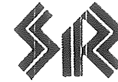

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Lennon and Jesus: Secularization and the Transformation of Religion

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Abstract: John Lennon's religious discourse, as manifested in his many interviews and song lyrics, is characterized by two conflicting elements: a strong interest in Jesus as a moral figure, and criticism of the Christian establishment. Lennon's message of love and peace was inspired by certain Christian ideas that he attributed to Jesus, as well as by his recognition of the declining relevance of established religion in society. Lennon also made close connections between the Beatles and religion. His ideas on religion therefore demonstrate both individualistic religious sensibilities and motivations that run counter to the religious establishment, and even, in a sense, aim to replace it. Lennon's attitudes toward religion are examined here in light of trends toward secularization in the 1960s; studies of religious experimentalism; and the non-conventional religious typology of humanism as a quasi-religion.

Résumé : Le discours religieux de John Lennon, tel qu'il se manifeste dans ses nombreuses interviews et paroles de chansons, est caractérisé par deux éléments contradictoires : un fort intérêt pour Jésus comme figure morale et une critique de l'establishment chrétien. Le message d'amour et de paix de Lennon serait inspiré par certaines idées chrétiennes qu'il attribue à Jésus, ainsi que par sa reconnaissance du déclin de la pertinence de la religion établie dans la société. Lennon a également établi des liens étroits entre les Beatles et la religion. Ses idées sur la religion démontrent à la fois des sensibilités religieuses individualistes et des motivations qui vont à l'encontre de l'establishment religieux, allant même, jusqu'à proposer de le remplacer. Les attitudes envers la religion de John Lennon sont ici examinées à la lumière des tendances à la

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sécularisation des années 1960 ; des études sur l'expérimentalisme religieux ; et de la typologie du religieux non conventionnel de l'humanisme comme une quasi-religion.

Keywords
John Lennon, Beatles, Christ, secularization, religious experience, humanism

Mots clés
John Lennon, Beatles, Le Christ, sécularisation, expérience religieuse, humanisme

> We are trying to make Christ's message contemporary[1]

Introduction

In May 1968, John Lennon gathered the other three Beatles and their close associates Pete Shotton, Derek Taylor, and Neil Aspinall in the Apple Corps office. He then announced that he was Jesus Christ reincarnate. Though the revelation had come to Lennon during an LSD trip with Shotton the night before, he was still convinced of its truth when he woke up the following morning. Those assembled, however, weren't so sure. Stunned into silence, the Beatles decided to delay comment.[2]

Luckily, the perplexing news was soon forgotten, and even John deserted his overt Christ fixation (the next day, he began his intimate relationship with Yoko Ono). Yet, whatever the catalyst for this incident,[3] it undoubtedly demonstrates Lennon's deep empathy for Jesus, as well as his strong religious sensibilities. As we will see below, he consistently expressed these sensibilities in relation to Jesus' teaching, and may also have implied them in his lyrics.

To be sure, Lennon is commonly regarded as anti-religious.[4] (His criticism of the Christian establishment and rejection of basic Christian creeds will be explained in depth in what follows.) Yet, as a careful analysis of his statements and song lyrics shows, this manifestly "secular" rock star devoted a great deal of his adult life to the contemplation of the meaning of Jesus and religion in modernity.

In the first part of this article, I will discuss these two conflicting aspects of Lennon's ideas on religion and unbelief. I will use his own statements in various interviews as a key to interpreting the religious attitudes conveyed in his songs, both with the Beatles and during his early solo career.[5] I will also aim to show that Lennon's discourse of love and peace stemmed, at least partly, from his recognition of the declining relevance of established religion in society. In fact, I believe that this discourse represents an attempt to *revitalize* certain religious ideals in a new guise. Indeed, his later, counter-religious solo tracks ("God," "I Found Out," and "Imagine") express ideals that purport to replace conventional religious ones.[6]

In the second part of this article, I will turn to the sociological context for Lennon's ideas, and submit them to a theoretical analysis. His views about Jesus' message, religiosity in modernity, and the decline of institutional Christianity will be discussed in light of several theories of secularization; sociological studies regarding secularization and

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religious experimentalism; and one non-conventional religious typology: humanism as a quasi-religion. It is my hope that a sociological perspective will clarify the historical background—i.e., the emergence of secularization and religious experimentalism in the 1960s and early 1970s—for Lennon's religious views. In utilizing these sociological and theoretical tools, I will try to make sense of the relationship between Lennon's own religious sensibilities on the one hand, and his rejection of institutionalized religion on the other.

Understanding Lennon's views on religion (and particularly on Christianity) is important for three reasons. First, Lennon is in many ways an ideal lens through which to observe his generation: the so-called "counterculture" of the late 1960s and early 1970s in England and the United States, symbolized by the cultural touchstone of Woodstock, "peace, love, and rock 'n' roll." His personal religious views were, in a certain sense, a product of these phenomena. Second, unlike most other religious seekers, Lennon was a cultural leader—and he used both his celebrity and his art to engender a cultural transformation. Songs like "Revolution" and "Imagine" were intended to influence public opinion; so, too, did Lennon attempt to translate his pacifist views into concrete action through his and Yoko's peace campaign. Third, Lennon's religious discourse may provide a useful test case for the applicability of theoretical models of secularization, alternative religious forms, and above all, the transformation of religion in modernity.

"The Beatles are More Popular than Jesus" and Secularization

Lennon's famous "more popular than Jesus" statement is an excellent place to begin an exploration of his peculiar interest in Jesus and awareness of the transformation religion was undergoing in modern society. In 1966, Lennon was quoted in an interview with his friend, the reporter Maureen Cleave, as saying,

> Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink ... We're more popular than Jesus now. I don't know which will go first—rock 'n' roll or Christianity. Jesus was alright, but his disciples were thick and ordinary. It's them twisting it that ruins it for me. (Cleave, 1966a, 1966b; Turner, 2006: 21–25)

Not surprisingly, this inflammatory statement raised hackles in the USA: A wave of anti-Beatles demonstrations rolled across the American South; people burned Beatles records on bonfires; radio stations were banned from playing Beatles records. Even the Vatican was sufficiently irked to make a special public comment on the matter. Brian Epstein, the Beatles' manager, expressed his fear that members of the group might be the target of an assassination attempt during the upcoming American tour (Turner, 2006: 20–35; Norman, 2008: 447–454). Fourteen years later, allegedly enraged by this statement and the "anti-religious" lyrics of "Imagine," Mark David Chapman—a Beatles fan, but also a "Jesus freak"—carried out the long-feared deed.[7]

The important point, of course, is not whether John really believed that he or the Beatles were "more popular than Jesus" in an objective sense. It should be noted, in this context, that his public apology at a Chicago press conference held shortly thereafter

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would seem to indicate that he *did* stand behind his bold statement: "We meant more to kids than Jesus did, or religion at that time," he explained, "I was just saying it as a fact, and it is true more for England than here. I'm not saying that we're better or greater, or comparing us with Jesus Christ as a person or God."[8] Rather, what matters is that Lennon felt comfortable—and confident—enough to discuss the decline of Christianity in such a casual manner.

Lennon compared the Beatles (and rock music in general) to Christianity, argued for the latter's decrease in popularity and eventual disappearance, and even separated the historical figure of Jesus from the religion that bears his name, on account of the latter's inferiority. All these assertions reflect a process of secularization—that is, a process in which religious creeds, practices, and institutions lose their social significance, and individuals or institutions experience a decline in levels of religiosity (Wilson, 1982: esp. 149; see below). As Bob Dylan put it two years earlier, albeit in altogether different circumstances, "The times, they are a-changin'." Lennon, however, was not merely the messenger, or the one who put a culture's state of mind into words. As a Beatle, he was arguably one of the instigators of a grand cultural transformation.

Indeed, the furious—some would even say overblown—reactions to Lennon's Jesus statement demonstrate that it was precisely Lennon's portent of secularization that lay at the heart of the controversy. In 1966, the public at large still viewed secularization as a novel phenomenon in both England and the US; likewise, it was only just beginning to draw scholarly attention.[9] Lennon's statements were arguably the first time that the more conservative segments of his audience had been confronted with this changing reality, and certainly in so bold a manner. Lennon seems to have been keenly aware of the parallels between his stardom and the religion of old: Beatlemania's intense levels of hysteria undeniably mirrored the ecstatic frenzies generally associated with evangelistic revivals. Lennon consciously ushered in a cultural war between institutionalized Christianity and the Beatles, who in turn came to represent something much larger than merely rock 'n' roll music.

In what follows, I will try to show that some of Lennon's lyrics and interview statements reveal an awareness of the confrontation between Christianity and the encroaching secularization. At the same time, it is clear that he regarded his art and music as a kind of *reaction* to what he recognized as a momentous religious and cultural change taking place in Western society.

"We're All Jesus": Lennon's Views on Jesus, Christianity and God

In interviews granted after the "more popular than Jesus" incident, Lennon consistently articulates an approach that at once combines a deep interest in certain Christian ideas with a rejection of both the Church as an institution and several of Christianity's more significant creeds. Although these interviews mostly reflect his own opinion, it is my belief that the views expressed here serve as the intellectual backdrop for some of his most famous songs, and were the impetus for his cultural–political activism. In this way, Lennon's personal religious ideas had the effect of influencing the masses, if only indirectly.

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To be sure, Lennon believed there was much good in Christianity.[10] In commenting on the benefits of studying with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, for example, he conceded that "there's a lot of good in Christianity, but you've got to learn the basics of it, and the basics from the Eastern beliefs, and work them together for yourself" (Coleman, 1992: 524). Lennon (as well as the other Beatles, and particularly George Harrison) had some interest in Eastern philosophy, Buddhism, Zen, Krishna devotion, and other popular religious ideas of his day.[11] This interest no doubt stemmed from his desire to uncover a spiritual message beyond that laid out in Church doctrine. Indeed, the most common feature of Lennon's treatment of religious issues is his attempt to unearth the *original Jesus and his authentic message*—i.e., before it was "corrupted" by the later religious establishment. Lennon sought the revitalization of the individual, and in particular the desire to be a more "conscious" and moral person.

In a cover story in December 1966 (Gross, 1966), for example, it was reported that Lennon "does not feel that one need accept the divinity of Jesus—he, personally, does not—in order to profit from his words." As a result of his extensive reading on ancient history as well as philosophy, "he [Lennon] contends that man has mishandled Christ's words throughout the centuries." Lennon was quoted as saying:

> I believe Jesus was right, Buddha was right, and all of those people like that are right. They're all saying the same thing—and I believe it. I believe what Jesus actually said—the basic things he laid down about love and goodness—and not what people say he said.

In other words, Lennon adhered to Christian ethics *without* believing that Jesus was Christ. This is a key aspect of Lennon's general attitude towards religion, later expressed in his song lyrics. As we shall see below, this "paradoxical" thinking fits neatly with the phenomena of secularization and the rise of alternative religious forms.

Lennon's interest in the Bible and Jesus is also clear from a conversation he had with Cleave, in which he told her that LSD led him to wonder whether Christ might have had similar transcendent experiences that had been reduced to dry dogma by the Church. There were times, he said, when he thought he understood the Bible anew. He wondered, for instance, whether, when Jesus said, "The Kingdom of God is within you," he in truth meant that we should be exploring that "within," rather than living obedient lives in return for "pie in the sky" (an expression he later repeated in "I Found Out" and other interviews). Furthermore, wondered Lennon, had Christ been thinking of mystical experiences when he said, "the truth shall make you free"? Was he in fact referring to the dissolution of barriers within one's own ego when he said, "I am in my Father, and ye in me, and I in You"?[12] Lennon did not hesitate to reassess both Jesus the person and his message in light of the spiritual experiences he had while in a state of altered consciousness.

Sometime between 1969 and 1971, in the context of an interview with Ray Coleman in which he explained his attempts at perfection—and his doubts that he would ever achieve it—Lennon declared, "I'd like to be like Christ." He then went on to describe himself as a Christian communist "in a pure sense, not in the way Russia or Italy think of Christianity or communism" (Coleman, 1992: 525).

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Lennon's admiration of the figure of Jesus coexisted with his belief that the Church—and institutionalized religion in general—was in truth the root of the problem, as he stressed in interviews in the early 1970s:

> I have nothing against it except that it organizes itself as a business, the Church. What I do like about it is that Christians talk about being perfect; so was Christ and I was taught that as a child. Christ is the one who most people in the West refer to when they speak of good people . . . If I could do what Christ did, be as Christ was, that's what being Christian is all about. I try to live as Christ lived. (Coleman, 1992: 535)

In an interview with Steve Turner in July 1971, after recording the album "Imagine," Lennon reacted spontaneously to a letter from "the Jesus Freaks in America" in which they called upon him to come back to Jesus. "I know what the Christian jazz is," he said. "I've had it all my life. This is the Christ bit, you know—give yourself to Christ. A: He's dead. B: Prove it to me." The conversation then proceeded to the matter of "looking for gurus," or what Lennon believed lay at the heart of Christians' love for Christ:

> You're looking for the answer that everyone is supposedly looking for. You're looking for some kind of Super Daddy . . . I think Jesus was probably a very hip guy. I think a lot of the stuff about magic and miracles is probably a lot of bullshit that was written about years later. I think he was just a very hip guy and you can read his messages. What he really says is "You are here. Be true to yourself. Try to love people. Love your neighbor. Help someone if they're down." They are quite practical statements. It's very aligned to communism, what he says. (Turner, 1971; 2006: 209–210)

In an interview in 1968, Lennon described Jesus as a mere person, albeit one who set a good example for humanity to follow:

> We're all Jesus and we're all God. . . . He's inside all of us and that's what it's all about. As soon as you start realizing that potential in everyone, well, then you can change it [humanity] and the person themselves [*sic*] can change it. That's the whole bit. Jesus wasn't God come down on earth any more than anybody else was. He was just a better example of a good guy. (Turner, 2006: 11, 212)

Lennon also had his own interpretation of the theological concept of the "Kingdom of God," which he associated with meditation. As he explained in an interview in 1967, "It runs alongside Christianity amazingly. Re-read it now, you know, what it's about. The kingdom of heaven within you. It *is* within you" (Nightingale, 1967).

Lennon's reference to the human's inside, his realization of the human potential, along with his reinterpretation of "the kingdom of heaven *within* you" (as well as the lyrics of "Tomorrow Never Knows," discussed below), all recall the concept of an "inside/outside experience" described in Aldous Huxley's *Doors of Perception* and his claim that "each person is at each moment capable of remembering all that has ever happened to him and of perceiving everything that is happening everywhere in the universe" while high on psychedelic drugs (Huxley, 1968 [1954]: 9, 16–17). As already mentioned, Lennon openly confessed that LSD granted him profound insight into Jesus' teachings.[13]

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In fact, reinterpreting religious traditions on the basis of an altered state of consciousness is common in religious experimentalism; it is an attempt to experience the sacred *without* being committed to it; it is a kind of "religion surrogate" (H. Smith, 1964).

As much as he appreciated certain Christian beliefs, then, Lennon made no bones about his *rejection of the Christian establishment*, which, as we shall see below, relates to the British becoming "believers" but not "belongers." He maintained that "Christianity has suffered ... not only because Christians have distorted Christ's words but because they concern themselves with structures and numbers and fail to listen to their vows"; believers fail to pay attention "to the words of their own prayers." He concluded: "They don't seem to be able to be concerned without having all the scene about, with statues and buildings and things" (Gross, 1966).

He was even more critical in an interview in 1967, when he replied to a question about his feelings on the religious dimension of the "flower-power movement" by saying,

> I can understand religion now. I might have come to that conclusion anyway at 25 or 26. But now I understand it—realizing that The Church Of England and all those things, they're government. We all rejected that. I'm not against organized religion if it's organized by religious people and not just by politicians disguised. But they've got themselves into the position of any big company—they lose touch. *I've realized religion is personal*. It's "Do as you would be done by" really.[14] (*emphasis mine*)

Similarly, when asked in an interview for the BBC in 1969 if he ever went to church, he replied:

> No, I don't need to go to church ... I respect churches because of the sacredness that's been put on them over the years by people who do believe. [But] I think a lot of bad things have happened in the name of the Church and in the name of Christ and therefore I shy away from church. (Wigg, 1969)[15]

Lennon had a distinctive *conception of God*. In his public apology for the "more popular than Jesus" comment, for instance, he explained, "I'm not anti-God, anti-Christ, or anti-Religion ... I believe in God but not as an old man in the sky. I believe that what people call God is something in all of us" (Coleman, 1992: 408). When asked in 1971 whether he believed in God, Lennon replied that since he "questions everything," he couldn't possibly believe in an "old man in the sky." But on second thought, he added, "I believe in something, definitely. I believe there is a force at work that you can't physically account for" (Coleman, 1992: 535). Moreover, when pushed on a French radio show to explain his supposed declaration that he *is* God, he answered:

> We're all God, you know. I mean, Christ said, the kingdom of heaven is within you. And that's what it means, you know. And the Indians say that and the Zen people say that. It's a basic thing of religion. We're all God. I'm not a God or the God. But we're all God and we're all potentially divine and potentially evil. We all have everything within us. And the kingdom of heaven is nigh and within us, you know. And if you look hard enough you see it.[16]

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Lennon expressed more than once a religious philosophy that can best be summed up as, "*finding your own God and your own church*"—in other words, an individual theological belief centered on one's self. Commenting on the shortcomings of his experimentation with drugs in 1969, he remarked, "You're left with yourself all the time, whatever you do—you know, meditation, drugs or anything. But you've got to get down to your own god and your own temple in your head."[17] On another occasion that same year, he stated, "as Donovan once said, I go to my own church and my own temple once a day, you know. And I think people who need a church should go, and the others who know the church is in your own head should visit that temple, 'cuz that's where the source is" (Wigg, 1969). Such expressions of religious individualism, the desire for a privatization of faith, and the call for self-realization had all been major religious trends since the 1960s, especially in the US (Bellah et al., 1985: 220–221, 231–235, 245–248).

Interestingly, however, when approached directly about his *personal notion of religiosity*, he felt uncomfortable being identified with any particular religion. Asked whether he called himself a religious person, he answered, "I wouldn't really. I am in the respect that I believe in goodness and all those things." But when interviewer Leonard Gross (1966) redefined being religious as being "concerned," according to Paul Tillich (see Tillich, 1963: 4–5; 1987: 13–15, 32–38), Lennon was more willing to embrace the title. "Well, I am then. I'm concerned alright. I'm concerned with people." This deeply humanistic stance will become more apparent in "Imagine" (and see below, on humanistic quasi-religion).

Lennon gave perhaps the best summation of his attitude towards religion in one of his last interviews (Sheff, 1981). Discussing the idea of father figures (such as the psychiatrist Janov and the Maharishi) and the tendency to confuse messages with messengers, he commented:

> People always got the image I was an anti-Christ or anti-religion. I'm not. I'm a most religious fellow. I was brought up a Christian and I only now understand some of the things that Christ was saying in those parables. Because people got hooked on the teacher and missed the message.

Interestingly, Lennon was here repeating some of the same ideas he had been articulating since 1966. Yet in a previous interview given to Robert Hilburn of the *Los Angeles Times* in 1979, Lennon confessed he had had a so-called "born-again experience": recently, he told Hilburn, he'd accepted that "Jesus was real ... I had this feeling, this vision and feeling. I truly had a born-again experience, if you want to call it that. It's an overused term. But it's something that people can relate to." When Hilburn asked him what "born again" meant, Lennon responded that "born once is born from the spirit below, which is when you're born. It's the spirit you're born with. Born again is born with the Spirit from above, which is a little bit different."[18] This may have been a turning point in Lennon's religious development, or even a kind of return to square one, in his adoption of established Christianity.

Apart from this later assertion, Lennon's views were quite consistent. He appreciated Jesus as a historical figure and a model for moral behavior, but he did not appreciate the

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Church as an institution. Indeed, not only did he deride the Church's rituals, he even rejected the Christian conceptions of God and Christ.

Christ Imagery, the Beatles, and Religion

John Lennon played with the image of Jesus in different ways. Sometimes he portrayed himself as Christ, while at other times he drew analogies between his (and the Beatles') and Jesus' message, or that of religion in general.

His most famous allusion to Jesus is in "The Ballad of John & Yoko." Recorded in April 1969 and released as a Beatles single in the most unstable phase of the band's career, the lyrics are a narrative account of John's and Yoko's difficulties getting married, their first "bed-in" for peace while on their honeymoon in Amsterdam, and the "Bagism" demonstration in Vienna (cf. Coleman, 1992: 492–501). The chorus repeats the following verse: "Christ! You know it ain't easy, you know how hard it can be. The way things are going, they're going to crucify me." The song, a complaint about the media's hounding of John and Yoko, expressed "the Lennons' paranoia about the public's scorn" (Coleman, 1992: 550). It is also possible that the Christ imagery derives from Lennon's feeling that, just as Jesus was mocked and harassed, his own message of peace was misunderstood (as well as, it might be noted, his love for Yoko). People did not believe that his intentions were pure, just as they did not recognize how vital was his peace campaign for making the world a better place. Indeed, Lennon felt that his message was conveyed only in order to be ridiculed, and that he and Yoko were the subject of media attention only so that they could be mocked.

The lyrics of several other tracks also indicate that Lennon perceived his public image and career as a struggle with the outside world. "Hold On" (1970) opens with the verse, "Hold on John ... It's gonna be alright, You gonna win the fight." "Isolation" (1970) deals directly with a similar situation, in which Lennon confesses: "Just a boy and a little girl, trying to change the whole wide world. Isolation: All the world is a little town, everybody trying to put us down. Isolation."[19]

Lennon also made at least one tongue-in-cheek allusion to himself as Christ: he signed Art Unger's copy of the issue of *Datebook* in which the notorious "more popular than Jesus" statement was published in the US as "John C. Lennon," remarking that "The C is for Christ."[20]

Clearly, Lennon genuinely regarded the Beatles' message as on a par with that of Jesus. In an interview in 1966, he again pointed to the shortcomings of established religion, and implied that if the public preferred the Beatles' music to the message of the Church, it was because the former expressed a commitment to the true message of Jesus: "If they took more interest in what Jesus—or any of them—said, if they did that, we'd all be there with them" (Gross, 1966). This association of the Beatles with Jesus' own message is crucial for the understanding of Lennon's themes of love and peace.[21]

In fact, Lennon was tempted to regard the Beatles and rock 'n' roll in general as a new type of religion.[22] After the breakup, he commented, "The Beatles were a kind of religion," and said that rock festivals at Woodstock and on the Isle of Wight "were the youth getting together and forming a new church, as it were" (Turner, 2006: 11). In a reference to the purpose of his peace campaign, Lennon said that "Power to the People"

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"isn't expected to make a revolution. It's for the people to sing, like the Christians sing hymns" (Coleman, 1992: 534).

Curiously, we can already see evidence of Lennon's religious imagination in 1961, when, in response to the question about the origin of the name "the Beatles," he answered: "It came in a vision: A man appeared on a flaming pie and said unto them, 'From this day on you are Beatles with an A.'"[23] Witty as it was, the answer may nonetheless reveal much about the young Lennon's religious imagination, and perhaps also his self-regard: clearly, he saw himself as worthy of such a revelation.

All these instances in which Lennon portrayed himself as similar to Christ, or the Beatles (or rock music in general) as the new (or better) face of Jesus' message, are important in that they show Lennon's inclination to draw parallels between his music and religion, or at least religious beliefs. Turning now to Lennon's lyrics, I would like to show that his ideas about Jesus' teachings and the tenuous state of religion in modernity were not the stuff of mere intellectual entertainment, detached from his artistic and cultural activity. On the contrary, interpreting his lyrics and public activity in light of his ideas about religion reveals his attempts, through art, to (1) conceal religious sensibilities, thus presenting them in a non-religious disguise, (2) express his notion of secularization, and (3) provide an alternative to established religion. In interpreting his lyrics as a religiously inclined discourse, I suggest that Lennon felt, as did Max Weber (1969: 342), not only that art produces values, but also that "art takes over the function of a this-worldly salvation ... [i]t provides salvation from the routines of everyday life."

Lennon's Gospel of Love

Unlike most pop artists of his time, Lennon tried in several of his songs not only to protest at the acts and ideology of the "Establishment," but also to promote a message with the potential to change his listeners' attitude toward life. Lennon, together with the other Beatles, sought above all to advance the message of love as a humanitarian value, or, as he defined it in 1972, "[an] appreciation of other people and allowing them to be. Love is allowing somebody to be themselves [*sic*]" (Cadogan, 2008: 198).

"The Word," from the Beatles' 1965 album *Rubber Soul*, is probably the earliest example of Lennon's tendency to couch a post-religious message in distinctly religious terms. Here, the Beatles call on their listeners to say the word "Love" as a kind of mantra, the key to being free, successful ("Say the Word and be like me"), and optimistic. Lennon clearly implies that his message of love accords with the Bible (the "Good Book"), but that it is found in other faiths, as well: "Everywhere I go I hear it said, In the good and the bad books that I have read." Love is here portrayed as a kind of divine message, which parallels that of Jesus.[24] Finally, he sings, "Now that I know what I feel must be right, I mean to show ev'rybody the light"—a clear reference to the language of preaching. Lennon believed that his vocation was not just that of a singer; rather, it was also that of a preacher of wisdom to the world—which in itself calls to mind ancient Christian ideas.[25]

Lennon's most famous "sermon" on love, however, is undoubtedly "All You Need is Love." Written as a hymn (beginning with the chanting of "Love, Love" throughout the first verses), the message is straightforward: "There's nothing you can make that can't

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be made," that is, as long as you have love. Love is the key to knowledge, understanding, success, etc. Here, as with "The Word," love is used not in its romantic sense, as was the case with other Beatles' songs, such as "She Loves You," "Can't Buy Me Love," "I Love Her," etc. Instead, love has an existential meaning: the love of mankind, humanity, and the universe. Its usage recalls the biblical injunctions to "Love your neighbor" (Lev 19:18) and "Love your enemies" (Matt 5:44), along with Paul's gospel of love (1 Cor 13; cf. 1 John 4:7–12).

In truth, however, the significance of "All You Need Is Love" lies in the context in which it was written and released. It debuted on a live television broadcast—the first international satellite link-up—on 25 June 1967, and was viewed by about 350 million people, in what Lennon could not have failed to recognize was a kind of "public sermon." The message was meant to be universal and to overwhelm its listeners—and, at the time, it arguably succeeded (Hertsgaard, 1995: 223–227).

The significance of love to one's life is also expressed in another unusual Beatles track, "Tomorrow Never Knows" (*Revolver*, 1966), in which Lennon announces "that love is all and love is everyone." Here love is portrayed as a cosmic entity that transforms individual persons into humanity as a whole. This song was a musically daring, bizarre, hypnotic, and LSD-inspired composition. The words, drawn from Timothy Leary's *The Psychedelic Experience*, were guru-like instructions for achieving a state of altered consciousness (Hertsgaard, 1995: 177–178; Turner, 2006: 124). Here Lennon called on his listeners to relax, to "surrender to the void," "see the meaning of within," "play the game 'existence,'" and, quite surprisingly, to believe ("It is believing, it is believing"). In this context, the role of love seems especially important, since it is the only substantial, concrete value acknowledged amidst the dynamic abstractions that characterize the psychedelic mood. Love, claims Lennon, is nothing less than the essence of life.

Interestingly, a more intense, even aggressive, exhortation to love one's fellow man is found in Lennon's solo single "Instant Karma!" (1969). According to Coleman (1992: 553), it marked "his belief that togetherness and love could still save the world." Lines like "What in the world you thinking of, Laughing in the face of love," and "Better recognize your brothers, Ev'ryone you meet," use the threat of Karma to confront those who reject the gospel of love. The chorus implies that everybody is entitled to be loved, since "we all shine on, Like the moon and the stars and the sun."

In light of Lennon's special interest in Jesus and his message, I would suggest that his emphasis on the message of existential or humanitarian love derived not only from his involvement with psychedelic drugs and transcendental meditation. On the contrary, it was mainly associated with Jesus' gospel, as Lennon understood it.

The Peace Campaign

In an interview in 1969, Lennon said, "I am an artist, and my art is peace" (Coleman, 1992: 531–532, 534). Indeed, Lennon is known for his pacifism, which he viewed as nothing less than a calling. The first musical step in this direction was "Revolution" (later included in the so-called *White Album*).[26] Recorded in May 1968, the song was Lennon's reaction to the student riots of spring 1968 (Wiener, 1991: 58–59).

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With a nod to various revolutionary mottos or activities—"destruction," a change in "the constitution" or "the institution," and, finally, "carrying pictures of chairman Mao"—Lennon presented himself as someone asked by the revolutionaries to join their cause. His reply is sympathetic: "Well, you know, we all want to change the world ... We'd all love to see the plan ... We all do what we can." Eventually, however, he declines to count himself as one of their number: "Don't you know that you can count me out" (it should be noted that in a later version, he added a provocative "in," cf. Wiener, 1991: 61). "... All I can tell you is brother you have to wait ... You ain't gonna make it with anyone anyhow." He also seeks to diffuse the radicals' passion, repeating three times in the chorus, "Don't you know it's going to be all right."[27]

Lennon also hints at his own alternative: "We'd all love to change your head. ... Well, you know, You better free your mind instead." The ideal change, it would seem from these lyrics, is not an external one, nor certainly one enacted under threat of violence. Rather, it should come from and remain *within* (which may also be a nod to psychedelics or Eastern meditation). In other words, instead of any political, Marxist, or military attempt to "change the world," people should first try to change their own individual attitudes towards life—a theme that echoes "All You Need Is Love," discussed above (Wiener, 1991: 60–63, 83–84; Cadogan, 2008: 22).

Lennon's actual peace campaign would begin several months later. Soon after their marriage in March 1969, John and Yoko staged their first "bed-in" demonstration for world peace at the Amsterdam Hilton. While lying in bed for seven days wearing white pajamas, John and Yoko accepted visits from journalists from around the world, who no doubt expected to see the couple doing something other than promoting world peace. Lennon urged others to grow out their hair as a symbol of the peace campaign. As he explained, "We are willing to become the world's clowns if it helps to spread the word for peace." Clearly, John and Yoko's campaign was aimed not so much at politicians as it was at the world's youth, whom they urged to adopt a policy of non-violence.[28] In the famous Amsterdam press conferences Lennon expressed this message explicitly, and with surprisingly religious fervor:

> All I'm saying is peace ... We're not pointing a finger at anybody ... The struggle is in the mind. We must bury our own monsters and stop condemning people. We're all Christ and we are all Hitler. *We are trying to make Christ's message contemporary.* We want Christ to win. (Coleman, 1992: 498)

Notably, "Christ" is used in three different contexts in this statement. Does it demonstrate the religious motivation at the basis of the peace campaign, or merely disclose Lennon's use of Christian symbolism in the service of promoting "secular" aims? In an interview with Coleman shortly thereafter, Lennon remarked about the peace campaign: "I think I'll win because I believe in what Jesus said" (Coleman, 1992: 532). Clearly Lennon's peace campaign was the result of religious sensibilities, if not the conventional Christian ones. More precisely, Lennon was motivated by what *he* regarded as Jesus' original message of peace and brotherly love, as articulated in the Gospels (e.g., Luke 19:38; John 16:33).

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Lennon's musical call for world peace is nowhere more pronounced than in his first solo single, "Give Peace a Chance." The track, which was recorded live in John and Yoko's second Montreal bed-in, is a simple repetition of the line, "All we are saying, is give peace a chance," dozens of times. Following this chant is a list of competing "solutions" for the world's problems: "Bagism, Shagism, Dragism, Madism, Ragism, . . . Ministers, Sinisters, Banisters and canisters, Bishops and Fish shops and Rabbis and Popeyes." At Christmas 1971, immediately after their move to New York, John and Yoko released the track "Happy Xmas (War Is Over)," featuring the chorus "War is over (if you want it)." As Lennon explained it, "If everybody demanded peace instead of another television set, there'd be peace" (Coleman, 1992: 524).

There can be no mistaking that Lennon's messages of love and peace are related in some way to his interest in Jesus and in the uncertain role of religion in modern society. In his early solo career, however, Lennon's lyrics were explicitly critical of conventional religious creeds, even going so far as to introduce an alternative belief system. Here, Lennon put forth ideas we have already encountered in his interviews.

"God": Unbelief and Self-realization

Lennon's most transparent display of unbelief is undoubtedly the song "God," released on his debut solo album *Plastic Ono Band* (1970). Here he declared that "God is a concept by which we measure our pain," which, as he explained to Steve Turner (2006: 210), means that "the more pain we're in, the more we need God." He then goes on to list a long series of things he does not believe in, including magic, tarot, Bible, Buddha, Kennedy, Zimmerman (i.e., Bob Dylan), and, most significantly, "Jesus." For the record, Lennon also claimed that, "I don't believe in Beatles."[29] As for what he *does* believe in: "I just believe in me, Yoko, and Me, and that reality." He then concludes that the dream, of which he was the dream weaver, is over. Now he is reborn.

During the same period, Lennon explained his philosophy of life to Steve Turner—the same philosophy, that is, that he had outlined so bluntly in "God": "You are here. Live for today . . . Why should I follow Jesus? I'll follow Yoko. I'll follow myself" (Turner, 2006: 209–210). As shown above, Lennon believed that his ideas cohered with Jesus' teaching; he also promoted a deliberately vague concept of God as a cosmic entity of goodness in which every human being may share.

Nonetheless, Lennon's seemingly obsessive need to deny his belief in Jesus and to declare that God is a farce implies that he *did* at one time view religion as truth. Indeed, he confessed to an intensive interest in religion during 1965–1966, what he called "the acid days," a period in which his superstar status became the catalyst for a serious reflection on the meaning of life. "Religion was an outlet for my repression," he said, and even referred to his occupation with religion as "the Godtrip." He also made clear that his current rejection of religion was the result of the "Primal Scream" therapy he was then undergoing with Dr Arthur Janov (Blackburn and Ali, 1971; on the therapy, see Norman, 2008: 639–642, 647–652).

He put forward a similar notion in his "Serve Yourself" (1980, released in Lennon's *Anthology*), written as a reaction to Bob Dylan's Christian track, "You Got to Serve Somebody" (*Slow Train Coming*, 1979). Lennon ridiculed the religious quest for Christ,

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Buddha, Mohammed, or Krishna, concluding: "You got to serve yourself, Nobody gonna do it for you, You may believe in devils, You may believe in laws, But you know you're gonna to have to serve yourself." As he explained in his famous *Playboy* interview (Sheff, 1981), "It's quite possible to do anything ... Don't expect Jimmy Carter or Ronald Reagan or John Lennon or Yoko Ono or Bob Dylan or Jesus Christ to come and do it for you. You have to do it yourself. That's what the great masters and mistresses have been saying ever since time began."

Lennon saw any kind of belief in an external entity as a dependence on fallacies, and drew a clear distinction between such beliefs and free will, self-awareness, and social activism.

"I found out": Religious Disenchantment

Another counter-religious song from *Plastic Ono Band* is "I Found Out." The track begins with a rejection of the missionaries who knock on Lennon's door, calling him "Brother, Brother." Lennon urges his listeners not to "take nobody's word what you can do," since "I showed you just what I've been through"—a reference, perhaps, to his own religious reflection, which ended, to use Max Weber's term, in disenchantment (Weber, 1946).

Lennon then moves on to a straightforward attack on Christian belief in the Second Coming, saying, "There ain't no Jesus gonna come from the sky," followed by a rebuff of Krishna consciousness: both [religions] "just keep you crazy with nothing to do, Keep you occupied with pie in the sky, There ain't no guru who can see through your eyes." Finally, there is a blatant rejection of Christianity and religion in general: "I seen the junkies, I've been through it all, I've seen religions from Jesus to Paul." Finally, the next-to-last verse enjoins, "Don't let them fool you with dope and cocaine," an image that portrays religion as little more than the "opium of the masses."

The fact that Lennon repeats the line "I found out" throughout the song emphasizes that all his concerted attempts to be converted to Christianity (and other gurus' wisdom) had ended in disappointment, or, as he put it, "Now that I found out, I know I can cry." Clearly Lennon's search for religious truth was genuine, and his inability to find it painful; nonetheless, he believed it his duty to expose the dubiousness of religious creeds and propaganda to the world.

"Imagine": Religious Utopia without Religion?

"Imagine" is Lennon's most forceful (and famous) "ideological" song, usually regarded as a call for the establishment of a human utopia, or as the last line in the chorus puts it, for a time when "the world will be as one." "Imagine" calls on the listener to consider a world devoid of all humanity's flaws: heaven and hell, nationalism ("Imagine there's no countries"), war, religion, possessions, greed, and hunger. It is a call for a new world order, characterized by unity and equality, and founded upon the complete elimination of the modern social order. In its place, Lennon proposes a principle of mutual responsibility, "a brotherhood of man" (see Fricke, 2002, who also stressed its special relevance after the terror attack on 11 September 2001). "Imagine" accords with

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Lennon's saying in "Revolution" that people should change their minds first, and that, in truth, *this* is the true and essential revolution.[30]

"Imagine" is generally considered an expression of an atheistic worldview, encouraging us as it does to "Imagine ... no religion" and "above us only sky." To many, the implication of these lines is the denial of God (Wiener, 1991: 161). However, given Lennon's concern with religious ideas, as demonstrated by the many interviews discussed above, I suggest that even in this seemingly anti-religious declaration, Lennon employs deliberate religious idioms (Mäkelä, 2004: 222–224 and references). For example, the last stanza, "Imagine no possessions / No need for greed or hunger / a brotherhood of man / Imagine all the people / Sharing all the world," seems at first glance to mimic the Communist Manifesto.[31] Yet, we already saw that in 1971 Lennon declared himself a "Christian communist ... in the pure sense," who wished to follow Jesus' moral teachings and who associated "Love your neighbor" with communism (Coleman, 1992: 525; Turner, 2006: 209–210). Hence, for Lennon, communist-like social reform was *not* anti-religious. In fact, he aligned it with Jesus' original message. Consequently, "Imagine no possessions ... brotherhood of man" may recall the communal ownership of property in the early Jerusalem church. According to the Acts of the Apostles 2:44–45 (NSRV): "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (see also Acts 4:32–35: "The whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions"). It is hard to deny the link between the utopian sentiments expressed in the biblical text and those in Lennon's song. In fact, it can justifiably be argued that Lennon was inspired by the apostles' idea of communal brotherhood, and sought through his songs to apply it to all humankind. Simply put, this last verse in "Imagine" transposes early Christian idealism to a modern search for a "brotherhood of man."

In fact, it is possible to interpret "Imagine" not as an anti-religious or atheistic song, but rather as a model of *alternative* religious thought, one that in truth reinforces certain religious, and particularly Christian, ideas. Imagining no hell or heaven, but merely sky, for example, does not necessarily imply a rejection of the divine system of heavenly reward and punishment. Indeed, it arguably accords with the biblical ideal of the End of Days, in which, after the Day of Judgment, there will be no saints and sinners, only believers, and the creation of a New Heaven and New Earth (Revelation 21:1). So, too, does the disappearance of countries, war, and violence accord with the prophetic ideal of non-violence ("They shall beat their swords into ploughshares"; "the wolf shall live with the lamb," Isa 2:4; 11:6–9; 65:25) and Jesus' teachings, especially the Sermon on the Mount and his call to "render unto Caesar" (Bryan, 2005). The call to imagine "no religion" can therefore be interpreted differently: as a rejection not of the concept of religion itself, but rather of the tendency to divide people in religion's name. Religion may also here refer to religious institutions, specifically the Church, which impose restrictions and boundaries on human brotherhood and prevent the world from being "as one."

Whether or not Lennon actually referred to those biblical ideas, the utopian discourse of "Imagine" cannot be detached from the religious ideas that gave birth to it.[32] What is absent in "Imagine," however, is the very essence of religion: God. The belief or

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expectation that humanity will heal itself, that it can achieve social utopia without divine involvement, is indeed unique, even innovative. It is a religious belief system devoid of God, or of any presumption concerning the divine (for a more precise definition, see below).

John Lennon's Religious Sensibilities and Unbelief

Lennon was inspired by Jesus' social message and regarded Jesus as a worthy personal example. At the same time, however, he rejected the conventional belief in Jesus, having determined Christianity (and all religion) to be an illusion, or at least unable to deliver on its promises. The religious ideas that Lennon embraced as meaningful were only fragments of the Christian doctrine. His religious preferences were, in truth, based on his own personal reflections on the New Testament and the history of the Christian faith. Specifically, he rejected the Church as a binding religious institution (although, it should be noted, he made clear that this was a personal choice). He also never acknowledged the conventional belief in Christ's divinity, as well as the Christian idea of God, although his refutation of these ideas in his songs implies that he was, in fact, deeply concerned by such Christian conventions.

While Lennon's religious ideas remained consistent throughout the period from 1966 to 1971, he did experience a certain *artistic* transformation. Whereas religion was implicit in his lyrics between 1966 and 1969 (with the possible exception of "The Ballad of John & Yoko"), in his first two solo albums, released in 1970–1971, he turned his attention squarely to unbelief and the relationship between religion and utopia. He displayed dissatisfaction with the traditional concept of God and Christ—and with "mainstream" Western religious thinking in general. It seems, then, that his attraction to Christian ideas and to religious ethics in general, and his refutation of the belief in Christ and the supernatural, are in fact two sides of the same coin.

The evidence discussed above points to two distinct but interrelated (and simultaneous) religious phenomena that should be investigated in light of the study of religion:

1. *Religious Sensibilities*: Lennon's acceptance of certain aspects of Jesus' teachings, and their central place in his personal development and art.
2. *Unbelief and Alternative Ideas*: Lennon's resistance to conventional Christian (or religious) ideas, institutions, and modes of thinking and acting, as well as his attempt to replace them with alternative ideas and concepts.

The main argument of this article is that although the two phenomena may seem contradictory, the fact that Lennon embodied them both simultaneously suggests that they are in truth interrelated. This interpretation opens up the possibility for a better understanding of the complex relationship between secularization and alternative forms of religious thinking. In what follows, sociological studies on secularization and ideologies that proffer alternatives to religion will be applied to Lennon's religious discourse.

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Lennon and Secularization Theory: Religious Decline or Religious Transformation?

Applying the concept of secularization to Lennon's views of religion reveals the complexity of secularization in general, and of Lennon's own views in particular. Secularization, or the phenomenon in which people become "less religious," includes the decline of religion's influence on all aspects of life, from personal habits to social institutions, in the face of scientific rationality (Berger, 1967: 126; Berger, 1979; Swatos and Christiano, 1999: 214).

Lennon's religious ideas may be considered "secularized" in two different ways. First, he rejected the core of Christian belief, including the divinity of Christ and the transcendental nature of God, along with other unworldly notions ("pie in the sky"). For many scholars, this is secularization as generally understood: an erosion of belief in the supernatural, or a loss of faith in the existence of otherworldly forces (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985: 429; Gilbert, 1980: 5, 9; Swatos and Christiano, 1999: 220). Second, Lennon dismissed both the authority and relevance of the Church and all institutionalized religion, since "they're government" and "politicians disguised" who "distorted Christ's words ... with statues and buildings and things." For other scholars, this, too, is evidence of secularization, with secularization understood as the process by which religious institutions, actions, and consciousness lose their social significance (Wilson, 1982: 149). Both Wilson, and Stark and Bainbridge, agree that the loss of faith in the supernatural leads to diminishing religious commitment and the collapse of religious organizations (cf. Lambert, 1999: 324–325).

Lennon's attitude towards religion should be evaluated in light of the cultural atmosphere in which he was educated, lived, and created his music. There is a consensus among scholars that post-war England witnessed a significant decline in involvement in mainstream religion. The majority of Britons simply did not feel that the Church was providing adequate answers to the moral problems and spiritual needs of the individual, let alone the country as a whole (Cowling, 1980; Gilbert, 1980; Barker, 1995). Davie (1994), however, suggested that since 1945, the British have become a nation of "believers" but not "belongers." In other words, while on the whole they do not participate in organized churches, they nevertheless hold significant religious beliefs. The decline in religious participation resulted not in secularism *per se*, but rather in nominal belief (i.e., without practice), or "privatized" religion. Religious life in Britain, Davie concluded, had changed, and not simply declined.

Secularization, therefore, can mean several different things at once: an overall decline in a religious belief system, for instance, or simple non-attendance at church on Sunday. Some even argue that the whole idea of secularization is false, and that the modern West is no less religious than it was in the past (Martin, 1969; Stark, 1981, 1999); rather, religion is a dynamic, organic concept always in a state of variation and change (Stark, 1999: 268–269). Others maintain that in modern Western Europe, the religious institution lost its non-religious functions and became a less central and more spatially diminished sphere within the new secular system (Casanova, 1994).

Lennon personally discarded both specific religious symbols and religious institutions, although his interest in religious *ideas* never waned. He proclaimed that for him,

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"religion is personal" (Nightingale, 1967). He believed that one has to "get down to your own god and your own temple in your head," since "the church is in your own head" (Wigg, 1969). Hence, Lennon regarded himself, at least to a certain extent, as a believer, but certainly not as a "belonger." But it cannot be said that he lacked religiosity altogether.

As noted above, the basic conception of secularization derives from the definition of religion as any system of values or beliefs that arises from attempts by individuals and/or social groups to effect certain ends by means wholly or partly *supernatural*. Secularization, we may then conclude, produces values and symbols that "have been emancipated entirely from assumptions of human dependence on supernatural agencies or influences" (Gilbert, 1980: 5, 9). In this sense, Lennon's denial of the divinity of Christ and God indeed corresponds to secularization. Yet this understanding of religion cannot account for his strong religious sensibilities: his assertion that "I'd like to be like Christ," for example, or his own interpretation of "the Kingdom of God," not to mention his short-lived belief that he was Christ incarnate.

For this very reason, recent sociologists of religion have objected to the absolute association of religion with the supernatural (cf. Stark, 1981: 176 n. 1). To them, religion is not limited to "actions, beliefs, and institutions predicated upon the assumption of the existence of ... supernatural entities with powers of agency," but may also include "impersonal powers possessed of moral purpose, which have the capacity to set the conditions of, or to intervene in, human affairs" (Wallis and Bruce, 1992: 10–11). This latter definition can certainly be applied to Lennon's understanding of Jesus' message of love, peace, goodness, and self-realization.

This turn away from conventional beliefs and institutions towards a more fluid and personal idea of religion was most pronounced in the US in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and particularly among American youth. This segment of the population counted among its number the majority of Lennon's audience, and was thus naturally inspired by him and the Beatles. One should also recall that in late 1971 John and Yoko moved to New York City, since the local freewheeling culture there appealed to them (cf. Wenner, 2000: 144–145).

During the 1960s, America witnessed a radical cultural and religious change: the emergence of the "counterculture," the generation of Flower Power, the Age of Aquarius. The erosion of the legitimacy of established institutions, combined with the growth of radical utilitarian individualism, resulted in an unprecedented spiritual "quest" for meaning in life. This new spirituality focused on immediate, powerful, and deep religious experiences of the sort that "impersonal," established religion could not provide (Marty, 1967; Bellah, 1976; Roof, 1993).[33] The 1960s began the "expressive revolution," characterized by self-oriented moral and spiritual individualism. Such individualism naturally undermined many aspects of established religion in the preceding age, and broke the connection between the establishment and the pursuit of the spiritual. The expressive revolution also undermined the link between Christian faith and civilizational order (Taylor, 2007: 473–475, 492).

A stress on individual responsibility for human welfare and destiny was made manifest by Cox's (1965) *The Secular City*. The Anglican bishop John A.T. Robinson (1963) also published *Honest to God*, in which he called for the elimination of the

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"other-worldliness" of religion, and for a focus on ordinary experience, especially that of human love. Robinson believed that the holy would thus be reintroduced into our secular lives, replacing the lost sense of the sacred.

Yet this drift away from religious belief and practice did not lead to religious apathy. Rather, it resulted in a growing diversity in the ways that individuals gave expression to their religious commitment (Roozen, Carroll and Roof, 1995). Religion became more individualized, fragmented, and privatized (Wallis and Bruce, 1992: 22).

Wuthnow's (1978) study of the San Francisco Bay Area Survey in the early 1970s examines this trend in depth. He concludes that the decline in commitment to organized religion and concomitant weakness of religious institutions was matched by a parallel interest in individual religious experience and Eastern religions or philosophies. In other words, young people were not necessarily less religiously minded; rather, their religious tendencies were directed toward new spheres (cf. also Stark and Bainbridge, 1985: 435–444). Wuthnow laid this shift at the feet of the generation gap, based on Mannheim's (1952: 276–320) theory of the "problem of generations." The root of the new religious symbols, he believed, was to be found in the clash between youth subculture and their more conservative elders. In an attempt at self-differentiation, youth sought answers in alternatives to established religion, much as they did, for instance, in Marxism or other radical philosophies (Wuthnow, 1978: 123–143, 162; cf. Cooper, 1971; Glock and Bellah, 1976).

Undoubtedly, the counterculture provoked a new wave of religious experimentalism. After all, young people wondered about the meaning and purpose of life as much as their more religiously conservative elders. They simply emerged less satisfied with the results of their contemplation. They continued, therefore, to search for something "more," or "beyond," yet derided the word "God." They became more interested in Eastern, mystical, humanist, or "other" religions, ones that were characterized by the unfamiliar. But, as Wuthnow remarked, "they remain[ed] seekers" (Wuthnow, 1978: 165, 171).

This transformation of conventional religiosity into new forms of religious individualism is ongoing. Indeed, despite the sway of modern science and technology, the triumph of capitalism, and the predominance of humanistic thought, religion still has a place in human experience. In fact, we might say that religion and religious ethics have always held firm, while the notion of the supernatural or other-worldliness such as paradise or the Kingdom of God took a serious beating (Kitagawa, 1967: 60–62; Swatos and Christiano, 1999: 217, 225).

Lennon's sense of religiosity certainly bears this out. His belief system was selective, and focused on Jesus as a moral figure. His aim was inner–not outer–directed, seeking spiritual growth and self-realization instead of a life lived in accordance with traditional religious dictates. This religious stance shares much in common with new religious forms, i.e., the notion that the self is the supreme spiritual authority. We might say that Lennon's was the forerunner of today's pluralistic and relativistic form of faith, in which Jesus is a symbol open to interpretation, available for whatever purpose and whichever role the individual seeker requires (Lambert, 1999: 321–324).

Lennon, we know, actually identified himself *with* Jesus by means of psychedelic drugs, in what scholars consider a "peak experience," or an intense religious feeling of transcendence or ecstasy (Laski, 1961; Maslow, 1970). Wuthnow has shown that peak

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experiences may be relatively common, and can include close contact with something holy or sacred or the belief in having achieved "harmony" with the universe or the beauty of nature. "Peakers" find their life more meaningful as a result, and continue to expend energy on the contemplation of meaning in their lives (Wuthnow, 1978: 103–112). Thus, Lennon's temporary self-identification with Christ should be seen as fundamental to his religious seeking. It also may have drawn him to unusual acts, such as the bed-in for peace a year later. These and other of Lennon's actions demonstrate that even a "secular" seeker of "spiritualism" who rejects the Church's doctrine can have an intense religious experience—even one that is closely related to conventional Christian creeds. The non-"belonger" may be, in his own special way, a great believer.

One important feature of secularization may have special significance for Lennon's decision to use his art as a means of promoting his gospel of existential love and world peace. Secularization leads to the diminution of religion's (and religious institutions') social significance. Religion therefore becomes less relevant to the status and operation of social roles as well as to the beliefs and actions of the individual.[34]

Lennon was probably aware of this general development when he commented in 1966 that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus and that Christianity was disappearing. At the same time, it is clear that he thought deeply about Jesus' original, humanitarian message. Although he never said so explicitly, his numerous statements on Jesus and religion reveal that when he wrote songs such as "All You Need is Love" and "Give Peace a Chance," etc., he was inspired by Jesus' teachings.

I suggest that Lennon chose to devote his art and life to this "non-religious" message of peace and love because he felt that religious institutions such as the Church of England, as well as leading Protestant ministers and the Pope, had not been dealing and were not able to deal with the most urgent and crucial humanitarian issues, and remained interested only in "business." Lennon thus took upon himself the task of a religious leader, seeking to "make Christ's message contemporary," as he announced at the Amsterdam press conference accompanying his bed-in for peace. In this way, Lennon's religious sensibilities and sense of social consciousness merged, the result being a powerful artistic legacy that, in itself, sought to serve as a substitute for the social role of certain religious institutions.

Lennon's "Imagine" as Humanitarian Quasi-Religion

Scholarly debate on secularization also addresses the question of what counts as "religious," and what as completely secular. The problem is how to classify belief systems that do not conform to the traditional and conventional religious forms, especially those characterized by a rejection of any belief in the supernatural. Understanding Lennon's attitude towards religion requires just such a discussion, since he embraced Jesus as a symbol of goodness but rejected other Christian supernatural and institutional tenets. "Imagine," for example, conveys a combination of religious idealism—peace, community of goods, social welfare, and "a brotherhood of man"—with the denial of transcendence, institutions and boundaries.

Several definitions have been suggested for such ideological systems, including implicit religion (Bailey, 1997: 8–9, 45, 85–90, 270–73; Bailey, 2003: esp. 58; Lord,

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2008; cf. Bailey, 1990: 484–485) and invisible religion (Luckmann, 1967: 48, 103, 105). These, however, are too general for our purpose.

The key question, it seems, is *why* people such as Lennon are so concerned with religious symbols to begin with, or why "Imagine" uses religious and Christian motifs, by way of either adaptation or rejection. Such a problem is tackled in a more sophisticated manner by John E. Smith's (Smith, 1994, 1996) model of "quasi-religion."[35] Quasi-religions lack a belief in the supernatural, but their structure and function are similar to those of recognized religions, and they sometimes build upon conventional religious traditions. They aim to provide a source of significance and purpose to human life, "a consecration to an ideal."

Quasi-religions emerged as a result of laities' discontent with established religious institutions in general, and clergy in particular; this stance naturally lent them an air of the "anti-religious." In addition, there is in these quasi-religions a certain attempt to free religious faith and devotion from the dogmas of theistic and super naturalist theologies. Quasi-religions (notably humanism) therefore regard religion in essentially individualistic terms, but continue to insist that their faith is religious (Shneider, 1973: 65; J.E. Smith, 1996: 18). All this would seem to explain Lennon's detachment from recognized religion even as he made extensive use of religious idioms.

Among the different types of quasi-religions, humanism is certainly the most relevant for understanding the religious idealism that gave birth to "Imagine." Humanistic theism is a reinterpretation of God in accordance with humanistic ideals. It denies the idea of God as a "basic physical cosmic *substance*," or a supreme being, but embraces the ideal God as the highest good, the *summum bonum*, the goal of ultimate rational devotion (Williams, 1973: 68–69; J.E. Smith, 1996: 18). This definition also sheds light on Lennon's perception of God ("We're all God"; "I believe in God, but not as an old man in the sky. I believe that what people call God is something in all of us") and on his association of Jesus with goodness and moral behavior.

Humanism differs from recognized religion not only in its unbelief in the supernatural due to its naturalism. It also lacks a diagnosis of the human predicament, an awareness of a fundamental disorientation or alienation inherent in human existence. It holds that there is no evil or obstacle in the human situation that cannot be overcome through the power possessed by human beings as they actually exist. Indeed, some humanists believe that morality can be void of religion and belief (J.E. Smith, 1994: 33–44; 1996: 19, 22).

Nevertheless, humanism and quasi-religions in general attempt to supersede traditional religion as a worldview and way of life, thus rendering themselves a *type* of religion, at least in a sociological sense. Humanism, for instance, like most religions, takes as its end goal the realization of the best that human beings are capable of becoming, and calls for a loyalty to these values. So, too, like conventional religions, humanism has a clear diagnosis-deliverance pattern, pointing to what is wrong with the state of things in this world and aiming to correct them through adherence to a set of beliefs. Finally, humanism boasts an ideal model of humanity and society at large. It aims at a this-worldly vision of the human ideal—e.g., freedom, peace, democracy—through the rigorous application of reason and science to human problems. It calls for the dismissal of both the illusion of the supernatural and the false appeal to supernatural powers.

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I believe that humanistic quasi-religion best illuminates the ideological construction of "Imagine," as well as Lennon's general conception of religion. It is a plea for moral self-responsibility and a quest for an ideal society in the here and now. It also denies supernatural beliefs. Lennon's religiosity is, in sum, a call for practical idealism, for a freedom of the mind from beliefs and practices that withhold existential love and prevent world peace. Humanistic quasi-religious ideology explains why Lennon says "Imagine no religion," yet goes on to describe a sort of religiously inspired utopia. What Lennon introduces in "Imagine" is a *humanistic substitute for religion*, which aims to avoid the vices and lapses of established religions while all the time striving toward the same goal.

We must not make the mistake of detaching "Imagine" from its original context. Lennon composed the lyrics after a long contemplation of Christianity and religion in general. The roots of its humanistic outlooks are arguably religious. This essential fact may also contribute to our understanding of quasi-religions, invisible religions, and other spiritual and social ideologies. As the case of John Lennon demonstrates, non-religious or counter-religious trends may in truth be sparked by more *conventional* and *traditional* religious sensibilities and symbols. Even when such beliefs are fragmented and detached from their original source, they may nonetheless provoke a creative, innovative, and individual religious sensibility.

Conclusion

John Lennon took great interest in Jesus' original teachings and regarded Jesus as a symbol and example for moral behavior and human goodness. At the same time, he rejected any conventional doctrine of supernatural power and authority, and criticized the Church as a "business." Lennon was very much aware of the erosion of the impact of Christianity on young people and of their quest for a new and different kind of spirituality, which he, himself, desired as well. Although many in England and elsewhere may have shared these views, what makes Lennon important in this regard is that his attitude towards religion influenced his art, through which he attempted to change people's minds.

Lennon's plea for existential love and peace was expressed in several of his songs. Clearly Lennon felt a deep commitment to and responsibility for promoting these ideals, as he once wondered, "What's the point of getting fame as a Beatle if you're not using it?" (Coleman, 1992: 501). From 1969 onward he used his stardom as a platform for promoting the political, social, and artistic ideals in which he believed. The inspiration for this commitment was, I suggest, religious.

In 1970–1971, Lennon wrote three songs—"God," "I Found Out," and "Imagine"—all of which confront traditional religious beliefs in the supernatural, including the conventional belief in Jesus Christ. Lennon regarded religion as creating pain and suffering instead of delivering human beings from anguish, and society from self-destruction. However, Lennon's counter-religious motivations were not devoid of religiosity: religion mattered to him, but he was nonetheless critical of its consequences.

Reading Lennon's religious discourse in light of his personal development shows how interrelated were the two. In 1966, he attempted to distance himself from the myth of the Beatles. His interest in Jesus' teaching provoked his love-and-peace message as part of

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the search for something more meaningful, perhaps even spiritual.[36] This occupation with religion and "love and peace" grew following his use of LSD, his experience with the Maharishi's transcendental meditation, and his relationship with Yoko. Through it all, Lennon tried to find a remedy for his troubled soul.[37] Following his "Primal Scream" therapy with Dr Arthur Janov in 1970, Lennon became very critical of religion. He detached his "love and peace" message from Jesus', advocating instead for a more secular ethical code as the means of achieving personal and universal redemption.

Secularization theories illuminate the background and character of Lennon's complex religious sensibilities, namely his adoption of major Christian symbols and a religious consciousness, while at the same time rejecting religious institutions and any belief in the supernatural. It is possible to see Lennon's ideas as the result of an overall religious decline, but it should be acknowledged that in Lennon's case, religion gave way to the search for a new form of spirituality. Lennon's attitude toward religion, especially the lyrics of "Imagine," corresponds to the concept of humanistic quasi-religion, which attempts to take the place of conventional religion. It aims to achieve a social utopia without the fallacies of supernatural beliefs and the pitfalls of religious institutions. In this, the case of John Lennon offers an opportunity for reassessing the intersection of individual and societal developments in religion and religious belief.

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Notes

1. John Lennon's statement at the press conference during his and Yoko's "bed-in for peace" in Amsterdam (Coleman, 1992: 498).
2. Shotton and Schaffner (1983: 167–168). See also Hertsgaard (1995: 237–238). Turner (2006: 17–18), who also interviewed Shotton, understates the significance of this incident, but nonetheless points to Lennon's empathy for Jesus (see below). Lennon's exact words to Shotton during the LSD trip were, according to Shotton: "I think I'm Jesus Christ. I'm ... back again ... I've got to tell everyone ... I've got to let the world know ... who I am. ... This is my reason for being here on this earth." On this Christ fixation as "peak experience," see below. Curiously, in 1965 Paul McCartney mentioned that he and John had an idea for a play about Jesus Christ coming back to earth as an ordinary person (Turner, 2006: 16).
3. Although revelations and religious ecstasy are common results of the use of psychedelics, they occur in the context of the user's religious faith, namely, the conviction that what is disclosed is true (H. Smith, 1964). Hence, the specific and extraordinary contents of Lennon's experience would seem to reflect his own faith.
4. Turner (2006: xviii). On the sleeve of the most recent biography of Lennon (Norman, 2008) he is called "a near-secular saint." The chapter that includes his "more popular than Jesus" incident is titled, "A Most Religious Fellow" (Norman, 2008: 439) but nonetheless neglects Lennon's other statements on religious issues. Thomson and Gutman call him "a secular icon" and "the atheist's messiah" (2004: 251, 253). Modern writers usually focus on Lennon's radical politics, as evidenced by Wiener's revealing study (1991).

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5. Turner (2006) is the most comprehensive collection of statements and anecdotal information on the subject to date, but lacks a theoretical framework, as well as a focus on Lennon and his solo career.
6. For the analysis of biblical or religious themes in the lyrics of popular music, see: Gilmour (2002); Gilmour (2005); Grossman (2002); Hazan Arnoff (2011). On U2's veiling of Christian messages and their construction by the listeners, see Galbraith (2011).
7. Jones (1992: 115–122); Turner (2006: 27, 36, 192). The connection between this incident and the assassination was also implied by Lennon's first wife, Cynthia (C. Lennon, 2005: 9). Curiously, the Vatican continues to pay attention to Lennon's assertion and recently even offered Lennon a complete absolution (Pisa and Evans, 2010).
8. Coleman (1992: 407–408). Maureen Cleave's explanation supports this statement: "He was simply observing that so weak was the state of Christianity that The Beatles were, to many people, better known" (Coleman, 1992: 406). Lennon affirmed this explanation when, in 1969, he added, "... whose fault is that? It's certainly not The Beatles' fault" (Cadogan, 2008: 41).
9. For the early apprehension of secularization as a religious transformation, see Cox (1965). For early sociological discussions, see Berger (1967); Luckmann (1967); Kitagawa (1967); Marty (1967). All these are discussed below.
10. Note that the young Lennon attended an Anglican Sunday School (Coleman, 1992: 114; Norman, 2008: 45–46). The religious character of Liverpool, affected by Irish Catholic population (Belchem, 2007), may also be relevant. In 1972 (when he recorded "The Luck of the Irish" and "Sunday Bloody Sunday," from *Some Time in New York City*), Lennon stressed his Irish ancestry (Wiener, 1991: 209; Cadogan, 2008: 147). On Lennon as an Irish name, see Belchem (2007: 159, 168, 357).
11. Members of Krishna Consciousness stayed at his Titenhurst estate in Ascot in 1971 (Coleman, 1992: 530–531). Lennon's interest in the relationship between Krishna Consciousness and Christian theology is documented in the transcript of the meeting of John, Yoko, George Harrison, and the founder of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Bhktivendanta Swāmi Prabhupāda, held in Ascot in September 1969. Available at: http://members.tripod.com/holysm0ke/Ascot.html. Cf. Turner (2006: 150–152 and passim); Wiener (1992: 101–102).
12. Turner (2006: 125). The latter sentence recalls the opening verse of "I Am the Walrus" (written a year or so later): "I am he, As you are he, As you are me, And we are all together."
13. Lennon used LSD intensively in 1966–1968, see Cynthia Lennon (2005: 241–248, 256, 259–261, 313); Shotton and Schaffner (1983: 117–118, 165).
14. Nightingale (1967). Similar assertions were repeated in the bed-in for peace in Montreal, in 1969 (Cadogan, 2008: 72–73).
15. Lennon also confessed that the lyrics of his song "Girl" (1965) and his book *In His Own Write* (1964) were in truth a dig at the Roman Catholic Church, in particular the concept of "pain will lead to pleasure" (Wenner, 2000: 85–86).
16. Wigg (1969). In the same interview, Lennon also admitted that he believed in life after death "without doubt." Elsewhere he defined God as an energy or power source, and not "as one thing," commenting that "[y]ou can be aware of your own energy and all the energy that's around you. All the energy is God. Your own energy and their energy, whether doing god-

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like things or ungodly things. It's all like one big jelly. We're all in the big jelly" (Nightingale, 1967; cf. Cadogan, 2008: 71).

17. Interview in ATV on 2 December 1969.
18. Rosen (2000: 133–135); Giuliano (2001: 143–145). For "born from above" / "spirit", see John 5:3–8. According to Cadogan (2008: 41), in 1969, Lennon said: "I'm a great Christ follower. I'm a Christian, only I don't belong to the big club they call the Church, because I think it's phony ... I read the Bible and I believe in Christ wholeheartedly."
19. Cf. also "Working Class Hero" (1970) and "It's So Hard" (1971). An example of Lennon's self-identification with the crucifixion is that, according to Shotton and Schaffner (1983: 167), during his LSD-inspired Christ fixation in 1968, when Shotton warned Lennon that he might be killed, Lennon asked how old Jesus was when he was killed and figured that "at least I've got about four years." Turner (2006: 16) also mentioned that the young Lennon drew funny cartoons of Christ on the Cross. In an interview on ATV on 2 December 1969, Lennon also compared the advocates of the peace campaign to Christian martyrs: "It's like, we've no need to be a few Christian martyrs because there's lots of us."
20. Turner (2006: 35). For a discussion of Lennon's self-identification with Jesus coming back again, as a peak experience, see below. According to Albert Goldman, Lennon's self-realization as Christ and fear of assassination simply derived from megalomania and a death wish (cf. Jones, 1992: 61–62). A more empathetic explanation is that this was "an extreme reaction to his discovery that to be the hero and representative of a generation was to be trapped into fulfilling that generation's expectations" (Rose, 1985: 10). For some, Lennon's public persona was that of a saint-like, modern-day savior, a Christ figure. Others criticized his pretentiousness (Coleman, 1992: 503–504; Thomson and Gutman, 2004: 159). Interestingly, Lennon was offered the role of Jesus Christ in Jesus Christ Superstar in December 1969, but the writers of the musical changed their mind, fearing that people would read his own character into the part (Mäkelä, 2004: 151). For the secular idea of messianism in pop culture as related to stardom (the film "Hair," the Who's "Tommy," etc.), see Mäkelä (2004: 154–155).
21. In the same vein, he drew analogies between Jesus and the Beatles. In an interview with Steve Turner in July 1971, Lennon reflected on how the Beatles might have been apprehended in antiquity—seemingly implying that the Beatles and Jesus were actually two of a kind. And in 1980, when asked why the Beatles would never perform again, he cynically alluded to the Beatles' "crucifixion" (Turner, 2006: 17). Although he pushed the analogy to sarcasm, he seemed to believe in it, at least partly.
22. On current approaches to the religious functions of popular music, see Sylvan (2002); Till (2010).
23. John Lennon (1961). Turner (2006: 17) comments that this alludes to God's alteration of Abraham's name (Gen 17) and also to Peter's vision in Acts 10:3–16 (the boiling pot in Jer 1:13 also comes to mind). According to Turner, in 1973, Lennon referred to this story as "imitation Bible stuff."
24. For the modern Protestant association of love with God, see, for example, Tillich (1987: 146–161).
25. Light symbolizes spiritual enlightenment, grace and goodness, perhaps even divine grace (Isa 2:5; Ps 97:11; Matt 5:14; Luke 2:32; John 8:12; 9:5). The use of "The Word" as a light-motif recalls the Word (*logos*) in John 1:1, namely the word of God (Dodd, 1968: 263–285; "The

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Word" is also associated with the divine light in John 1:4). Love is therefore portrayed in this song as a heavenly-like message, which parallels that of Jesus.

26. Lennon's appearance in the anti-war film *How I Won the War* piqued the interest of Peter Watkins, film producer of *The War Game*, who called John to offer assistance in efforts for World Peace (Coleman, 1992: 494). For more on the film and Lennon's anti-war feelings at the time (1966), see ibid. (412–413); Wiener (1991: 17).
27. See also Coleman (1992: 543–544); Wenner (2000: 110–111). Later Lennon addressed the issue of workers' rights and women's fight for equality through the radical political position proffered in "Power to the People" (1971): "Say you want a revolution, We better get on right away, Well you get on your feet, And out on the street." See Coleman (1992: 559–561); Wiener (1991: 154–155).
28. Coleman (1992: 493–498, 501); Mäkelä (2004: 165–172). On John's and Yoko's additional, seven-day bed-in in Montreal in May 1969 (Cadogan, 2008) and other artistic and political acts for world peace, such as the EP track "War Is Over," see Coleman (1992: 498–502, 550–551); Wiener (1991: 129, 159, 199). It is interesting to note Lennon's call to students in Berkeley to avoid a confrontation with the police during the Montreal bed-in (Wiener, 1991: 92–93; Cadogan, 2008: 54–55). For Lennon's anti-war views, see Coleman (1992: 530). For his self-reflection about his role as an artist who promotes a "political" agenda, see ibid. (533–534).
29. As he declared in 1970: "I don't believe in the Beatles myth" (Wenner, 2000: 134).
30. Lennon's utopianism is also apparent in "Hold On" (1970): "Hold on world, world hold on, It's gonna be alright, You gonna see the light, When you're one, really one, You get things done, like they've never been done, So hold on." Actually, Lennon's utopianism makes sense in light of G. Homans' (1950) theory that human social life is a mechanism for obtaining rewards that individuals cannot get for themselves.
31. For some hostile listeners, these verses of "Imagine" were interpreted as support for communism (Jones, 1992: 117). Lennon himself described "Imagine" as "virtually the Communist Manifesto, even though I am not particularly a communist and I do not belong to any movement. ... But because it is sugar-coated, it is accepted" (Blaney, 2005: 83).
32. A somewhat similar religious interpretation is suggested by songwriter Jimmy Webb, according to which "[a]nything that divides us, that causes us to be violent toward one another, doesn't come from God" (Fricke, 2002).
33. A spirit of utopianism also reached rock 'n' roll, such as in Joni Mitchell's "Woodstock"(Harris, 1993).
34. Wilson (1966; 1982: 149); Berger (1967: 107). According to Wuthnow's survey (1978: 164–185), even among religious conservatives, theology has only a little influence on their preferences regarding governmental change, economic reforms, and the value of material possessions, and their attitudes are quite similar to those of religious liberals and the nominally religious. Strong differences in theological dispositions and in levels of religious commitment are therefore associated with only minimal differences in values, lifestyles, and political leanings.
35. Quasi-religions hold definitions of "ultimate concern" which depart from the belief in the supernatural. See Tillich (1989). There are, of course, also forms of unofficial and non-institutional religion, such as folk religion, superstition, and magic, which need not concern us here. See Greil and Robbins (1994).

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36. In his famous "more popular than Jesus" interview, he told Maureen Cleave: "There is something else I'm going to do ... something I must do. Only I don't know what it is" (Cleave, 1966, cited in Thomson and Gutman, 2004: 75). For additional evidence of his quest for meaning in his life, see Shotton and Schaffner (1983: 117).
37. When using LSD shortly before he met the Maharishi, Lennon was "still searching for the key for his own self-realization" and "spiritual fulfillment" (Shotton and Schaffner, 1983: 137). In the period when he began his relationship with Yoko, he "was searching in new directions for answers in his life" (C. Lennon, 2005: 291).

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