Hicks—it is claimed that what Byrne did was 'not nice' and almost ended in court.[37] However, the letter is a parable of strained New Age cooperation without fully asserting an ethos of exclusivity. It retains a studied positivity about the collaboration of all involved, while also referring interested parties to the 'original' teachings:

> We think that 'The Secret' clearly and beautifully presents Abraham's Law of Attraction in a way that is easy to understand … It is our desire that, rather than being upset that our part of 'The Secret' will be omitted in future offerings of it, that instead you enjoy the original Abraham version, as it is, at this time, and that you look forward to what other incredible things these talented people may bring to you.[38]

Underlying these words is a negotiation of the overall network sociality of New Age cultural production. Hicks can't refute the value of *The Secret* teachings, but neither can she demand exclusivity over the ideas, nor that followers commit exclusive loyalty to her Abraham branding of them. To make such claims to exclusivity—even amid a bid to control rights over the work—would be to contradict the material basis upon which New Age mobilisation depends. Liberal tolerance of the rights of others to express themselves and adopt beliefs is required by intermediary spaces. The magazines, fairs and healing centres have no commercial interest in or editorial commitment to any providers who would withdraw their products from, or insist in barring competitors from, the marketplace they all require. And to audience members who expect to flit through the latest available ranges of New Age inflected products, an attempt by a producer to assert moral restriction over belief options would be something akin to saying Bruce Springsteen fans can only go to

Springsteen concerts. Religious sects that do demand exclusive loyalty to a creed are clearly still possible, but as a marketplace the New Age is not to be confused with such other types of new religious movements that restrict access to interpretations of the sacred.[39]

While the above cases concern the production of *The Secret* as an informational commodity, two related legal controversies are worth mentioning—they bear directly upon the claims of a film in which teachers are presented as personal embodiments of the success principles espoused. The first is that the only teacher from outside the United States to appear, Australian 'investment trainer' David Schirmer, has since been banned for life from providing financial services for dishonest and misleading conduct.[40] The second case provides a similar disconfirmation. In June 2011, James Arthur Ray was found guilty of the negligent homicide of three of the sixty-four participants in his $10,000 'Spiritual Warrior' workshop in Arizona. They died after an incorrectly conducted Native American style sweat lodge.[41]

—THE POLITICS OF THE SPIRITUAL COMMODITY

The point of interpreting *The Secret* as above is not to suggest New Age teachers are in constant litigation, but to highlight the broader social and property relations that are a condition of the movement's possibility. The New Age is religion at its most attuned to contemporary liberal cultural production.[42] Its authors are simultaneously entrepreneurs who sell media that adapt existing knowledge into forms amenable to ownership for the purposes of exchange. The dynamics of such production resemble any other field in which the generic is shaped to become saleable—for instance, in the way that contemporary television formats create brands for crosspromotion of media commodities, but from resources found in existing genres.[43]

In this final section I want to conclude by considering some of the political and ethical concerns entailed by the ingression of such commodity relations into the sphere of religion. The disputes over *The Secret* raise standard issues about the ethics of ownership among contemporary symbolic innovators working in the same milieu with access to similar cultural resources. Within this frame the matter is one of establishing who is responsible for the distinctive contributions deemed to be

authorship. However, beyond the relations among entrepreneurs there are other questions surrounding the broader provenance of the cultural resources themselves. Much New Age teaching is inspired by or directly reproduces elements of religious traditions from around the world. This might appear consistent with the idea that religion is a public good—in the sense that inherent to its rationale is the spreading of its moral teachings. By this logic, possession of religious knowledge by one person does not diminish its value to another; religion, 'seeks to provide a spiritual benefit that is ideally unalienable to any of its practitioners and that can be enjoyed simultaneously by all'.[44] Even if through commodification, the New Age spread of knowledge would seem to effect the 'win-win' dissemination of any existing religious teachings that are drawn upon.

However, as Goorha argues, the idea that religion could ever be a pure public good is a simplification. Any 'shared benefit' is normally tempered by organisational regulation of the sacred and the entitlements various actors have in relation to it. There is a disjunction between theoretical free availability of information and actual social restrictions on ways in which it may be disseminated and used. In the eyes of those who would control it, unauthorised use is potential sacrilege. It is because most religion is the preserve of higher sacred values requiring special forms of social control that its entry into exchange relations may be seen as inimical to its logic. The instrumental imperatives of sales maximisation can be seen as an inherent threat to the integrity of the sacred.[45] So it is that James Arthur Ray, Byrne and other New Age entrepreneurs can be viewed as contemporary mountebanks preying on the credulous, preaching fantastical words distorted by the profit motive.

Yet it is not simply the case that economic values are incompatible with religious ones in general. Commodification changes the ways some forms of religion continue to exist in the world. According to his biography on *The Secret* website, Ray is an 'expert on many Eastern, indigenous and mystical traditions'.[46] Regardless of whether his motives are sincere his use of particular extant knowledge traditions recontextualises them both in symbolic and social terms, and in such ways that reproduction of the intangible does arguably alter its cultural significance for others.

As York argues the New Age itself is only conceivable in social contexts marked by detraditionalisation and globalisation.[47] The mass presentation of religious options to European and other affluent consumers depends, firstly, on the

weakening of social obligations to follow religions ascribed by their birth communities and, secondly, on the availability of the spiritual resources of other cultures through transnational, including postcolonial, relations. Influences between cultures are inevitable, but cultural resources exist in the public domain on a range of different terms. Evangelical religions for instance have spread across the globe in line with conversional imperatives. However, in other cases the spread of religion beyond its community of origin, especially through its becoming exchangeable on a market open to all paying agents, sits uneasily with understandings of cultural property.

The Native American knowledge and practices that Ray was selling and distorting in his Spiritual Warrior retreat are an example of Indigenous religiosity that has meaning in social relation to particular peoples and places. As with many other Indigenous traditions, its sacred status is largely dependent upon cultural patrimony as collectively owned property that cannot be 'alienated, appropriated, or conveyed by an individual' acting without a community mandate.[48] In this, specific religious meaning is fused with ethnocultural significance. The adoption of indigenous spiritual traditions by non-indigenous teachers has led to numerous claims of appropriation.[49] For example, Australian Aboriginal religions have been reproduced in the New Age, but in contradiction of traditional prohibitions over the transmission of secrets.[50] Erroneous use 'can cause deep offence to those familiar with the Dreaming'.[51]

One well-known *cause célèbre* in Australia was the Marlo Morgan affair. Morgan's travelogue *Mutant Message Down Under* (originally claimed to be based on a true experience of the author) is about a US woman, a divorcee with a stress-ridden life at home, who comes to Australia to find the liberating secrets of Aboriginal knowledge.[52] By going on walkabout with an Aboriginal tribe, she then goes through extreme processes of acculturation which bring her to appreciate 'true beingness'.[53] It is by learning 'authentic' Aboriginal ways that she claims to shed those accumulated layers of modern illusion which have occluded her real self. Morgan's narrator steps, barefoot, on a path that will take her away from modern social mediation to knowledge of what it truly means to be a human being. This is achieved through exposure to knowledge that is manifested in the cultural forms of the Aboriginal tribe she calls the Real People, precisely because they have not lost

touch with the essential meaning of human existence and the unity of life—unlike 'mutants' or moderns everywhere to whom they want to impart their wisdom via the narrator. Overall, she learns from the Real People how to 'shed old ideas, habits, opinions' in order to achieve a 'state of unconditional acceptance'.[54] By the end of the narrative Marlo is transfigured, able to say 'I felt I was finally ready to face the life I had apparently chosen to inherit'.[55] She returns to her normal environment full of renewed purpose.

Mutant Message was the subject of a sustained campaign by Indigenous activists who denounced both Morgan's fabrications and her right to make them.[56] Indigenous legal scholar Larissa Behrendt deems Morgan's 'misuse and disrespect of tribal objects and practices' to constitute 'a severe breach of Aboriginal law'.[57] The work is part of a larger tendency in which New Age primitivism idealises and homogenises native peoples, omitting actualities such as political struggles that are not amenable to romanticised images of native wisdom.[58] As Behrendt notes, the representations are almost exclusively positive, but thereby suggest an achieved Aboriginal wellbeing that detracts from rights claims. What is framed as appreciative liberal openness to other cultures by Morgan is further extension of colonial dispossession through arrogation of the same cultural resources by which Indigenous peoples 'attempt to resist and survive dispossession'.[59]

Cultural appropriation does not necessarily take place through the market, and not all marketised cultural exchanges constitute it. However there are two particular interrelated ways in which the New Age use of Indigenous spiritualities effects their transvaluation through commodification. First, when an 'ideological product' is sold the logic of marketing encourages a collapse in the distinction between its content and promotional messages.[60] Representation is driven in part by claims of the beneficial value of the meanings conveyed to the consumer. In the New Age such value is insistently portrayed as the kind of therapeutic benefit summarised by Morgan's transformation into someone who now has the tools to face her stressful, professional, urban, non-indigenous life. The terms upon which spirituality comes to be known are determined by a private good: the desire to feel better among those who occupy the subject position of alienated modern individual. Second, the New Age trope of perennism—the idea that there is an underlying message of cosmic unity and higher subjectivity throughout Eastern, esoteric, indigenous and generally

'non-modern' philosophies—renders diverse traditional knowledges equivalent.[61] Sutton finds that there is actually very little similarity between Aboriginal religions and core New Age beliefs beyond a general shared affinity for nature.[62] Yet Morgan, in line with other perennists like Ray, claimed that *Mutant Message* 'could have taken place in Africa or South America or anywhere the true meaning of civilization is still alive'.[63] But this homogenisation is not just an ethos. It is an operating philosophy of market pluralism consistent with as many cultural resources as are available coming to act as therapeutic products in New Age intermediary spaces.

Through such recontextualisation the significance of each tradition is recast as its empowerment of the addressee seeker, and each becomes fungible in its capacity to fulfil this same role. Such generalised equivalence allows for market exchange just as it contradicts the normative expectation in indigenous communities that the sacred value of such knowledge is that it is not fungible, but tied to a specific collective revelation. However, as has been widely discussed in the legal literature, the principal problem faced by communities that would assert moral rights over traditional intangible cultural property is that available intellectual property regimes do not recognise collective genesis as ownership. The form of ownership recognised as the basis of property rights is defined by exactly the kind of authorial modification of language through which New Age entrepreneurs are able to transform existing traditions into private property for exchange.

Ultimately these are complex issues. Those who seek legal protection of cultural property through contemporary legal frameworks need to make private property arguments, but any bid for *sui generis* legal restriction over traditional knowledges would set a precedent for ethnic groups to make a range of property claims.[64] The cultural appropriation model has also been regarded as overly simplistic by several recent commentators of the New Age. Stressing agency, they point out that some indigenous people themselves are providers of the services, that the engagement of many New Agers with indigenous spirituality is more sensitive than in obviously problematic cases like Morgan's, and that all cultures borrow, adapt and interact.[65] Through concepts such as 'textual poaching' cultural studies is often inclined to recognise hybridity over essence, and intertextuality over claims to unique authorship. In these terms cultural borrowing and the circulation of culture in general could be seen as a public good.

In examining the underlying property relations of New Age commodity production I hope to have shown that, aside from how people live out roles, social-structural positions bear great weight upon how cultural resources are reconstructed for market sale, and vice versa. Through commodification agency is mobilised through transactions. Providers cater for the uses to which consumers would put the goods they supply. This framework, however, generates conflicts over property rights when pre-existing resources are copied and modified to this end. The possible tensions between providers in the market indicates the limits of the liberal New Age mobilisation which relies upon the collaborative sharing of resources and rights to use them.

Elsewhere in the required 'supply chain' of pre-existing knowledge, actors who would make other kinds of proprietary claim over those cultural resources are positioned differently. The problem for custodians of traditions may not simply be particular errant uses of the knowledge, but its very circulation in a marketplace under the control of non-authorised actors. The normal assumption that the value of information does not diminish when it is reproduced is not so clearly the case in this context. Thus, Stewart Muir's claim that New Age use of indigenous knowledge is non-rivalrous fails to recognise that, when unauthorised, it may violate the grounds upon which that knowledge is of sacred value for its community of provenance.[66]

Sharing of knowledge across cultural boundaries and mutual enrichment from this are an ideal, but not a straightforward matter of dissemination. The assumption that religion is inherently a public good—one that its proponents would want to see distributed as widely as possible, rather than in a 'club context' of mutual obligations—fails to recognise the social conflicts recontextualisation may entail. The circulation of information is irrepressible, but its economic, social and cultural value are articulated in the forms of its circulation. The terms upon which this may constitute a good deserve careful consideration.

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[1] John Frow, 'Cultural Property', in *The Sage Handbook of Cultural Analysis*, ed. Tony Bennett and John Frow, Sage, London, 2008, p. 430.

[2] Notably Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion,* Routledge, London and New York, 2005; Mara Einstein, *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age,* Routledge, London and New York, 2008; Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1999.

[3] David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times*, Polity, Cambridge, 2000.

[4] For some secularisation theorists, such as Bryan Wilson (*Religion in Sociological Perspective*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1982) and Steve Bruce (*God is Dead: Secularization in the West*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2002) religious consumerism is evidence of secularisation itself. Wilson and Bruce argue that consumption reduces the significance of religion to mere personal lifestyle choice where previously it had held sway over primary social institutions. For my critique of such views see Guy Redden, 'Religion, Cultural Studies and New Age Sacralization of Everyday Life', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 14, no. 6, 2011, pp. 649–63. While I do not have space to rehearse the arguments here, the current article can be understood as an exploration of the tensions that arise when religiosity becomes imbricated with 'worldly', 'mainstream' social patterns such as commodification. In my view such imbrications designate contemporary instances of the continual adaptations of religiosity to social environments rather than to some pure domain of 'the secular' that is external to religion and can somehow replace or dilute it (as is implicit in Wilson's and Bruce's formulations). They can cause much 'discomfort', however, when they call into question settled notions of the religious and its place in the social, as explored with regard to one particular issue (of ownership) here.

[5] Laurence Iannaccone, 'Sacrifice and Stigma: Reducing Free-Riding in Cults, Communes, and Other Collectives', *The Journal of Political Economy,* vol. 100, no. 2, 1992, p. 272.

[6] Daniel P. Mears and Christopher G. Ellison, 'Who Buys New Age Materials? Exploring Sociodemographic, Religious, Network and Contextual Correlates of New Age Consumption', *Sociology of Religion,* vol. 61, no. 3, 2000, p. 297.

[7] Franz Höllinger, 'New Age: Re-Enchantment of the World?' in *Alternative Religions among European Youth*, ed. Luigi Tomasi, Ashgate, Aldershot, 1999, p. 45.

[8] Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, State University of New York Press, Albany NY, 1998, p. 515.

[9] Catherine L. Albanese, 'The Magical Staff: Quantum Healing in the New Age' in *Perspectives on the New Age*, ed. James R. Lewis and J. Gordon Melton State University of New York Press, Albany, 1992, p. 73.
[10] Ellie Hedges and James A. Beckford, 'Holism, Healing and the New Age' in *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality*, ed. Steven Sutcliffe and Marion Bowman, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2000, p. 170.
[11] Kimberley J. Lau, *New Age Capitalism: Making Money East of Eden*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2000; Jennifer Rindfleish, 'Consuming the Self: New Age Spirituality as "Social Product" in Consumer Society', *Consumption Markets & Culture,* vol. 8, no. 4, 2005, pp. 343–60; Michael York, 'New Age Commodification and Appropriation of Spirituality', *Journal of Contemporary Religion,* vol. 16**,** 2001, pp. 361–72; Adam Possamai, 'Alternative Spiritualities and the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *Culture and Religion,* vol. 4, no. 1, 2003, pp. 31–45.
[12] Guy Redden, 'The New Age: Towards a Market Model', *Journal of Contemporary Religion,* vol. 20, no. 2, 2005, pp. 231–46.
[13] Possamai, p. 31.
[14] Maxine Birch, 'The Goddess/God Within: The Construction of Self-Identity through Alternative Health Practices' in *Postmodernity, Sociology, and Religion*, ed. K. Flanagan and P.C. Jupp, Macmillan, London, 1996.
[15] Hanegraaff.
[16] Mark Bevir, 'The West Turns Eastwards: Madame Blavatsky and the Transformation of the Occult Tradition', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion,* vol. 112, no. 3, 1994, p. 765.
[17] Lau, p. 3.
[18] José Argüelles, *The Mayan Factor: Path Beyond Technology*, Bear and Company, Santa Fe, 1987, p. 83.
[19] Guy Redden, 'The New Agents: Personal Transfiguration and Radical Privatization in New Age Self-Help', *Journal of Consumer Culture,* vol. 2, no. 1, 2002, pp. 33–52.
[20] Steve Bruce, 'The New Age and Secularisation' in *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality*, ed. Steven Sutcliffe and Marion Bowman, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2000, p. 228.
[21] Qtd in Elizabeth Puttick, 'Personal Development and the Human Potential Movement' in *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality*, ed. Steven Sutcliffe and Marion Bowman Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2000, p. 210.
[22] Nigel Thrift, 'The Place of Complexity', *Theory, Culture and Society,* vol. 16, no. 3, 1999, p. 48.
[23] *The Secret* (DVD), Prime Time Productions, 2006; Rhonda Byrne, *The Secret*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2006. The book is an edited transcript of the DVD.
[24] Oprah's *The Secret* special episode was originally broadcast on 8 February 2007 and is on YouTube in five parts, the first of which is <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NPPGDfuk8aE>.
[25] Deepak Chopra, *Unconditional Life: Mastering the Forces That Shape Personal Reality*, Bantam, New York, 1989.
[26] William Walker Atkinson, *Thought Vibration: or, The Law of Attraction in the Thought World*, The

Library Shelf, Chicago, 1906; Samuel Smiles, *Self-help: with Illustrations of Charakter, Conduct and Perseverance*, John Murray, London, 1866, p. 1.

[27] Hanegraaff, pp. 487–8.

[28] See for example, Esther Hicks and Jeremy Hicks, *The Law of Attraction: The Basics of the Teachings of Abraham*, Hay House, Carlsbad, 2006.

[29] Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*, trans. Alan R. Clarke, Harper Perennial, New York, 1998; James Redfield, *The Celestine Prophecy: An Adventure*, Bantam, Sydney, 1993.

[30] <http://www.themastersofthesecret.com/>.

[31] Ron Mcintosh, *The Greatest Secret: God's Law of Attraction for Lasting Happiness, Fulfillment, Health, and Abundance in Life*, White Stone Books, Lakeland, Florida, 2007; Marc Allen, *The Greatest Secret of All: Moving Beyond Abundance to a Life of True Fulfillment,* New World Library, Lovato, California, 2007; Talane Miedaner, '*The Secret Laws of Attraction: The Effortless Way to Get the Relationship You Want*', McGraw-Hill, New York, 2008; Robert C. Worstell, *Secrets to the Law of Attraction*, Worstell Foundation, Mexico, Missouri, 2007; Dave Lakhani, Bob Beverley, Kevin Hogan and Blair Warren, *The Secret Behind the Secret Law of Attraction*, Network 3000 Publishing, Eden Prairie, Minnesota, 2007. The last title is one of several commentaries or critiques of *The Secret*.

[32] Frow, 'Cultural Property'.

[33] Heriot v. Byrne, 2009 WL 742769 (N.D. Ill. March 20, 2009) United States District Court, N.D. Illinois, Eastern Division. <http://www.ezjustice.com/cases/heriot.shtml>.

[34] Free ebook editions of two of Byrne's key influences are available on *The Secret* website at <http://thesecret.tv/secret-treasures-ebooks.html>: Wallace D. Wattles, *The Science of Getting Rich: Attracting Financial Success Through Creative Thought* and Charles. F. Haanel, *The Master Key System*.

[35] John Frow, 'Information as Gift and Commodity', *New Left Review,* no. 219, 1996, p. 92.

[36] *A Current Affair*, Channel 9, http://video.au.msn.com/watch/video/the-secret-stoush/xhnzw35

[37] Esther and Jerry Hicks 'Abraham: The Secret Behind "The Secret"', 27 April 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CFp-iPSPplE?.

[38] 'The Secret: The Television Movie, From Jerry & Esther', <http://www.andydooley.com/products/secretWHY.html>.

[39] Colin Campbell, 'The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization' in *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain*, ed. M. Hill, vol. 5, SCM Press, London, 1972.

[40] <http://www.asic.gov.au/asic/asic.nsf/byheadline/10-130AD+ASIC+bans+Victorian+man+from+providing+financial+services+for+life?openDocument>.

[41] <http://www.smh.com.au/world/selfhelp-author-guilty-in-sweat-lodge-deaths-20110623-1ggaj.html>.

[42] There is not room here to discuss the issue of whether the New Age should or should not be considered religion, given that it merges with apparently 'secular' concerns. Like most, I maintain that it is religion, as shaped by particular contemporary forces. In even in its most nominally spiritual forms

such as *The Secret*, New Age theorisations of reality fulfil the substantive definition of religiosity by positing the role of superempirical powers in the conduct of life. The fact that the socio-cultural form of this religiosity is so unlike conventional expectations of religion is precisely what warrants inquiry.

[43] Albert Moran and Justin Malbon, *Understanding the Global TV Format*, Intellect Books, Bristol, 2006.

[44] Prateek Goorha, 'Some Insights on Religion from Public Goods Economics', *Forum for Social Economics*, no. 40, pp. 221–31.

[45] Carrette and King.

[46] <http://thesecret.tv/teachers.html>.

[47] York.

[48] Daniel J. Gervais, 'Spiritual but Not Intellectual: The Protection of Sacred Intangible Traditional Knowledge', *Cardozo Journal of International and Comparative Law* 11, 2003, p. 471.

[49] See Robert Clarke, 'New Age Trippers': Aboriginality and Australian New Age Travel Books', *Studies in Travel Writing,* vol. 13, no. 1, 2009, pp. 27–43.

[50] Christina Welch, 'Appropriating the Didjeridu and the Sweat Lodge: New Age Baddies and Indigenous Victims?', *Journal of Contemporary Religion,* vol. 17, no. 1, 2002, p. 31.

[51] Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao, 'Introduction' to *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*, ed. Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao, Rutgers University Press, 1997, p. 16.

[52] Marlo Morgan, *Mutant Message Down Under*, HarperCollins, New York, 1994.

[53] Ibid., p. 147.

[54] Ibid., p. 99.

[55] Ibid., p. 175.

[56] In particular Robert Eggington and Paul Sampi. See also Clarke, York.

[57] Lisa Behrendt, 'In Your Dreams: Cultural Appropriation, Popular Culture and Colonialism', *Law Text Culture*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1998, p. 263.

[58] Bowman, 145–7.

[59] Behrendt., p. 269; Lisa Aldred has made similar arguments within the Native American community. Lisa Aldred, 'Plastic Shamans and Astroturf Sun Dances: New Age Commercialization of Native American Spirituality', *The American Indian Quarterly,* vol. 24, no. 3, 2000, pp. 329–52.

[60] Andrew Wernick, *Promotional Culture: Advertising, Ideology and Symbolic Expression*, Sage, London, 1991.

[61] See Possamai; Aldous Huxley provided a precursor, Aldous Huxley, *The Perrenial Philosophy*, Triad Grafton, London, 1985.

[62] Peter Sutton 'Aboriginal Spirituality in a New Age', *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, no. 21, 2010, pp. 71–89.

[63] Clark, p. 32.

[64] Michael F. Brown, 'Can Culture Be Copyrighted?', *Current Anthropology* , vol. 39, no. 2, 1998, pp. 193–222.

[65] Stewart Muir 'The Good of New Age Goods', *Culture and Religion*, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 233–53; Jane Mulcock, 'Dreaming the Circle: Indigeneity and the Longing for Belonging in White Australia' in *Transgressions: Critical Indigenous Histories*, ed. Mark Hannah, ANU E Press, Canberra, 2007, pp. 63–82; Welch.

[66] Muir, p. 238.