

**The Invisible Inside the Visible –
The Visible Inside the Invisible:
Theoretical and methodological aspects of research on
New Age and contemporary Esotericism**

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This paper presents a rather specific German – or central European – perspective. I feel that religious – or spiritual – phenomena are still a bit different in our countries, and the same seems to be true in the case of the scholarly way of looking at them. Therefore I would like to share with you my approach to contemporary religious studies. It started as a New Age project in 1986 and has been going on since that time in different fields, including Esotericism and the adoption of non-Christian religions in the West, but also mainstream Christian religiosity and religions of migrants in central Europe, especially Muslims.

My doctoral thesis (Bochinger 1994) appeared in 1994, shortly before Wouter Hanegraaff's (1996). This coincidence, which is now reflected by our two papers in the present volume, has led to intensive private discussions between us. Although I am sure that we are rather close together in the most decisive points, our general approaches are quite different. This is partly caused by differing terminologies and theoretical backgrounds, which might be mutually translated, but also by the fact that New Age never was – nor is – a coherent phenomenon, but looks quite different in different countries. Therefore, I would like to opt for more pluralism on the level of our meta-discourse. Why should it not be possible to start with social sciences and go on to the history of ideas – the opposite of Hanegraaff's methodology? I am convinced that a fruitful multi-disciplinary approach cannot be achieved if you decide in advance from which side you have to start. Therefore, this paper will take you back a bit to my own approach. At the end you may compare and find out what is useful and what is not.

The starting point of my doctoral thesis was to research post-Christian religion in Germany. So I started with a phenomenological approach, looking for phenomena which were new and uncommon in traditional Christian belief systems and faith practices. At that time (1986), the term "New Age" was on everybody's lips, so I could not but deal with this concept, and I partly identified with it, because there was in fact something like a millennial atmosphere in the alternative religious scenes of that time. Therefore, I started with questions of the sociology of religions, although more than half

of my book consists of ideo-historical analyses of forerunners and backgrounds. Coming back to some of the results of my study, in this paper I want to present eight small sections, starting with some methodological reflections, going on to my own approach to New Age in Germany and a recent research project, and drawing conclusions from them.

1. Common aspects of different scenes within contemporary religious culture

I start with a proposition: since New Age and Esotericism are fuzzy terms, they can be properly understood only in a general framework of contemporary religious culture. I am convinced that it is very useful to look at the different religious phenomena of contemporary religious culture as a whole – or at least, as different parts of a common setting. Although I consider myself a historian of religions, I think it would be too much of a reification if you try to separate neatly different trends, define neatly for instance what New Age or Esotericism is and what it is not. If you look at the approaches of various New Age scholars, you will find that probably nobody describes exactly the same phenomenon. Some of the approaches even contradict each other. So one of the most important goals is to clarify what everybody is talking about. It is not a question of who is right and who is wrong, but just to find out, what is in everyone's minds. Another important point has been made by Michael Rothstein: We should find ways to compare the phenomena as well as our approaches.

So we should not just let everybody eat his own cake, as Michael York puts it, but we have to shift the question to a more methodological level. Should we, for instance, drop the term "New Age", taking up Wilfred Cantwell Smith's suggestion in the 1960s for the term "religion"? I do not think that this will be productive. On the contrary, I am sure that we need such fuzzy terms to work with contemporary religious culture. But we should not forget about their fuzziness, otherwise the chaotic empirical facts will not be covered by them any more.

The reason for that is to be found in the sociological conditions of contemporary religious culture. All of us share a global culture with so many choices to be made and so many risks to be taken that we are inevitably combining elements from different sources. The same is true for the religious people we study. From my perspective, this should be a main element of describing contemporary Esotericism or New Age. The central idea of Madame Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine* for instance, that all religions have the same core and all the differences are just clothing which should not be

mistaken for the core, is somehow paradigmatic for being religious in modern (or even post-modern) times. Today you can find the same way of choosing one's own religious activities or elements of beliefs not only in the field which we call alternative spiritualities, but also within so-called mainstream Christianity. Even basic "esoteric" convictions, for instance that life is a pathway or that different religious practices or ideas may be useful at one time and have to be dropped later, may be found in mainline churches as well.

Even in the so called fundamentalist wings of contemporary religiosity, you can find such fluid orientations – although the doctrines may demand the opposite. For instance, in a recent research project in Germany we found people wandering through the Pentecostal and fundamentalist scene, who had been baptised up to five times in different groups. Looking from the personal perspective, this may be interpreted as a continuing quest for true Christian community, accompanied by changeable feelings of hope and disappointment. Looking from a sociological perspective however, the same phenomenon may be seen as an effect of a multiple process of religious life, very similar to the things which can be found in the more pluralistic wings of contemporary religious culture.

I am impressed by William Bloom's statement, based on his British context, that much of what has been called "New Age" before, is now part of the normal discourse within society. I observed exactly the same in Germany, for instance related to the books of the physicist Fritjof Capra. In 1980, the author had to ask about 30 different publishing houses in the United States, until he found somebody to print his first book, *The Tao of Physics* (1976). The same happened again in Germany. The title was even changed to *Der Kosmische Reigen* ("The Cosmic Dance"), because the original title with its combination of Western Physics and Eastern Philosophy did not seem acceptable for the public. Both the American and the German publishing houses were very lucky with their decision, because they made a lot of money with this uncommon book. Later on, the German title was changed back to *Das Tao der Physik*. Five years later, Capra's books were taken as key texts for New Age religion in Germany, especially his second book, *The Turning Point* (1983). And now they are republished in a normal science book series by DTV-Verlag, one of the most generalist publishing houses in Germany. They effectively became part of normal discourse in Germany. Similar things could be said about the spread of practices like Feng Shui or Reiki, or alternative medicine techniques, and so on.

But in contrast to William Bloom, I would not draw the conclusion that New Age is the majority religion in Germany. The reason is that the same things as have been said about Capra could also be said for books like Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* (2002), which are also connected with certain widely-spread religious convictions. Therefore, the "Axis of Evil" is also part of our normal discourse today, and even might prove to be stronger than New Age moralities. Therefore I suggest looking at it on a more structural and functional level. This I want to do in the following sections.

2. Invisible and visible religion

The title of this paper refers to Thomas Luckmann's book *The Invisible Religion*, which appeared in English in 1967. Many scholars in the field of contemporary religious culture, including myself, followed Luckmann's idea that modern secularisation does not lead to the disappearance of the religious dimension, but to a change of its phenomenological structures. What had been inside church walls and may be called the visible religion, now turns outward to every possible dimension of modern society and therefore becomes "invisible" (in the sense that you will probably overlook it, if you stick to traditional church sociology). Anything may take over religious functions although remaining secular at the same time. This approach – with its functional definition of religion – was, and still is, very useful for describing new religious phenomena, because very often they are on the margin or even totally outside mainstream religious fields and discourses. And very often it is hard to decide whether they should be called religious or not – if you are not ready to go beyond traditional categories for defining religion.

Of course, this is not the case for every phenomenon of contemporary religions in the same way. The word "pagan" for instance, in claiming an alternative religious orientation in the strict sense of the word, negatively refers to a certain mainstream discourse (be it Christian theology or rather Enlightenment or idealistic philosophy). At the same time it creates its own parallel religious discourse. So at least if people identify with the word "pagan" in the emic perspective, it is not difficult to include them into a religious studies slot from outside. But there are other fields, in which it is much more difficult to prove the relevance of a religious studies approach, for instance the wide field of healing methods or psychotherapy, not to speak of the contemporary health movement. The same is the case with deep ecology. It might even be useful to look at activist movements like Greenpeace as somehow religious.

Luckmann's approach has served as a theoretical framework for many studies, which tried to focus on religious – or spiritual – phenomena outside the traditional, well-defined fields. If you call those phenomena “invisible religion” it is up to you whether and how you approach them by religious studies methods. But as with every other approach, it has its own blind spots. I think one central problem is the following: making use of the concept of “invisible religion” in the field of alternative spirituality paradoxically tends to strengthen the dichotomy between traditional and new religious phenomena. By the way, the term “alternative” has a similar effect: it tends to make a fundamental difference between one type of religiosity, which may be found inside the churches and could be called “visible religion” after Luckmann's terminology, and the other types outside the traditional mainstream setting.

If you look at it in this way, you will have to face two fundamental problems. One is to overcome the tendency to unify unconsciously all the alternatives, only because they are different from the so-called mainstream. This is similar to the well-known tendency of Christian and other anti-cult activists, who for instance find “self-redemption” and “exploitation” everywhere outside their own Evangelical convictions and their particular church tax system. I am a bit suspicious of Paul Heelas' concept of “self religion” in this respect, and also of Wouter Hanegraaff's “this-wordliness”. Both concepts induce an opposite position towards mainstream theological anthropology and its world view, which to me does not really seem suitable, because you can find much “otherworldliness” and also socialising efforts within the New Age scene, or alternative spirituality. Of course, Paul Heelas and Wouter Hanegraaff are also aware of that, but we draw different conclusions. I rely more on the structural and functional solution.

The other problem is the tendency to overlook the fact that inside the so-called mainstream you will find the same – or very similar – developments as outside. In my eyes, this is a decisive phenomenon within contemporary religious culture: there is a structural pluralisation, which does not accept any boundaries along confessional lines. This was one of the first results of my New Age study: I observed that it is not possible to separate a “Christian” and a non-Christian half of it on the phenomenological level, because church members and non-members joined the same events, were friends with each other and often much more closely connected than with other fellow members of the same church or groups (from this you can understand why – similar to Steven Sutcliffe – I do not appreciate talking about “the” New Age movement). In Germany, non-church people make use of church facilities such as church academies for adult education – even in cases where the

general atmosphere is rather anti-ecclesiastical. This result of my thesis turned out to be rather offensive in the eyes of the apologist anti-cult specialists, for instance the experts of the “Evangelische Zentralstelle für Weltanschauungsfragen”. For their own apologetic needs, they felt it absolutely necessary to make a clear distinction between a Christian and a non-Christian New Age. I can understand this way of looking at the phenomena, but at the same time I think that religious studies scholars should not share it, because on the empirical level there *is* no clear distinction along such confessional lines.

So I suggest a shift from descriptions of New Age, which were concerned with a certain content of its ideas, to a more structural approach. If we are aware that the invisible religion is part of the visible religion and vice versa, we might find a way to avoid the trap of reificationism.

3. Global and regional aspects of New Age

Another, very decisive, proposition of my study was that New Age is not the same in different countries. This point marks a central difference between my approach and that of Wouter Hanegraaff. He tried to approach the topic in a rather traditional way, well-known in history of religions, starting from written texts and trying to get a general idea about the topic, before turning towards the varieties of the fieldwork experience. Therefore, he examined the books which were categorised as “New Age” in the libraries of the late 1980s in his country. Different from that, my own approach was more lead by social science methods. So I tried to find out how the book market developed, what the readers of those books tried to make out of it, how they identified with the phenomenon, and so on. As a consequence, I went the other way round to Hanegraaff: he first described “New Age in general” by means of the history of ideas, leaving the developments in single countries to further detailed studies, whereas I started with a specific situation in a specific country, then tried to trace it to historical backgrounds and come to more general conclusions only later. Of course, both approaches, as all the others, have their own methodical advantages and disadvantages.

4. The German case of New Age

In Germany, the term New Age never achieved a status comparable with that in the UK or US. It was only a label without any deeper connection to worldviews or social identities. For a few years from about 1983 until the end of the 1980s, there seemed to be a New Age boom in Germany. All the big publishing companies started pocket book series, and there were many

congresses and similar events which promoted a new era of alternative spirituality, the marriage of science and Eastern religions, networking and global harmony. But already at that time it was observable that almost nobody identified with the term “New Age” personally. The book series were cut down a few years later, because they did not sell any more in this context. Today, New Age is totally forgotten as a term of self-identification – perhaps apart from New Age music. (Oliver Freiberger, my colleague in the religious studies department of our university, used one of my essays for his introductory course, but he found out that none of the students had ever heard the word “New Age” before.) It only survived as an expert’s term and also an apologist’s term for new religious developments outside the Christian mainstream. To make it clear: I do not mean that it has necessarily to be dropped for scientific use, as we are free to formulate our terminology on the etic level. But I want to make it clear that the situation is really different in our different countries, and that it would be a simplification to just generalise from one country, or from books, to the real New Age – wherever that may be.

Secondly, as I found, the people behind the German New Age boom in the 1980s were not the leading figures of alternative spiritualities, which of course are also very present in Germany. They were media experts such as editors or conference organisers. Those mediators were the real creators of the New Age in Germany. I do not say that they created the new religious phenomena themselves (which in my opinion would be a vast over-estimation of what they are able to do, even in post-modern societies). But they tried to canalise already existing needs and therefore they sought an umbrella term to cover different developments in the fields of spirituality and alternative religion. I think Wouter Hanegraaff is totally right that the choice of the term New Age was rather accidental. In fact I found out how the term gained its leading position in the German media market. The graphic designer of the Goldmann paperbacks, where the first New Age series was published, had opted for the term New Age (instead of “Paradigmenwechsel” – paradigm change – and some other options), because it was short and therefore suitable for the book covers. So it became a label in the strict sense of the word. But for me, this is not the end of the story, because those media phenomena affected the further development of the alternative spiritual scenes, which made use of it. So they caused a fundamental change of the status of those alternative spiritualities. Many of them were not at all new, but they had existed in certain sub- or counter-cultures and now came to be elements of mainstream discourse. And I am sure that without this process the phenomena, which we now call New Age, would not have raised the academic interest of so many scholars.

Another point has to be added from the sociological viewpoint: the development of the media market was caused by a certain need in the midlife generation of that time to allow entry into general discourse, of what had previously been a sub- or counter- cultural tendency. The reason for this was the developing biographies of the students' movement generation of the late 1960s, who had then reached the sort of positions in society against which they had previously struggled. Rethinking their worldviews, some of them rediscovered religion as a possible field of liberation and resurgence. As one New Age editor of the Goldmann Verlag told me in an interview, "New Age" in Germany may therefore be seen as "the midlife crisis of the 1968 movement".

Another central actor in this field was the former left-wing publisher Herbert Röttgen with his rather famous subculture publishing house Trikont. (They had sold the Mao Bible in Germany from 1967 onwards, and also Che Guevara's diary and other revolutionary books of that time.) At the end of the 1970s, Röttgen and his co-actors first discovered mythology and religion as fields for liberating activities. They started with books on American Indian religion and the Dalai Lama, being examples of non-mainstream, subversive and non-bourgeois forms of religion. So he started to organise shamanism conferences and introduced the Dalai Lama to the German public at the *Frankfurter Buchmesse*. Then one of the American Indian shamans complained that those left-wing, middle-class, young Europeans would follow the examples of their colonial forefathers and steal the last property of the Indians, their religion. They should instead try to re-animate their own indigenous traditions. So Trikont (or Dianus-Trikont, as it amended its name between 1980 and 1982) started to organise congresses on Celtic religion and even experimented with some right-wing political groups in Austria and Germany, who worked in the same field. Therefore part of what has been described as Pagan, in Germany was actually at the heart of the New Age phenomenon. Röttgen even experimented with the term New Age, and he was the one that first drew my attention to 19th century backgrounds, related to William Blake (who, as far as I see it, coined the term New Age in his *Milton* in 1804), and other persons in the religious counter-culture of that time. But the term became part of the general discourse only later, when Dianus-Trikont went bankrupt and some big paperback publishers, including Goldmann, republished its books under this new label. In contrast to such big publishing houses, Trikont had never needed such a label, because the label was simply Trikont itself.

I now want to mention a second perspective, which was also very central for the German New Age: Fritjof Capra. As opposed to the US, in Germany

Capra's book *Wendezeit (The Turning Point)* was seen as the key text of New Age, together with Marilyn Ferguson's *Aquarian Conspiracy* (1980). The reason probably was the widespread success of those books on the German market and their simultaneity with the first New Age book series. In the summer of 1983, many people of all classes and age groups read *Wendezeit* on their holidays. As *Wendezeit* sounds rather similar to "New Age", the first secondary explanations drew heavily from this approach and also from Marilyn Ferguson, which allowed them a broader description of the phenomena. So in Germany, New Age had a double function: it was the umbrella for the former counter-culture joining the mainstream in religious aspects, and it was the label for a new discourse, the combination of sciences and Eastern religions. Only much later did the books of Shirley MacLaine and similar approaches come into the bookshops and also became labelled New Age. Even the Theosophical tradition, which is often said to be at the core of New Age, did not play a prominent role. It had been translated (or distorted) to the German-speaking countries by Anthroposophy, which was already present long before the New Age started and is still quite independent from this recent development, having nearly nothing to do with the German counter-culture of the late 1960s.

5. Is the New Age concept relevant, then?

The peculiarity of the New Age story does not at all mean that it is somehow marginal within contemporary religious culture. On the contrary, I think it is an excellent case study for religious developments in general. New Age, at least in Germany, is a term for describing a general process of religious changes in society. It stands for religious resurgence in a former counter-culture generation, rediscovering some of the bourgeois values which its members had dropped in their youth. Of course, it is not the traditional form of religion any more, and inevitably it is something very secular. I think this interpretation is rather parallel with Wouter Hanegraaff's way of describing New Age as a matter of secularisation. I just don't agree with his understanding of Esotericism as the basis of it, and this will my next point.

I would like to complete this section with a short look at the further development of "New Age" in Germany. It is clear, that the first storm blew over shortly after the great times of the mid 1980s. Christian and other apologists discovered the term and employed it in a negative way. So the users simply changed their vocabulary. It is very important to see that they did not at all stop what they had done before, but the different topics developed further. Some of them became part of mainstream culture. On the other hand, nothing of it was really new. So the most important result of the

short New Age era was, that – thanks to the 1968 generation – many marginal traditions came out of their back rooms and became socially acceptable in mainstream culture. This, in fact, is an aspect of democratising religion. But it is also an effect of secularisation, which allows for counter developments also in other religious spheres.

The most important part of this development was the reconstruction (or perhaps even construction) of contemporary Esotericism. In many aspects, the term Esotericism just took over what had previously been called New Age in Germany. But the main line of it shifted from the specific needs of the former 1968 generation and also from Fritjof Capra and his colleagues to other topics like healing and certain other spiritual ideas and practices.

6. Esotericism

As opposed to Wouter Hanegraaff's approach in his thesis, but much closer to his more recent publications, including the paper in this journal, I look at Esotericism as something already modern in the German sense of the word, i.e. having come to being after about 1789 as an answer to the Enlightenment, the French and American revolutions, the human rights movement and also industrialisation. Therefore I look at Esotericism as being itself an outcome of secularisation – although it is obvious that many of its constituent parts have their backgrounds in earlier periods, perhaps even in antiquity. But again, as with the New Age, modern Esotericism should not be described in the reificationist way as some sort of religious tradition, but as a certain style of being religious or spiritual. If you look at Madame Blavatsky and the Theosophical movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries for instance, you will find very similar developments as described in relation to New Age above. Somehow, Theosophy was the New Age of that time. For instance, many Theosophists claimed to be Buddhists or Hindus at the same time; the Theosophisches Verlagshaus in Leipzig published the first Buddhist magazine in Germany, and also the philosophy of Nietzsche. As Michael Bergunder pointed out recently, the central idea of the one religion behind all religions is a typical reaction to modern needs of religious pluralism, although it is of course much older than modernity. But its age does not explain the widespread contemporary reception of it – unless you apply a psychological interpretation and interpret it as some sort of regression. If, on the other hand, you see it as a specific modern phenomenon (in the German usage of the word modern), this allows you to draw further conclusions. It is not a regression back behind the Enlightenment, but a collective answer to it. So in my approach, Esotericism is to be looked at first as a sort of religious

or spiritual mobility, which perfectly fits into very modern – or even postmodern – needs.

This was the reason why I focused on Emanuel Swedenborg in the historical part of my book. Similar to Hanegraaff's description in this journal, I think that Swedenborg is a sort of prototype of this specific modern way of being religious. His father had been a Lutheran bishop, oriented towards pietism. Swedenborg himself had studied the new sciences of his time and developed some sort of Deist theology, but he was not content with that and got into a deep crisis. So he developed a very independent type of religiosity, which could not have come into being in earlier eras because of the general conditions. Swedenborg's works still have the form of traditional dogmatics, but the content is revolutionary. Only under modern conditions of liberty of religious thinking or criticising, were people like Andrew Jackson Davies able to develop a totally new way of being religious, or spiritual. I think it is not accidental that he and others rely on Swedenborg.

So the core of what I would like to call Esotericism is an independent, non-dogmatic approach to religion or spirituality. Of course, this is not a sufficient approach to Esotericism from a historical viewpoint, and I don't want to draw attention away from the excellent work which has recently been done in Amsterdam and also in Halle and other places. But at the same time I think that the structural side is a necessary element of properly understanding it, because otherwise present developments will be reduced to an effect of historical phenomena.

7. The contribution of mainline Christian churches to New Age phenomena

For my last point I would like to argue against common approaches which try to separate Esotericism or New Age as a distinct entity within the history of religions. The point is, that mainstream Christianity had and still has a big impact on the development of new religious phenomena and the so-called New Age scene. The same is true for other religions in other contexts, but I have to restrict myself to the German scene.

Again, I start with a structural argument, taken from the book market. Until about the end of the 1980s, there was a clear demarcation between religious and secular publishers, the first oriented on confessional lines. Non-Christian religions were either dealt with in scientific publishing houses or in book programmes of the religious subcultures. Nowadays, you can find religious books everywhere, even in former left-wing publishing houses. At the same

time, former Roman Catholic publishers are proud to have emic Buddhist books in their programmes. Even the religious institutions themselves have changed their attitude. So some years ago, the new edition of the Roman Catholic Adult Catechism, which is a rather important product for the publisher's finances, was withdrawn from the old, established Catholic Herder Verlag and handed over to Oldenbourg, a secular, educational publishing company. The reason was probably that Herder had dared to publish too many critical insider books, for instance in the field of liberation theology. The consequence is that even the Roman Catholic authorities contributed to the general process of religious diffusion and structural pluralisation.

But the contribution of mainline churches is not at all limited to such structural developments. In fact, some of the most important processes within the German new religious scenes of recent years came into being inside the churches and spread from there to more independent places of religious experience. One example is the great success of Zen Buddhism in German speaking countries, which was mainly spread by Roman Catholic monks and nuns. They first discovered Zen to deepen their own spiritual life within the monasteries. Later on, some of them started to transmit their experience to the laity outside, which led to an ongoing process of independence from traditional religious institutions. Nowadays, some Zen centres have even turned out as mainly non-Christian bases, hosted by Christian institutions.

Another example is the spread of the Enneagram, which goes back to some esoteric concepts, connected with G.I. Gurdjieff. In its present use, the concept was developed in the USA by a Catholic monk, Richard Rohr, and very successfully promoted in Germany by a Protestant pastor, Andreas Ebert from Nuernberg. He tried to introduce new concepts for spiritual welfare. Of course, the original traditions were somehow adapted or even transformed by these ecclesiastical forms of reception, but at the same time, they also adapted and transformed the church institutions making use of them.

Apart from that, there are many examples of new religiosity within the churches far away from any professional or theological aid. To learn more about this process in the religious laity, we carried out a qualitative research project at the University of Bayreuth from 1999 until 2001, which was financed by the German Research Foundation (DFG). In this project, we somehow tried to prove the opposite side of my earlier findings, that it is not possible to separate between a Christian and a non-Christian New Age. We now interviewed Protestant and Catholic church members and tried to find

out whether and how they adopt alternative spiritual orientations. We found that even in our own rural region, where religious institutions are still effective, there is a far-reaching change in religiosity. This can be observed not so much within Sunday services or other manifestations of the “official” religious practice but in the religiosity of every day life, in the value concepts and agency structures of church members. Astonishingly enough, we found nearly the whole spectrum of alternative religious orientations, which are known from the contexts of big cities with much weaker church influence. Furthermore, we found that it is not possible to infer religious ideas or worldviews from the quality of the relationship to a church or religious community. On the one hand, we found many people who were closely connected to the church but at the same time had a totally differing worldview from the catechism of the church. And we found the same thing the other way round.

I think we have to be very careful to separate the following questions:

- Is there a connection to a traditional religious community and what is it like?
- Is there a connection to some traditional worldviews or ideas and what is it like?
- Is there a present interest in keeping up those connections, creating new relations, inventing new traditions and so on?

This has to be taken into account on the New Age side as well as in the study of traditional communities, whether mainline churches, Muslim communities or whatever.

8. Summary

We live in pluralistic times, where there are choices to be made by everyone. We should think about that when we look at our fieldwork and study projects as well as when we look at our own approaches at the level of meta-language. A pluralist way of handling scientific approaches is the most suitable for the phenomena.

From a structural viewpoint, Esotericism or New Age are very modern types of religion, religiosity or spirituality, because they encourage people to choose different items for their own sake, being guided by their own experience and not by the dogmatics of a certain tradition. So somehow,

there is sort of an esoteric or New Age underlying element in the whole range of contemporary religion. By the way, this is what sociologist Ernst Troeltsch called “Spiritualism” or “Mysticism” one hundred years ago. Esotericism and New Age also have a certain democratising effect on this process.

However, it would be misleading to take over the emic viewpoint, that New Age, Holism or whatever you call it, may be a common religion of the future. Because, at the same time, opposite developments are to be found. They are made possible by the same general conditions that caused the New Age or contemporary Esotericism.

Since the end of 18th century, our cultures have faced a heavy decline of traditional institutions: the secularisation process. This process is the cause of the rise of Esotericism and New Age, but at the same time it structures and limits them in the same way as it limits the traditional religious communities.

Starting not from the general viewpoint, but from concrete contexts, allows a more dense perception of specific developments, which have to be taken into account for a suitable theory of New Age or Esotericism. Of course it is also necessary to go the other way round. Only the combination of several steps will allow a non-reificationist view. So detailed studies as well as general overviews have to be carried on and should be interconnected in both directions. Finally, it seems very useful to look at New Age or Esotericism in the framework of contemporary religious culture as a whole, and comparing it with other developments.¹

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Notes

¹ One very important point, omitted for reasons of space, is the comparison between Western Esotericism (or New Age) and similar phenomena in other continents, for instance in Japan, or also in West Africa.

“The Invisible Inside the Visible – The Visible Inside the Invisible: Theoretical and methodological aspects of research on New Age and contemporary Esotericism”, © Christoph Bochinger, *Journal of Alternative Spiritualities and New Age Studies*, 2005 1 59-73.