



Methods

The rising culture and worldview of contemporary spirituality: A sociological study of potentials and pitfalls for sustainable development[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Several social scientists claim that the rise of the culture of contemporary spirituality is a pivotal part of the gradual but profound change taking place in the Western worldview, both reflecting the larger cultural development, as well as giving shape and direction to it. Its emergence is therefore not to be neglected in attempts to create a more sustainable society. The aim of this study is to generate insight into the culture and worldview of contemporary spirituality and explore its potentials and pitfalls for sustainable development. An investigation of the sociological literature on the so-called “New Age” phenomenon results in a delineation and overview of these and shows that this culture is both a potentially promising force, as well as a phenomenon posing specific risks. A structural–developmental understanding is introduced in order to be able to distinguish between regressive and progressive tendencies in this culture, and comprehend the deeper logic behind the observed potentials and pitfalls. This may serve to facilitate the actualization of the culture’s potentials while mitigating its pitfalls, and in that way contribute to the timely challenge of creating a more sustainable society.

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1. Introduction

Theoretical and empirical insight vis-à-vis worldviews and values is an essential element in approaches aiming to design and support more sustainable development paths for society. Our beliefs about the divine, the spiritual and the transcendent as well as about our role in the world as moral agents shape our sense of duty and responsibility to care for others and for nature (Hulme, 2009). Issues like climate change raise questions with strong moral and ethical dimensions that need to be dealt with in policy-formation and international negotiations (Wardekker et al., 2009). Additionally, research shows that values and beliefs are strong predictors of policy opinion and policy support (Shwom et al., 2010) and tend to be indicative for environmental behavior (e.g. Karp, 1996; Milfont and Duckitt, 2004; Schultz and Zelezny, 1999). Because everyday consumption choices are deeply enmeshed in a web of non-instrumental motivations, values, emotions, self-conceptions and cultural associations (Sorin, 2010), values and worldviews can also be seen as major drivers in consumer trends and economic spending patterns, including those concerning the green economy. Lastly, the concept of sustainable development itself contains both objective and subjective dimensions, as it can be seen as “a quest for developing and sustaining ‘qualities of life’” (De Vries and

Petersen, 2009), which are at least partially shaped by the views and values that individuals and groups hold.

However, even though the concept of values has played a significant role in the climate change and sustainable development debates, it tends to be narrowly defined, predominantly referring to monetary worth, relative worth, or a fair return on exchanges, which are typically measured as numerical quantities (De Vries and Petersen, 2009; O’Brien and Wolf, 2010). Therefore, as O’Brien and Wolf (2010) state, “in relation to climate change, what are still missing from economic-oriented and welfare-based approaches to valuation are the differential subjective values of individuals, societies and cultures regarding the experience and consequences of environmental transformations. Economic concepts such as utility and efficiency cannot capture the often subjective and nonmaterial values affected by climate change” (p.232–233). Therefore, a systematic integration of worldviews and values is argued for in both research and practices concerned with sustainable development. While there are many different possible approaches for investigating worldviews and values in the context of sustainability (see for example O’Brien, 2009, who explores traditional, modern and postmodern worldviews in Norway and their interface with climate adaptation measures), there is a cultural development that may be particularly of interest, as it seems to hold a certain potential for sustainable development (Campbell, 2007; Dryzek, 2005; Hanegraaff, 1996; Heelas, 1996; Ray and Anderson, 2000; Taylor, 2010). This is the rise of the culture and worldview of contemporary spirituality.

Several social scientists and philosophers claim that a gradual but profound change in the Western worldview is taking place — a change in the direction of a more re-enchanted, post-material, metaphysical

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or spiritual worldview (Campbell, 2007; Gibson, 2009; Houtman and Mascini, 2002; Inglehart and Welzel, 2005; Partridge, 2005; Ray and Anderson, 2000; Tarnas, 2007). Some authors speak in this context of a “spiritual revolution” (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005) or a “spiritual turn” (Houtman and Aupers, 2007). As Inglehart and Welzel (2005, p. 31) put it, based on the results of the World Values Survey, the largest existing worldwide, cross-cultural, longitudinal data-set on (changes in) cultural beliefs, values and worldviews:

Although the authority of the established churches continues to decline, during the past twenty years the public of postindustrial societies have become increasingly likely to spend time thinking about the meaning and purpose of life. Whether one views these concerns as religious depends on one's definition of religion, but it is clear that the materialistic secularism of industrial society is fading. There is a shift from institutionally fixed forms of dogmatic religion to individually flexible forms of spiritual religion.

Clearly, the emergence of contemporary spirituality is not just a counter-cultural or marginal phenomenon. On the contrary, as Heelas and Woodhead emphasize, this “spiritual revolution... has taken place in key sectors of the culture” and “has its home within the more general culture of subjective wellbeing whilst *also* being a relatively distinctive or specialized variant of the more widespread culture” (2005, p.75, 86). Sutcliffe and Bowman (2000) even state that “contrary to predictions that New Age would go mainstream, now it's as if the mainstream is going New Age” (p. 11). The culture of contemporary spirituality appears to be a pivotal part of the change taking place in the Western worldview, both reflecting the larger cultural development, as well as giving shape and direction to it. The emergence of contemporary spirituality is therefore not to be neglected in our aims to create and facilitate the emergence of a more sustainable society and respond to issues like climate change: not only is it a powerful and growing subculture in itself, it is also largely compatible with as well as instructive for the broader cultural development.¹

The aim of this study is therefore to generate insight into the culture and worldview of contemporary spirituality and investigate both its potentials for sustainable development, as well as explore the risks or pitfalls that it poses, predominantly on the basis of the sociological “New Age” literature. As far as I am aware of, no study of this specific terrain has been made before. Additionally, perspectives on the culture of contemporary spirituality are not always comprehensive; the literature on the phenomenon frequently tends toward polarization between critics and adherents. For some, the “New Age” represents a step backwards from the standards of modern rationality towards pre-modern, irrational thinking and the abandonment of the self-responsibility of the individual; it is seen largely as a regressive, reactionary and narcissistic movement (e.g. Lasch, 1978). Others tend to emphasize its noble intentions, qualities and potentials as well as its overall progressive signature (e.g. Ray and Anderson, 2000). However, the former position tends to dominate in social-scientific analyses of the New Age movement (Höllinger, 2004). Because the term New Age has acquired negative connotations both among the general public and among New Agers themselves (Lewis, 1992), I generally prefer the more neutral term “contemporary spirituality” (although I use them interchangeably throughout this article). The use of this term is in line with my aspiration for a more nuanced understanding of this phenomenon in its dignity and its disaster, its ‘grandeur et misère,’ vis-à-vis issues and goals of sustainable development. In Section 3 I will show that a developmental framework is uniquely suitable for making sense of the observed potentials and

pitfalls for sustainable development, as it enacts an empowering perspective that inspires to appeal to the potentials while avoiding or mitigating the pitfalls. More generally, this study may shed light on the complex interaction between the more objective, exterior and the more (inter)subjective, interior dimensions of issues, goals and discourses concerned with sustainable development.

2. Literature Review: An Exploration of Potentials and Pitfalls

In its response to the prevailing Western worldview, as well as in its search for alternative ways of relating to nature, the culture and worldview of contemporary spirituality offers some distinctive potentials for the issues and goals of sustainable development, as well as poses some threats or pitfalls. In this section I present these potentials and pitfalls respectively, based on an exploration of the sociological literature on the “New Age” phenomenon (see Table 1 for an overview of these possible potentials and pitfalls). The main used sources include New Age standards, notably Hanegraaff's historical exploration of New Age religion, which presents an analysis on the basis of the most important New Age texts, sources, authors, themes and beliefs (New Age Religion and Western Culture. Western Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought, 1996) and Heelas' sociological study of “The New Age Movement” (The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity, 1996). Next to that, Campbell's sociological account of the process of “Easternization” in the West (The Easternization of the West. A thematic account of cultural change in the Modern era, 2007) and Heelas and Woodhead's empirical exploration of the holistic milieu in Kendal, England (The Spiritual Revolution. Why religion is giving way to spirituality, 2005), have been used extensively. Additionally, several other sources have been employed, including various articles reporting empirical studies in this domain (e.g. Aupers and Houtman, 2006; Höllinger, 2004; Jacob et al., 2009).

2.1. Exploration of the Potentials of Contemporary Spirituality for Sustainable Development

Firstly, the potentials include a rehabilitation of nature; Campbell (2007) signals a dramatic change in popular beliefs and attitudes towards nature that has occurred over the past thirty to forty years, which comes to concrete expression in the rise of the animal rights movement, the swing to vegetarianism and the consumption of whole and organic food, the holistic health movement, and the origination and expansion of the environmental movement itself. These are all different manifestations of the contemporary spiritual idea that some sort of spirit, divine life force or higher value is present in all of nature (including the human body and being), which therefore needs to be treated with respect, or even reverence (see also Taylor, 2010). This idea is profoundly influenced by Eastern spiritual ideas and ideals (Campbell, 2007) and has positive, practical consequences for environmental behaviors, resulting in an overall greening of individual life-styles. An example of this is the change in attitude towards meat-eating, as animals are increasingly considered in terms of their well-being and rights, including the right not to be killed and eaten (Campbell, 2007), and seen as sentient ‘fellow creatures’ instead of merely ‘food’ (Verdonk, 2009). Because of its considerable and well-documented impact on the environment, meat consumption is highly significant in the context of sustainable development.² Also Heelas emphasizes this point: “‘right livelihood,’ to use the Buddhist term, and green consumption are the natural responses to the experience of the value and sacrality of both nature and the person, these practices being seen as providing the best way of ensuring that the natural is respected” (1996, p. 86). More

¹ Interestingly, environmental philosophers have for decades emphasized that a profound change in cultural worldview is needed, if we are to find solutions for the environmental crisis and make the transition to a sustainable society—and they have often suggested that such a change in worldview would necessarily move in a more spiritual, re-enchanted direction (Devall and Sessions, 1985; Duintjer, 1988; Lemaire, 2002; Naess, 1989; White, 1967; Wilber, 1995; Zweers, 2000).

² In their 2006 publication “Livestock's Long Shadow,” the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations has stated that animal agriculture substantially contributes to climate change, air pollution, land-, soil-, and water degradation and to the reduction of biodiversity (FAO, 2006).

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