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Trajectories to the New Age. The spiritual turn of the first generation of Dutch New Age teachers

Anneke VAN OTTERLOO
University of Amsterdam, Netherlands

Stef AUPERS
Erasmus University Rotterdam, Netherlands

Dick HOUTMAN
Erasmus University Rotterdam, Netherlands

Abstract

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. The authors therefore study the motivations of the 'first generation' spiritual seekers to turn to the New Age on the basis of 42 qualitative interviews with Dutch New Age teachers who grew up in the counter culture. The analysis demonstrates that they were motivated by discontentment about Christian churches and modern work organizations, especially in the field of social care. Due to the countercultural emphasis on individual liberty, the respondents experienced institutions as both 'meaningless' and 'alienating' and felt attracted to the promises of humanistic self-spirituality and holism. In the conclusion the authors speculate on how and why the young 'second generation' New Agers turns to spirituality nowadays and in what ways their motivations differ from those of the first generation.

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

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Corresponding author:
Stef Aupers, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Erasmus University, PO Box 1738, 3000 DR Rotterdam, Netherlands
Email: aupers@fsw.eur.nl

Résumé

La plupart des études portant sur la spiritualité New Age reste trop descriptive et manque de solides explications historiques et sociologiques empiriquement fondées pour expliquer sa popularité croissante depuis la contre-culture des années 1960 et 1970. Ainsi, les auteurs étudient les motivations de la « première génération » de personnes en recherche spirituelle qui se sont tournées vers le New Age, sur la base de 42 entretiens qualitatifs avec des enseignants néerlandais ayant adopté le New Age, tout en ayant grandi dans la contre-culture. L'analyse montre que leur mécontentement à l'égard des Églises chrétiennes traditionnelles et des organisations de travail modernes les ont incité à se tourner vers le New Age. En raison de l'accent mis sur les valeurs de liberté individuelle, les répondants en sont venus à considérer les deux institutions comme « vides de sens » et « aliénantes ». Ils se sont de plus en plus sentis attirés par les promesses de l'auto-spiritualité humaniste et du holisme. Dans la conclusion, les auteurs évoquent comment et pourquoi la jeune « deuxième génération » d'adeptes du New Age se tourne à nouveau vers la spiritualité et la façon dont ses motivations diffèrent de la première génération.

Mots-clés

contre-culture, New Age, Pays-Bas, spiritualité, tradition chrétienne, travail moderne

Introduction

While the Christian tradition has been steadily declining in North-western Europe since the 1950s, 'New Age' or 'post-traditional spirituality' has been growing in recent 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 advertising (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 private, '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 into 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 be traced back at least as far as 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 of 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 into 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 properly 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, 2004) or ‘Easternization’ of the Western world (Campbell, 2007). What is lacking, however, is a more specific and empirically informed historical-sociological explanation of 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: 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 into a ‘public secret’ for many (e.g. Possamai, 2005). The people who initially came into contact with a spiritual lifestyle in the counter culture – the 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 who 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 into 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 interviews with 42 New Age teachers or therapists, who worked for the 24 Dutch New Age centres that were sampled for our study. Our respondents can be considered to be ‘first generation’ New Agers since the majority were in their teens and twenties between 1965 and 1975 and 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 practise, “alternative” ideas and activities’ and that ‘the new age is a product of the baby-boom phenomenon, the ’60s generation’. About two-thirds 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, about 80% of them were highly educated (i.e. had completed a school of Higher Vocational Education or a University course). When these interviews were conducted (in 1995–1996), our respondents already looked back on a long 'career' in the New Age milieu: they were avid consumers of spiritual books, courses, training and therapies and by then had become teachers on the Dutch New Age circuit. All of the New Age centres 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 centres and their courses in *De Koörddanser*, 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 were transcribed verbatim 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 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 20 years ago or more, which means that they probably constructed an image of the past, the historical circumstances and their former identities on the basis of their present situation. 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 Agers (Van Rooden, 2004: 524–551; Brown, 2001). This point demands our 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: 179).

The reports of the interviewees, in short, cannot 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 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.

Dutch religion, secularization and the counter culture in the 1960s and 1970s

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, that they did not feel 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 themselves Roman Catholic church-members (35%), while the last third said they belonged to the Dutch Reformed (20%) and the Neo-Calvinist (8%) churches (Bernts et al., 2007). The Dutch Reformed Church, which had been largest in the Netherlands and had maintained a privileged state position since the end of the 16th century, had already earlier given evidence of a more open attitude to society (e.g. the foundation of 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 political parties, broadcasting corporations or societies, especially those 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 massive decrease of church membership and of Christian beliefs, doctrines, practices and lifestyles, as well as a serious contraction of the influence of church religion on social and cultural life. All in all such developments resulted in depillarization in a relatively short period: a more secular consciousness and a modern way of life focused on self-expression and the like (Dekker, 1992: 38).

A few brief comments on the many processes of secularization and the general change of values, norms and practices (modernization) in the 1960s and 1970s may add to an 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 society in the Netherlands, since the term more aptly expresses the collective and taken-for-granted nature of Chistian religion *before* the 1960s. But there's yet another reason why the rapid changes to the cultural landscape in that period may be better referred to as 'dechristianization'. 'Secularization', after all, implies a turn towards a largely secular society – that is, a society where *religion in general* is marginalized – whereas 'dechristianization' implies only the erosion of *one particular type of religion*. The latter concept may be more appropriate 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 ‘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, when it was adopted and developed by many young people with middle-class backgrounds who – like our respondents – were dissatisfied with the Christian tradition *and* modern secularism.

The countercultural take-off

During the ‘countercultural revolution’ (Marwick, 1998; Campbell, 2007) members of the counter culture primarily expressed their discontent 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). The American philosopher Theodore Roszak’s ideas became popular in the Netherlands thanks to the translation of his book *The Making of a Counter Culture* (1969), which was reprinted no fewer than five times between 1971 and 1974. The core aims of the counter culture were 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 ‘exotic’, ‘irrational’ or ‘deviant’.

The counter culture not only changed the political landscapes of Western societies but also had important religious ramifications. Whereas those people 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, the ‘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 liberation from the alienating machineries of society and to 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 in the countryside, where they lived as if the New Age had already dawned. Moreover, the spiritual and political wings of the counter culture – formerly united in the *Fantasio* youth centre – were separated in 1969 when two alternative centres were founded in Amsterdam: *Paradiso*, focusing on political activism, and *De Kosmos*, concentrating on Eastern religion and Gnostic (self-) spirituality. The latter centre 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 centre in the Netherlands: it closed its doors in 1984 but became a blueprint for the hundreds of other spiritual centres 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 careers' 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 north-eastern countryside, which also transported non-fluoresced water to the big cities. They travelled 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.

Discontentment with Christianity

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 God's will and hence expose His intentions, does not offer consolation, but rather stimulates people to turn their backs on this cruel and malevolent 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 and found consolation for these tragic misfortunes:

> It was 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 any more, all these religions! And theologians are just babbling!’ But in a certain way, Zen presented itself to me … But this was years later.

Marjan says 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 who was seriously ill; she had a problem with her mucous membrane and could not cough. And my sister knew that there would come a time when she was 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 12 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 terrible! I want to have nothing to do with that!’

Greetje 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 neighbour, who does not believe, is a very loving person. Why would she go to hell? That is madness!” So I said: “Goodbye!”’ Reproaches against God for His alleged cruelty or apparent indifference do not, however, necessarily result from people’s own misfortunes or those of their relatives. Marga, for instance, explains why she – though given a Christian upbringing 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, 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 misfortune. 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 realign one's life to find who one 'really' or 'fundamentally' is (implying that one is personally responsible for one's fate). It is this new cultural climate – in which individual liberty had become more and conformity to external authority less important – that damaged the meaning-providing potential of Christianity and made people susceptible to the New Age alternative of 'inner spirituality'.

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, on account of her 'classical Catholic upbringing', which cast women as 'bad by definition', she continuously felt forced into 'an oppositional role'. Marjan recounts how she left the Catholic Church in her early 20s 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 at the front of the class (because I was a difficult child) and still remember that I turned around and looked to see whether anyone 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 with a 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 did 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 distance myself from my Reformed upbringing.

Since then, he asserts, he has ‘completely dissociated’ himself 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 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, who had 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 when 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 are still with us today and have in fact become even more widespread since (Inglehart, 1977). More than that, they have entered mainstream culture. This is exemplified by the way modern companies have appropriated these values to bestow on their mass-market products dreams of personal authenticity, non-conformity and rebelliousness through their advertising (Frank, 1998).

This increased salience of values pertaining to individual liberty and self-attainment since the 1960s, as 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 captive 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 – problems our respondents solved by leaving the Church and taking refuge in the spiritual milieu of the New Age.

Discontentment with modern work organization

Discontentment with traditional Christian religion was, 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 especially – at modern 'technocratic society', which was held to alienate individuals from their potential achievements (Roszak, 1969; Zijderveld, 1970). Daniel Bell (1996: 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 discontentment with modern rationalized work organization played a major role in their turn to the New Age. No fewer 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?

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 just wasn't lively. I didn't met any people with spirit' (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 fed not only 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, which dealt 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 had 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 than I thought!’

Once applied, spiritual approaches proved eye-openers, because they provided opportunities to treat clients at the physical *and* spiritual levels. Another respondent chose to become a homoeopath, since homeopathy 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 mental or spiritual causes of their physical symptoms. This triggered her to immerse herself deeper in 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 world-view that included ‘body’, ‘mind’ and ‘spirit’, and entered the New Age movement. In their current practice, they emphasize the ‘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 practising 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 the 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, conversely, criticize 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. This discontentment has led them to reject the Cartesian divide between mind and body and instead to conceive of the two as intrinsically connected. This constitutes an important factor in explaining their turn to the New Age, which 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).

Alienation, stress and burnout

Respondents like those mentioned above have been pushed towards the New Age by discontentment 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 discontentment, but more acute health problems such as stress, burnout or physical illness. The following respondent illustrates how a personal crisis – assumed to have been 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 any more. One day I did not feel very well, but thought, 'It will pass.' 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 spent 10 days in 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 have never returned since then. (Arno)

The biographies of these respondents reveal how feelings of stress or alienation, evoked 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 themselves 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 years, but that did not work out. Then I thought 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)

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 was mainly born of dissatisfaction with institutional life in the 1960s and 1970s. This dissatisfaction, expressed by each 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, which 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, that is, 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 world-view 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 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 (Aupers and Houtman, 2010).

This is surely a doctrine that can be transferred to new generations, as is suggested by the presence of a second generation of people holding a firm interest in New Age spirituality (e.g. Bernts et al., 2007; 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; 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 them for an 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 that this is one of the major problems to be addressed in future empirical research on contemporary spirituality. To the extent that the contemporary turn to spirituality is indeed driven by the modern institutions of market and media, this would after all entail a paradoxical reversion of the patterns demonstrated in this paper for the 1960s and 1970s. While then the turn to New Age spirituality was driven by rebellious disgust with mainstream society and its institutions, it may 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 towards 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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Biographies

Anneke van OTTERLOO is a sociologist of culture and lectures part-time in Sociology at the University of Amsterdam. She was editor of the research project *Techniek in Nederland in de Twintigste Eeuw* (*Technology in the Netherlands in the Twentieth Century*) and wrote various articles in Dutch and international journals on religion, New Age spirituality and culinary culture. The last was also the topic of her dissertation (1990, *Eten en eetlust in Nederland (1840–1990) Een historisch-sociologische studie*, Bert Bakker) and *The Sociology of Food: Eating, Diet and Culture* (with Mennell S and Murcott A, 1992, Sage).
Address: Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, University of Amsterdam, Oudezijds Achterburgwal 185, 1012 DK Amsterdam, Netherlands.
Email: A.H.vanOtterloo@uva.nl.

Stef AUPERS is Associate Professor at the Centre for Rotterdam Cultural Sociology (CROCUS) at Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Much of his research deals with tendencies of 're-enchantment' in the modern world. He has published in Dutch and international journals on themes such as New Age spirituality, conspiracy culture, Internet culture and online games. His latest books are *Religions of Modernity: Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital* (edited with Houtman D, 2010, Brill) and *Paradoxes of Individualization: Social Control and Social Conflict in Contemporary Modernity* (with Houtman D and de Koster W, 2011, Ashgate).
Address: Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Erasmus University, PO Box 1738, 3000 DR Rotterdam, Netherlands.
Email: aupers@fsw.eur.nl.

Dick HOUTMAN is Professor of Cultural Sociology at the Centre for Rotterdam Cultural Sociology (CROCUS) at Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Most of his research addresses cultural change in the West, with a focus on its political and religious ramifications. His latest books are *Farewell to the Leftist Working Class* (with Achterberg P and Derks A, 2008, Transaction), *Religions of Modernity: Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital* (edited with Aupers S, 2010, Brill), *Paradoxes of Individualization: Social Control and Social Conflict in Contemporary Modernity* (with Aupers S and de Koster W, 2011, Ashgate) and *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality* (edited with Meyer B, 2012, Fordham University Press).
Address: Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Erasmus University, PO Box 1738, 3000 DR Rotterdam, Netherlands.
Email: houtman@fsw.eur.nl.