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New Age Movement

The New Age Movement is the spiritual movement that emerged in the context of the counter culture of the 1960s. It is vital for an understanding of religious change in the West since then, especially the shift from “religion” to “spirituality”. What follows below discusses respectively its counter-cultural roots, its worldview and cultural logic, and its implications for secularization theory.

The New Age Movement constitutes a secularized offshoot of western esotericism, which has been present in the West since the Renaissance. Its more recent historical roots are situated in the so-called ‘counter culture’ of the 1960s. Central to the latter’s outlook was a rejection of pre-defined social roles, of the institutions that defined these roles, and most generally, of a modern society that was understood as standing in the way of personal liberty, self-attainment and personal authenticity. This critique made “The System” the central metaphor in articulations of discontents about modernity and informed well-known counter-cultural slogans like “Turn on, tune in, drop out” and “Power to the imagination”.

This demonization of modernity quite logically sparked a sacralization of the personal inner world as the realm where genuine freedom could still be found. This turn within was not only exemplified by the popularization of psychedelic drugs like LSD, peyote, and

psilocybin (“magic mushrooms”) and of oriental religious traditions like Buddhism and Hinduism that foregrounded meditation, but also by the emergence of the New Age Movement. The movement draws its name from the hope and the expectation that a major transformation was imminent due to the beginning of a new astrological era, i.e., that the Piscean Age (defined by hierarchy and inequality) was giving way to the Age of Aquarius (defined by liberty and equality).

Even though the “New Age” label itself has meanwhile lost traction, the worldview that defines it is more widespread in the West nowadays than it used to be in the 1960s and 1970s. This worldview has gradually permeated the cultural mainstream and has in the process lost much of its former critical and counter-cultural edge. It consists of a handful of logically interconnected tenets that assume, validate, and legitimate each other. Central to these is a notion of the sacred that differs strikingly from dualistic Christian understandings. For here the sacred is not defined as a transcendent person-like agent-creator who resides in a realm of his own, but rather as a diffuse, non-personal life force, power, energy or spirit that permeates all of the world and the cosmos (immanence). This spirit is as such taken to connect ‘everything’ (holism) and to be present within every single human being as well (self-spirituality). Because of this, it is held that the spiritual truth can only be attained by taking one’s personal emotions, feelings and intuitions seriously (‘listening to the voice within’). Religious belief here in effect gives way to an epistemology that foregrounds personal experience (‘gnosis’).

Because the spiritual truth can only be personally experienced, religious authorities, leaders, texts, institutions, and dogmas are understood as only leading away from it and religious traditions are conceived as having buried it under layers of dogma, doctrine and ritual. This applies especially to religions that foreground external authority most, which is why oriental religions like Hinduism and Buddhism are understood as more legitimate than

Christianity, especially in its conservative guises. Differences between religious traditions should hence not be taken seriously, because such would entail a foregrounding of manmade side issues. Similarities are however vital, because all religious traditions are seen as stemming from the same source, as the spiritual doctrine of perennialism epitomizes (“There are many paths, but there is just one truth”). Provided that doctrinal and institutional side issues are bypassed and neglected, religious traditions are hence not rejected unequivocally. Rather than sticking to a single tradition, however, those concerned are encouraged to freely pursue their ‘personal spiritual paths’ (seekership) by exploring different religious traditions and spiritual practices simultaneously and/or successively (bricolage).

Much of the research interest in the New Age Movement is motivated by the legacy of secularization theory, especially its notions of religious decline and religious privatization. For while Christianity has clearly lost much terrain since the late 1960s, New Age spirituality has become more widespread in this same period. While this divergent development is meanwhile accepted by most sociologists of religion, there is much controversy about its implications for the empirical adequacy of secularization theory. Highlighting the omnipresence of private practices of bricolage and the absence of clear ideological significance in the public realm, the received view holds that it basically confirms it. This interpretation has however been critiqued on two counts. Firstly, it misconstrues fragmentation and bricolage as ‘proving’ the absence of a coherent and unifying spiritual worldview. It is after all precisely such a worldview that accounts for this characteristic fragmentation and bricolage by actively encouraging it. Fragmentation and bricolage do in effect not prove the absence, but rather the presence of a coherent and unifying spiritual worldview. Similarly, the assumption that public significance must necessarily be ideological significance can be critiqued for maneuvering the public significance of New Age spirituality out of sight. For it is clear and virtually uncontested that the latter plays major (indeed,

increasing) therapeutic roles in the public realms of health care (complementary and alternative medicine) and work and organization (human resources management, business leadership).

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Cross-references

Esotericism

Individualism (including individualization)

Privatization of religion

Secularization

Spirituality

Further readings

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