

ON THE FINNISH PRESENT-DAY RELIGIOSITY AND THE NEW AGE THOUGHT

Martti JUNNONAHO

Institute of Multicultural Education, University of Joensuu
FIN-80101 Joensuu, P.O. Box 111, Finland

1. ON THE NEW AGE THOUGHT

The New Age Movement is a cultural phenomenon that has more than one meaning. Virtually it is not a religious movement, because it has no consistent doctrine or structure, but it is rather an umbrella-like concept that includes many things: e.g. so called alternative religious communities, groups and cults, but also other kinds of spiritual thinking that can be found in the Western culture and society. The concept "New Age" is based on Alice Bailey's theosophical thinking, where it means that mankind and the whole universe has – after the Second World War – reached a turning point. According to her mankind faces a total change of human culture, a leap to new spiritual reality. (See HEINO 1997: 33.)

The New Age Thought was mentioned for the first time in the late 1960s in a few articles published by some North-American journals.¹ The articles spoke about a huge spiritual hunger that can be perceived in the Western World, and the disability of the traditional churches to feed the hunger. The New Age Movement was considered as an attempt to create a social, religious, political and cultural convergence that would unite the new mystical religious thinking of the East to the secularized Western World.

The first New Age book shops and centers were opened in the early 1970s in the USA, but the spiritual background of the movement in the West is more far away in the history, in those religious movements that emphasize the mystical experience and the religions of the East, movements like Spiritualism, Theosophy, Anthroposophy, New Thought, Christian Science and so on. All these movements accept some kind of transcendentalism.

When the New Age idea was developed, the activists started to create a network that consisted of those communities and groups that had been founded on the ruins of the hippie movement of the 60s. (JUNNONAHO 1996: 40–60) but the network included also different occult and mystical Eastern religions, metaphysical book shops, groups of psychic and mental development, alternative health centers, and practically all possible groups of so called alternative religiosity.

The New Age Thought can be defined rather as a vision and an experience than as a belief system. The most important thing seems to be a radical mystic change on the indi-

¹ The brief introduction to the New Age Thought in this paper is mainly based on Gordon J. Melton's article "The New Age Movement" (MELTON 1986).

vidual level. It can consist of such new realities as discovery of psychic capacity, physical or mental healing experience, outburst of new human resources or approval of a new view of the universe. The most essential is that the new individual vision is adapted to society and the world, because basically New Age means an altered world, the heaven on the Earth.

One basic feature in the New Age Thought is the idea of Universal Power or Energy that makes the individual change possible. The Energy is called by several names (as "prana", "mana", "the Holy Spirit", "chi'i" and so on), and it is believed that it can heal any illness or disease. The Energy is believed to be released under meditation or some therapy, and it is believed that the Energy is flowing between human beings when they love each other. In this connection it is also possible to speak about one universal religion regardless of whatever it is called.

Another very common idea in the New Age Thought is the belief in reincarnation that is one of the most central concepts in many Eastern religions, and that has – special thanks to the Theosophical Movement – been known for more than one hundred years in the Western world.

One factor that has made the New Age Movement so tempting and popular here in the West is its concern about the future of the Globe. The individual movements within the New Age Thought may differ from each other in many ways and details, but they can share the same concern for world peace, starvation, natural production of food, natural care of health, and so on. On the other hand, it is very common that the New Age People seek their ways to astrologers, clairvoyants or spiritual mediums.

2. ON THE FINNISH HISTORY OF RELIGION

To understand the present-day religious situation in Finland some knowledge of the Finnish history of religion is needed. In the pre-Christian age – during maybe six thousand years – people living in Finland had their own ethnic religion. It was based on the same kind of elements as many other primitive religions: shamanism, ancestor worship, spirit belief and so on. (See e.g. SIIKALA 1987.) Unfortunately we have no time to describe it more detailed now, but in any case it was the soil for the Christian faith.

The first Christian influences came to Finland almost one thousand years after the dawn of Christianity. The very first effects came from the Eastern Church via Russia, but it were the three organized crusades from Sweden that started the Roman Catholic influence in Finland in the 12th century. The Orthodox influences affected mostly the Eastern parts of the country. (JUNNONAHO 1995: 1–3.)

From the 16th century, the Lutheran reformation started in Finland very effectively, and the Catholic Church was forbidden in Sweden and Finland in 1520 by the strong Swedish king Gustav Vasa. Then Finland developed into a Lutheran country where all other religious affiliations were illegal, and it was compulsory for every Finnish citizen to be a member of the Finnish Evangelical-Lutheran Church. By the end of the 19th century the Finnish Lutheran Church ruled practically the whole Finnish religious, cultural and social life. Keeping that in mind we have to observe, that at the same time the Finnish

ethnic religion still had some influence, specially among the rural people. In fact we can say that the Finnish religious situation was for almost one thousand years – quite much a syncretistic one, where the ethnic religion and the Christian Faith coexisted.

Of course the ethnic religion was losing its influence all the time, and the Christian Church was increasing its power, because it was the only acceptable and legal religion in Finland. (JUNNONAHO 1995: 1–3)

When the Lutheran Church had gained the total hegemony in the Finnish society, the great industrial, social and idealistic revolution started in Europe, including Finland. That meant quite essential changes in the Finnish society also from the religious point of view, from the viewpoint of the Lutheran Church, to speak exactly. It meant that the Finnish society had to start a new development towards religious freedom, because numerous new religious groups both Christian and non-Christian – had started their activities in Finland, e.g. some new Anglo-American Christian sects (Pentacostalism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Adventism, Methodism), Theosophical Movement, Buddhism, Islam and Judaism. The process went on for several decades, and the prevailing law of religious freedom in Finland was made in 1922. Together with that process also the secularization started, and we can say that after the Second World War the Finnish society has been more or less secularized in the same sense as any other Western European country. (JUNNONAHO 1995: 4–11.)

3. ON THE PRESENT-DAY RELIGIOSITY IN FINLAND

Statistically Finland seems to be a very homogeneous country from the religious point of view, because still about 86 per cent of the people are members of the Finnish Evangelical-Lutheran Church. The membership of the Orthodox Church, and the Pentecostal movement is about one per cent of the Finnish population each. All other religious churches and communities are much smaller. Little more than 11 per cent of the Finns are not members of any religious community, at least from the statistical point of view. All inquiries show that about 5 to 7 percent of the Finns are atheists or so called free-thinkers. (Suomen tilastollinen vuosikirja 1995.)

The membership of a religious community is not, however, the only criterion to measure the religiosity of people, because it is possible to be a member of church without being a so called believer, and it is possible to be a believer without being a member of any religious community. The religiosity of the Finns seems to be extremely interesting, if we think that about 86 per cent are members of the Lutheran Church, and only 2 to 3 percent go to church on Sundays.

The Research Center of the Finnish Lutheran Church started to measure the religiosity of Finnish people with Gallup polls in the late 1970s. (SIHVO 1979.) In these surveys one of the most important indicators of religiosity has been belief in God. It has been asked if the Finnish adults believe in personal God, and if they believe, in which way. According to the inquiries about 30 to 35 per cent answer that believe in God as the Church teaches it, and about 30 per cent answer that they believe in God but in some

other way. But the inquiries do not tell directly, in which other way or ways. (SUNDBACK 1995.)

There are also differences in the results of the polls depending on age, education, place of residence, political view, sex and occupation of the informants. (E.g. SIHVO 1979.)

We can say that the older informant is, the more traditional belief in God he/she has. Younger people say more often than older people that they believe in God in some other way than the Church teaches.

From the educational viewpoint we can say that the less education people have, the more traditional belief in God they have; on the other hand the more education they have, the more modern belief in God they have, if we think that believing in God in some other way than the Church teaches is something modern.

Furthermore, the results of the polls reveal that people in rural regions believe in God in a more traditional way than people in big cities (like Helsinki and the neighboring cities). And women are more traditional in their beliefs than men. And finally, we can notice that the more in the left the informant's political view is, the more radical or modern is his/her belief in God. The members of the Conservative Party and the Center Party are equally conservative/traditional in their beliefs in God.

Table

Religiosity in Finland according to EVSSG 1990 (Percentage. N = 588)

	Generations	
	All	Younger*
1 Has received religious socialization in home	58	33
2 Is a religious person	54	36
3 Meaning of life is dependent on God	31	14
4 Believes in God	65	48
5 Believes in personal God	32	23
6 Believes in life after death	44	43
7 Believes in resurrection of the dead	37	35
8 Receives consolation and strength from religion	43	27
9 Praying is a habit	28	18
10 Denies personal importance of God	12	20
11 Never goes to church	14	25
12 Believes in spirit/'power'	46	45
13 Believes in reincarnation	24	20
14 Meditates/contemplates	24	16

(* 18-25 years-olds)

In the same inquiries it has also been asked, if the Finns believe in 'spirit' or 'power', in reincarnation, and if they are meditating. All these are, in my opinion, indications of the so called New Age Thought. The results of the surveys show that almost half of the

Finnish people believe in 'spirit' or 'power', and every fourth Finn says that he/she believes in reincarnation, and is a meditator. (SUNDBACK 1995: 100, table 4.3.)

It is quite obvious that this kind of research approach can always be heavily criticized, but in my opinion, it unquestionably shows that the New Age Thought is clearly visible in the Finnish religiosity, and in the Finnish culture in general. Based on the results of the polls it is, of course, impossible to say reliably how important an impact the New Age Thought has on the Finnish religiosity. We can only say that it is perceivable. And it can be observed also outside this kind of inquiries. In any media (newspapers, journals, TV, radio, Internet and so on), in the Finnish discourse on the whole, we can see signs of the New Age Thought daily. Somehow it seems to be a natural part of the contemporary Finnish everyday-life and popular religion. And from the viewpoint of the comparative study of religion the most important observation is that the impact of the New Age Thought on the Western culture is a sign of the fact that the meaning of the concept of religion has quite radically changed during the last few decades.

The first and perhaps the most striking characteristic of the late-modern spirituality is that of the emphasis on individual choice. The phrase describes the way that members of the postwar generation involve themselves so called "cafeteria" style in religion. They reject a fixed menu and pick and choose religious alternatives, including the alternative to disaffiliate altogether from religion. The people reject the authority of religious traditions and institutions to prescribe from the top down what one should believe, how one should practice his or her religion, or how one should live morally as a religious person. Instead, they view these matters in much the same way that they view choice of life style and consumption patterns: as individual prerogative. It has been said that "Cogito ergo sum" may now be understood as I think and I choose My practices to express My religious feelings and My beliefs and norms. Robert Bellah argues that this "expressive individualism" reveals a culture "whose center is the autonomous individual, presumed able to choose the roles he/she will play and the commitments he/she will make, not on the basis of higher truths, but according to the criterion of life-effectiveness as the individual judges it. (ROOF et al. 1994: 248)

And as a consequence of the growth of choice, a second common theme is that of faith exploration among diverse religious traditions what some have called *a mixing of codes*. As people move in and out of religious involvement they explore and experiment with various religious and spiritual possibilities, and they often construct their own personal form of spirituality. Many draw their religious beliefs and practices from a variety of sources, both religious and non-religious – for example, Eastern spiritual practices, various forms of New Age spirituality, witchcraft, the ecology movement, psychotherapy, feminism, as well as more traditional Judeo-Christian elements. The result is often a kind of religious pluralism within the individual, a personal "collage" rather than "received one". (ROOF et al. 1995: 250)

LITERATURE

HEINO, H.

1997: Mihin Suomi tänään uskoo? WSOY. Juva.

JUNNONAHO, M.

1995: Vaihtoehtoisesta uskonnollisuudesta Suomessa. TYT: n julkaisusaria B 1/95. Tampereen yliopisto.

1996: Uudet uskonnot – Vastakulttuuria ja vaihtoehtoja. Tutkimus TM-, DLM- ja Hare Krishna-liikkeestä suomalaisessa uskonmaisemassa. SKS. Saarijärvi.

MELTON, G. J.

1986: *Encyclopedic Handbook of Cults in America*. New York.

ROOF et al (eds.)

1995: *The Post-War Generation and Establishment Religion. Cross-Cultural Perspectives*. Westview Press. San Francisco.

SIHVO, J.

1979: Uskonnollisuus ja kirkollisuus Suomessa. Kirkon tutkimuslaitos Sarja A N:o 34. Tampere.

SIKALA, A.-L.

1987: *Kansanusko. – Suomen historia 3*. W&G.

SUNDBACK, S.

1995: *Tradition and Change in the Nordic Countries. – ROOF et al. (eds.) The Post-War Generation and Establishment Religion. Cross-Cultural Perspectives*. Westview Press. San Francisco.

1995: Suomen tilastollinen vuosikirja.