

Journal article

Accepted for publication September 2010, forthcoming in:

Social Compass

Trajectories to the New Age

The Spiritual Turn of the First Generation of Dutch New Age

Teachers

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Word count

7.804 (excl. literature)

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Trajectories to the New Age

The Spiritual Turn of the First Generation of Dutch New Age Teachers

Anneke van Otterloo, Stef Aupers, and Dick Houtman

Most studies on New Age spirituality remain overly descriptive and lack solid, empirically grounded historical-sociological explanations for its increasing popularity since the counter culture of the 1960s and 1970s. In this article we therefore study the motivations of the ‘first generation’ spiritual seekers to turn to the New Age on the basis of 42 qualitative in-depth interviews with Dutch New Age teachers that grew up in the counter culture. The analysis demonstrates that they were motivated by discontents about Christian churches and modern work organizations, especially in the field of social care. Due to the countercultural emphasis on individual liberty, our respondents experienced both institutions as ‘meaningless’ and ‘alienating’ and felt attracted to the promises of humanistic self-spirituality and holism. In the conclusion we speculate on how and why the young, “second generation” New Agers turns to spirituality nowadays and in what ways their motivations differ from the first generation.

Trajectoires du Nouvel Âge

Le tour spirituel de la première génération du New Age enseignants néerlandais.

Anneke van Otterloo, Stef Aupers, et Dick Houtman

Le plupart des études sur la spiritualité Nouvel Âge reste trop descriptive et manque des solides explications historiques et sociologiques empiriquement fondées pour sa popularité croissante depuis la contre-culture des années 1960 et 1970. Dans cet article donc, nous étudions les motivations de la ‘première génération’ de chercheurs spirituels à se tourner vers le Nouvel Âge. Nous le faisons sur la base de 42 interviews qualitatifs approfondis avec des enseignants néerlandais nouvel âge, qui ont grandi dans la contre-culture et de nos jours s’occupent activement avec la propagation du discours de la spiritualité. L’analyse montre qu’ils ont été principalement motivée par le mécontentement à propos traditionnelles églises chrétiennes, d’une part et les organisations modernes du travail de l’autre. En raison de l’accent mis en général sur les valeurs de liberté individuelle, nos répondants ont vu les deux institutions comme ‘vides de sens’ et ‘aliénants’; ils de plus en plus sentiraient attirés par les promesses de l’ auto-spiritualité humaniste. Dans la conclusion nous spéculons sur comment et pourquoi la nouvelle, la ‘deuxième génération’ se tourne vers la spiritualité Nouvel Âge.

Key Words

New Age, spirituality, counter culture, modern work, Christian tradition

Trajectories to the New Age

The Spiritual Turn of the First Generation of Dutch New Age Teachers

1. Introduction

While the Christian tradition is steadily declining in North Western Europe since the 1950s, ‘New Age’ or post-traditional ‘spirituality’ is growing in the last decades and it flourishes most prominently in France, Great Britain, the Netherlands and Sweden (Houtman and Aupers, 2007). Although its counter force *vis-à-vis* the secularization thesis has never been uncontested (e.g. Wilson, 1976) and remains a hotly debated issue (e.g., Aupers and Houtman, 2006; Bruce, 2002; Heelas et al., 2005), it is nowadays fairly generally accepted that New Age spirituality is a phenomenon that increasingly penetrates western mainstream culture (Moerland and Van Otterloo, 1996; Campbell, 2007; Houtman, 2008). Sutcliffe and Bowman (2000:1) even contend that “now it’s as if the mainstream is going New Age”. And indeed: New Age spirituality nowadays spills over to various realms in society, such as the media and popular culture (Partridge, 2004; Possamai, 2005), marketing and advertisement (Frank, 1998) and even ‘rational’ business organizations and management (e.g., Grant et al., 2004; Heelas, 1996).

Against this background, it is remarkable that most studies on New Age spirituality remain overly descriptive and lack solid, empirically grounded explanations for its attraction and popularity. In such descriptive accounts, the multi-faced, ‘rhizomic’ character of New Age spirituality is generally considered to be its main feature – leading in many cases to the conclusion that we are dealing here with a growing network of “spiritual seekers” and not with a unified movement (Sutcliffe, 2003). From such perspectives New Age is typically

characterized as a privatized “pick-and-mix religion” (Hamilton, 2000), “religious consumption à la carte” (Possamai, 2003) or a “spiritual supermarket” (Lyon, 2000). Other studies are historical genealogies providing insights in the traditions in which contemporary New Age spirituality is rooted. Hanegraaff (1996), for instance demonstrated that we are dealing here with a secular outgrowth of the long-standing western esoteric tradition that can at least be traced back to the Renaissance. Sutcliffe (2003), in addition, has written a precise and detailed history of the New Age – his analysis ranges from the apocalyptic, other-worldly New Age cults in the 1950s to the this-worldly spiritual cults of the 1960s and 1970s with their optimistic messages of individual freedom, self-authority and personal growth (see also Heelas, 1996).

Descriptive studies such as these provide important insight in the historical roots, ideologies and multiple discourses of New Age spirituality but abstain from a more explanatory, sociological approach. There are of course psychological explanations (Farias, 2006) and some veritable sociological studies that critically analyze the role of class, ‘habitus’, social control and authority in the seemingly ‘liberal’ spiritual milieu (e.g., Aupers and Houtman, 2006; Rose, 1986; Wood, 2007). Moreover, there are those largely theoretical sociological accounts that analyze the driving social-cultural forces behind an assumed “re-enchantment” (Partridge, 200) or “easternization” of the western world (Campbell, 2007). What is lacking, however, is a more specific and empirically informed historical-sociological explanation on why New Age spirituality has bloomed so rapidly since the 1960s and 1970s. It is especially important to contextualize New Age in this particular time frame since it is commonly assumed that the counter cultural milieu shaped and popularized New Age spirituality as we know it (Campbell, 2007; Hanegraaff, 1996; Heelas 1996). The young protest generation that formed this counter culture, Daniel Bell (1996[1976]: 52) noted, turned esoteric spirituality into “a widespread cultural movement” whereas “(..) in the past this

knowledge was kept hermetic, its members were secretive”. Since the 1960s and 1970s, then, the esoteric tradition has become more mainstream and evolved from an esoteric ‘secret doctrine’ for relatively few people to a ‘public secret’ for many (e.g., Possamai, 2005). The people that initially came into contact with a spiritual lifestyle in the counter culture – this first generation of ‘spiritual seekers’ – still forms the backbone of today’s spiritual milieu (e.g., Rose, 2005). They are the ‘religious virtuosi’ – the spiritual teachers that actively and passionately produce, promote and, literally, sell the discourse of spirituality on today’s “market of ultimate significance” (Luckmann, 1967). The main research question of this article is, then, *how* and *why* this first generation became involved with spirituality in the first place – a question that is theoretically relevant since it promises substantial insight in the (counter) cultural context of the 1960s and 1970s that boosted New Age spirituality to become a widespread phenomenon.

To empirically study this question, we rely on qualitative data collected by means of in-depth interviews with 42 New Age teachers or therapists, who worked for 24 Dutch New Age centers that were sampled for our study.¹ Our respondents can be considered to be the ‘first generation’ New Agers since the majority was in their teens and twenties in between 1965 and 1975 and they initially came into contact with spirituality during that time. As such, our sample confirms the point made by Rose (2005: 80) that “counter-culturalists continue to maintain interest in, and practice, ‘alternative’ ideas and activities” and that “the new age is a product of the baby-boom phenomenon, the ‘60s generation”. About two third of our respondents were women, which reflects the large proportion of women in the spiritual milieu found and discussed in other studies (e.g., Heelas et al., 2005; Woodhead, 2007). In addition,

¹ With thanks to the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research and the Institute of Theology and Religious Studies of the University of Amsterdam for financial support and assistance.

about eighty percent of them was highly educated – completed a school of Higher Vocational Education or a University. When these interviews were conducted (1995-1996), our respondents already looked back on a long ‘career’ in the New Age milieu: they were avid consumers of spiritual books, courses, trainings and therapies and by then reached positions in the Dutch New Age circuit as teachers. All of the New Age centers were located in the Randstad, the highly urbanized western part of the country that provides abundant New Age activities. The sampling was based on an overview of Dutch New Age centers and their courses in *De Koördanser*, a nationwide monthly memo for “personal growth and spirituality”, now available on the Internet (<http://www.kd.nl>). The interviews lasted 90-120 minutes and focused on the contents of the teachers’ courses and their personal biographies. All interviews have been transcribed verbatim so as to prepare them for analysis. In the current paper, we analyze the biographical part of the data, so as to get a grip on how and why our respondents turned to the New Age.

Before starting our analysis we must first pay attention to an important methodological issue. The stories of the respondents about their ‘trajectories to the New Age’, i.e. the ways they became interested and involved in spirituality, refer to events in the (remote) past so we have to rely on the memory of our interviewees. In many cases the personal events they communicated, happened about twenty years back in time or more which means that they probably constructed an image of the past, the historical circumstances and former identities on the basis of their present situation. As specimens of *oral history* we must therefore reckon with some distortion in their narratives about the period of the 1960s and the reasons why they started a new life as New Ager (Van Rooden, 2004, 524-551; e.g., Brown, 2001). This point asks attention all the more, since they had continued their spiritual trajectory at least until the mid 1990s, when the interviews took place. Recollections of past identities and life circumstances may thus in particular be framed by their spiritual disposition; from their

present situation as New Age teachers they may for instance have constructed an image of their past identities as somewhat ‘lost’, ‘insecure’ or ‘alienated’ to legitimate their ‘personal growth’ and successful position in the contemporary spiritual milieu. Contrasts such as these are a recurrent feature of the narratives of our respondents and may be related to a process of conversion that involves a reinterpretation of past biographies, always following the formula “Then I *thought*...now I *know*” (Berger and Luckmann, 1991[1966: 179]).

The reports of the interviewees, in short, can not simply be understood as true representations of historical facts, but are to be handled with caution since they are selective interpretations and coloured (re)constructions of past events. Aware of these shortcomings we will also use other independent studies to contextualize and validate the respondents’ narratives. Nevertheless, we think that the method of ‘oral history’ provides an important methodological strategy to study how personal life stories are embedded in and are informed by socio-cultural change (e.g., Van Rooden, 2004). The narratives of our respondents, we therefore maintain, inform us about a more general experience of a generation in an important period of socio-cultural change in the Netherlands: the counter culture of the 1960s and 1970s.

2. Dutch Religion, Secularization and the Counter Culture in the 1960s and 1970s

2.1 The Dutch Religious Landscape and Dechristianization

Christianity in the Netherlands had been a plural phenomenon since the Reformation. In the 1960s, the main formative period for our respondents, a majority of the Dutch population still declared themselves to belong to a Christian church. But secularization was on its way. The

number of people saying, when asked, they felt not affiliated to a church had already reached a third of the population in 1966 (33%, Bernts et al., 2007). In the same year another third declared itself a Roman Catholic church-member (35%), while the last summed third said to belong to the Dutch Reformed (20%) and the Neo-Calvinist (8%) churches (Ibid.). The Dutch Reformed Church that had been largest and maintained a privileged state position, had already earlier given evidence of a more open attitude to society (e.g. the 'Breakthrough' to the new Labour Party in 1946) and a loss of members. The Neo-Calvinists and Roman Catholics clung to their beliefs and rituals, staying in their own social circles. The churches' influence reached far into society by means of the organization of political and social life along confessional lines. Even health care, sports, clubs and associations were thus 'pillarized' and it was only recently (1954) that Roman Catholic bishops had officially forbidden believers to vote for, listen to or be a member of non Catholic parties, broad casting corporations or societies, especially of a socialist signature.

From about 1960 onwards, however, the varied and strongly pillarized Dutch religious landscape rapidly changed under the influence of a process of secularization. The period and culture in which our respondents became adults witnessed an abrupt and massively decrease of church membership, of Christian beliefs, doctrines, practices and lifestyles and a serious restraint of the scope of church-religion on social and cultural life. All in all such developments resulted in depillarization in a relatively short time span, a more secular consciousness and a modern way of life focused on self-expression and the like (Dekker, 1992: 38).

Some short comments on multifarious process of secularization and the general change of values, norms and practices (modernization) in the 1960s and 1970s may add to a better understanding of our respondents' position and perspective in this period. Van Rooden (2004) prefers the term 'dechristianization' over 'secularization' as a description of what actually

happened to Christian churches and societies in Western Europe and the Netherlands in particular. From his perspective, ‘dechristianization’ more aptly expresses the collective and taken-for-granted nature of Christian religion *before* the 1960s. But there’s yet another reason why the rapidly changing cultural landscape in that period may be better referred to as ‘dechristianization’. ‘Secularization’, after all, implies a turn towards a by and large secular society – that is, a society where *religion in general* is marginalized – whereas ‘dechristianization’ only implies the erosion of *one particular type of religion*. The latter concept may be more feasible since it opens the possibility of religious change. Empirically speaking this is exactly what happened: the erosion of the Christian tradition in the 1960s was accompanied by the rise of many alternative religious movements and new forms of spirituality in the Netherlands as well as in other western countries (e.g., Campbell, 2007; Houtman and Aupers, 2007). In those days, New Age spirituality was quite literally ‘esoteric’, i.e. somewhat deviant and not yet popular among the general public. Spirituality especially emerged in the so-called alternative counter culture of the 1960s and 1970s where it was developed by many young people with middle-class backgrounds who – like our respondents – were dissatisfied with the Christian tradition *and* modern secularism.

2.2. The Countercultural Takeoff

The ‘countercultural revolution’ (Marwick, 1998; Campbell, 2007) and participants of the counter culture primarily expressed their discontents with a ‘bourgeois’, ‘technocratic’, and ‘capitalist’ society that kept individuals in a suffocating stranglehold. Radical transformations in manners, norms and values, with various and loosely knitted youth initiatives and movements vehemently criticizing ‘the establishment’, marked this period of rapid socio-

cultural change. Following the early initiatives of ‘beat poets’ such as Kerouac, Watts, and Ginsberg in the 1950s, the counter culture was inspired by politico-philosophical, spiritual and lifestyle sources from the East (like Buddhism, Zen and yoga) as well as the West (like esotericism, Marxism, egalitarianism, collective and communitarian lifestyles). American philosopher Theodore Roszak’s ideas became very popular, in the Netherlands also due to the translation of his book *The Making of a Counter Culture* (1969), reprinted no less than five times between 1971 and 1974. An expansion of individual liberty, a radical democratization of society and its institutions, and the provision of more room for identities that were once considered ‘deviant’, were the counter culture’s central aims.

The counter culture not only changed the political landscapes of western societies, but had important religious ramifications as well. Whereas those ideal-typically referred to by Zijderveld (1970) as ‘Anarchists’ and ‘Activists’ were prominently involved in constructing and defending new modes of social life to transcend technocratic and capitalist consumer society, ‘Gnostics’ represented the spiritual dimension of the counter culture. This wing of the counter culture freely experimented with different, mostly non-Christian, esoteric traditions to seek for salvation from the alienating machineries of society and find ‘inner’ spirituality. This ‘Gnostic’ type of religion is not so much focused on a transcendent God ‘out there’, but on ‘the god within’ (Heelas 1996); epistemologically speaking it is not so much based on belief, but on the primacy of personal experience as the road to absolute truth, beauty and the good life (Hanegraaff 1996). Zijderveld concludes: “The Gnostics of all ages search for God (i.e. for utter reality, meaning and freedom) in the depth of their own souls” (1970: 108).

Whereas political activism, anarchism and this ‘Gnostic’ type of (self)spirituality could initially only be distinguished analytically, they increasingly developed into fundamentally different wings of the counter culture. In the Netherlands, political protest manifested itself mainly in the streets and on the squares of Amsterdam whereas spiritual

seekers often “dropped out” and retreated to communes on the country side where they lived as if the New Age had already dawned. Moreover, the spiritual and political wing of the counter culture – once united in a youth center like *Fantasio* – got organized in 1969 in at least two different alternative centers in Amsterdam: *Paradiso* focusing on political activism and *De Kosmos* concentrating on eastern religion and Gnostic (self)spirituality. The latter center claimed in a folder in 1972: “The act that matters most and that changes everything, is the step from the outer world to the inner world.” *De Kosmos* was the first New Age center in the Netherlands: it closed its doors in 1984 but became a blueprint for the hundreds of other spiritual centers that marked the transition from counter cultural spirituality to, what generally became known in the 1980s as, the New Age Movement (Aupers, 2005; Moerland and Van Otterloo, 1996).

Most of our respondents were part of this counter culture in the Netherlands. In the 1960 and 1970s, they were interested in feminism, Marxism and other alternative political and social movements; they experimented freely with alternative lifestyles, drugs and spirituality. Many of them even started their ‘spiritual career’ in *De Kosmos*. Following courses like ‘Yoga’, ‘astrology’ or ‘holistic massage’ encouraged them to proceed into the spiritual milieu and this brought them eventually to their positions as spiritual teachers. Their spiritual socialization also took place through the reading of New Age books, translated or not, and journals like *De Waterman* (Aquarius), written by the Hobbitstee, a small commune in the northeastern countryside, that also transported non fluoresced water to the big cities. They traveled a lot and communicated with kindred souls abroad and at home. In general, many respondents explicitly refer to the counter culture as a period of liberation – for western society in general but more particularly for themselves. When asked how they became involved in the New Age milieu, many pointed out how much New Age spirituality was ‘in

the air' at the time. As such, they got acquainted with this unique cultural-historical context in an almost 'natural' way. Marjet explains:

“The beginning of the sixties. My brother was very interested in yoga and hitchhiked to India together with his nephew. In those days, this had a sort of magic ring to it. But it also had a lot to do with spiritual growth, making a connection with the higher world that one could no longer recognize in the church. Yoga, spirituality, and sexuality: everything had become completely different. It had happened within a few years. One became unbound (...) In essence, one was seeking new norms and values that suited one.”

3. Christianity and Its Discontents

3.1. A Cruel God

It is hardly surprising that precisely the era of the counter culture, characterized by a spirit of individual liberty and personal growth, witnessed a huge acceleration in the process of secularization (Brown, 2001). The new cultural climate damaged the plausibility and legitimacy of the traditional Christian solutions to problems of meaning, because the quest for personal autonomy eroded obedience to authority. Under these circumstances, the doctrine that personal misfortune and suffering reflect His will and hence expose His intentions, does not offer consolation, but rather stimulates people to turn their backs against this cruel and malignant God.

This was the principal reason to break with Christianity and turn to the New Age for some of our respondents. One of them is Eva, who explains how the death of her parents and,

shortly afterwards, a brother, alienated her from the Christian tradition. Only years later, she acquainted herself with Zen to find consolation for this tragic misfortune:

“It has been very decisive that my parents and a brother died very shortly after one another. This shook up my life completely! At first [my reaction was]: ‘I don’t want it anymore, all these religions! And theologians are just babbling!’ But in a certain way, Zen presented itself to me (...) But this was years later.”

Marjan tells the following about a similar occurrence:

“When I was about 23 years old, my family and I were having a very difficult period. It was then, I think, that I discovered that I had lost God a long time before. In any case: I then felt a great anger towards God. My sister had committed suicide and another sister got mentally ill. I always connected it to God after Auschwitz: ‘What in God’s name can one still say about God after Auschwitz?’ Or after having lost my sisters: ‘How in God’s name can you still deal with a God? What is God? What are you?’”

And Pieter recounts:

“My separation from the church had to do with the fact that my older sister had a child with a handicap. She had a problem with her mucous membrane; she could not cough. And my sister knew that she would one time be too late to remove the mucus from her throat and that the child would suffocate. This is indeed what happened within a year. After that, she gave birth to another baby and it had exactly the same problem. My

mother said: ‘God is working on her (my sister), but she doesn’t listen.’ I think I must have been twelve years old, but I thought: ‘Something is terribly wrong here; somebody is completely abandoned. And that there is a God who wittingly gives somebody a child like that, not once, but twice – that’s a shame! I want to have nothing to do with that!’”

Greetje has also distanced herself at an early age (“when I was 12”) from the Dutch-Reformed milieu in which she had grown up: “I thought it was not good. I figured: ‘This makes no sense since my neighbor who does not believe is a very loving person. Why would she go to hell? That is madness!’ So I said: ‘Goodbye!’” In reproaching God for His alleged cruelty or apparent indifference, people do however not necessarily react to their own or their close relatives’ misfortunes. Marga, for instance, explains why she – though raised in a Christian fashion and trained as a teacher – decided that she did not want a job at a school with a Christian identity:

“I could not tell those stories from the Bible. It took me so much effort; I just could not get it out of my throat! And then the way these stories were interpreted. I also had problems with the suffering of Jesus Christ: that he was hanging on the cross and all the terrible things he went through. All these things were told in the church. Well, I could not stand this at all!”

The changed cultural climate since the 1960s, to sum up, has damaged the meaning-providing potential of the Christian tradition with its emphasis on a radically transcendent and almighty personal God who is responsible for fortune and suffering. In New Age, to the contrary, such an external agent who causes suffering does not exist. It instead conceives of misfortune as

either predestined by an impersonal and continually evolving cosmic order (preventing the possibility of blaming ‘someone’) or a spiritual sign that one is following the wrong track and hence needs to re-attune one’s life to who one ‘really’ or ‘at deepest’ is (implying that one is personally responsible for one’s fate). It seems that the new cultural climate, in which individual liberty had become more and conformity to external authority less important, damaged Christianity’s meaning-providing potential, while making people susceptible to this New Age alternative of ‘inner spirituality’.

3.2. Religious Dogmas and Authorities

The changed cultural climate not only undermined the appreciation of Christianity’s typical way of dealing with illness, death, and suffering, however, but also eroded the authority of priests, ministers and other religious authorities. During the 1960s, traditional Christian religion was increasingly experienced as ‘imposed from the outside’ by religious authorities who guarded its form and substance and hence left little room for personal interpretation or experience. Mary recounts how, due to her “classical Catholic upbringing” that cast women as “bad by definition”, she continuously felt forced into “an oppositional role”. Marjan recounts how she left the Catholic church in the beginning of her twenties because of “the hassle with Alfrink [a progressive Dutch archbishop who clashed with orthodox Catholicism] and the like at the time; I no longer wanted to belong to that church.” Janneke, another respondent with a Catholic background, comments: “(I had) a sort of anger and resistance (...) against the church (...) Always that ‘confession of guilt’ and ‘my fault’ (...) I experienced much repression and much unfairness in that.” Ria recounts the following about an experience she had as an eight-year-old child:

“I was in class and a chaplain gave a lesson. He was discussing the commandments and rules and said at a certain moment: ‘Now all children who know that their mother is lying have to put their finger in the air.’ I was sitting in front of the class (because I was a difficult child) and still remember that I turned around and looked whether someone would actually do this. About half of the class held a finger in the air. And then I thought: ‘If this is religious faith, then it is not something for me.’”

Sandra, a respondent of strict Reformed upbringing – “Very much with religion and the Bible and prayer before meals, three times a day” – talks about “so much narrow-mindedness and such a small world”. Other respondents, also of strict Reformed upbringing, speak about “oppressing things” (Tiny) and recount – in the words of one of them – how they “very strongly reacted against Christianity as we received it; the Christianity that starts from ‘Man is sinful’ and with so many prohibitions. That became so oppressive to me” (Betty). Another respondent, Robbert, explains how he distanced himself from his strict Reformed upbringing after he got an insatiable desire for sexual freedom so as to be able to cope with past experiences of incest:

“Since I had the feeling that something completely different was going on with me, I felt that I had to embark on a journey of discovery. Especially sexuality fascinated me, although I did not know then what it was or why. But I had to! If I would not explore it, I felt, I would not really live. These were two opposing forces. It was absolutely not a fun time. And that brought me to distancing myself from my Reformed upbringing.”

Since then, he assures, he has “completely dissociated” from his strict Reformed upbringing, has “abandoned the dogmas received in it”, and is “no longer bothered by the feelings of guilt sustained there”.

About half of our respondents have dissociated themselves from the Christian religion they were brought up in, not infrequently “after a period of strongly reacting against (...) Christianity” (Lea). They recount their aversion to religious dogmas and moral prohibitions, experienced as imposed ‘from the outside’, and explain how they feel this focus on externalities marginalizes personal experience and the ‘inner world’. It annoyed Marga, brought up in a strict Reformed family, for instance, how religion tended towards empty ritualism: “I was especially upset because people in our circle were decently sitting in the church on Sunday, while exploiting each other on weekdays. As a child one cannot accept that any longer, you know”. Another respondent, grown up in a Protestant village in the province of Zuid-Holland, recounts her experiences during confirmation classes:

“And then I visited confirmation class and there was this minister, Reverend De Weert. Well, this was rather difficult because his son was in my class. And he [the minister] told things in confirmation class that I knew contradicted his personal private life. And that did not work for me. I just did not buy it! And that became my first struggle with religious faith. Because since then I felt that I did not want to go there” (Matthea).

Yet another respondent, involved in an ecumenical congregation as a student, recounts how he felt at the time that experiences and emotions were neglected and ignored, especially during funeral services:

“It is like they are bumping into a ceiling that limits them, while you realize at a certain moment that there is more. (...) A pastor, or a minister, or any representative of the church: they are supposed to have something special, because they have this special connection to ‘Our Lord’. And I just could not see that! (...) I then dropped out and that’s why I did Zen: to base my life upon my own experience and not believe what others or the Scriptures have to say” (Michiel).

Although the cultural and political turbulence of the 1960s has waned since the late 1970s, the key countercultural values of individual liberty and self-attainment are still with us today and have in fact become even more widespread since, as Inglehart (1977) has demonstrated. More than that, they have in the meantime entered mainstream culture. This is exemplified by the way product brands have appropriated these values to bestow their products with dreams of personal authenticity, non-conformity and rebelliousness (Frank 1998).

This increased salience of values pertaining to individual liberty and self-attainment since the 1960s, our foregoing analysis demonstrates, has undermined much of the appeal of the Christian tradition, because it has caused the latter to be increasingly experienced as a suffocating yoke imposed by an illegitimate external power. Due to these values, in other words, obedience to external religious authorities – be they an almighty God, religious dogmas, priests, or ministers – gives rise to feelings of alienation. It evokes a sense of being held captured in a moral system that prevents one from being true to oneself. Due to cultural processes that may alternatively be referred to as individualization, de-traditionalization, or subjectivization, the status of the Christian tradition has thus changed dramatically. Having served as the most important cultural resource for the *solution* of problems of meaning for a very long time, it has increasingly become a major *source* of problems of meaning itself –

problems our respondents solved by leaving the church and taking refuge in the spiritual milieu of the New Age.

4. Modern Work and Its Discontents

Discontents with traditional Christian religion were however not the only reason for entering the spiritual New Age milieu. The counter culture of the 1960s and 1970s pointed its arrows not only at traditional moral authorities, after all, but also – and perhaps even more – at modern ‘technocratic society’ that was held to alienate individuals from their true potentials (Roszak, 1969; Zijderveld 1970). Daniel Bell (1996[1976]: 143) even states that “though it [the counter culture] appeared in the guise of an attack on the ‘technocratic society’ [its ideology] was an attack on reason itself.”

And indeed, our interviews point out that deeply felt discontents with modern rationalized work organizations play a major role in their turn to the New Age. No less than 26 of our 42 respondents pointed to their working environments when asked why they eventually turned to the New Age. Most strikingly, a large majority (19 out of 26) of this group was originally working in social care – most of them were (sometimes academically trained) physiotherapists, psychologists, social workers, or hospital nurses. What exactly triggered them to drop out of these regular jobs and start careers as spiritual teachers in the New Age milieu?

4.1. Inhuman Institutions

Almost all of these respondents point out that they had always wanted to “work with people”. Motivated by this goal, they chose an education and a job in the field of social care but – in many cases – quickly became disappointed. In the most general sense, they became disenchanted with the rationalized, anonymous and hence “inhuman” approach in their disciplines and occupations. This approach is described – in the words of a respondent who formerly worked in a psychiatric institution – as “a system that breeds many problems”. “Physiotherapy”, another respondent comments, “was a bit of a detached kind of education. Everything had to be ‘objective’. There was a great gap between the patient and the service provided by the organization” (Marjet). Yet another, trained as an academic psychologist, contends about the university: “It was just not juicy. I have not met any people with juice” (Cas). Rationalized work was especially experienced as annoying by those who initially started out idealistically to help people: “People were really slipping away from me because one could not really help them” (Janneke), “I could not help people” (Nannie) and “I was constantly struggling with things, because I felt I was swimming against the tide” (Matthea).

These feelings of discontent were not only fed by the “anonymity”, “objectivity” or “hyper-rationality” of the institutions, but especially by advanced specialization, our respondents recount. Those interviewees who were originally working with the human body in their day-to-day job or education, for instance, became dissatisfied with their fields’ narrow focus. The five physiotherapists in our sample provide a good example. They had – as one of them explains – “always felt that physiotherapy was too limited” and increasingly became fascinated by questions like “What makes this person really sick? What can we find behind the body?” (Gerard). These questions pushed them gradually towards the spiritual New Age milieu that deals with such questions about the “deeper”, “inner” or “spiritual” self and the

meaningful connections between “body and soul” (Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1996), as the following quote demonstrates:

“I was educated as a physiotherapist, so I was always interested in working with people. But already during my education, I felt a sort of discontent (...) And then I noticed that I learned a lot, but I could not *really* help people. That was really frustrating. So I thought: ‘There must be a way to touch people’s deeper layer.’ I had always been interested in nutrition and after doing macrobiotics, I discovered Shiatsu. I completed my education, but I am now working with Shiatsu” (Mieke).

Janneke explains in a similar vein:

“I was never really enthusiastic about physiotherapy. Some things were good about the education, but when one entered the field, one failed: one could not really get a grip on people. I was not able to help them. And with this [Cranio-Sacred therapy and aura reading] I gain amazing results! It has to do with people becoming really aware. It’s like a light that turns on, like: “Hey, it is different then I thought!””

Once applied, spiritual approaches proved eye-openers, because they provided opportunities to treat clients at the physical *and* spiritual level. Another respondent chose to become a homoeopath, since the latter approaches humans as “whole beings”. Although she thereby entered the alternative field, she was still dissatisfied with the fact that her clients approached her as a regular doctor. They wanted her, for instance, to cure their headaches without treating the real, mental or spiritual causes of their physical symptoms. This triggered her to immerse herself deeper into the spiritual milieu:

“So when one would ask them, ‘Have you thought about what could be the *real* cause of this?’, they would not react. And then I thought: ‘I cannot work like this (...) If you come to me as a client, you have to reveal something about yourself. Not just your illness. And not only your body, but also your spirit, your soul.’ (...) So now I am occupied with meditation and relaxation and breathing exercises (...) In this fashion, I let it [spirituality] enter my practice” (Nannie).

These respondents, in short, were dissatisfied with the one-dimensional focus on bodily existence in their profession, sought a worldview that included ‘body’, ‘mind’ and ‘spirit’, and entered the New Age movement. In their current practice, they emphasize “wholeness” of the individual and “work at various levels” (Gerard). The point that specialization in their professions propelled these people to the spiritual (or holistic) milieu is validated by the fact that the psychologists in our sample became increasingly aware of the limitations of their discipline’s focus on ‘mind’:

“I am a psychologist and wanted to work with people in a therapeutic fashion (...) At the end of my education, we had a guest lecturer who was practicing bio-energetics. No attention had been paid to this in my education. But it worked. And I thought: ‘This is the way I want to work!’ (...) If you are occupied with the body as a psychologist, you are immediately in touch with people’s emotions. If you simply focus on verbal expressions, people can exclude their emotions, detach them from the body (...) By means of a physical approach, emotions are immediately present” (Ria).

Their dissatisfaction with the cognitive approach and the one-sided focus on the mind thus led the (former) psychologists in our study to therapeutic practices that included the body and, more generally, all other aspects of human beings:

“I was looking for a therapeutic method that would cover the whole person, a technique that would cover the animal-like, wild side of the human body as well as the higher, moral layers that are also prominent in the body. That’s what I found: a therapy (...) that covers humans on all levels and in all varieties (...) For me, it is inconceivable how psychotherapists can practice psychology without interventions in the body. They don’t know what they are missing!” (Cas).

“During my education, I was involved in hypnosis, something that was not actually a part of my study (...) After my education, I worked in a psychiatric institution and at the university. At a certain moment, I left scientific psychology (...) I now prefer to work with a model that considers body, mind, and spirit as an interconnected whole (...) That these two parts [body and spirit] are generally detached from one another, considered a contradiction: I just don’t see it like that!” (Anton).

Respondents who used to work mainly with the body, then, became dissatisfied with their profession’s lack of attention to ‘mind’ or ‘spirit’, while psychologists, *vice versa*, critique their discipline’s denial of people’s somatic dimension. Despite their different professional backgrounds, they thus drew the very same conclusion: ‘body’, ‘mind’ and ‘spirit’ cannot be separated, as the institutions in which they once worked demanded. This is an important reason why they left their jobs and – sometimes gradually, sometimes abruptly – started careers in the spiritual milieu.

Since the start of their careers in the field of welfare, to sum up, professional (over)specialization has been a major source of frustration for many of our respondents. These discontents have led them to reject the Cartesian divide between mind and body, conceiving of the two as intrinsically connected instead. This constitutes an important factor in explaining their turn to the New Age that fully embraces a holistic worldview where ‘everything is connected’ and that is “characterized by a criticism of dualistic and reductionistic tendencies in (modern) western culture” (Hanegraaff, 1996:517).

4.2. Alienation, Stress and Burnout

Respondents like those mentioned above have been pushed towards the New Age by discontents with their professional disciplines and the rationalized organizations in which they used to work. Quite a few of them, however, indicate that this created not mere discontents, but more acute health problems such as stress, burnout or physical illness. The following respondent illustrates how a personal crisis – assumingly caused by a ‘dehumanizing institution’ – motivated her to find out ‘who she really was’ and ‘what she actually wanted’. These questions sparked a process of soul searching, initially by means of secular psychology, but later on in the spiritual milieu:

“I had a burnout in my work and it was not the first time. I was a nurse in a psychiatric institution. I ran into a deadlock, over and over again. (...) I used to call this a burnout, but now I frame it in quite another way. So I thought: ‘I can’t go on like this! I have to do something about it. Is this work good for me?’ In nursing one gives, one gives a little bit more, one really gives a lot! And I had a lot to give, but I

forgot that I also needed a lot for myself. So I was completely out of balance. This was the motivation for me to work on myself. So I went to the RIAGG [a Dutch psychological institution] but that did not run deep enough. Since then, step by step, one ends up in a place where one needs to be (...) Like a breathing group for instance. Rebirthing! That was such a sensation! Like: ‘My God! I feel so much happiness in my body!’ I felt I could dance!” (Sandra).

Another respondent, who did not work in welfare but in a commercial organization, tells a similar story:

“I became involved because I ran into a deadlock myself (...) I was only working, working, and working and I did not feel my body anymore. At a certain day I did not feel very well, but thought: ‘It will pass over.’ I told my boss: ‘I am going home because I can’t take it any longer.’ Well, saying that was in itself an accomplishment for me. I went to bed and things got worse. It turned out that I had appendicitis and I had been walking around with it for weeks; and I had not even felt it! (...) I stayed for ten days on Intensive Care and that’s when things happened within me (...) I thought I was very important, but no one came to visit me. The company just marched on without me and then something awoke in me: ‘What the hell am I doing?’ I said to myself: ‘Never again!’ And I never returned since then” (Arno).

The biographies of these respondents reveal how feelings of stress or alienation, invoked by their work in modern (welfare) organizations, resulted in personal crises. This encouraged them to leave their organizations and start exploring the depths of their own souls in an attempt to re-attune their lives to ‘who they really were’. In other instances, however,

respondents did not quit voluntarily, but were fired – a stressful event that also stimulated them to reconsider their position in life in general and work in particular:

“I worked for 25 years in public health and was fired during a reorganization. At first, I tried to find work in the same field. I participated in an outplacement agency for one and a half year, but that did not work out. Then I contemplated for a while and decided at a certain point: ‘I will just try it! [working with auras and chakras]’ It is of course something radically different. You have to denounce a large part of your self-image, since you say goodbye to all knowledge, everything you have done before. That’s quite a step!’ (Betty)

5. Conclusion and Discussion

Having studied the biographies of the ‘first generation’ of spiritual teachers in the Netherlands, we conclude that their turn to the New Age is mainly born from dissatisfaction with institutional life in the 1960s and 1970s. This dissatisfaction, expressed by each individual respondent, was part and parcel of a broader counter culture that ate away at the plausibility of the dominating institutional structures. Especially the call for individual liberty that rapidly permeated western culture in the 1960s and 1970 led to strong aversion to every authoritative structure external to the self: from this perspective, traditional Christian institutions and authorities lost much of their former meaning-providing potential. More than that: they rapidly transformed from *solutions* to problems of meaning into major *causes* of the latter. In a similar vein modern institutions were increasingly experienced and defined as alienating forces – as Weberian ‘iron cages’ that suffocate and compartmentalize the individual. In this cultural climate, the esoteric tradition became an attractive alternative – a

new and vital source of meaning for a growing population of dissatisfied youngsters. Especially its fundamentally humanistic premises of an ‘authentic’ or ‘spiritual’ self beyond institutional roles was considered promising – it catered to a new individualized, yet meaningful way of life outside church and chapel. Moreover, holistic assumptions about a unity between body, mind, and spirit countered the experienced ‘problems’ of modern specialization in working environments.

Our analysis of the turn to New Age is of course restricted to a particular time (the 1960s and 1970s) and place (the Netherlands) and can and should not be generalized. As such, we consider it an important task for future research to contextualize the motivations to turn to the New Age, i.e., to make a comparison between different western countries and between different ‘generations’ of spiritual seekers. As to the latter, we can only theorize whether and how contemporary trajectories to New Age spirituality differ from the countercultural ones that we have sketched in this paper. Authors like Steve Bruce (2002), to begin with, argue that New Age is doomed to die out because its worldview is still mainly carried by the generation of countercultural baby boomers studied in this article and cannot be transmitted to a new generation. Especially its lack of a shared doctrine, Bruce maintains, makes the socialization of a new generation “unnecessary and (...) impossible” (2002: 99). This argument is quite problematic, because the doctrine of self-spirituality – i.e., the need to be true to one’s deeper spiritual self by taking one’s personal experiences, intuitions and emotions seriously, by following only one’s personal path and by distrusting external authorities and institutional demands – is still uncontested in the contemporary spiritual domain (Heelas, 1996; Hammer, 2001; Aupers and Houtman, 2006). One may even argue that precisely in its shared rejection of religious conformity, New Age spirituality is just as dogmatic as any other type of religion is.

This is surely a doctrine that can be transferred to new generations, as is also suggested by the presence of a younger second generation of people holding a firm interest in New Age spirituality (e.g., Bernts et al., 2006; Rose, 2005). It is however quite unlikely that this second generation's turn to New Age spirituality has been driven by anti-institutional rebellion and resistance against "the system", including the Christian church and rationalized work environments. This young generation, in North Western Europe at least, has after all not been socialized primarily in traditional Christian values, while work has meanwhile become increasingly infused with 'soft' humanistic values like 'self-expression', 'personal growth' and 'play' (e.g., Grant et al., 2004). The values of the counter culture, in other words, have increasingly come to permeate the cultural mainstream (Bell, 1996[1976]; Marwick, 1998; Campbell, 2007; Houtman, 2008).

Could it be, then, that precisely the powerful modern institutions of market and media now play major roles in socializing young people into this type of spirituality, or at least priming them for it? Since the 1980s, New Age spirituality has after all become a commodified market phenomenon, using commercial strategies like advertising, branding and modern media techniques to seduce people. Moreover, the media are nowadays suffused with content that may prime (especially young) people for New Age spirituality – 'glossy' spiritual magazines, shows like *Oprah* or *Dr. Phil*, television series like the *X-Files* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and films like *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* may play a major role in opening teenagers up to spirituality, preparing a first introduction to the spiritual milieu (e.g., Partridge, 2004; Possamai, 2005). Indeed, Schofield Clark (2003) demonstrates that media consumption nowadays feeds, formats and mediates teenagers' beliefs in the supernatural.

We consider this one of the major issues for future research on contemporary spirituality. To the extent the contemporary turn to spirituality is indeed driven by the modern

institutions of market and media, such would after all entail a paradoxical reversion of the patterns demonstrated in this paper for the 1960s and 1970s. While by then the turn to New Age spirituality was driven by rebellious disgust with mainstream society and its institutions, it may hence nowadays rather be driven by the seductive powers of the market and the media as contemporary modernity's arguably most powerful institutions. To the extent that such is indeed the case, attitudes *vis-à-vis* the commodification, commercialization and mediatization of spirituality among the generation of New Agers studied in the paper constitutes another promising avenue for future research.

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