

# Enjoying Religion

## *Pleasure and Fun in Established and New Religious Movements*

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## SIX

# "Our Play Pleases the Man, the Spirits of the Desert, and Whatever"

## *Enjoying Religion at Burning Man*

François Gauthier

Enjoying religion?<sup>1</sup> Enjoyment was not what I felt when my parents dragged me to Sunday mass at the Catholic church of our suburban city on the Quebec side of the Ottawa River. Neither did my parents, nor anyone else for that matter, seem to be enjoying themselves. I did, of course, understand that enjoyment was not the objective, nor the desired or even acceptable collateral effect, of this type of religion. Repentance for one's sins, fear about the prospects of afterlife, a sense of sacrifice, culpability, morality, solemnity, and seriousness were the internal movements that were conducive to the heights of spirituality.

What has happened that we may even think of investigating enjoyment *and* religion? I see two related processes at work here. First, that the empirical, observable social realities that we understand as religion have changed quite radically over the course of the second half of the twentieth century. Second, our conceptions of religion have changed accordingly, if not our concepts. In this new sociohistorical period, formerly nonexistent, undermined, overlooked, or dismissed realities have come to the fore and can no longer be discarded and considered secondary. This new era that is continuing to unfold is one in which the body, experience, and emotions have become central; and one in which the hedonism of consumer cultures contributes to the reshaping of religion.

Among these new forms, the Burning Man festival is paradoxically unique and paradigmatic. While nonexplicitly religious, this week-long

extravaganza unravels within a sacred geography that is organized around an *axis mundi* where stands the "Man." Participants identify strongly with this event-based (counter)culture and abundantly report personal transformations in the wake of intense liminal experiences in which enjoyment is definitely a defining part. In fact, pleasure and enjoyment are some of the prime motivations for participating in this festival in which hedonism, playfulness, and irony seem to complement rather than compete with moments of interiority, sadness, sorrow, pain, mourning, and grief. How is one to understand such a phenomenon? What makes it religious, and what makes this religiosity enjoyable?

In order to answer these questions, this chapter draws on Roberte Hamayon's work on Siberian shamanism in particular and religion in general, and especially her book *Why We Play* (2016). First, I will discuss the recent transformations of religion in the light of Hamayon's distinction between "God" and "Shaman" religion, and I will expose the lineaments of her theory of play. Second, I will briefly present the Burning Man festival and outline some of its religious dimensions following a definition of religion as a triaxial system of the gift. The dynamics of the gift will provide a basis from which to argue why Burning Man is enjoyable. Third, I will return to the concept of play and show how play is central to the Burning Man experience and how this, too, brings enjoyment. All in all, I argue that Burning Man is a vibrant example of today's trend toward enjoyable religion because it provides a theater in which the drive to give (and receive) and the drive to play can be fully expressed and made to cater to a soteriology of self-realization in a culture of authenticity.

### THE DYNAMICS OF PLAY, GIFT, AND RELIGION

The theme of enjoyment evokes images of delight, joy, and fun, and almost naturally leads to approaching the subject from the perspective of play. This intuition is not ill founded, as we will see, as it by no means limits enjoyment to these positive emotions. As anyone who has done any sports or played chess knows, play involves moments of anger, frustration, desperation, even fear. Still, in the end, all of this partakes of the experience of play and is considered enjoyable. Enjoyment is complex and ambivalent.

#### *Why God Doesn't Like Play*

Hamayon explains how the Fathers of the Church made a special point in criticizing and banning play, especially bouncing and hopping, dancing freely, laughing, performing theater and comedy, as well as games of chance. Resort to chance and luck was understood as an affront

to God and the work of the Devil. As for hopping, it was associated with Pagan fertility rituals and was also understood as calling onto chthonic forces antithetical to God worship. Christianity was not the only religion to oppose play and the resort to chance, to police games and divert their disruptive potential into tamed rituals and well-orchestrated processions: Mahayana Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and other God religions also concurred in the repression of play and the policing of games (see also van Nieuwkerk, this volume). On the other hand, Hamayon's work has shown how play is central to Siberian shamanism. Indeed, play and games please the spirits and coincidentally attract chance, luck, vitality, food, health, and other benefits. The shaman's play is made of dances, songs, jokes, and seduction in order to ensure that hunters will be successful or that health will be recovered. Hence, there is a fundamental distinction between God and Spirit religions.

Play- and chance-oriented games are "techniques of dealing with indeterminacy and randomness" (Puett 2016, xviii) and were banned by the church for these reasons. They were seen as intruding on the powers of God by trying to force his hand. The shaman, on the other hand, imitates the animals with whose spirits he is negotiating vital energy and health, plays with them, seduces them, and pleases them with songs, jokes, and dance. The animal spirits are not transcendent in a hierarchical, vertical sense: they are horizontal others with whom one deals as one deals with humans. "Play builds a homology between humans and immaterial entities—something unacceptable to religions defined by a transcendent, non-imitable deity" (Puett 2016, xvii). The creation of a frame in which indeterminacy is summoned is thus contrary to the logics of "God religion"—something that only starkens as they tend toward monotheism. Play is rejected by single deities that cannot be imitated, represented, and played with. God does not like laughter, dance, or music, which are all believed to brew heretical and diabolical power. There is a political dimension to this as well: God religion is corollary to the emergence of a hierarchical state and absolutist rule, which are not known for their sense of humor. They have pursued the repression of play and game and have transformed them into anesthetized ritual celebrations of power.

What this means, then, is that the shift we have seen occurring over the last half century is extraordinary. It is a rupture more than a linear transformation or the re-actualization of the same. That we may find "enjoyment" in religion today—including in "traditional" religion—and witness an increase in practices that have elements of play in them are signs that we have been leaving an era of "God religion" and entering one in which there is a sort of "return" to "spirit religion."

### What Is Play? Game, Play, and Ritual

The Buryat ethnographic material that serves as Hamayon's starting point (see also Hamayon 1990) reveals two complementary yet irreducible facets to play: agonistic conduct (repel the rival) and seduction through imitation (approach the female). It is these two poles (distinguished in English by the terms "game" and "play") that became separated in societies where animals were domesticated and in which deities and vertical political authority (the "state") emerged. Our own attitude toward play is tributary to this division and the preference for game as the most serious and acceptable type of play.

Hamayon starts from Benveniste's idea that play is better understood as a "*modality of action*": a "fundamental way of interacting with [others and] the world" that involves the creation of a "fictional framework" (Puett 2016, xvi). It is a "sort of doing" (*sorte de faire*) rather than a "real" doing (*véritable faire*) (Hamayon 2012, 20). It is "another way of doing: doing something else, elsewhere, otherwise" (67). It is doing "as if" (107) in a spirit of "what if." In other words, play is metaphorical.

In this light, play ceases to appear as a degraded form of ritual and becomes an essential and specific type of activity. Ritual and play become complementary opposites on a spectrum delimited by liberty and obligation: on one end, obligation, or respect of a rule; on the other, freedom and expression of agency. The distinction between game and play can also be understood on this spectrum: game appears closer to ritual (rules are more important and the share of personal liberty is more constricted), while play minimizes rules and obligation in order to allow the full expression of liberty. This is why Hamayon refuses to radically separate ritual and play and insists on the ritual latency in play (2012, 316). Furthermore, ritual and play are both metaphorical: both create frames at a distance from normal social life and posit a potential outcome. In the case of "worship-type rites" (Hamayon 2016, 293), the outcome is ideal-typically circumscribed by tradition: correct execution of the ritual entails predefined results. Any failure in prompting the desired outcome will be imparted to procedural failures, not to the ritual itself. Play, on the contrary, intentionally un-determines any possible outcome. While ritual aims at restricting the margin of indeterminacy produced by its metaphorical structuring, play, on the contrary, does everything to exploit its potentialities. Finally, both ritual and play, therefore, suppose an absent third party, from whom the possible outcomes originate. Worship-type ritual defines this Other, while play keeps the source of luck, chance, success or vitality indeterminate.

Hamayon shines some light on Huizinga's (1949) definition of play as "a rhythmical movement in a limited space referring to another realm of reality" (Hamayon 2016, 293) by showing how play is both (1) a movement within a frame defined by a set of rules that is performed with a fair

amount of latitude, and (2) the creation of a fictional frame in which actions do not mean what they would mean in non-play (Hamayon 2012, 298). While rules are fundamental to play, the "limited space" defined by the rules aims at maximizing the freedom of action and the opening of potentialities. Play has a corresponding ethics: an "optimistic voluntary ethic" (Hamayon 2012, 121; my translation) that acts as an impetus for engagement and action: shaking the die *projects* the possibility of a *positive outcome*. This active tempting of fate is precisely what Christianity abhorred. Such an ethic also corresponds to an entrepreneurial culture: who risks nothing gains nothing.

### What Is the Gift?

The concept of gift is also useful for the analysis of Burning Man and a discussion on how and why it may be enjoyable. In his seminal "Essay on the Gift," Marcel Mauss (2016) defined the term "gift" as a complex of liberty and obligation, on the one hand, and self-interest and altruism (or interest-for-others), on the other (see Caillé 2000). Contrary to impersonal market exchanges or those of the bureaucratic state, the gift involves individuals and produces subjectivity and social bond. Giving and receiving are thereby means of producing identities, both subjective and collective. For Mauss (2016), the gift is the "bedrock of the eternal human morality." This morality is grounded in debt, as those receiving become obliged by the gift (Godbout 2013). Yet unlike monetary debt, social debt is insolvent and is not perceived negatively (Graeber 2011). Community building, therefore, involves a dynamic of mutual indebtedness, a virtuous circle that Jacques Godbout calls "positive mutual indebtedness" (2013). Against the utilitarian idea that human action is always self-interested (the profit motive: *l'appât du gain*), Godbout (2007) has argued that individuals are also moved by a desire to give (the gift motive: *l'appât du don*). In other words, there is a fundamental desire to engage in gift relations for their own sake. Contrary to certain interpretations of the gift, the desire for reciprocity is neither the only nor the first motive for giving—this only pushes the gift back into a utilitarian mold and annuls its heuristic. Rather, there is a desire to give, as well as a desire to receive and to reciprocate: a desire to be recognized as a *homo donator* rather than a *homo oeconomicus* (Godbout 2013). It's a desire but also a pleasure: the joy of giving.

### What Is Religion in This Perspective?

Since Burning Man is not an established religious institution nor a "world religion," a further discussion is needed regarding the definition of religion. In the frame of this chapter, I will suggest a definition grounded in the prior discussions on play and gift. If we admit, with



Hamayon and other anthropologists, that shamanism is a religion in which the shaman's action can be understood as playing with spirits (immanent, horizontal others), then our definition must accommodate a spectrum of phenomena that stretches from shamanic religions (which play) to god religions (which have rituals). Drawing on Marcel Mauss, Camille Tarot has defined religion as a triaxial, symbolic system of the gift:

All the great religious systems seem to articulate more or less straightly [*sic*] three systems of the gift. A system of the *vertical* gift and circulation, between the *world beyond* (or the *beyond world*) and this one, that goes from the disturbing strangeness of alterities immanent to [. . .] *Sapiens* [e.g., the unconscious self of modern psychology], to the pursuit of pure transcendence [the Calvinist God]. A system of the *horizontal* gift, between peers, brothers, "co-tribals" or "co-religionnaires," oscillating between the clan and humanity, because the religious plays a role in the creation of group identity. Finally—or first of all—a system of the *longitudinal* gift, according to the principle of transmission to the descendants, or of debts owed to group ancestors, or of faith, in short, of exchange between living and dead. It is by the way in which each religious system unfolds or limits a certain axis, and, above all, interweaves axes[;] it is in the dimensions and in the relative importance that is attributed to each of them, that religious systems distinguish themselves probably most of all from one another. But with the gift we can at last grasp some of the dynamics, of the movement, of the action of religious systems, action that so often is kept out of range from the historical studies or of the sociology of religions (Tarot 2000, 148; see also Gauthier 2016).

In what follows, I argue that Burning Man can be understood as a vibrant example of a "shamanic" type of religion that articulates gift relations along these three axes, although with a structural preference for the horizontal and vertical axes.

### THE TOTAL EXPERIENCE OF BURNING MAN

The Burning Man festival (BM) started as a wooden, man-shaped effigy being burned on San Francisco's Baker Beach by a small company at the initiation of Larry Harvey and Jerry James, during the Summer Solstice of 1986. One of them recalls how "instantly, people on the beach assembled with our little group around the Man. We looked at each other and thought: 'we've just created community.'"<sup>2</sup> The experiment was repeated at the end of the summer in the following years, and it was moved to the remote expanses of Black Rock Desert, Nevada, in 1990. The event's length eventually became fixed to a week's duration (Monday to Sunday), and its attendance grew steadily over the course of the 1990s until 2013, when it became limited to 70,000.

Originally uncoordinated, the growth of the event and a series of crises (see Doherty 2004) resulted in BM evolving toward a crescent-shaped, full-fledged municipality named Black Rock City, three miles wide, featuring a score of official "departments" (e.g. Department of Public Works, Black Rock Rangers peace officers, Media Mecca, Lamplighters, Census Bureau, Camp One, Sanitation Services, First Aid) and unofficial services (e.g., radios, newspapers, airport, mail). These include hundreds of "theme camps" (the basic social organization unit, which includes between a dozen to a few hundred participants) that all have the vocation of gifting a specific set of services, activities, experiences and/or goods to the whole of the "burner" community. From 1996 onward, this cultural experiment in ephemeral effervescent citizenship has been guided by a theme with potent symbolism: *Inferno* (1996), *Fertility* (1997), *Nebulous Entity* (1998), *Wheel of Time* (1999), *The Body* (2000), *The Seven Ages of Man* (2001), *The Floating World* (2002), *Beyond Belief* (2003), *Vault of Heaven* (2004), *Psyche: The Conscious, Subconscious & Unconscious* (2005), *Hopes and Fears: The Future* (2006), *The Green Man* (2007), *American Dream* (2008), *Evolution* (2009), *Metropolis* (2010), *Rites of Passage* (2011), *Fertility 2.0* (2012), *Cargo Cult* (2013), *Carnival of Mirrors* (2014), *Caravansary* (2015), *Da Vinci's Workshop* (2016), and *Radical Ritual* (2017).

The name of the event is derived from the forty-foot-high, human-shaped effigy that stands above a yearly-changing structure at the very center of "the Playa." The structure burns on the Saturday evening in a spectacle of fire dancers and fireworks amid an extremely charged atmosphere, as the whole of participants circle the Man. At the center of the crescent's opening onto the open Playa, called the "W(h)ol(l)y Other," a temple has been erected every year since 2000 at the initiative of artists such as David Best. The Temple instantly became a tradition and BM's second most important attraction (or "sacred space") after the Man. The Temple was dedicated at first to loved ones lost—to loss itself, to victims of suicide, and to forgiveness. It was immediately invested by *burners* who leave letters, offerings, and photographs and construct small shrines in which they express regret, love, forgiveness, hurt, mourning, hope, thankfulness, and other deeply felt emotions (Gauthier 2004; Pike 2005). Contrary to most spaces at BM, which are animated with music, noise, laughter, and shouts (and in which a ludic atmosphere reigns), the ambience at the Temple is hush, soft, and solemn; "burners" spontaneously leave their bicycles and other gear at a distance, thereby consecrating the space's sacredness. Tears, sobs, hugs, and confessions are commonplace, and the Temple is invested by a score of more or less intimate rituals such as engagements, weddings, dispersion of ashes, ritualized declarations of love, forgiveness, and so on, particularly at sunrise and sundown (see figure 6.1). The Temple burns on Sunday evening, without artifice and in an intense yet subdued and quiet atmosphere that sharply contrasts with

the burning of the Man. Some participants hold hands; others sit in meditation or engage in body movements suggesting letting go, prayer, and thanksgiving; and many cry. Such practices are key to the BM experience for many who find its environment conducive to expressing and ritualizing such emotions and experiences that do not find an outlet in what “burners” call the “Default World.”

The BM experience is abundantly reported to be transformative. Accounts more than abound of first-timers (called “virgins”) who arrived as “tourists,” with no clear idea of what to expect and how to participate (i.e., how and what to *give*), who experience being “blown away” and come back the year after with an elaborate project—to *give back*. Many also report a turn in their life as a result of their experience, exemplified by a professional reorientation. This has led to the growth of BM into a veritable year-round *event-culture* (St John and Gauthier 2015) whose participant-led efflorescence movement now includes regional events and community networks in thirty countries around the world, including a thriving European scene.

The event and its spillover into a score of off-Playa events is made possible by the involvement of an army of dedicated volunteers. While participants were originally primarily North American, from Canada and the United States, European and non-American participants now count for over 10 percent of the total population of Black Rock City. Socio-



**Figure 6.1.** The Temple of Stars at sundown. Burning Man 2008. Photo by author.

demographic data are made available by the Census Bureau and confirms observations: the population is mostly white, born out of various middle-class milieus with some working-class representatives, with a majority being highly educated (university level) and reporting occupations including students, IT employees, start-uppers, geeks (the Silicon Valley basically shuts down during BM), cultural creatives, health, education and social workers, holistic and alternative therapeutic practitioners, artists, musicians, engineers, architects, and so on. Politically, BM has evolved from attracting a majority of left-wing Democrats, environmentalists, marginals, ferals, libertarians, and anarchists toward a wider spectrum over the last decade, including 5 percent of Republicans. The age sample is also noteworthy, as it includes people well over sixty down to young children, with a peak of mid-twenties to late-thirties. While selling, buying, brands, sponsors, and publicity are banned, the cost of the ticket has risen from \$200 to \$500–1000 today, which covers infrastructural costs, various land-use and permit fees, as well as the Black Rock Arts Foundation, which helps fund some of the giant-scale art projects every year.

### *Enjoying Burning Man*

If BM has become such a landmark of contemporary counterculture, it is definitely because it is enjoyable. Very few would bother to go through such extensive preparation and effort to get to Black Rock Desert if BM was not “fun.” As such, BM is an extravagant and extreme product of hedonistic, consumer culture. American sociologist Howard Becker, in his classical study of marijuana smokers, has shown how “pleasure” is not a given, natural state but something that is constructed, acquired, and learned (1963). Becker showed how learning to appreciate the ambivalent effects of marijuana signifies filtering out certain sensations and focusing on others, while interpreting them positively. He also showed how this practice participated in the production of an “outsider” identity, cast against a devaluation of the “mainstream.”

Becker’s conclusions apply to BM in two complementary ways. First, the experience is an intense and radical one that is cast against a mainstream “Default World,” thereby defining a subcultural identity and catalyzing heightened feelings of community. Second, there is nothing natural about enjoying living in a hostile environment such as the Black Rock Desert: preparation demands a very high investment in time and resources, as one must bring everything one needs to survive, including water; temperatures oscillate between very hot in the day to very cold at night; dust rapidly incrusts itself everywhere, and winds regularly produce suffocating dust storms that annul visibility; acclimation is difficult and dehydration is a very real and serious threat, which is in turn increased by alcohol and drug consumption; basic hygiene and healthy

eating borderline on the impossible, and the portable toilets can often be disgusting; “burners” typically experience an emotional roller-coaster that includes breakdowns, sickness, and hangovers as much as amazement, joy, laughter and ecstasy; and the *playa* is a noisy and cacophonous place all day and night, making it difficult to escape or even just sleep. All in all, BM is very far from being a quiet and restful holyday by the seaside. How, then, is this made to be enjoyable?

In *A Sociology of Religious Emotion*, Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead have argued that emotions and feelings are not individual but, rather, that they belong to situations as a whole (2010). They result from complex interactions between interpersonal relations in social, symbolic, and material settings. Similarly, there is no such thing as a religious emotion *per se*: emotions are religious insofar as they are “integral to religious regimes” (10). This perspective is particularly worthy here. In what follows, I will argue that BM is made enjoyable because it offers a religious setting in which to experience the contemporary obligation to express one’s subjectivity and to experience and experiment community at the same time, through gifting and play. The first step in this argument is to define the cultural environment within which BM has sprung.

#### *The Ethics of Authenticity and Expressivity*

Charles Taylor has argued that the consumer cultural revolution of the 1960s onward massified and democratized what he calls the “culture of authenticity and expressivity” (Taylor 1991). This culture has seen the mainstreaming of psychological concepts such as the “self,” understood as a potential to be *discovered* through experience, introspection, experimentation, and reflexivity; *realized* over the course of one’s life; and *narrativized* in the language of self-transformation, self-discovery, individual progress, and change (Illouz 2007). Eva Illouz has documented how therapeutic discourses and practices have reshaped modern notions of identity within an immanent framework that is functionally soteriological (2008). Charles Taylor has argued that this culture results in a politics of “mutual display” rather than “common action” (Taylor 2002, 85), one for which fashion provides the model: personality is expressed through material and aesthetic symbols that align with others who act “as co-determiners of the meaning of our actions” (86). The culture of authenticity—which particularly permeates the middle classes to which most “burners” belong—is one that is paradoxically very individualistic and very sociable at the same time. The rise of “social media” highlights how expressive individualism is tied to the desire and need to belong, requiring constant recognition by significant others. Yet, today’s “self-interested and impersonal institutions” (Riis and Woodhead 2010, 176) do not allow for such recognition to become institutionalized and perennialized. This inherent ephemerality, instability, and mobility of identities carries an

ambivalence: it is both liberating, as one is not assigned to a fixed identity, and creator of insecurity and angst, as communal bonds and identities are fragile.

In the terms of Riis and Woodhead, the culture of authenticity generates its own “emotional regime,” which, while emphasizing self-discovery and self-expression, has nothing idiosyncratic about it: it is a historical construct that predates individuals and is culturally infused. It constitutes the background against which identities and meanings are interpreted and recognized. I argue that if BM is enjoyable, it is because it provides a space in which to fully—and *playfully*—experience and experiment the emotional regime of the culture of authenticity. It also opens up a space for the gift.

#### *The Enjoyment of Giving and Receiving*

It is amazing that gifting has been neglected by BM’s numerous commentators and analysts (Gauthier 2015). Yet the gift provides a heuristic entry upon BM’s many and undifferentiated dimensions: political, economic, artistic, moral, and, of course, religious.

The Ten Principles define BM’s cultural ethos and contribute to its preservation and dissemination. They are Radical Inclusion, Gifting, Decommodification, Radical Self-Reliance, Radical Self-Expression, Communal Effort, Civic Responsibility, Leaving No Trace, Participation, and Immediacy.<sup>3</sup> Commenting on the Ten Principles from the perspective of the gift shows how these principles form an integrated system that caters to the culture of authenticity. Commercial exchanges of any type are banned at BM, and even direct barter remains extremely limited. Instead, the essence of BM is to engage in gifting. The organization stresses the unconditional aspect of the gift to the detriment of the expectation of reciprocity, something which also verifies on the field. The gift is the very means by which the culture and community of BM are produced, in a space outside the market. This Decommodification also implies that participation is preferred to an attitude of spectacle and consumption. Active participation is presented as a gift, while art projects, as all other goods, services, and activities offered on Playa, are strongly encouraged to be participative in nature. The principle of Radical Inclusion, which aims at keeping the “burner” community open and to undermine the creation of statuses and cliques, is also a declension of gift, as “virgins” and newcomers are valued on the basis of their (unique) potential for participation (i.e., to *give*).

The principle of Immediacy is “in many ways, the most important touchstone of value in our culture. We seek to overcome barriers that stand between us and a recognition of our inner selves, the reality of those around us, participation in society, and contact with a natural world exceeding human powers. No idea can substitute for this experi-



ence,"<sup>4</sup> which is thought of as a gift: the key for discovering one's true self. To experience something directly rather than trust "outside authorities" is the cornerstone of the ethics of authenticity. Similarly, the principle of Radical Self-Reliance "encourages the individual to discover, exercise and rely on his or her inner resources." It is an invitation to self-discovery, yet this exploration is not an end in itself: it is related to the call for Radical Self-Expression, which "arises from the unique gifts of the individual. No one other than the individual or a collaborating group can determine its content. It is offered as a gift to others." It is also embedded in a community of reference: "In this spirit, the giver should respect the rights and liberties of the recipient." Giving obliges the receiver, and it can either be a way to create subjectivity and community or crush the other with generosity. Gifting must not only be freed from the expectation of reciprocity (giving *in order* to receive), it must also be oriented toward nourishing the community. Hence, the principle of Communal Effort (i.e., collective gifts toward a common goal): "Our community values creative cooperation and collaboration. We strive to produce, promote and protect social networks, public spaces, works of art, and methods of communication that support such interaction." The same goes for its social, moral, legal, and political counterpart, Civic Responsibility, which extends to the "Default World," to which Black Rock City remains bound: "We value civil society. Community members who organize events should assume responsibility for public welfare and endeavor to communicate civic responsibilities to participants. They must also assume responsibility for conducting events in accordance with local, state, and federal laws." As for Leave No Trace, it is a further extension of this responsibility to the whole of "Nature": "Our community respects the environment. We are committed to leaving no physical trace of our activities wherever we gather. We clean up after ourselves and endeavor, whenever possible, to leave such places in a better state than when we found them." Leaving No Trace is further understood as a means of reciprocity: giving back to the Desert and to Nature.

Corollary to gifting, the Playa is also a place for receiving. If gifts are given freely, they still require a recipient. And in this environment, gifting calls for gifting. BM is a potlatch of gifts, a crescendo of giving, as participants playfully try to out-give each other and rival in originality and generosity. This is clearly the logic that drives the conception of gigantic art pieces and art cars: to become a milestone of a given year. This is also true at the level of micro-interactions, for instance, within theme camps: to be the craziest, the most original, the most generous, to be *over the top*. As a result, one constantly receives gifts.

A recurring narrative recounts how A is in need of something when, all of a sudden and out of nowhere, B (often accompanied by some friends) comes around with precisely that which is needed. Other stories tell how someone required a helpful hand to carry out their plans, only to

see help materialize *and* bring lunch and refreshments. "The Playa provides" is an oft-heard "burner" motto. Interviews and conversations show how "the Playa," "the Man," the "burner" community, "Life," "Nature," and even the "Universe" are cast as the true agents of the gift. Hence, one is never a giver *ex nihilo*: one gives because one has received—from specific others, from the community, from the Playa, from Burning Man. The BM experience is for many so intense that whatever one gives, one has the feeling that one has received even more, highlighting Godbout's virtuous circle of positive mutual indebtedness. As the above quote makes clear, the "natural world" without, as the authentic Self within, is that through which one becomes in contact with transcendence, that which "exceeds human powers."

Gifts at Burning Man also create status through recognition. Yet this does not result in any effective hierarchy. Trying to boil BM down to the interested pursuit of "cultural capital" would miss the point. This does not mean that there is no self-interest at work nor that certain special statuses emerge, only that the dynamics of gift cannot be reduced to these variables. It is clearly *l'appât du don*, the gift motive that animates the vast majority of participants. The desire to belong, to contribute to something bigger than oneself. The ephemerality of BM is a key factor in allowing that gifts be made for the sake of giving (i.e., unconditionally): the weight of obligations that result from receiving is thus neutralized, as is self-interest (*l'appât du gain*). Gift here is more than a "social lubricant": it is how "the social" is produced through interactions. The imperative of gift and self-expression gives participants

an excuse to walk up to a stranger and strike up a conversation when you otherwise wouldn't. Walking through the streets of Black Rock City it's common to be pulled aside and invited to partake in a cold adult beverage, a game, a tarot card reading, a meal, or a hug. That underlying fear of rejection that most of us unconsciously harbor isn't a factor at Burning Man because it's unlikely that anyone would reject a heartfelt gift. Burners feel safe and confident interacting and building connections with others through this system that serves to further strengthen the sense of community. (in Jaenike 2014)

At the same time, BM is an arena for self-discovery. As a participant told me: "Burning Man *gave* me an opportunity to discover and express who I really am" (emphasis added). Yet as we have seen, this self-discovery is anything but narcissistic: it is constitutively tied to a social context and a matrix of social bonds and interactions. The authentic self requires the recognition of others and a feeling of community. Identity and belonging are two sides of the same coin.

Seen in this light, we can understand why BM is enjoyable, even though it is not a smooth ride. The intensity and spectrum of emotions that make up its experience are enjoyable in the end because they occur in



an extraordinary situation *that allows for the emotional regime of the culture of authenticity and expressivity to be lived in full*. It is enjoyable because its gift economy lets “burners” be who they are without the risk of rejection and with the feeling that they *belong*. This is why BM is often referred to as “Home.” It is also enjoyable because it is a place *that allows the full expression of the desire to give* (gift motive).<sup>5</sup> Finally, I argue that BM is not only an example of “enjoying religion”: it is enjoyable *because it is religious*. My argument is twofold: first, I need to show how BM is “religious” from the perspective of the definition of religion as a triaxial system of gift; second, that it is a play-type religion rather than a god-type, and that the ethics of play involve an obligation to enjoy oneself.

### *The Religiosity of Burning Man*

Tarot’s definition invites us to distinguish three interconnected yet different systems of the gift. The horizontal axis is determining here, as reveal the many types of gifts that occur between “burners”: from simple participation and volunteering to material gifts, services, entertainment, the creation of massive art pieces, and other extravagant productions. Yet, as we have seen, this horizontal axis is subordinated or conditioned by the superimposition of various indeterminate, invisible, metaphysical entities on the vertical axis: “Life,” “Nature,” the “Playa,” the “Cosmos,” the “Universe,” “Burning Man,” etc. The community as a whole and the universe are conflated. At the same time, we have seen how this immanent-transcendent reference is bound to a conception of the true and authentic “Self,” whose discovery, realization and expression form a contemporary soteriology—the very object and meaning of life.

The longitudinal, or temporal, axis is perhaps not as easy to characterize. Neither is it as important as the other two. Some “burners” do believe that they are in some way reconnecting with ancient tribal cultures and their intimate rapport to nature through this type of gathering, yet it would be hazardous to make this into a structuring rule. More commonplace is the feeling that BM’s cultural laboratory is a “lived utopia.” In a sense, then, the gifts of BM are gifts to an intangible future. This is made obvious in the political meaning that some, including the organization, attribute to BM: literally changing the world. This sentiment is not shared by all “burners,” yet even some who would oppose such a label are deeply involved in bringing BM to the outside world through regional networks and events year-round and all over the globe.

The practices observed at the Temple hint at another system of gifts with the intangible on the longitudinal axis: honoring the deceased and the lost. The multiple shrines, offerings, and inscriptions stapled to the Temple’s walls and niches form a personalized type of ultramodern ancestor worship.<sup>6</sup> Those honored have a personal signification for the initiators, which connects the Temple to the dynamics of the culture of

authenticity and its cult(ivation) of the Self. The consummation of the Temple by fire is a means of symbolically linking personal loss to a grander cosmic order. Interrogated “burners” explain how the fire and smoke “release” both the “spirit” or “soul” of the disappeared and the emotions of the griever by dispersing them in the firmament. In 2015, the ashes of psychedelic guru Timothy Leary were ritually deposited within the Temple, and a gathering in his name took place at the burn with participants taking LSD while his ashes were being sent into “outer space,” in the words of his friend, actress Susan Sarandon.<sup>7</sup>

This analysis of the gift along three axes shows how the gift systems occurring on the horizontal, vertical, and longitudinal axes are interconnected and constitute a dynamic and coherent whole. It also shows how the intangible structures this whole and how this confers a particularity to the experience over the course of the week: that of a *total* experience. Participants are out of words to describe how BM is like living the equivalent of a year in a week’s time. This does not mean that the experience is only positive; far from it. Eva Illouz has written how suffering is integral to the imperative of self-discovery, and how these experiences of hardship, suffering, pain, and loss become positively connoted within the narrative of self-discovery (2008). It is experiencing this mythology of the self that proves to be thrilling and, ultimately, enjoyable. Fulfilling the prophecy of the realized self can be a deceptive and difficult experience in everyday life. By contrast, BM provides an enchanted environment in which to experience it through gift but also through play.

### *The Enjoyments of Play*

“Play” is not one of BM’s scripted principles, yet it is as structuring and important as the gift. Perhaps this is because play goes without saying in today’s hedonist culture, contrary to gift, which needs to be instituted and made explicit. An unwritten norm is not to take yourself too seriously. I have noted dozens of situations where “burners” are quick to recall this ludic obligation to those who become too heated up or “full of themselves.” Similarly, “play” (such as dance, jumping around, making farces, being theatrical) occurrences by far exceed those of agonistic and competitive “games.” While there are many competitions among the activities proposed (best costume, best drink, best joke, best kiss, best cunnilingus, Mad Max style fights at the Thunderdome), they are derisive in nature. The winner is typically awarded a hug, a drink, or a spanking by a drag queen. This shows that what is really at stake here is not winning—except the esteem and recognition of others in making the whole an exceptional experience. In a profoundly agonistic society of perpetual evaluation and constant “challenges,” BM provides a dust-ridden yet friendly utopian alternative (see figure 6.2).

Play, let us recall, is the exertion of liberty within a defined frame. We have seen how the Ten Principles explicit and delimit a normative frame that is brought to life through the various expressions of the gift. Play in this context introduces a margin in which “burners” perform metaphorically (i.e., to act “as if”). An important feature of BM is the use of pseudonyms: Captain Winner, Maid Marian, Low Clarence, Mr. Bad, Liquor Pig, Scribble, Countess, Cookie Cutter, Caveat Magister, and so on. Most of these *pseudos*, known as “Playa names,” are often granted by others rather than self-proclaimed, while pseudonyms that are self-appointed can be revoked when they seem to lack in irony or spirit. Combined with costume wear or simply nakedness, which both abound, a carnivalesque logic is clearly at work here, one in which “Default World” identities and statuses are transcended and transgressed in favor of an equalitarian society typical of festive rituals and play. Similarly, conversations avoid going too deep into “burners’” professional occupations. It is common for “burners” to become close friends and emotionally (or sexually) intimate with people of whom they ignore the real name and occupation. The important is to *be there*, and to *be yourself*. In a sense, “burners” play at being “themselves at BM”—a characteristic that has been radicalized by the portability of filming gear such as cell phones (there is normally no cellular connection on Playa, and phones are otherwise useless), drones, and GoPro-style cameras. In other words, the “Self” itself is an object of



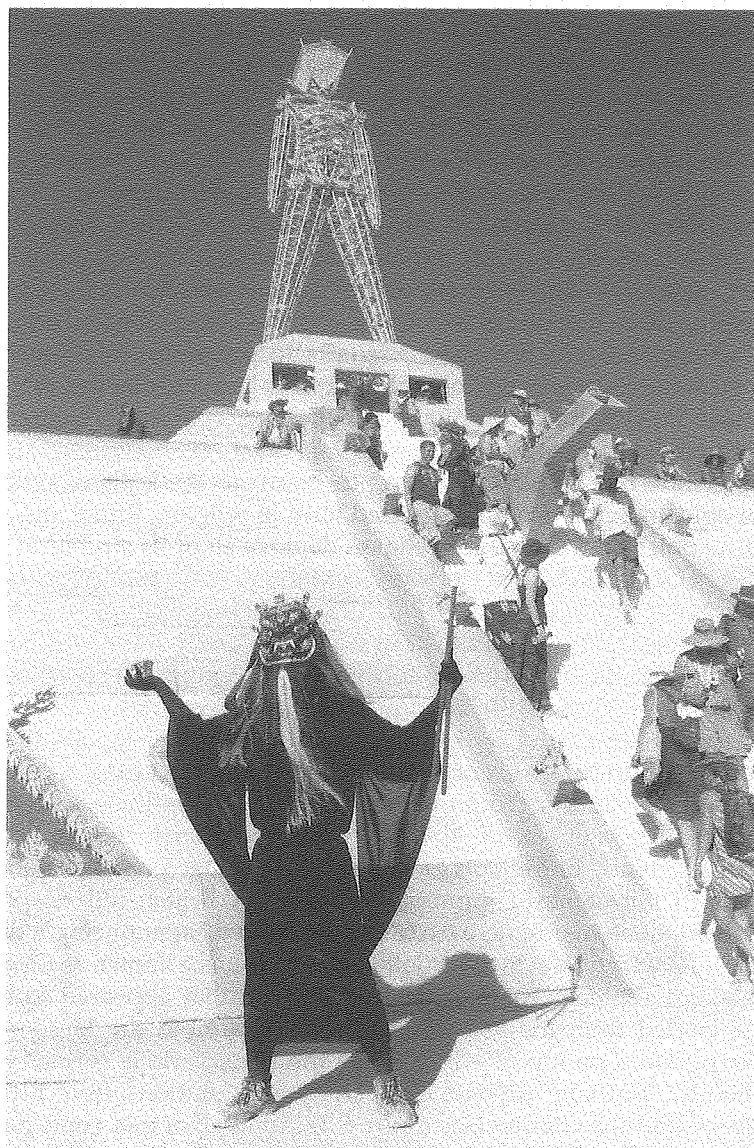
**Figure 6.2.** Open-Playa Art Piece inviting play-type interactions. Burning Man 2004. Photo by author.

play and mise-en-scène. “Burners” can experiment the possibilities of the Self in ways that are not given in everyday life, without negative consequences, leading to an exhilarating sense of freedom and liberty.

Play opens a fictional frame that introduces a margin with respect to ordinary social reality. The whole of Black Rock City can be cast as such a fictional frame: “burners” go about “as if” it was a real city, and “as if” they were citizens. Yet play is a serious thing: you know you are playing, but you still play seriously. Black Rock City is a fictional frame in which a myriad of other fictional frames take place. This is why theme camps aim at providing improbable settings, in which to do “as if”: vegan restaurants, diners, *crêperies*, cafés, grilled-cheese joints, Canadian sugar shacks, oyster bars, ambulant lemonade counters, roller-disco or bowling lanes, counseling practices, spas, huge whale-shaped mobile dance clubs, massage parlors, chapels, sweat lodges, Balinese chanting rituals, and so on. The more outlandish, the more improbable, the better. Participants aim to surprise, to provide an experience out of context, one that highlights the metaphorical function and stretches its symbolic possibilities. There is a ritual latency in play. Yet ritual attempts to constrain indeterminacy, while play does everything to exploit it. This is why playing is much more than “having fun”: it is a way to experiment other selves and normally repressed parts of one’s self.

The perspective of play allows us to return to the issue of religion. Play or spirit-religion is not a degraded form of religion. Ritual and play constitute poles between which religion deploys all of its structural possibilities. The rapport that “burners” entertain with explicit religious symbolism exemplifies the playful nature of BM religiosity. The Temple, for example, is built out of industrial waste. Its 2008 edition was named the Basura Sagrada, literally the “holy garbage” Temple. The reactions to the 2003 theme “Beyond Belief” are also illustrative. While all themes generate discontents and its load of critics, explicitly religious themes have ritually been the object of critique, derision, and scoffing on the BM blog and other “burner” forums. The theme was nevertheless a primer for the production of a score of shrines, processions, rituals, confessionals, self-help tents, theater plays, temples, and other phantasmagorical worships in the name of improbable deities. A British red telephone booth stood alone in a remote expanse of the Playa, announcing a direct line to God—which rang busy. Another giant art-piece known as *Cleavage in Space* represented a mighty metal chandelier that appeared to have crashed-landed from the heavens. Meanwhile, around the Mesoamerican-like pyramid on top of which stood the Man, various shrines were inhabited by “burners” dressed in a variety of figurations, from Elvis to Balinese or Buddhist deities (see figure 6.3). Amid all of this, some participants meditated, sitting in the three-quarter lotus position wearing dust masks.

What does all this mean, then? From a “traditional” religious studies, world religion-centered perspective, it is difficult to comprehend such a paradoxical mixture, and many might be tempted to dismiss it as simulacra, profanation, or insignificance. Is this serious, or just mockery? Approached from the perspective of play, the apparent paradox dissolves.



**Figure 6.3.** Costumed participant at the base of the Man's pyramid. Burning Man 2003. Photo by author.

Censuses in the last years have recorded a proportion of 72 percent of participants declaring having “no religion.”<sup>8</sup> Our own survey in 2014 has shown that a majority (around 60 percent) of actors involved in the efflorescence of BM outside Black Rock City identify as “spiritual, not religious.” Among those reporting belonging to a religion, it is interesting to note the all-but absence of orthodox and conservative strands of God-religions (Pentecostals, Jews, Muslims). This signifies that an overwhelming majority of “burners” can be classified as partaking in the “spiritual revolution” (Heelas and Woodhead et al. 2005), with its cosmological, immanent-transcendent, energetic conception of the divine. Even more important, this signifies that belief is not the central aspect of “burners’” religiosity, which is rather defined by the pragmatics of symbolic efficacy and a play with indeterminacy. The Man—and BM itself, for that matter—has no official or arrested meaning, and “burners” are keen on emphasizing, when questioned in interviews or informal conversations, that what it means for them is valid only for them, and that other people certainly have other interpretations. In practice, though, the vast majority of “burners” I have interviewed and talked to practically always come up with the same answer: “the Man for me symbolizes BM, my experience of it, and the burner community.” A fundamental characteristic of BM is the *indeterminacy of meaning that acts as a condition of possibility of communitization and meaning*. This structuring indeterminacy, which is characteristic of festive rituals and carnivals, places BM resolutely on the play side of the religious spectrum.

As Hamayon writes, play-type religion is not defined by “belief” in the post-Reformation Christian sense of “faith” (2012, 313). Rather, belief in the context of play is lax and latitudinarian. You believe in as much as you are caught in the gist of playing, yet you are still conscious of playing. The player is therefore both lucid and a dupe, as Huizinga argued (1949). Play is a gamble on what the future holds. To the “as if” and “what if” of play, we can add: “why not?”

In the case of Siberian shamanism, play pleases the “spirits,” a vague expression that encompasses animal spirits as well as the spirits of the dead. Humans play so the “spirits”—in other words, indeterminacy and alterity—will be kind and generous. Play is a “structure of interaction” through which humans interact among themselves while hoping that this interaction will produce a positive outcome in the guise of “chance” (Hamayon 2012, 180–92). What is highlighted through the Siberian example is how play presupposes an absent third. Play-type religion does not seek to define the “invisible” agents: it simply does not exclude that there may be invisible agents with whom to commerce. God does not like play since He requires recognition as a transcendent being (through belief and faith). God is the Actor, and the believer must be the receptacle of His Grace. The “spirits,” on the other hand, are said to enjoy the players’ enjoyment. This is why ethnography has collected numerous examples



that attest an *obligation* to stay up all night, to dance, sing, eat, and even engage in coitus, all with a display of good humor. In other words, *enjoyment is an obligation* in play-type religion. This is certainly the case at BM, where participants' emotional roller-coasters are funneled into narratives of enjoyment. Enjoyment, therefore, is an important part of BM's religious emotional regime not only because it is interpreted within the framework of the quest for identity and belonging in the age of authenticity but also because it is constitutive of play-type religion.

Hamayon further insists that an effect is expected in the "real world" as a result of play—namely, in the form of chance, success, good luck, abundance, health—in other words, in a form or another of *vitality*. Play thus becomes a "rhythmic movement within a delimited space, *in order to produce an 'effect' in another order of reality*" (Hamayon 2012, 323; my translation and emphasis). This expectation can be found in two forms: first, and more immediately, through the abundance that is experienced as a receiver, underscored by the mythologies and realities of the providential Playa ("the Playa provides"); second, in the *expectation of self-transformation*. Narratives of transformation have been more than abundant since the very outset of BM's history and constitute an important feature of participants' motivations and narratives. This trope functions in part as a self-fulfilling prophecy, in the literal sense as well as in the metaphorical sense: a promise of fulfilment of the quest for the Self.

Play has a performative character: attract chance. If the result is positive, then the player has luck *and* is a good player. If he loses, he is not lucky, and he can play again *until he succeeds*. In any case, the result is not aleatory, and there is a belief in an indeterminate intentional source of chance. From the God-religion perspective that is ours in a Christianity-embedded culture, it seems strange to impute the source of chance to an indeterminate invisible agent. Strange, indeed, yet efficient, and extremely widespread across cultures (Hamayon 2012, 220). As we have seen, playing involves an *optimistic voluntary ethic* that values action over passivity. Distanced from the logics of God religion, contemporary phenomena such as BM seem to indicate a sort of "return" to such shamanistic, playful logics. Such a shift is perhaps best understood as having something to do with the rise of consumer capitalism and its mobility and flexibility imperatives (Martikainen and Gauthier 2013). We have come full circle and can now move to a conclusion.

## CONCLUSION

Burning Man is a hedonistic extravaganza in the desert. It isn't hard to fathom that participants are enjoying themselves and that enjoyment is one of the main reasons for making the trip (pilgrimage?). Considering there is something religious about BM is similarly not much of a stretch

of the imagination, even if what has been described here appears to be at some distance from Christian forms. Yet once we consider that enjoyment is constructed, not given, and that the same goes for religiosity, thinking about enjoying religion requires that we go about things in a somewhat oblique manner. In this chapter, I have suggested that approaching the subject through gift and play theories could provide an interesting interpretation as to why participants may be enjoying religion at BM.

I have argued that BM is not only a formidable terrain in which to see religion being enjoyed, but that it is its religiosity that makes it so enjoyable. To recount the argument synthetically, Riis and Woodhead provided a heuristic framework from which to seize the issue of enjoyment and religion through the concept of "emotional regimes" (2010). In this perspective, "religious emotional regimes" are made of situational interactions between social determinations, symbols, and agents. The culture of authenticity and expressivity that has become mainstreamed through the consumer revolution of the 1960s provides a path for inner-worldly salvation through the exploration, expression, and recognition of the autonomous Self. This culture of authenticity is particularly alive in "event-cultures" such as BM, and can be understood as catering to such a religious emotional regime. Through a discussion based on the Ten Principles and ethnographic material, the civic, cultural, and religious experiment of Black Rock City appears to be a remarkable liminal frame in which to fully and playfully experience and experiment with the dynamics of identity, recognition, and belonging typical of the culture of authenticity. It is because participants experience their "selves" in a particularly welcoming and open social environment characterized by intense feelings of community that the complexities and ambivalences of the emotions lived can be interpreted as enjoyable.

At the core of the dynamics of the Ten Principles lies the gift. Considering BM from the perspective of the gift opens onto another dimension of enjoyment. Set against a market society in which self-interest, calculation, and maximization (the profit motive) is a structuring principle, BM provides a context in which the motive to give can freely express itself. The ephemerality of this context allows for modern subjects to give unconditionally, freed from self-interested calculation. It also allows them to receive without feeling obliged to direct reciprocity and without feeling "crushed" (Mauss 2016) by the gifts of others. Defining religion as a triaxial system of the gift highlights how the gifts of BM suppose a third party—a conflation of the community and Nature—that creates the sentiment of participating in "something larger." "Burners" are, therefore, both the dispensers and receivers of a sort of grace.

Finally, Roberte Hamayon's work on play has proven central to our discussion by enabling a third entry into the issue of enjoyment and religion. Rather than seeing play as a degraded ersatz of "real" religion and ritual, it suggests that religion can be conceptualized on an ideal-



typical spectrum opposing “God” to “spirit” religions, ritual (observance of rules) to play (liberty within a frame). The abundance of play-type (vs. game-type) play at BM can be interpreted as exploiting the margin opened by play and the possibilities that arise from indeterminacy. There is an ethics of play that is also at work at BM: play is not only enjoyable but also *must* be enjoyed. There is an obligation to pleasure, as the pleasure of play pleases the spirits as much as it displeases God—whether these spirits are explicit or only constitute an indeterminate, supposed metaphysical third as is the case here.

The insights whose threads we have followed in these different religious dimensions (soteriology of the self, gift system, play) are interconnected, intricate, and complementary. In other words, they form a system that actualizes the “grammar” of religion in a culture of authenticity. Play is particularly attuned to such a culture as it allows for experimentation with different selves and different identities. On a general level, play as a vast yet specific modality of action involves metaphorical situations and actions (“as if” and “what if”) and thereby serves not only a *subjectivation* function but also, through the logics of gift, a function of *communitization*. Finally, then, whether it be from the angle of authenticity, gift, or play, enjoying religion at BM has to do with the dual experience of subjectivity and belonging, identity and community, agency and obligation.

## NOTES

1. This contribution has been made possible by different funding schemes at various moments of the research. More recent funding has been allotted by the Université de Fribourg and the Swiss National Fund (see <https://www.burningprogeny.org>).

2. Personal interview, 2003. I have conducted research on Burning Man since 2001, including participant observation at the 2003, 2004, and 2008 events, as well as coordination of a team of five MA students at the 2012 event. Material collected includes several dozens of more or less structured interviews, innumerable informal conversations, and field notes, as well as secondary sources and contact with key actors.

3. Cf. <http://burningman.org/culture/philosophical-center/10-principles/> (accessed March 23, 2017). All following quotes are drawn from this webpage.

4. <http://burningman.org/culture/philosophical-center/10-principles/> (accessed March 23, 2017).

5. I am using “desire” (or “longing”) to avoid “need,” which easily slips into a utilitarian and economic anthropology in which individuals are concerned with their satisfaction.

6. “Ancestors” is a generic term here, designating the departed. The Temple rituals also concern lost peers, who become ancestors through their disappearance.

7. This story was widely circulated in “burner” networks as well as in media in a variety of versions (e.g., <http://www.usatoday.com/story/life/2015/09/06/susan-sarandon-burning-man-timothy-leary-ashes-15d/71801664/>, accessed May 23, 2017).

8. Burning Man census data is available at <https://burningman.org/event/volunteering/teams/census/>.

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## SEVEN

# Happinez, Zen, and Wealth

Frans Jespers

### NEW SPIRITUALITIES AND CONSUMPTION

Nowadays, a number of spiritual practices leave something of a commercial impression: burn incense from this particular brand or follow a course by that infallible guru as your true key to happiness, for instance. While traditional religions tend to focus on contrite contemplation or a lasting devotion to a higher power, the goal in new spirituality, rather, seems to be closer to self-realization. And it often seems as if conspicuous consumption lights the way. Does this mean that the content of the religious traditions has become mere merchandise here?

Where lifestyle or entertainment are concerned, it is clear that religious elements are often offered as a commercial package. You can buy Buddha heads in a garden center to give your garden a relaxing atmosphere. By contrast, in various computer games, gods and miraculous powers add to the excitement. So both purchasers and players enjoy religion—or, rather, religious *elements*—in manifold ways. In spiritual practices, the association with religion is stronger, although here once more participants often seem to avoid a direct link with the notion of religion. Such practices often hover over the borderland between religion and secularity. To what extent does it make sense to speak of “religion” in spiritual consumption? Can the religious aspect be truly identified? Can we discover what it is that makes religion such an attractive means for commercial exploitation, for enjoyment?

Two of the most successful spiritual practices in the Netherlands over the past few years (approximately 2010 to 2015) provide examples here. Zen.nl is a meditation institute profiling itself as a modern form of Zen