NEW AGE RELIGION AND SECULARIZATION

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Some years ago a considerable stir was caused in the Dutch popular media by a novel which had climbed the bestseller lists with almost unprecedented speed and then stubbornly refused to vanish from the number one position. The book was written by an American, James Redfield, and had a catchy title: *The Celestine Prophecy*. Following its phenomenal success, an accompanying *Celestine Workbook* quickly appeared; and by the time everybody knew that the *Celestine Prophecy* was about the revelation of “nine spiritual insights,” the time was deemed ripe for a follow-up entitled *The Tenth Insight*, quickly followed by its own workbook. The end is not yet in sight: at the time of writing those who thirst for more may profit from yet a third volume in the series, *The Celestine Vision*, again with its own workbook. Even though these later volumes have not attained the same sales as the first, they must still be considered highly successful books, as attested by their prolonged presence on the Dutch bestseller lists. The “celestine phenomenon” is an international one — on the World Wide Web the nine insights are the subject of enthusiastic discussion, Redfield’s books have spawned a whole range of secondary products (books of aphorisms, videotapes, and so on), and the lessons of the workbooks

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1 This is a revised English translation of a text that has been published in Dutch, as *Christelijke Spiritualiteit en New Age: Over de rol van “Celestijnse Beloften” in een seculiere samenleving* (Utrechtse Theologische Reeks 36), Utrecht 1997. The research was supported by the Foundation for Research in the Field of Philosophy and Theology in the Netherlands, which is subsidized by the Netherlands Organization for the Advancement of Research (NWO).
are now being put into practice in the context of numerous courses for spiritual development.²

Let me begin this article with two statements. Firstly, *The Celestine Prophecy* is an extremely significant book which should be on the reading list of anybody who wishes to understand what is happening to religion in contemporary western societies. Secondly, this does not detract from the fact that *The Celestine Prophecy* is an appallingly shallow piece of writing, produced by an author without an ounce of literary talent and whose “insights” evince a remarkable lack of profundity or originality. I cannot recall ever having encountered a book of worse quality during more than five years of studying New Age literature.³

It will be obvious, therefore, that if I consider *The Celestine Prophecy* such an important book it is not because of its qualitative merits but in spite of their absence. Bestsellers of this kind are significant because they function as a sort of thermometer for what is happening to religion in our society. As such, *The Celestine Prophecy* has succeeded in bringing many observers to an unexpected, even revelatory, insight (but one which will not be found among the nine discussed in the book): “New Age spirituality” is no longer a phenomenon limited to a comparatively marginal subculture, but has developed into a type of broad folk religion which appeals to many people at all levels of society. To many observers this has come as an unpleasant surprise. Literary critics and journalists were mystified and shocked by the suggestion that precisely this kind of *Trivialliteratur* encapsulates the sentiments of the spiritually interested populace. But while such reactions are understandable enough, there is no reason to infer that everybody who has experienced the *Celestine Prophecy* as an inspiring
