

Beyond the Spiritual Supermarket

The Social and Public Significance of New Age Spirituality*

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Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman

Abstract

This paper argues that New Age is substantially less unambiguously individualistic and more socially and publicly significant than today's sociological consensus acknowledges. First, an uncontested doctrine of self-spirituality, characterised by a sacralisation of the self and a demonisation of social institutions, provides the spiritual milieu with ideological coherence and paradoxically accounts for its overwhelming diversity. Second, participants undergo a process of socialisation, gradually adopting this doctrine of self-spirituality and eventually reinforcing it by means of standardised legitimations. Third, spirituality has entered the public sphere of work, aiming at a reduction of employees' alienation to simultaneously increase their happiness and organisational effectiveness. A radical sociologisation of New Age research is called for, documenting how this doctrine ideal of self-spirituality is socially constructed, transmitted and reinforced, and critically deconstructing rather than reproducing sociologically naive New Age rhetoric about the primacy of personal authenticity.

Keywords

Spirituality, Thomas Luckmann, privatisation thesis, socialisation, New Age capitalism

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About the authors

Stef Aupers is a postdoc of sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands. He participates in the research program *Cyberspace Salvations: Computer Technology, Simulation and Modern Gnosis*, funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). He has published widely on New Age and has in 2004 defended his Ph.D. thesis *In de ban van moderniteit: De sacralisering van het zelf en computertechnologie* [Under the Spell of Modernity: The Sacralisation of Self and Computer Technology] (Amsterdam: Aksant).

Dick Houtman is an associate professor of sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands, and a member of the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research (ASSR). His principal research interest is cultural change in late modernity, with a focus on its political and religious ramifications. His latest book is *Class and Politics in Contemporary Social Science: 'Marxism Lite' and Its Blind Spot for Culture* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 2003) and he is currently preparing a book that is provisionally titled *Beyond Faith and Reason: New Age, Postmodernism and the Disenchantment of the World*.

Beyond the Spiritual Supermarket

The Social and Public Significance of New Age Spirituality

Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman

1. Introduction

In most of the social-scientific literature, New Age – or ‘spirituality,’ as increasingly seems the preferred term – is used to refer to an apparently incoherent collection of spiritual ideas and practices. Most participants in the spiritual milieu, it is generally argued, draw upon multiple traditions, styles and ideas simultaneously, combining them into idiosyncratic packages. New Age is thus referred to as “do-it-yourself-religion” (Baerveldt), “pick-and-mix religion” (Hamilton), “religious consumption à la carte” (Possamai) or a “spiritual supermarket” (Lyon). In their book *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality*, Sutcliffe and Bowman even go so far as to argue that “New Age turns out to be merely a particular code word in a larger field of modern religious experimentation” (1), while Possamai states that we are dealing with an “eclectic – if not kleptomaniac – process (...) with no clear reference to an external or ‘deeper’ reality” (40).

This dominant discourse about New Age basically reiterates sociologist of religion Thomas Luckmann’s influential analysis, published about forty years ago in *The Invisible Religion*. Structural differentiation in modern society, or so Luckmann argues, results in erosion of the Christian monopoly and the concomitant emergence of a ‘market of ultimate significance.’ On such a market, religious consumers construct strictly personal packages of meaning, based on individual tastes and preferences. Indeed, in a more recent publication, Luckmann notes that New Age exemplifies this tendency of individual ‘bricolage’: “It collects abundant psychological, therapeutic, magic, marginally scientific, and older esoteric material, repackages them, and offers them for individual consumption and further private syncretism” (75(b)).

Luckmann emphasises that those personal meaning systems remain a strictly private affair: by their very nature, and unlike traditional church-based Christian religion in the past, they lack a wider social significance and play no public role whatsoever. Writing thirty years ago, the late Bryan Wilson has made a similar claim about the post-Christian cults, stating that those “represent, in the American phrase, ‘the religion of your choice,’ the highly privatized preference that reduces religion to the significance of pushpin, poetry, or popcorns” (96). And more recently, Steve Bruce has characterised New Age as a “diffuse religion,” noting “There is no (...) power in the cultic milieu to override individual preferences” (99(a)).

Accounts such as those are found over and over again in the sociological literature, as Besecke (186) rightly observes: “Luckmann’s characterization of contemporary religion as privatized is pivotal in the sociology of religion; it has been picked up by just about everyone and challenged by almost no one.” Work done in anthropology and the history of religion nonetheless suggests that this orthodoxy is deeply problematic (Hammer (a, b), Hanegraaff (a, b), Luhrmann). And indeed, from within sociology itself, Heelas has demonstrated convincingly that New Age spirituality is remarkably less eclectic and incoherent than typically assumed. Our aim in the current paper is to elaborate on those dissenting voices and demonstrate that this sociological orthodoxy is not much more than an institutionalised intellectual misconception. More specifically, we criticise three related arguments that together constitute the privatisation thesis: 1) that New Age boils down to mere individual ‘bricolage’ (section 2), 2) that it is socially insignificant, because “the transmission of diffuse beliefs is unnecessary and it is impossible” (Bruce 99(a)) (section 3), and 3) that it does not play a role in the public domain (section 4). We summarise our findings and briefly elaborate on their theoretical significance in the final section.

We base ourselves on data from a variety of sources, collected during the first author’s Ph.D. research in the period 1999-2003 (see Aupers (a)). Besides literature on New Age and a variety of flyers and websites of Dutch New Age centres, we especially draw on in-depth interviews with two samples of New Age teachers. Focusing on this ‘spiritual elite’ rather than on people who only vaguely identify with labels such as

‘spirituality’ or ‘New Age’ enables us to study the worldview of the spiritual milieu in its most crystallised and ‘pure’ form. Besides, these are of course the very people who communicate this worldview to those who participate in their courses, trainings and workshops. The first sample consists of spiritual trainers who work for Dutch New Age centres in the urbanised western part of the country.¹ The centres have been randomly sampled from a national directory of nature-oriented medicine and consciousness-raising CC(Van Hoog) and the respondents have next been randomly sampled from those centres’ websites. Eleven of those initially contacted – a very large majority – agreed to be interviewed.² The second sample consists of trainers at Dutch New Age centres that specialise in spiritual courses for business life. Apart from this theoretically imposed restriction, the sampling procedure was identical to the one just described. Nine in-depth interviews were completed with, again, almost no refusals.³ Finally, we rely on data from a theoretically instructive case study of the Dutch company Morca that has embraced New Age capitalism. Within the context of this case study, the first author has conducted in-depth interviews with Morca’s president-director, his spiritual coach, four employees who had participated in the company’s spiritual courses, and three employees who had not. Unless indicated otherwise, we draw on data from the first sample of spiritual trainers in section 2, on those from the second one in section 3, and on those from the case study in section 4.

2. The Ethic of Self-Spirituality

Diffuse religion cannot sustain a distinctive way of life (Bruce 94).

As the sociological orthodoxy suggests, teachers of Dutch New Age centres indeed prove to combine various traditions in their courses. One may use tarot cards in combination with crystal-healing and Hindu ideas about chakras; another may combine traditional Chinese medicine, western psychotherapy and Taoism into another idiosyncratic concoction. There is, in short, no reason to deny the prominence of ‘bricolage’ in the spiritual milieu.

What is a problem, however, is that whereas scholars on New Age typically assume that this ‘bricolage’ or ‘eclecticism’ is the principal characteristic of New Age, *none* of the interviewees feels that the traditions on which s/he bases his or her courses are at the heart of one’s worldview. As the Dutch New Age centre Centrum voor Spirituele Wegen argues in one of its flyers, “There are many paths, but just one truth.” This *philosophia perennis* or ‘perennial philosophy’ derives from esotericism – and especially from Blavatsky’s New Theosophy (Hanegraaff (a)) – and has influenced the first generation of New Agers in the 1970s through the work of Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki and Aldous Huxley. According to this perennialism, all religious traditions are equally valid, because they all essentially worship the same divine source. Perennialism’s virtual omnipresence in the spiritual milieu can be illustrated by means of the following explanations by three of the interviewed New Age teachers:⁴

I feel connected with the person of Jesus Christ, not with Catholicism. But I also feel touched by the person of Buddha. I am also very much interested in shamanism. So my belief has nothing to do with a particular religious tradition. For me, all religions are manifestations of god, of the divine. If you look beyond the surface, then all religions tell the same story.

That is important: you can find spirituality in every religion (...) In Christianity you’ll find Gnosticism, in Hinduism it is the philosophy of Tantra, in the Jewish tradition it is the Kabbalah. The fundamentalist versions of religion are divided: only Allah, only Jesus Christ. But the esoterical undercurrent is almost the same!

For me it is easy to step into any tradition. I can do it with Buddhism from Tibet, with Hinduism, and I can point out what is the essence of every religion (...) I am dealing with almost every world religion (...) There is not one truth. Of course there is one truth, but there are various ways of finding it.

More fundamental than ‘bricolage,’ in short, is perennialism: the belief that the diversity of religious traditions essentially refers to the same underlying spiritual truth. Accepting this doctrine, people become motivated to experiment freely with various traditions to explore ‘what works for them personally.’ As already briefly indicated above, Heelas (2) has done path-breaking work in laying bare the precise nature of this underlying spiritual truth, pointing out the primacy of the doctrine of self-spirituality:

Beneath much of the heterogeneity, there is remarkable constancy. Again and again, turning from practice to practice, from publication to publication, indeed from country to country, one encounters the same (or very similar) *lingua franca* (...) This is the language of what shall henceforth be called 'Self-spirituality' (...) And these assumptions of Self-spirituality ensure that the New Age Movement is far from being a mish-mash, significantly eclectic, or fundamentally incoherent (emphasis in original).

In the spiritual milieu, Heelas explains, modern people are essentially seen as "gods and goddesses in exile" (19): "The great refrain, running throughout the New Age, is that we malfunction because we have been indoctrinated (...) by mainstream society and culture" (18). The latter are thus conceived of as basically alienating forces, estranging one from one's 'authentic,' 'natural' or 'real' self – from who one 'really' or 'at deepest' is:

(T)he most pervasive and significant aspect of the *lingua franca* of the New Age is that the person is, in essence, spiritual. To experience the 'Self' itself is to experience 'God,' 'the Goddess,' the 'Source,' 'Christ Consciousness,' the 'inner child,' the 'way of the heart,' or, most simply and (...) most frequently, 'inner spirituality' (19).

This, then, is the binding doctrine in the spiritual milieu: the belief that in the deeper layers of the self one finds a true, authentic and sacred kernel, basically 'unpolluted' by culture, history and society, that informs evaluations of what is good, true and meaningful. Those evaluations, it is held, cannot be made by relying on external authorities or experts, but only by listening to one's 'inner voice': "What lies within – experienced by way of 'intuition,' 'alignment' or an 'inner voice' – serves to inform the judgements, decisions and choices required for everyday life" (23).

Like traditional forms of religion, the idea of self-spirituality consists of a well-defined doctrine of "being and well-being" (Goudsblom) or a "theodicy of good and evil" (Weber). A 'mundane,' 'conventional' or 'socialised' self – often referred to as the 'ego' –, demonised as the 'false' or 'unreal' product of society and its institutions, is contrasted with a 'higher,' 'deeper,' 'true' or 'authentic' self that is sacralised and can be found in the self's deeper layers. In the words of our respondents:

I experience god, the divine, as something within me. I feel it as being present in myself. I connect with it as I focus my attention on my inner self, when I meditate. (...) It's all about

self-knowledge, being conscious about yourself. (...) It has nothing to do with something that's outside of you that solves things for you.

I think spirituality is something that lives inside of you. It has a lot to do with becoming the essence of who you are and being as natural as possible.

I am god. I don't want to insult the Christian church or anything, but I decide what I'm doing with my life. (...) There is no 'super-dad' in heaven that can tell me 'You have to do this and that, or else....' I am going to feel!

This sacralisation of the self is logically tied to an understanding of social institutions as evil. Modern bureaucracies, for instance, are generally regarded as 'alienating,' 'nonsensical,' 'inhumane,' and 'without soul,' while excessive identification with career, status and pre-structured work roles is regarded as a major source of personal problems. More generally, the subordination of the self to pre-given life orders is held to inescapably result in frustration, bitterness, unhappiness, mental disorder, depression, disease, violence, sick forms of sexuality, etcetera. The sacralisation of the self, in short, goes hand in hand with a demonisation of social institutions to produce a clear-cut dualistic worldview (Aupers and Houtman):

If you cannot find yourself in your work (...) If you don't have pleasure in your work, then you start to think about yourself negatively and that's a bad thing. Then you become physically and mentally ill.

It can make people really ill. You should know how many people have psychological and psychosomatic complaints because they are imprisoned in a role, a role where they are not at home. I meet many of these people in this centre.

'I am my work.' I hear that a lot. When people retire they fall into this black hole. 'I do not exist anymore.' Because 'I am my work, my status. I am the director.' (...) That's hard! Things go wrong then. They will become bitter and unhappy. Sometimes they die soon.

This dualistic worldview constitutes the heart of the doctrine of self-spirituality. Motivated by perennialist philosophy, participants in the spiritual milieu freely use various concepts to describe the spiritual essence of human beings and 'follow their personal paths' towards their deeper selves by delving into various religious traditions. They may speak, for instance, about the 'higher self' of Theosophy, the 'divine spark' of Gnosticism, the 'soul' of Christianity, the 'Buddha nature' of Buddhism or the 'inner child' of humanistic

psychology. Notwithstanding those essentially trivial differences, the underlying doctrine of self-spirituality is uncontested.

The emergence of a pluralistic spiritual supermarket confirms Luckmann's classical prediction, in short, but has simultaneously blinded many observers to the commonly held doctrine of self-spirituality – the belief that the self itself is sacred. It is this doctrine that paradoxically accounts for the staggering diversity at the surface of the spiritual milieu – an inevitable outcome when people feel that they need to follow their personal paths and explore what works for them personally – and simultaneously provides it with ideological unity and coherence at a deeper level. The common characterisation of New Age as 'pick-and-mix-religion' or 'diffuse religion' is not plainly wrong, then, but rather superficial. If it is believed that the sacred resides in the deeper layers of the self, after all, what else to expect than people following their personal paths, experimenting freely with a range of traditions in a highly heterogeneous spiritual milieu? The diversity of the spiritual milieu *results from* rather than *contradicts* the existence of a coherent doctrine of being and wellbeing.

3. The Social Construction of Self-Spirituality

As we have seen, the spiritual milieu is in fact more doctrinally coherent and hence less diffuse than typically assumed. It remains to be seen, therefore, whether 'spiritual socialisation' really is an oxymoron, because "the transmission of diffuse beliefs is unnecessary and it is impossible" as Bruce (99(a)) claims. To study this, we analyse the biographies of the spiritual trainers of our second sample. They have been strategically selected because they specialise in spiritual courses for business life and in fact all prove to have started their own careers there. How and why did they make this remarkable shift from 'normal' jobs, such as clerk, president-director or manager, to the spiritual world of shamanism, aura reading, tantra and channelling? More specifically: what, if any, was the role played by socialisation?

Alienation as the key: Who am I, really?

In obvious contrast to the way Christian identities are typically adopted, only one of those nine respondents developed an affinity with spirituality due to parental socialisation during his formative period. Contrary to Bruce's suggestion, however, this does not mean that socialisation plays no role at all, although this process only started after they got motivated to get involved due to the experience of identity problems. Through excessive identification with the goals set by the companies they worked for, with their pre-structured work roles and well-defined task descriptions, they increasingly felt alienated. This raised questions of meaning and identity: 'What is it that I really want?,' 'Is this really the sort of life I want to live?,' 'What sort of person am I, really?'

The case of Chantal, who now works in the New Age centre Soulstation, is exemplary. She studied economics, rapidly made a career in the business world and, she explains, completely identified with her work. Looking back she states that she was "marched along the paths set out by society" and adds: "I studied marketing and sales, but had never learned to look in the mirror." Like most others, she points out that her identity crisis began with an "intruding conversation" with a consultant:

I was working at MCR, a computer company, and I was the commercial director. A big team, a big market, and a big responsibility for the profits. Much too young for what I did. But that was my situation: You did what you had to do. Then I was invited by a business partner to visit a consultant. I sat there talking for two hours with that man. It was an inspiring visit and suddenly he looked at me intrudingly and said: 'I hear your story. It sounds perfect, looking at it from the outside, but where are you?' In other words: 'The story is not yours. It is the standard "format" of the company you are presenting, but where is your passion? What makes you Chantal instead of Miss MCR?'

The latter question marks the beginning of an identity crisis and an enduring quest for meaning. She adds:

I thought: 'Shit, I have no answer to this question and I have to do something with that.' The result of this conversation was a burnout that lasted almost a year. That's a crisis, you know! In the evening hours I started to do coaching sessions, I started thinking about the question: 'Who am I, really?' You start to look in the mirror. And then, at a certain moment, you can no longer unite your private life with your position at work. It's like your skis are suddenly moving in

opposite directions. And that's definitely not a comfortable position: before you realise, you're standing in a split.

The suggestive metaphor of “standing in a split” between the demands of business life and private life applies to most of the respondents. The more they become involved in ‘soul searching,’ the more they alienate from their working environments. ‘Being true to oneself’ becomes an imperative and, in the end, becomes incompatible with the demands of business life. This cognitive dissonance is the main reason why respondents eventually resign from their regular jobs. Marco, founder of New Age centre Merlin, specialised in Enneagram trainings (the Enneagram is a psycho-spiritual model to increase self-knowledge) and shamanistic courses, states in this respect:

That is why I left business life. When I felt that I had to work on the basis of my intuition, or my feelings, this became a problem. (...) It was just not accepted that such a thing as intuition existed. I had to base my accounts on numbers and figures. I couldn't bear that any longer. Now I want to do work that feels right.

Yet another respondent, Marie-José, worked for nineteen years as a consultant, a manager and, finally, a director. She started working on ‘intuitive development’ in her personal life but felt increasingly that she could not reconcile these private practices with her public task as a director. These were, she explains, “two incompatible languages”:

Finally I ended up in a sort of dull routine and realised that the organisation was only interested in its own survival (...) The only thing that counted was that one could legitimate one's decisions to the outside world. I severely began to disconnect from the company. (...) It became clear to me that I performed a certain role that fitted the formal position I had in that company. Like ‘This is my role, so this is the way I act and what I feel is something I let out when I am at home.’ Then I thought: ‘I have to leave this company, because I can't stand it no longer to act as if I feel nothing, while in fact I am overwhelmed by my emotions.’ (...) I figured: ‘What will happen when I express my feelings in the office? Should I cry?’

The process of ‘soul searching’ that follows should not be misconstrued as a strictly personal quest for meaning. Although a latent sense of unease or discomfort may well have been present beforehand, it is indeed quite telling that it typically became manifest only after a conversation with a consultant or coach. Remarks like “He touched something

within me,” “Something opened up” or “The light went on” indicate that due to this contact latent discomfort becomes manifest and triggers a process of searching the depths of one’s soul.

What follows is a process of socialisation, in which three mechanisms validate and reinforce one another: 1) acquiring a new cognitive frame of interpretation, 2) having new experiences, and 3) legitimating one’s newly acquired worldview. These mechanisms, Tanya Luhrmann demonstrates in her study on neopaganism, are the pushing powers behind an “interpretive drift”: “the slow, often unacknowledged shift in someone’s manner of interpreting events as they become involved with a particular activity” (312).

Spiritual careers: Knowledge and experience shifting in tandem

Initially, the process of soul searching has a secular character. Motivated by their identity crises, respondents start describing their selves in vocabularies derived from humanistic psychology. Emotions are permitted and valued positively, but are not yet defined as higher, spiritual or sacred. Although they generally start out with humanistic psychological self-help books and courses, they eventually end up doing more esoteric types of trainings, such as shamanism, aura reading and the like.

Daan comments on his relentless participation in various courses as “a sort of hunger that emerges in yourself. You start to nourish and feed it. And so you hop from course to course.” By satisfying their ‘hunger’ on the New Age market, the respondents acquire alternative frames of interpretation, new vocabularies and symbols to interpret their experiences. They learn to label weird, out-of-the-ordinary experiences as spiritual. *Vice versa*, these experiences validate the acquired frame of interpretation. In the words of Luhrmann: “Intellectual and experiential changes shift in tandem, a ragged co-evolution of intellectual habits and phenomenological involvement” (315). The story of Marie-José provides a good illustration:

We were walking on a mountain (...) And I was just observing, thinking what a beautiful mountain this was and suddenly everything started to flow within me. This was my first spiritual experience (...) I felt like: ‘Now I understand what they mean when they say that the

earth is alive.’ I began to make contact and understood that I am like the earth, a part of nature, and that my body is alive.

The formulation ‘Now I understand what they mean when they say’ illustrates that knowledge precedes experience and, perhaps, shapes its specific content. A similar story is told by Chantal. During her stay at Findhorn she learned about the existence of auras, chakras and streams of energy inside and just outside the body. This resulted, she argues, in ‘spiritual experiences’:

When I was there, someone said: ‘You have a healing energy around you and you should do something with that.’ Well, I had never heard of these two words, ‘healing’ and ‘energy.’ So I was like: ‘What do you mean?’ She said: ‘I’ll give you an instruction.’ After that I started practicing with a friend of mine. I moved my hand over her body and I indeed felt warm and cold places. And I felt sensations, stimulation. Then I became curious.

Chantal began to delve deeper in the matter of healing and increasingly felt streams of energy around people. After a while she started to actually see these fields of energy:

After this I began to see auras, colours around people. At that time I still worked at this computer company and – after three months (at Findhorn) – I returned to the office. During meetings I was really staring at people; like, ‘I have to look at you, because you have all these colours around you.’

Respondents voluntarily internalise a spiritual conception of the self in the process and radically re-interpret their personal identities in conformity with it. On the one hand, a new image of the self in the present emerges: undefined emotions and experiences are now understood in spiritual terms and the new identity is understood as profoundly spiritual. On the other hand, they start to re-write their biographies: they break with their past identities, now understood as ‘one-dimensional,’ ‘alienated’ or ‘unhappy.’ As one respondent argues: “I now know that I was structurally depressed without being aware of it.” Statements such as those exemplify the cultural logic of conversion: they have ‘seen the light’ and now re-interpret their past lives as ‘living in sin.’ As with classical conversions, they follow the logic of ‘Then I thought..., but now I know.’ The more our respondents became immersed in the spiritual milieu, the more these considerations were reinforced, to eventually reach

the point of successful socialisation, “the establishment of a high degree of symmetry between objective and subjective reality” (Berger and Luckmann 183).

Legitimations

Having left their regular jobs and having started new careers as trainers and teachers in the spiritual milieu, it is hardly surprising that our respondents regularly encounter resistance and critique. They are well aware that they are seen by many as “irrational,” “softies,” or “dreamers” and that their way of life is perceived by many as “something for people with problems.” How do they deal with these and other forms of resistance? A core element in their legitimation strategy is a radical reversal of moral positions: they argue that it is not themselves, but the critical outsider who has a problem, although he or she may not be aware of this. Following the doctrine of self-spirituality, resistance, critique and moral opposition are taken as symptoms of a deeply felt anxiety that cannot (yet) be directly experienced. Critics, our respondents argue, project an unresolved ‘inner problem’ on the outside world. In the words of Marie-José:

People who have such strong resistance secretly have a strong affinity with spirituality. Otherwise they wouldn't be so angry. They just can't break through their resistance. Obviously they have a problem. Why else would you make such a fuzz about something that doesn't concern you?

Daan tells a similar story:

People are projecting it on the outside world: they get angry. There is obviously something in themselves they are not satisfied with. And then it's easier to get angry with others than to say: 'This is jealousy in me' or 'This is greed.' 'No, let's not take a look at that, let's project it on the outside world.' To handle these problems takes loads of strength and efforts (...) To enter a process of spiritual growth, you have to be very strong. As we can read in the Vedic literature: it is much easier to conquer seven cities than to conquer yourself.

Marco, who, among other things, works with the Enneagram (a psycho-spiritual model to increase self-knowledge), explains his strategy in dealing with resistance and critique during his courses as follows:

Of course, in my trainings, I regularly meet people who show resistance but I can easily trace that back to their personality. Then I say: 'You see, this is your mechanism of resistance that is now emerging.' (...) Then I say: 'I can fully understand you, I know the reasons why you are saying this.' Then they say: 'It is useless debating with you!' I say: 'But what can I do about it? (...) It is part of the type of person you are, as explained by the Enneagram.'

Our interviewees normalise their positions and pathologise criticism by outsiders by 'reading' it as a symptom of psychological fear, anxiety or insecurity, in short. As a consequence, the 'inside' group is portrayed as courageous and free (because they choose to face their 'demons'), while the 'outsiders' are labelled as alienated because they are disconnected from their deeper selves.

The process of socialisation unfolds as follows, then. First, latent feelings of alienation become manifest after a conversation with a consultant, raising problems of meaning and identity – 'What is it that I really want?,' 'Is this really the sort of life I want to live?,' 'What sort of person am I, really?' Second, during the process of soul searching that follows, people are socialised into the ethic of self-spirituality, with knowledge and experience shifting in tandem. Third, after successful socialisation, standardised legitimations are deployed, further reinforcing the ethic of self-spirituality. Those findings are strikingly consistent with those of Hammer (a), based on a content analysis of a sample of New Age texts in his case. In his book *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age*, Hammer also demonstrates that several cognitive and social mechanisms are operative so as to make New Agers conform to a set of unwritten norms (see Hammer (b) for a very brief summary of the argument as well as Hanegraaff (b) for a similar type of analysis):

Labelled spiritual rather than religious, experiences are presented in numerous New Age texts as self-validating and primary. Thus, attention is turned away from the fact that the frame of interpretation is culturally constituted, and that ritual forms and collective practices fundamentally shape individual experience (366-7(a)).

This process of socialisation into a spiritual discourse about the self reveals that participants in the spiritual milieu are less authentic than they typically believe they are. After all: how authentic are those concerned, when they have in fact been socialised into a shared emphasis on the primacy of personal authenticity? New Agers' self-claimed

authenticity rather reminds one of the classical scene in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, in which a crowd of followers enthusiastically and literally repeats Brian's words with one voice when he desperately attempts to convince them to go home and leave him alone: "We are all individuals!" they shout, with only one astonished dissenter muttering "I'm not...."

It is striking to note that, apart from the latent feelings of alienation that trigger it, the process of socialisation into a spiritual discourse about the self is basically identical to that revealed by Howard Becker in his classical study of marihuana users. In that case, too, acquired knowledge underlies the recognition and positive evaluation of experiences, just as in both cases "deviant groups tend (...) to be pushed into rationalizing their position" by means of standardised legitimations (38) so as to neutralise critique from outsiders and reinforce the adopted way of life to insiders.

4. Self-Spirituality's Public Significance: Bringing 'Soul' Back to Work

"Sociologists rarely study spirituality in the workplace," Grant et al. (267) observe. Although some substantial studies have been done in this field (e.g., Heelas; Mitroff and Denton (a); Nadesan; Roberts; Goldschmidt Salamon),⁵ this blind spot is probably due to the received wisdom that spirituality lacks public significance, remaining confined to "the life-space that is not directly touched by institutional control" (Luckmann 73(b)) and failing to "generate powerful social innovations and experimental social institutions" (Bruce 97(a)). But obviously, the very rarity of studies of spirituality in the workplace precludes any premature conclusions to the effect that spirituality fails to affect our 'primary institutions,' modern work organisations. "(I)f it appears to sociologists that spirituality cannot take root within secular bureaucracies, it may be because their theories have not yet allowed it," as Grant et al. (281) rightly note. And indeed, notwithstanding common claims to the contrary, it is difficult to deny that spirituality has in fact entered the public domain of work organisations.

New Age incorporated

In the 1980s, business organisations became interested in the worldviews and practices of the New Age and, *vice versa*, New Age began to turn towards business life (Heelas; Nadesan). Renowned management magazines such as *People Management*, *Industry Week* and *Sloan Management Review* publish articles on the opportunities of spirituality for business life on a regular basis (e.g., Baber; Berman; Braham; Hayes; Mitroff and Denton (b); Neal; Traynor; Turner; Welch). Indeed, on a basis of 131 in-depth interviews and 2,000 questionnaires in American companies, Mitroff and Denton demonstrate that employees and managers feel a great need to integrate spirituality in business life. In *A Spiritual Audit of Corporate America* they conclude:

This age calls for a new ‘spirit of management.’ For us, the concepts of spirituality and soul are not merely add-on elements of a new philosophy or policy. (...) No management effort can survive without them. We refuse to accept that whole organisations cannot learn ways to foster soul and spirituality in the workplace. We believe not only that they can, but also that they must (14(a)).

Most of the spiritual ideas, initiatives and practices that are applied in business life can be labelled as self-spirituality: “The inner-individual orientation is what most people, including the majority of our respondents, mean by spirituality” (Mitroff and Denton (a) 26).

Examples of large companies that have become interested in New Age trainings are Guinness, General Dynamics, and Boeing Aerospace – even the US Army has adopted them (Heelas). It is hard to tell to what extent New Age affects American business life, but there are some indications. Naisbitt and Aburdene (273) refer to a survey held among five hundred American companies, at least half of which had at one time or another offered “consciousness-raising techniques” to their employees. They estimate that companies in the US spend at least four billion dollars on New Age consultants annually, which is more than ten percent of the total of thirty billion spent on company trainings every year (see Barker; Nadesan; Swets and Bjork 95).

Since the 1990s, the shift of New Age towards business life has become clearly visible in the Netherlands, too (see Aupers (b) for more details about the history of New

Age in the Netherlands). A prime example is Oibibio in Amsterdam, founded in 1993. Oibibio's business department offered trainings in spiritual management, such as 'Team management and the soul' and 'Management in astrological perspective,' to keep companies "ready for battle" in times in which "dynamic streams of production, services and information increasingly put pressure on organisations and managers." They make the following claim in their flyer:

Our trainers are builders of bridges: they speak the language of business life and pragmatically know how to implant the spiritual philosophy in your organisation; they do so in cooperation with your employees.

Oibibio's bankruptcy in the late 1990s did not trigger a decline of New Age capitalism in the Netherlands. Instead it marked the birth of many other, more successful New Age centres such as Metavisie, Soulstation, Being in Business and Firmament. Metavisie, probably one of the largest players in this field, claims to have offered in-company trainings to seventy-five of the one hundred most renowned companies in the Netherlands.⁶ The list of clients on their website comprises more than two hundred national and international companies and institutions, among them many of the major Dutch banks and insurance companies (ABN Amro, ING, Generale, Rabobank, Aegon, Amev, De Amersfoortse, Centraal Beheer, Interpolis, Zwitserleven and Delta Lloyd) and IT-companies (Cap Gemini, CMG, Compaq, Getronics Software, High Tech Automation, IBM Nederland, Oracle and Baan Software). Internationally renowned Dutch multinationals such as Ahold, Heineken and telecom company KPN are also on the list, as well as remarkably many government-sponsored institutions such as the national welfare organisation UWV-GAK and the University of Amsterdam, and the Ministries of Finance, the Interior, Trade and Industry, Justice, Agriculture and Fisheries, Transport and Public Works, Welfare, Health and Cultural Affairs, and Housing, Regional Development and the Environment. This is, indeed, convincing evidence that New Age is penetrating the public sphere. More than that, the list indicates that especially organisations producing immaterial services rather than material products provide their employees with spiritual in-company

trainings. Especially the post-industrial service sector seems hospitable towards New Age, then. What is the goal of the spiritual in-company trainings in all of these organisations?

The interviews with trainers of New Age centres that specialise in spirituality in business life and those centres' websites reveal that their courses aim primarily at deconstructing the typically modern separation between the private and public realms, by trying to impose the logic of the former upon the latter. This complies, of course, with the ethic of self-spirituality: the centres aim to make the rationalised environments less alienating and more open to 'authenticity' and 'spirituality.' By doing so, it is argued, they seek for a win/win situation or, in the terms of Heelas "the best of both worlds." In the following accounts, "authenticity" is held to result in both well-being *and* efficiency and "spirituality" in happiness *and* profit, while "soulful organisations" are portrayed as successful:

Organisations are in movement. The pressure increases. People want dedication. There is a call for a new sort of leader. A leader that takes business results *and* human potential into account. (...) Metavisie helps to create these leaders of the future. Together we cause a paradigm shift in society. A society that is not primarily obsessed with money and profit but a society that celebrates the quality of human life. Where it is the highest goal to be your most authentic self (www.metavisie.com).

The mission of Being in Business is to build a bridge between organisations and spirituality to make businesses more successful. Success, then, is not primarily defined as making more profit, but also as increasing well-being for you and your employees. Being in Business shapes this spiritual dimension in your organisation by providing services that will increase consciousness, vitality, fun, pleasure and energy. Spirituality is profit. Because profit is nothing more than materialised energy. The more energy your organisation generates, the higher the profit. And spirituality in your organisation is of course much more (www.beinginbusiness.nl).

People who develop personal mastership steadily become more capable to live their authenticity. In such a situation, one can put all one's natural talents in the world and do what one is really good at. The more authentically one lives, the more effective one's actions. Authenticity therefore has a large impact on productivity within organisations (www.soulstation.nl).

Firmament strives towards unlocking, developing and reinforcing the unique potential and inspiration of individuals. By doing so, they bring back the soul into your organisation. It is our experience that vital and soulful organisations, where employees recognise their personal goals in the goals of the organisation, operate powerfully on the economic market (www.firmamentbv.com).

Although bureaucratisation may pose all sorts of practical obstacles to the introduction of spiritual practices in the workplace (Grant et al.), this should not blind us to the fact that it also paradoxically underlies attempts to bring ‘soul’ back to work – to break with ‘alienating’ bureaucratic organisational structures and pre-given work roles. As we have seen, this seems to apply especially to organisations in the post-industrial service sector, probably because the highly skilled and specialised work in this sector is much more difficult to rationalize and control from without, and because attempts to nevertheless do so are likely to meet with fierce professional resistance.

Indeed, the ‘best of both worlds’ approach that dominates the concomitant discourse suggests that tensions between bureaucratic demands on the one hand and opportunities for spiritual practices on the other may in fact be less severe than typically assumed. Organisational goals are typically taken for granted and remain strictly instrumental, after all, while the ‘inner lives’ of employees are considered valuable assets that enable firms and organisations to strengthen their positions in highly competitive and demanding environments. Although it is hard to deny that spirituality has entered the public realm of work, then, what is badly needed is good ethnographic research into whether and how tensions between bureaucratic demands and spiritual practices emerge and, if so, how those are dealt with on an everyday basis.

Self-spirituality in action: ‘Grow or I’ll shoot!’

We finally present the findings of a case study of a company that has to a large extent institutionalised the ethic of self-spirituality. This case is not typical of contemporary business life, but is theoretically instructive. Whereas people enter the spiritual milieu freely and voluntarily, driven by problems of identity caused by alienation, as we have seen, the employees of this particular company find themselves in a setting in which the ethic of self-spirituality is more or less imposed upon them. Its functioning as a binding social norm – as a ‘social fact’ in the classical sense of Emile Durkheim – thereby becomes more visible and easier to study, precisely because not all employees are equally enthusiastic about such an imposition of a spiritual regime. As such, this case study

enables us to further illustrate the claims made above about the existence and nature of a coherent spiritual doctrine of being and wellbeing and about the dynamics of socialisation into such a spiritual discourse about the self.

The company in case is Morca, a producer of bathroom equipment with branches in various countries in Western Europe.⁷ Geert, its president-director, is deeply involved in New Age and provides in-company trainings for his employees. On a personal level, Geert is motivated to implement spirituality in business life because of his own biography. The development he went through exactly matches the analysis in the previous section: he went through an “enormous personal crisis,” made contact with his current spiritual coach, followed various New Age courses and increasingly embraced the ethic of self-spirituality. He discovered – in his own words – that he is both “the question and the answer” and “the painter and the canvass.”

Marcel, his coach and spiritual mentor, takes care of the courses at Morca. Marcel works with various religious traditions (Christianity, Taoism, Buddhism), embraces the ‘perennial philosophy’ and emphasises the primacy of self-spirituality: “The spiritual leader knows that self-knowledge is the source of all wisdom.” Three questions are at the heart of his courses: ‘Who am I?’, ‘What do I want?’, and: ‘How do I get it?’ The president-director explains the goal of the courses as follows:

I want to provide the opportunity for employees to find themselves in their jobs. And it is my conviction that if you ‘follow that path,’ you’ll end up encountering your inner spirituality. And when people get inspired they are inclined to make beautiful things. And we all profit from that.

Like the New Age centres, then, Morca aims for the ‘best of both worlds.’ It aims to transform the public realm of the organisation into a private sphere where employees can express themselves fully because “authenticity is the most important thing in the world.” By doing so, Morca expects its employees to be more happy and, hence, more effective, so as to increase productivity and profits.

It is important to note that participation in the courses is *formally* a free choice. Geert claims to have abandoned his former missionary attitude “Grow or I’ll shoot.”

Having learned that people cannot be forced into a spiritual lifestyle he now argues (like his coach): “Pulling the grass will not make it grow faster.” As we will see, however, employees in Morca are in fact subject to social pressure to participate in the in-company trainings, producing mutual distrust, critique and a divide between participants and non-participants.

Participants: ‘It takes guts!’

All of the interviewed who have participated in the trainings are people in mid- to top-level management positions. They are extremely positive about the trainings, because those have given them the opportunity to solve personal problems (“stones in your backpack”) and to grow spiritually. They emphasise the influence of Geert and Marcel in making them participate. In the words of Mark, an assistant group controller: “I am doing it because someone gave me a kick in the butt to participate. That’s how it feels. That one is Geert.” The latter’s influence is perceived as stimulating. Originally, they were sceptics and thought it was all “vague” and “irrational.” In compliance with the analysis in the previous section, they now label these forms of scepticism as “psychological resistance” or “fear of growth.” Beforehand, they were just not aware of their problems in private and working life, thinking “Private is private, don’t bother me about that!” This attitude changed while participating. Arthur was the first to “break through his resistance” during the courses. He explains:

A lot of shit from the past entered my consciousness. When you become emotional and start to cry in front of the group – and not just a little bit, but letting loose completely... That takes guts! You need that guts. If you don’t have those, well, then it gets tough. Everybody thought: ‘I am sitting here with my colleagues, I have to work with them tomorrow, I am not going to cry!’ So there was this mechanism of resistance: ‘I don’t want this.’ I was one of the first who dealt with a serious emotional problem (...) Once I did it, others showed the courage to follow.

This statement exemplifies the legitimations discussed in the last section. ‘Opening up’ to colleagues and showing emotions is now understood as a sign of ‘guts,’ while defending the boundary between private and working life is understood as a symptom of fear. Frank is another participant who entered the world of self-spirituality through the courses:

I am very rational and before I started the course I told Marcel this: 'What I know about myself is that I have the feeling that I don't really have emotions.' However, the first session we did, I was filled with tears, overwhelmed by emotions. In a certain situation Marcel told me: 'I thought you had no emotions?' Then I thought: 'Well, I obviously have them but they are normally hidden somewhere where I cannot reach them.'

In short, the stories of these employees exemplify the breakdown of the modern separation between private and public life produced by the shift towards self-spirituality in the organisation. They are convinced that this approach works: it helps them to solve personal problems and to be more open and expressive at the office. This in turn, they argue, stimulates a sense of fellowship and community: "We have become much more open towards one another. We have become a group. We really trust each other." Under the influence of the president-director and his coach, then, self-spirituality has become an organisational asset. But how do those who did not participate in the courses evaluate all of this?

Non-participants: 'I don't feel like doing that!'

The interviewed who have not participated in the trainings are mainly people who occupy lower positions in the organisational hierarchy (production, administration and the like). Moreover, they are supervised by the participants discussed above. Their accounts mirror those of the managers who have participated and who have become involved in spirituality in the process. They experience the influence of the president-director not as stimulating, but as pressure. Taking a more conventional stance, they reject the privatisation and spiritualisation of public organisational life and wish to preserve the divide between private and public. Personal issues, Johan argues, are out of place in a working environment:

I think courses like this are disturbing. I mean: I am not against it, but I would never do such a thing with colleagues. I've heard that it revolves around showing your personal feelings and emotions. That frightens me (...) To really let yourself go, you need to know people very well. You need to trust people (...) In this respect, I really want to keep my private life private.

Martijn tells a similar story:

At a certain moment it was explained what the course was all about. How you had to act, what you had to do and how you had to open yourself up to others. Then I thought: 'Do you really have to do that in front of your fellow-workers?' Actually, I don't feel like doing that. It's not that I have to keep everything as a secret, but it 'runs deeper,' they say. And then I think: 'Do I want that?'

These employees paint a completely different picture of spirituality in business life: they defend the modern boundary between private and public and perceive the sharing of emotions with co-workers (especially superiors) not as courageous, but as frightening; the influence of the president-director not as stimulating, but as pressure. Moreover, they disagree with the participants that the courses result in a stronger sense of unity. On the contrary:

In a company like this you get two camps, because there are people who participate and those who do not. And, to be honest, I think that the people who participated have changed. How do you say that? These were people who already had high self-esteem. That became stronger during the course. Maybe that is the power of the course: 'Believing in yourself.' But it's not nice to feel better than others and treat them that way.

The other interviews confirm that there are two camps in the company. The spiritual group argues that the others would better join in, because otherwise "They'll miss the connection." The secular group "feel(s) less than the others," feels that they "don't fit in" and "are not respected." These quotes nicely illustrate the tension that has built up around the courses and, more generally, around spirituality in the organisation. In her critical study on 'New Age spiritualism' in business life, Nadesan claims: "Those who reject the (spiritual) discourse or those who fail to achieve success get labelled as unwilling to take care of themselves or, worse, as reaping their karmic rewards" (19).

As we have demonstrated, spirituality is widespread in Dutch company life and is considered a valuable asset to enhance both meaning *and* effectiveness. We are not dealing with a mere hype or the latest management fashion. After all, the discussed developments began already in the late 1980s, blossomed in the 1990s and have remained salient ever

since. More substantially, our data indicate that especially organisations in the post-industrial service sector are hospitable towards self-spirituality. Highly educated professionals working typically in mid- to top-level management are, in comparison with production workers, more oriented towards intrinsic motivations, goals and rewards. They give priority, Mitroff and Denton (212 (a)) demonstrate on the basis of their survey, to “interesting work” and realizing their “full potential as a person.” Indeed, from an organisational perspective, this makes it profitable to break with alienating bureaucratic structures and incorporate issues like self-understanding, identity and self-spirituality in corporate culture. This elective affinity between the post-industrial service sector and New Age spirituality further strengthens our conviction that spirituality in public organisational life can not be dismissed as a mere hype or the latest management fashion.

The case of Morca, again, is not typical of spirituality in the public realm, but it does demonstrate convincingly that substantially more is at stake than individuals exploring their own spirituality. More specifically, it demonstrates that self-spirituality is a well-defined doctrine with a strong potential for socialisation: people at this company learn the importance of rejecting external authorities and making contact with their ‘deeper selves.’ Although exactly the same occurs in the spiritual milieu, as we have seen above, it easily remains unnoticed there. This is because participants who enter voluntarily to work on their personal problems are likely to experience this process of socialisation as a strictly personal and authentic delving in the self’s deeper layers.

5. Conclusion and discussion

In his defence of secularisation theory, Steve Bruce criticises authors such as Rodney Stark (see also Stark and Bainbridge) and Grace Davie, who argue that secularisation is *by definition* accompanied by religious innovation. Stark, Bruce explains, makes *a priori* assumptions about religion as a universal human need, while Davie argues from a similar perspective that there will always remain a “believing without belonging.” We agree with

Bruce that such claims about humans as ‘essentially’ religious beings are “nonsociological” (104(a)). More than that: they are metaphysical, we would argue.

We also agree with Bruce that much research into spirituality is sociologically naive and immature. This not only applies to the research of those who are overly sympathetic to spirituality and hence cannot resist the temptation of ‘going native,’ as our colleagues from anthropology say. Perhaps surprisingly, it equally applies to the work of those who are highly critical of it (see Woodhead for examples). Because of his own tendency to criticise other people’s ideas about spirituality as ‘nonsociological’ (104(a)) or ‘bad sociology’ (b), Bruce himself perhaps provides the best example. Attempting to hammer home the radical individualism of the spiritual milieu, he writes:

Findhorn, one of Europe’s oldest centres of New Age thought and teaching, *requires* of those who take part in its various forms of group work that they confine their talk to ‘I statements.’ The point of this is to establish that, while each participant has a right to say how he or she feels or thinks, *no-one has a right* to claim some extra-personal authority for his or her views (83(a); emphasis added).

To be sure, those observations do much to underscore the radical individualism of the spiritual milieu. But simultaneously, and ironically, they do more than that. They also demonstrate how this very individualism operates as a socially sanctioned obligation of personal authenticity, revealing precisely the social significance of spirituality that Bruce denies. Arguing that allegedly ‘diffuse beliefs’ such as those cannot and need not be transmitted (99), Bruce’s failure to capture and satisfactorily theorise this ambiguity of the spiritual milieu’s ‘individualism’ causes him to overlook that people are socialised into compliance to the doctrine of self-spirituality.

What Bruce has on offer, then, is a mere sociologically naive reproduction of New Age rhetoric about the primacy of personal authenticity rather than a mature and critical sociological analysis. The assumption that people all by themselves develop their strictly personal and authentic spiritualities is obviously sociologically naive, since “as good sociologists, we all know that there is no such thing as an isolated individual” (Besecke 194). Besecke also criticises the received conception of ‘privatised religion,’ arguing that it results in a conception of religion “as almost an exclusively psychological phenomenon,

with very limited and indirect social consequence” (187). As we have demonstrated, spirituality is in fact less unambiguously individualistic and less privatised than most sociologists hold it to be.

The conception of spirituality as embraced by Bruce (and, to be sure, most other sociologists of religion) inevitably coincides largely with the self-image of the spiritual milieu. It is hardly surprising, after all, that the spiritual practitioners interviewed by Heelas et al. also deny in every possible way that the doctrine of self-spirituality is socially constructed, transmitted and reinforced: “Time and time again, we hear practitioners rejecting the idea that their relationships with their group members or clients have anything to do with pre-packaged (...) ways of transmitting the sacred” (27). But even if spiritual practitioners do not “(tell) their group members or clients what to think, do, believe or feel” (28), they do tell them that they should take their personal feelings seriously, that a one-sided reliance on thinking at the cost of feeling is detrimental and that one should follow one’s heart.

The task to be taken up in the years that lie ahead, in short, is a radical sociologisation of research into New Age and spirituality. What we need is research that critically and systematically deconstructs emic rhetoric to document how precisely spirituality is socially constructed, transmitted and reinforced in the spiritual milieu and how, why, and with what consequences it is introduced at the workplace.⁸

Notes

¹ This is the so-called ‘Randstad,’ which is where most Dutch New Age centres are situated anyway.

² Those interviews have been conducted by Inge Van der Tak, our research assistant at the time (2002), carefully supervised by ourselves, of course. Interviews lasted about ninety minutes on average and were tape-recorded and typed out verbatim (see Aupers, Houtman and Van der Tak for a report of the findings). The same procedure was followed for the two rounds of interviews conducted by the first author (see below).

³ Those interviews have been conducted by the first author in 2003.

⁴ Unlike those in the remainder of this section, these three quotes are taken from the interviews with the second rather than the first sample of spiritual trainers. It should be emphasised, however, that all respondents from both samples adhere to this type of perennialism.

⁵ Substantial fieldwork on New Age and business organisations has also been done in Denmark, published in Danish, by Kirsten Marie Bovbjerg (2001).

⁶ These claims made by Metavisie can be found on their website www.metavisie.com. We have not contacted the companies on the website to validate whether they indeed contracted Metavisie to provide in-company trainings.

⁷ To safeguard anonymity, the actual name of the company and names of the president-director, the spiritual trainer and the employees interviewed are changed into pseudonyms.

⁸ Obviously, it is important to study whether normal participants in the spiritual milieu, just like the spiritual elite studied here, also adhere to the doctrine of self-spirituality.

Furthermore, it is preferable to study the process of socialisation by means of participant observation. An obvious drawback of the methodology used for the current paper – i.e., interviewing those who have completed the full process after the fact – is that biographical data thus obtained are inevitably coloured by the newly acquired spiritual identity. It should however be noted that, given the nature of this identity (self-spirituality, primacy of authenticity, anti-institutionalism, etcetera), the approach used here seems biased *against* the finding that processes of socialisation do occur. Another drawback of our approach here, and hence another advantage of participant observation, is that only the latter enables one to study the role of resistance to socialisation into a spiritual discourse as a reason for abandoning a course.

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