CHAPTER THREE

I DID IT MY WAY?

INDIVIDUAL CHOICE AND SOCIAL CONFORMITY IN NEW AGE RELIGION

Olav Hammer

*The individualistic imperative*

A few years ago, I was invited to hold a public lecture on the attitudes toward science in the New Age milieu. The session was partly sponsored by the University of Gothenburg, so I had prepared a fairly scholarly presentation. My talk focused on the double rhetorical role of science in contemporary religiosity: often rejected as materialistic and prejudiced, but also invoked in order to legitimize belief. As it turned out, I had badly misjudged my audience. The front rows were largely filled with individuals active in the local New Age scene. It soon became all too apparent that these were people who hoped to hear from me that science, e.g. quantum mechanics in Fritjof Capra’s version, confirmed the New Age vision.

One of my arguments proved particularly unpalatable to the people in the auditorium. New Agers, I suggested, often make a bold leap from declaring that they are personally unable to provide a natural explanation for a particularly striking experience, to stating that no such explanation exists. Therefore, the New Age argument goes, the existence of supernatural forces must be postulated. An angry voice countered with the suggestion that I disregarded the many mysterious abilities that really could not be explained without reference to such metaphysical concepts as mind-over-matter, and mentioned fire-walking as an example. I pointed out that there are well-documented natural explanations of fire-walking, and suggested that her example, rather than weakening my argument, in fact supported it. My interlocutor triumphantly responded that she wasn’t interested in hearing me summarize what other people had written or said. Only two things mattered: did I have my own opinion, and was it based on my personal experience? I attempted to explain that no experience of walking on coals could
possibly be relevant to understanding the physics of heat capacity and thermal conductivity, but soon realized that I had lost the discussion. Since I didn’t speak from firsthand experience, but was quoting authorities that the New Agers did not recognize as such and felt no particular respect for, I had alienated my audience.

This brief anecdote illustrates a very common sentiment in New Age circles. In discussions with believers, on web sites and in the literature, one finds references to the primacy of personal experience and the need to follow one’s own personal spirituality. As one particular book on healing through colors puts it: “The greatest teacher is in yourself. What we offer, are just guidelines.”

Individualism, in several guises, is perhaps the most highly prized norm of New Age religion. This ostensible individualism is closely connected with other characteristic traits of New Age discourse. We are all supposed to choose only what rings true to our hearts. Subjectivity, intuition and feeling are presented as the best ways to gain knowledge, whereas the intellect plays a subordinate role. The same book on color healing suggests that “the [colored therapeutic] oils, in most cases, have their strongest effect if chosen with the heart and not with the head” (Ibid.: 71) and that “it is highly unlikely that [users] will experience unfolding benefits from choices made through the intellect” (Ibid.: 78). The ultimate goal of this subjective spirituality is also thoroughly individualistic: it is to transform our own selves.

The fact that intuitive, individual preferences tend to result in contradictory choices, does not seem to present any real problem. The authors briefly dismiss the issue: “It would be impossible to answer the question of the ‘true’ system. All would be true to the extent to which people at their level of growth support them. However, they would all be untrue if they were not truly experienced.” (Ibid.: 54–55). My angry audience would have concurred: since my understanding of fire-walking was based on an intellectual assessment of second-hand sources, it was by their definition “untrue”.

**Emic and etic perspectives**

A sizeable body of scholarship appears to accept this professed individualism as an empirical fact. A classic formulation of individualism as a