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Beyond the Spiritual Supermarket: The Social and Public Significance of New Age Spirituality

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

Introduction

In most of the social-scientific literature, the term 'New Age'—or 'New Age spirituality', as increasingly seems to be 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 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 (1) 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'', while Possamai (40) states that we are dealing with an ''eclectic—if not kleptomaniac—process . . . with no clear reference to an external or 'deeper' reality''.

The dominant discourse about New Age basically reiterates sociologist of religion Thomas Luckmann's influential analysis, which was published about 40 years ago in *The Invisible Religion*. Structural differentiation in modern society, Luckmann argues, results in erosion of the Christian monopoly and the concomitant emergence of a 'market of ultimate significance'. In such a market, religious consumers construct strictly personal packages of meaning, which are based on individual tastes and preferences. Indeed, in a more recent publication,

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Luckmann (''Privatisation'' 75) notes that New Age exemplifies the 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.''

Luckmann emphasises that such personal meaning systems remain strictly private: by their very nature and unlike traditional church-based Christian religion in the past, they lack wider social significance and play no public role. Writing 30 years ago, the late Bryan Wilson made a similar claim about 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). More recently, Steve Bruce (*God is Dead* 99) characterised New Age as a ''diffuse religion'', noting that ''There is no . . . power in the cultic milieu to override individual preferences''.

Such accounts are found again and 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 in anthropology and the history of religion nonetheless suggests that this orthodoxy is deeply problematic (Hammer *Claiming*; ''Contradictions''; Hanegraaff *New Age*; ''Prospects''; Luhrmann). Indeed, from within sociology itself, Heelas demonstrated convincingly that New Age spirituality is remarkably less eclectic and incoherent than is typically assumed. Our aim in this article is to elaborate on the dissenting voices and demonstrate that this sociological orthodoxy is not much more than an institutionalised intellectual misconstruction. More specifically, we criticise three related arguments that constitute the privatisation thesis: firstly, New Age boils down to mere individual 'bricolage'; secondly, it is socially insignificant, because ''the transmission of diffuse beliefs is unnecessary and it is impossible'' (Bruce, *God is Dead* 99); thirdly, it does not play a role in the public domain. We summarise our findings and briefly elaborate their theoretical significance in the final section.

We use data from a variety of sources, collected during the first author's doctoral research during 1999–2003 (see Aupers, *In de ban*). Besides literature on New Age and a variety of flyers and websites of Dutch New Age centres, we draw on in-depth interviews with two samples of New Age teachers. Focusing on this 'spiritual *élite*' rather than on those who only vaguely identify with 'spirituality' or 'New Age' enables us to study the worldview of the spiritual milieu in its most crystallised and 'pure' form. Besides, these are the very people who communicate this worldview to those who participate in their courses, training sessions, 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 selected from a national directory of nature-oriented medicine and consciousness-raising (Van Hoog) and our respondents were then randomly selected from the centres' web sites. 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, most of those contacted.[3] Finally, we rely on data from a theoretically instructive case study of the Dutch

company Morca that has embraced New Age capitalism. Within this context, the first author 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 done so. Unless indicated otherwise, we draw on data from the first sample of spiritual trainers in section two, on data from the second sample in section three, and on data from the case study in section four.

The Ethic of Self-Spirituality

> Diffuse religion cannot sustain a distinctive way of life. (Bruce, *God is Dead* 94).

As sociological orthodoxy suggests, teachers of Dutch New Age centres combine various traditions in their courses. While one may use tarot cards in combination with crystal-healing and Hindu ideas about *chakras*, another may mix traditional Chinese medicine, Western psychotherapy, and Taoism into another idiosyncratic combination. There is thus no reason to deny the prominence of 'bricolage' in the spiritual milieu.

However, while New Age scholars typically assume that 'bricolage' or 'eclecticism' is the principal characteristic of New Age, *none* of our interviewees feels that the traditions on which they base their courses are at the heart of their worldview. As the Dutch New Age centre Centrum voor Spirituele Wegen states in one of its flyers, ''There are many paths, but just one truth.'' This *philosophia perennis* or 'perennial philosophy' derives from esotericism—especially from Blavatsky's New Theosophy (Hanegraaff, *New Age*)—and influenced the first generation of New Agers in the 1970s through the work of Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki and Aldous Huxley. According to this philosophy, 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 with 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.

Therefore, perennialism is more fundamental than 'bricolage': 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, 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.

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 the individual from his/her 'authentic', 'natural' or 'real' self —from the person s/he is 'really' or 'at deepest':

> the 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'. (Heelas 19)

This 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, 'unpolluted' by culture, history or society, which informs evaluation of what is good, true, and meaningful. Such evaluation, 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).

As in 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'—is demonised as the 'false' or 'unreal' product of society and its institutions and contrasted with a 'higher', 'deeper', 'true' or 'authentic' self that is sacralised and 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!

The 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 considered as a major source of personal problems. More generally, the subordination of the self to pre-given life orders is held inescapably to result in frustration, bitterness, unhappiness, mental disorder, depression, disease, violence, sick forms of sexuality, etc. The sacralisation of the self thus goes hand in hand with a demonisation of social institutions to produce a clear-cut dualistic worldview (Aupers and Houtman), as the following statements by our respondents show:

> 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.

The 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 they '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. These essentially trivial differences notwithstanding, the underlying doctrine of self-spirituality is uncontested.

The emergence of a pluralistic spiritual super-market confirms Luckmann's classical prediction, 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 remarkable diversity at the surface of the spiritual milieu—which is inevitable when people feel that

they need to follow their personal paths and explore what works for them personally—and at the same time provides ideological unity and coherence at a deeper level. The common characterisation of New Age as a 'pick-and-mix-religion' or 'diffuse religion' is therefore not wrong, but rather superficial. If New Agers believe that the sacred resides in the deeper layers of the self, it is only to be expected that they follow their personal paths, experiment 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 well-being.

The Social Construction of Self-Spirituality

As we have seen, the spiritual milieu is 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 (*God is Dead* 99) claims. We examined this by analysing the biographies of the spiritual trainers in our second sample. They were selected because they specialise in spiritual courses for business life and in fact all turned out to have started their own careers in that world. The question is how and why they embarked in this remarkable transfer from 'normal' jobs, such as clerks, president-directors or managers, to the spiritual world of shamanism, aura reading, tantra, and channelling. More specifically, the question is what role, if any, socialisation played in this process.

Alienation as the Key: 'Who am I, Really?'

In obvious contrast to the way Christian identities are typically adopted, only one of the nine respondents developed an affinity with spirituality as a result of parental socialisation in his formative period. Contrary to Bruce's suggestion, this does not, however, mean that socialisation plays no role at all; it only started after respondents were motivated to become involved, due to experiences 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 job descriptions, they felt increasingly 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,[5] who now works in the New Age centre Soulstation, is a typical example. She studied economics, rapidly made a career in the business world, and, she explained, became completely identified with her work. Looking back she stated that she was ''marched along the paths set out by society'' and added: ''I studied marketing and sales, but had never learned to look in the mirror.'' Like most others, she pointed out that her identity crisis began with an 'intrusive 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 intrusive 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 marked the beginning of an identity crisis and an enduring quest for meaning. Chantal added:

> I thought: '. . . 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 respondents. The more they became involved in 'soul searching', the more they became alienated from their working environments. 'Being true to oneself' becomes an imperative and is in the end incompatible with the demands of business life. This cognitive dissonance is the main reason why respondents eventually resigned 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, stated:

> 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.

Another respondent, Marie-José, worked, for 19 years, as a consultant, manager, and, finally, 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 explained, ''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 followed 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 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 this contact revealed the latent discomfort and triggered a quest for the depths of one's soul.

This was followed by a process of socialisation, in which three mechanisms validated and reinforced one another: acquiring a new cognitive frame of interpretation; undergoing new experiences; legitimating one's newly acquired worldview. These mechanisms, as Tanya Luhrmann demonstrates in her study on neopaganism, are the propelling forces 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 started with descriptions of their selves using vocabulary derived from humanistic psychology. At that stage, emotions were permitted and valued positively, but not yet defined as higher, spiritual or sacred. Although respondents generally started with self-help books and courses related to humanistic psychology, they eventually ended up engaging in more esoteric types of training, such as shamanism, aura reading, and the like.

Daan described 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.'' In satisfying their 'hunger' in the New Age market, respondents acquired alternative frames of interpretation, new vocabularies and symbols to interpret their experiences. They learned to label weird, out-of the-ordinary experiences as spiritual. In turn, these experiences validated 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 is a good illustration of this:

> 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 phrase 'Now I understand what they mean when they say . . .' illustrates that knowledge precedes experience and perhaps shapes its specific content. Chantal told a similar story. 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 argued, 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 practising 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 into the matter of healing and increasingly felt streams of energy around people. After a while, she started actually to see 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 internalised a spiritual conception of the self in the process and radically re-interpreted their personal identities in conformity with it. A new image of the self in the present emerged: undefined emotions and experiences are now understood in spiritual terms and the new identity is understood as profoundly spiritual. They started to re-write their biographies: they broke with their past identities, now understood as 'one-dimensional', 'alienated' or 'unhappy'. As one respondent asserted: ''I now know that I was structurally depressed without being aware of it.'' Statements like this exemplify the cultural logic of conversion: individuals have 'seen the light' and now re-interpret their past lives as 'living in sin'. As in classical conversion, 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, until they had reached 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 started new careers as trainers and teachers in the spiritual milieu, our respondents regularly encountered resistance and critique—responses which are hardly surprising. They are well aware that many see them as 'irrational', 'softies' or 'dreamers' and that many perceive their way of life as 'something for people with problems'. How do they deal with such 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 outsiders who have a problem, although they may not be aware of it. Following the doctrine of self-spirituality, resistance, criticism, and moral opposition are taken as symptoms of a deeply felt anxiety that cannot (yet) be directly experienced. Critics, our respondents argued, project an unresolved 'inner problem' on to 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 fuss about something that doesn't concern you?

Daan told a similar story:

> People are projecting it on to 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 to the outside world.' To handle these problems takes lots 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—as mentioned—works with the Enneagram, explained his strategy of dealing with resistance and criticism during his courses:

> Of course, in my training, 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 from outsiders by 'reading' it as a symptom of psychological fear, anxiety or insecurity. As a consequence, the 'inside' group is portrayed as courageous and free (because they choose to face their 'demons'), while 'outsiders' are labelled 'alienated' because they are disconnected from their deeper selves.

The process of socialisation thus unfolds as follows: firstly, 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?' Secondly, the process of soul searching follows, which socialises individuals into the ethic of self-spirituality, with knowledge and experience shifting in tandem. Thirdly, after successful socialisation, standardised legitimations are deployed, further reinforcing the ethic of self-spirituality.

These findings are strikingly consistent with Hammer's content analysis of a sample of New Age texts. In his *Claiming Knowledge*, Hammer also demonstrates that several cognitive and social mechanisms are operative which make New Agers conform to a set of unwritten norms (see Hammer, ''Contradictions'' for a very brief summary of the argument and 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. (Hammer, *Claiming* 366–7)

The process of socialisation into a spiritual discourse about the self reveals that participants in the spiritual milieu are less authentic than they often believe

they are. After all, how authentic can they be when they have in fact been socialised into a shared emphasis on the primacy of personal authenticity? New Agers' self-claimed authenticity reminds 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 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 criticism from outsiders and reinforce the adopted way of life.

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

''Sociologists rarely study spirituality in the workplace'', Grant, O'Neil and Stephens (267) observe. Although some substantial studies have been carried out in this field (e.g. Heelas; Mitroff and Denton, *Spiritual Audit*; Nadesan; Roberts; Goldschmidt Salamon),[6] the 'blind spot' which Grant et al. identified may be 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, ''Privatisation'' 73) and failing to ''generate powerful social innovations and experimental social institutions'' (Bruce, *God is Dead* 97). However, the very rarity of studies of spirituality in the workplace precludes premature conclusions that spirituality fails to affect our 'primary institutions' or modern work organisations. Grant et al. (281) rightly note that ''if it appears to sociologists that spirituality cannot take root within secular bureaucracies, it may be because their theories have not yet allowed it''. Indeed, common claims to the contrary notwithstanding, it is difficult to deny that spirituality has 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, while New Age began to turn towards business life (Heelas; Nadesan). Renowned management magazines such as *People Management*, *Industry Week*, and *Sloan Management Review* regularly include articles on the opportunities of spirituality for business life (e.g. Baber; Berman; Braham; Hayes; Mitroff and Denton, ''Study of Spirituality''; 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 (14) conclude that

> 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.

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'' (ibid 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 of 500 American companies, at least half of which had at one time or other 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 10% of the total of 30 billion spent on company training every year (see Barker; Nadesan; Swets and Bjork 95).

Since the 1990s, the shift of New Age towards business life has also become clearly visible in the Netherlands (see Aupers, ''We are all Gods'' for further 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 training in spiritual management, such as 'Team management and the soul' and 'Management in astrological perspective', to keep companies ''ready for battle'' in times when ''dynamic streams of production, services, and information increasingly put pressure on organisations and managers''. Oibibio made the following claim in its 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 training to 75 of the 100 most renowned companies in the Netherlands.[7] The client list on their web site comprises over 200 national and international companies and institutions, among them many 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 multi-nationals, such as Ahold, Heineken, and telecom company KPN, are also on the list, as are—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 tangible products offer their employees spiritual in-company training. The post-industrial service sector in particular thus seems to be hospitable towards New Age. The question is what the goal of the spiritual in-company training in all of these organisations is.

Our interviews with trainers in New Age centres which specialise in spirituality in business life and the centres' web sites reveal that the courses primarily aim at deconstructing the typically modern separation between private and public spheres by trying to impose the logic of the former upon the latter. This, of course, follows the ethic of self-spirituality: the centres aim to make the rationalised environments less alienating and more open to 'authenticity' and 'spirituality'. In doing this, it is argued, they seek for a win/win situation or, in Heelas's terms, 'the best of both worlds'. In the following accounts, 'authenticity' is held to result in *both* well-being *and* efficiency and 'spirituality' is believed to result in happiness *and* profit, with 'soulful organisations' being 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-set 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 area is far more difficult to rationalise and control from without and because attempts to this 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 and opportunities for spiritual practices may in fact be less severe than is often assumed. Organisational goals are usually taken for granted and remain strictly instrumental, while employees' 'inner lives' are considered valuable assets which 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, reliable ethnographic research is needed to explore whether and to what extent tensions between bureaucratic demands and spiritual practices emerge and how they are dealt with on a day-to-day basis.

Self-spirituality in Action: 'Grow or I'll Shoot!'

We present the findings of a case study: 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. While individuals enter the spiritual milieu freely and voluntarily, driven, as we have seen, by problems of identity caused by alienation, the employees of this particular company find themselves in a setting in which the ethic of self-spirituality is more or less imposed on them. Its function as a binding social norm—as a 'social fact' in the classical sense of Émile Durkheim—thereby becomes more visible and easier to study, precisely because not all employees are equally enthusiastic about the imposition of a spiritual regime. The case study allows us further to illustrate the claims made above about the existence and nature of a coherent spiritual doctrine of being and well-being and about the dynamics of socialisation into a spiritual discourse about the self.

The company in case is Morca, which manufactures bathroom equipment and has branches in various countries in Western Europe.[8] Geert, the president-director, is deeply involved in New Age and provides in-company training for his employees. On a personal level, Geert's motive to introduce spirituality in business life lies in his own biography. The development he went through exactly matches the processes analysed in the previous section: he experienced 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 was 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?', 'How do I get it?' The president-director explained 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, 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''. Consequently, Morca expects its employees to be happier and thus more effective—to increase productivity and profits.

It is important to note that, *formally*, participation in the courses is a free choice. Geert claims to have abandoned his former missionary attitude of ''Grow or I'll shoot!''. Having learned that people cannot be forced into a spiritual life-style he now argues (like his coach) that ''Pulling the grass will not make it grow faster''. As we will see, however, Morca's employees are in fact subject to social pressure to participate in the in-company training, which results in mutual distrust, criticism, and division between participants and non-participants.

Participants: 'It takes guts!'

All the interviewees who participated in training are in mid- to top-level management positions. They were extremely positive about the training, because it gave them the opportunity to solve personal problems (''stones in your backpack'') and to grow spiritually. They emphasised the influence of Geert and Marcel in making them participate. Mark, an assistant group controller, acknowledged: ''I am doing it because someone gave me a kick in the butt to participate. That's how it feels. That one is Geert.'' Geert's influence is perceived as stimulating. Originally, participants were sceptics and thought it was all 'vague' and 'irrational'. Following the pattern set out in the previous section, they now label previous expressions of scepticism as 'psychological resistance' or 'fear of growth'. Before, they were just not aware of their problems in their private and working lives, thinking ''Private is private, don't bother me about that!''. This attitude changed during participation. Arthur was the first to 'break through his resistance'. He explained:

> A lot of . . . [bad stuff] 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 having '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.'

The stories of these employees exemplify the breakdown of the modern separation between private and public life, which is brought about by the shift towards self-spirituality in the organisation. They were convinced that this approach works: it helps them solve personal problems and be more open and expressive in the office. This in turn, they argued, 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, self-spirituality has become an organisational asset. Yet how do those who did not participate in the courses evaluate this?

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

The interviewees who had not participated in the training mainly occupied lower positions in the organisational hierarchy (production, administration, and the like). Also, they are supervised by the participants discussed above. Their accounts, however, reflect opposite views and attitudes. For them, the influence of the president-director was not stimulating, but pressure. Taking a more conventional stance, they rejected the privatisation and spiritualisation of public organisational life and wished to preserve the divide between private and public. Personal issues, Johan argued, 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 expressed a similar view:

> 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 a secret, but it 'runs deeper', they say. And then I think: 'Do I want that?'

These employees painted a completely different picture of spirituality in business life: they defended the modern boundary between private and public and perceived the sharing of emotions with co-workers (especially superiors) not as courageous, but as frightening. Moreover, they disagreed with the participants that the courses resulted in a stronger sense of unity. On the contrary, one said,

> 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.

Other interviews confirmed that there are now two camps in the company. The spiritual group argues that the others had better join in, because otherwise ''They'll miss the connection''. The secular group ''feel[s] less than the others'' and feels that they ''don't fit in'' and ''are not respected''. These quotes aptly illustrate the tension that has built up around the courses and, more generally, around spirituality in the organisation. In her critical study of 'New Age spiritualism' in business life, Nadesan (19) claims that ''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''.

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 'hype' or the latest management fashion. After all, the developments we discuss began as early as the late 1980s, blossomed in the 1990s, and have remained salient ever since. More importantly, 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, as Mitroff and Denton (*Spiritual Audit* 212) demonstrate, to ''interesting work'' and realising their ''full potential as a person''. Indeed, from an organisational perspective, it is profitable to break with alienating bureaucratic structures and incorporate issues like self-understanding, identity, and self-spirituality in corporate culture. The elective affinity between the post-industrial service sector and New Age spirituality further strengthens our conviction that spirituality in public organisational life cannot be dismissed as mere hype or the latest craze in management.

While the case of Morca is not typical of spirituality in the public realm, it convincingly demonstrates that substantially more is at stake than individuals exploring their spirituality. More specifically, it demonstrates that self-spirituality is a well-defined doctrine with a strong potential for socialisation: employees of 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 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 into the self's deeper layers.

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. According to Bruce, Stark makes *a priori* assumptions about religion as a universal human need, while Davie argues from a similar perspective, stating that there will always remain a 'believing without belonging'. We agree with Bruce that claims about humans as 'essentially' religious beings are ''nonsociological'' (*God is Dead* 104). 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'. Perhaps surprisingly, this also applies to the work of those who are highly critical of spirituality (see Woodhead for examples). Because of his own tendency to criticise other researchers' ideas about spirituality as 'nonsociological' or ''bad sociology'' (''Good Intentions''), Bruce may be a good example of this. Attempting to impress on the reader 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. (*God is Dead* 83, emphasis added)

Such observations indeed underscore the radical individualism of the spiritual milieu. However, ironically, they do more than that: they demonstrate how this 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' cannot and need not be transmitted (ibid 99), Bruce fails to capture and satisfactorily theorise the ambiguity of the spiritual milieu's 'individualism' and causes him to overlook that individuals are socialised into compliance to the doctrine of self-spirituality.

What Bruce offers is thus merely the 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 develop their strictly personal and authentic spiritualities by themselves 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 most other sociologists of religion) inevitably coincides largely with the self-image of the spiritual milieu. It is, after all, hardly surprising that the spiritual practitioners whom Heelas et al. interviewed denied 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'' (Heelas et al. 27). Yet, 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 they should follow their heart.

The task in the years ahead is a radical 'sociologisation' of research into New Age and spirituality. We need 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 in the workplace.[9]

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NOTES

1. This is the so-called 'Randstad', where most Dutch New Age centres are situated.

2. The interviews were conducted by Inge Van der Tak, our research assistant at the time (2002), who was carefully supervised. Interviews lasted about 90 minutes on average, were tape-recorded and transcribed (see Aupers, Houtman and Van der Tak for a report of the findings). The same procedure was followed for the two sets of interviews conducted by the first author (see below).
3. These interviews were 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. All names in this article are pseudonyms, unless interviewees gave permission to use their real names.
6. Substantial fieldwork on New Age and business organisations has also been carried out in Denmark by Kirsten Marie Bovbjerg, with findings published in Danish.
7. Metavisie's claims can be found on their web site (www.metavisie.com). We have not contacted any of the companies to verify whether they indeed contracted Metavisie to provide in-company training.
8. To safeguard anonymity, the name of the company and names of the president-director, the spiritual trainer, and employees interviewed are pseudonyms.
9. Obviously, it is important to examine whether grassroots participants in the spiritual milieu, just like the spiritual *élite* studied here, also adhere to the doctrine of self-spirituality. Further, it is preferable to study the process of socialisation by means of participant observation. An obvious drawback of the methodology used for the current article—interviews with those who completed the full process—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, etc.), the approach used here seems biased *against* the finding that processes of socialisation do occur. Another drawback of our approach, and hence another advantage of participant observation, is that only the latter enables us to study the role of resistance to socialisation into a spiritual discourse as a reason for abandoning a course.

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