CHAPTER 38

New Age in Norway

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New Age up to the 1970s

The background of the New Age in Norway was, like in other countries, the countercultural movement of the late 1960s, characterised by political radicalism, the anti-war movement, hippie culture, the use of psychoactive drugs, pop music, a growing ecological awareness, and an interest in Asian religions.

In the early 1970s, New Religious Movements of Asian provenance such as Hare Krishna (ISKCON), Ananda Marga, the Divine Light Mission of guru Maharaji Ji, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi’s Transcendental Meditation as well as the Western, sufi-inspired Eckankar and the Christian-inspired Children of God had representatives in Norway. Through information meetings and courses, for instance at the universities, the representatives of these movements contributed to increase the general awareness of Eastern religions and to nourish countercultural religious syncretism and alternative spirituality in Norwegian youth culture.

In the 1970s there existed several distribution centres for alternative thought and lifestyle, including religious ones. Most important among them were the countercultural work communes in Hjelmsgata 1 in Oslo and on Karlsøy in Troms. In 1976 Karma Tashi Ling, a centre for Tibetan Buddhism, was opened in Oslo. It attracted people from countercultural milieus as well as Buddhists.

Magazines and periodicals were important vehicles for alternative thought in the 1970s when thirty-six different titles, most of them short-lived, were published (Ahlberg 1980: 221). The most important were Vibra (appearing in 1969), Gateavisa (the Street Paper, published 1970–), Vannbæreren (Aquarius, 1974–78), Arken (1978–1989) and Josefine (1971–1977). While occultism, Christian mysticism, and alternative religious movements and therapies were among the topics of Gateavisa in the early 1970s, the publication soon changed its profile and largely stopped carrying articles on these topics. The religious part of the counterculture was then continued by Vannbæreren, which was the largest countercultural magazine in the Nordic countries. Vannbæreren published many articles about ecology and religion. The tradition of Vannbæreren was continued by Arken, which started out as a more broadly countercultural publication, but became a vehicle of anthroposophical thought, while Josefine
from the beginning was an anthroposophic periodical, concentrating on meditation, spiritualism, and consciousness, as well as on ecology and biodynamic farming.

Ecological thinking and the preservation of natural resources have been a major component of the Norwegian counterculture from the beginning, frequently with connections to alternative religious thinking. Biodynamic farming, for instance, became an ideal for several of the countercultural communes that were established in the 1970s. Most of them, however, were short-lived. Ecological thinking and environmental concerns were nourished by the deep ecology of the philosopher Arne Næss (1912–2009). Deep ecology is characterised by a belief in the inherent value of all living beings, regardless of their utilitarian instrumental benefits for humans. Ecological thinking and concerns for the environment were further nourished by two massive demonstrations against the exploitations of the river Mardøla (1970) and the river Alta (1979–80) to get hydroelectric power.

In his Økologi, samfunn og livsstil, utkast til en økosofi, 1974 (translated into English as Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy, 1989), Arne Næss was influenced by the neohinduism of Mahatma Gandhi in his support of pantheism and non-violence, and his use of Hindu concepts and belief in the intrinsic value of all living beings. In 1987, Erik Damman, who was the founder and leader of the movement Fremtiden i våre hender (The Future in Our Hands), working for political, personal, and social change and for a just world, published Bak tid og rom (Behind Time and Space, 1987) where he presented the attempts by central New Age thinkers to create a synthesis between religion and science.

One main influence on alternative religious thinking in Norway has been the considerable number of people who have taken courses in meditation. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi visited Oslo in 1960 and gave a lecture. Courses in TM meditation started in the 1960s, and in 1965, a Norwegian section of Maharishi’s organisation, Spiritual Regeneration Movement, was established. From the 1960s until today, some forty to fifty thousand people have attended courses in Transcendental Meditation. In 1966, students at the University of Oslo on the initiative of Are Holen founded AMS (Academic Meditation Society). To begin with, AMS cooperated closely with TM, but the group broke loose from Maharishi Mahesh Yogi’s organisation in 1972 and changed its name to Acem in 1974 (Løøv 2010). Acem rejected the Hindu background and Eastern philosophy of TM and increasingly promoted this-worldly goals and sought its support in science and Western psychology instead of in religion. TM’s meditation on a mantra was in Acem replaced by meditation on a “method sound”. Its ideal is to avoid any connotation of mysticism, and to provide a method of meditation.