The social reality of contemporary communities in a global context is that of change. Significant changes in the ways that communities cohere and morphose are occurring in the modern, post-industrial and technological world. The fragmentation and diffusion of communities is recognised by many social commentators as the process of the dissolution of fundamental building blocks of society—the consequences of which are evident in the growth of the social ills of modernity. The paradigm for this perspective is entropic. Collapse is intrinsic to solidity; as Marx observed, “All that is solid melts into air.” The argument of this chapter recognises this process but theorises an alternative model for these changes. Communities from this new perspective are in transformation, one central element of which is increased diffusion. However, transformation does not signify disintegration, rather it suggests the emergence of new structures which attain new positions of balance. The core argument of this chapter is that New Age exhibits the key features of these novel diffuse communities.

Most New Age communities are not the same as, nor even equivalent to, the notion of a circumscribed community based in a specific geographical locality. Whether this notion of community is centred on a physical location such as, for example, a sacred site or temple, or indeed a virtual location such as the cyber sites for New Age spirituality proliferating on the world wide web, geographic specificity is not essential to New Age communities. There are, it should be conceded, a number of significant geographical locations or centres for New Age ideas. Across the post-industrial, technological world there are a growing variety of individual network locations that host the manifold holistic practices of the New Age, from specialist learning centres such as the Esalen Institute at Big Sur in California, to retreat centres, from Adelaide in Australia, to São Paulo in Brazil, to the Greek island of Zakynthos. In the UK, for example, Findhorn in North Scotland is a specific community that functions as a central network hub for New Age courses (Sutcliffe 2000); Glastonbury in Somerset is a town that hosts multiple New Age organisations and groups (Bowman 2000); Kendal
in Cumbria has recently been the subject of extended ethnographic study as a centre for a diverse range of activities that relate to New Age and alternative health (Heelas, Woodhead et al. 2005); Totnes and the area around Dartington where the Schumacher College is located and the magazine *Kindred Spirit* is produced is also a focal area for Buddhist retreat centres such as The Barn, Sharpham Trust and Karuna Trust (Corrywright 2004b).

These places and others like them form important nodes in the web of New Age spiritualities. Such centres, distributed across the world with international visibility and participants, feed the New Age community in its widest sense. Yet withal this evidence indicating the primacy of geographically situated communities, the central hypothesis of this chapter is that the most accurate definition of New Age communities is not related to a specific site, building, township or institution.

New Age communities are predominantly fragmented, non-localised networks. They are communities of the cultural diaspora. Organisationally, the New Age is best represented by the model defined by Gerlach and Hine in 1970 (and accepted by many scholars of the New Age, such as Michael York [1995] as the most accurate typological construct for New Age) as a Segmented Polycentric Integrated Network or SPIN. Some recent research has been directed at developing this model using the more organic and appropriate metaphor of the web. The morphology of New Age spiritualities’ beliefs, practices and communities is akin to a web, or rather webs within webs. This is a nodal network that is multivocal, plural and decentred. Its functionality requires a systems methodology to comprehend the activities of its participants (Corrywright 2003; 2004a).

The relationships between these communities, systems or networks are complex and ever-changing. The element of change and the shifting patterns of the network communities of New Age and alternative spiritualities are set against a backdrop of an increasingly static formation of a globalised world. This relationship, between flux and staticity has been the subject of philosophical reflection from Heraclitus to Henri Bergson but is perhaps being more efficiently examined today in the work of social theorists such as Manuel Castells. Castells has characterised the conditions of (post)modernity as system of ‘flows’ and networks: “The material foundations of society, space and time are being transformed...dominant functions are organised in networks pertaining to a space of flows that links them up around the world” (1996:476).