CHAPTER 7

From Western Esotericism to New Spirituality: The Diversity of New Age in Finland

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Introduction

‘New Age’ is a slippery concept. Despite more than three decades of research, there still seems to be no consensus on the broader cultural significance of the various phenomena the concept encompasses. By the 1990s the label itself lost popularity both among its adherents and also among scholars; some have even predicted the downfall or at least the stabilization of the New Age culture (Melton 1992). On the other hand some scholars have seen New Age in terms of a much broader cultural change that they have more recently characterized as “spiritual revolution” and which is said to involve the biggest religious and cultural change in Europe since Christianization (Tacey 2004; Heelas & Woodhead, et al. 2005; Heelas 2008). There are also less enthusiastic scholars who describe the popular discourse of spirituality as a ‘silent takeover’ of the religious by the contemporary capitalist ideologies and neoliberalism (Carrette & King 2005), or as an integral part of consumer culture (see Gauthier & Martikainen 2013).

Depending on one’s approach and points of emphasis, the whole phenomenon may appear in very different light. For instance, Wouter J. Hanegraaff (1996) has argued in his thorough survey of New Age literature that all the important New Age ideas stem from the nineteenth century Western esotericism. In such a view, New Age appears as the latest outgrowth of an esoteric subculture that has deep roots in Western civilization. However, when one casts the net on a wider set of writers and organizations, as Gordon Lynch (2007) has done, the picture that emerges is of an emerging spiritual trend that cuts across many religious traditions, including mainstream Christian churches. Rather than holistic or alternative spirituality, Lynch therefore speaks about “progressive spirituality,” which aims to incorporate the key values of liberal democracies (equality, tolerance, individuality), empowers women, accommodates scientific knowledge, and is ecologically responsible. Taking an even larger perspective, Colin Campbell (1999; 2007) has argued that the whole Western civilization is undergoing a change in which the previously dominant cultural features are in the process of being replaced
by features that have been more characteristic of Eastern civilizations. At the fundamental level the change involves a rise of a monistic view of reality, where man and nature, mind and body, spiritual and physical, come to be conceived as unitary, rather than as opposed in a hierarchical relationship. Campbell argues that especially since the 1960s new interpretations in theology, political thought and science all provide evidence of a far-reaching “easternization” of the West.

Much of the confusion stems from the fact that New Age as a label seems to cover diverse and often contradictory beliefs, practices and worldviews. Michael York (2004), for instance, has distinguished between three different orientations within the category of the New Age. The first, the occult or esoteric orientation emphasizes the supernatural and is often preoccupied with apocalyptic visions of the coming transition to the new era. The spirit guides, channeled messages and angelic lore are typical features of this orientation. The second, the spiritual orientation, takes more or less the opposite approach and emphasizes human capacities and efforts to achieve spiritual growth and individual wellbeing in this life through various holistic methods involving body and mind. Here, the typical practices include meditation, yoga, bodily manipulations and various psychophysical therapies often linked to the Human Potential movement. The conception of the coming era, if any such is explicitly present, typically involves an idea that collective change will be brought about not through supernatural intervention, but if and when sufficient numbers of people change their consciousness first. The third orientation identified by York puts more emphasis on external social, humanitarian and ecological goals and sometimes aims at changes in educational and other institutions envisioned from a more holistic perspective.

Empirical studies of New Age also suggest that the scene is in the process of diversification. In his analysis of survey data from Norway, Botvar (2007) has argued that those who are attracted to popular New Age beliefs, such as astrology, fortune telling, and reincarnation, can be distinguished from those who are seeking a richer spiritual life, who value new emotional experiences, and who want to explore things that enrich their inner life. Botvar also shows that whereas the popular New Age is most widespread among those with lower social status, the experiential spirituality is more evenly distributed in society and is associated with stronger involvement in voluntary organizations, social networks and other indicators of increased social capital. Through an analysis of the age profiles of these two groups Botvar argues that there is a transition from New Age to spirituality. Interest in New age seems to decline with age while the opposite is the case with spirituality.