

## The New Age Market in Graz, Austria

Franz Höllinger \*

*Evidence of trends suggesting the mainstreaming of New Age is presented in two studies of the New Age market in Graz, Austria. This paper presents findings of a study of the New Age market in Graz, Austria. The first part of this study maps institutions which offer New Age-related group activities, and the second part investigates the interests of those buying New Age literature. Comparisons are made with a representative survey on the diffusion of New Age practices among the general Austrian population. It is suggested that 'diluted' versions of New Age disseminated by the contemporary New Age market are less spiritual, less esoteric and less magical than the core of New Age, to which most of the social scientific literature refers.*

During recent decades the so-called New Age movement has undergone a considerable change. In the period of its formation in the 1960s, New Age was strongly linked with the counter-cultural, anti-modernist movements of that time, such as the hippy, commune and ecology movements (Bellah 1976; Berger, Berger & Kellner 1993). Since that time, the new esoteric and spiritual methods have been disseminated to a larger part of the population of modern societies by an expanding book market and an equally expanding market of workshops and courses (Heelas 1996; Bowman 1999; York 2001). Many methods and therapies, which for a long time were ignored, distrusted and rejected both by mainstream science and common sense, are gaining legitimacy as means for improving psycho-physical well-being.

Nowadays, a considerable section of medical practitioners include homeopathic medicine, acupuncture, and other alternative therapies in their repertoire. In the same way, an increasing number of psychotherapists combine discourse-centred forms of analytical psychotherapy with holistic methods, such as energy work, body-mind-spirit therapies, transpersonal psychotherapy, etc. Even management training firms have detected the potential of New Age methods for improving the power of concentration, self-awareness and creativity of their clients (Heelas 1996).

In this paper I will give evidence of these trends by means of an empirical investigation of the New Age market in Graz, with a population of 240,000 inhabitants, the second-largest city in Austria. The first part of the study is based upon a mapping of institutions which offer New Age-related group activities (workshops, courses etc), and a classification of the activities offered according to the workshop information. The second part analyses the interest in specific New Age-related contents and activities among the buyers of New Age literature in Graz. The study was carried out by participants of an empirical research seminar on "new religious movements" at the Department of Sociology of the University of Graz,

---

\* © Franz Höllinger. The following students participated in this project: Cornelia Grötschnig, Martin Mayerl, Christian Mosböck and Susanne Rabler. Many thanks to them for their excellent work! E-mail: [franz.hoellinger@uni-graz.at](mailto:franz.hoellinger@uni-graz.at)

Austria, in the academic year 2005-2006. Finally, I will present results from a representative Austrian survey which provides information on the diffusion of New Age practices among the general Austrian population.

### **1. Delimitation and classification of the field of New Age contents and activities**

Any empirical examination of New Age phenomena is confronted, first of all, with the problem of definition and delimitation of the field. "New Age" is used in social-scientific literature as an umbrella term for a range of distinct phenomena which are supposed to share some common elements. According to Horst Stenger (1993) and Adam Possamaï (2005), the common core of New Age can be characterized by three interconnected principles or objectives, which can be found in different formulations in the literary production and discourse of New Age followers:

- (a) *holism or monism*: all elements of the cosmos are interconnected; a universal energy exists which unites everything;
- (b) *the human potential ethic*: our goal in life is to develop our psychic abilities and forces, to become more intuitive and sensitive, to achieve a balance of body and mind;
- (c) *the search for spiritual knowledge*: the ultimate goal in life is to attain access to the greater reality, to discover one's true self.

Social-scientific studies usually refer to these or similar principles when they try to delimit and classify the contents and activities belonging to the field of the New Age. Comparing the listings and classifications of New Age activities given by different authors (such as Russell 1982; Stenger 1995; Kemp 2004; Possamaï 2005), one finds an overlapping core; however, due to the fact that the meanings of the terms which are used as criteria for definition are rather vague, and that an enormous number of activities exist which match these criteria to some extent, the classifications and the range of concrete phenomena considered as part of the New Age differ from author to author. It seems to be impossible to draw a precise line between New Age and bordering areas, such as new religious movements, the psychotherapy market, and the contemporary fitness and health boom.

Our empirical investigation of New Age activities is based on a classification system composed of five main categories which refer to the focus of the respective activity: (1) methods for healing and health-improvement; (2) body-mind-spirit exercises; (3) methods focusing on the analysis and development of the personality; (4) methods focusing on spiritual growth; (5) techniques for the harmonization of the life-space. Each of the main categories is composed of sub-categories of specific contents/activities (e.g. yoga and tai chi as sub-categories of body-mind-spirit exercises). The classification was implemented in the following way: if the course information included terms which are typical of the New Age discourse, as can be seen in the following examples, the respective course was classified as New Age activity.

*Body Flow*

Would you always have liked to learn to understand the original language of nature? To communicate with your environment as openly and clearly as with yourself? To understand your body from inside? To have a chat with its desires and anxieties?

Body Flow permits the experience of a greater wisdom by means of intuition and inspiration. ... Once the tensions within your body are released, it will be able to free up the whole artistry of its healing power. Your inner healer will be awake and your soul will be able to unfold.

*Feel well, better, best*

*(enthusiasm, self-motivation, stress-release, conflict resolution)*

We will analyse our conflicts and find solutions on the rational and mental level. We will learn to motivate ourselves, to rapidly put ourselves into a good inner state, to control and to manage our emotions and perceptions. In the alpha state of relaxation positive affirmations will be stored in the subconscious. When back at home, our attitude towards life will develop in a more positive direction from day to day. Happiness, health and the joy of life will emerge.

(WS: practitioner in life-training, NLP, Silva Mind Control, Laughter-Yoga)

If the title of a workshop/course corresponded to a sub-category of the coding scheme, it was classified under that category regardless of the context in which it was offered by the respective institution. When it was not possible to classify the activity on the basis of the title, the workshop information about the contents of the workshop and the qualifications of the practitioner/therapist were used as criteria for classification. In the area of 'personality development', the delimitation between New Age-related and non-New Age activities is particularly difficult, because practically all courses offered in this area are based to some extent on a holistic view of the human personality. Thus, the delimitation could be conducted only on the basis of a pragmatic criterion: if the course description comprised keywords which are typical of the paradigm of holism (such as "connection between inside and outside", "synchronicity", "energy flow"), the course was classified as New Age-related; if the description indicated that only analytical, discourse-oriented methods would be used, the course in question was not counted as New Age activity.

## **2. The supply side of New Age: Market-oriented group activities**

The target of our investigation was to record as completely as possible within the time constraints of the research project all New Age-related group activities (information workshops, encounter groups, therapies, training, professional training courses, etc) offered on a commercial basis in Graz during the winter semester 2005-2006. Flyers and brochures were collected from New Age centres, New Age bookshops and shops, adult education centres, etc; in addition, an extensive search of internet web pages was carried out. Altogether, 463 group activities were registered. From personal contacts in the field, I know that many individual practitioners do not advertise their courses and workshops in public, but only among their clients.

It would have been too time-consuming to cover these activities systematically. Thus, our compilation is by no means complete.

Table 1 presents the registered group activities according to the focus of their content. Almost two-thirds of the activities account for therapies and methods related to healing and health-improvement, and to body-mind-spirit exercises, such as yoga and tai chi. 22% of the activities focus on psychological self-knowledge and personal development. Around 10% of the activities are concerned more directly with spiritual growth (meditation, Buddhist practices etc), 5% deal with techniques for the harmonization of the life-space (feng shui, geomantics). We found only a very small number of neo-shaman or neo-pagan group activities. At present, channelling seems to be the only relatively popular method in this field. Some neo-pagan groups may exist which do not advertise their activities in public (e.g. a shamanistic healing group, conducted by a Peruvian shaman, takes place every second year). However, the fact that neo-paganism is given less emphasis in German-language New Age literature (e.g. Bochinger 1994; Stenger 1993; Knoblauch 1989) than in the respective English literature (e.g. York 1995; Possamaï 2005) might indicate that there are in fact relatively few neo-pagan groups in Austria and Germany, compared to the Anglo-Saxon countries.

*Table 1: Number of New Age group activities, by type of focus*

	<b>N=</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Healing and Health</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>32%</b>
Chinese medicine, acupuncture, shiatsu, etc	31	
Chakra- /Energy-work	29	
Alimentation (5-elements-approach, etc)	10	
Reiki	10	
Homeopathy / Bach-flowers	10	
<b>Body-mind-spirit exercises</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>31%</b>
Yoga	59	
Tai Chi, Qi Gong	49	
<b>Personality development</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>22%</b>
Holistic psychology	12	
Astrology	11	
Mental training	6	
<b>Spiritual growth</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>11%</b>
Meditation	22	
Channelling	7	
Buddhism	5	
<b>Harmonization of life-space and environment</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>5%</b>
Feng Shui	12	
Geomantics	10	
<b>Total</b>	<b>463</b>	<b>100%</b>

(non-bold text: most frequent contents/activities within the main category)

The great majority of the registered health and body oriented courses, but also a considerable part of the spiritual activities, are based on traditional Chinese and Indian philosophies and spirituality. In many cases, however, the course description emphasises only the practical objectives of these methods, such as “improvement of the energy-flow”, “balance”, “harmony” and “self-awareness”, and omits the philosophical and spiritual dimension.

Our Yoga courses transmit basic knowledge of traditional Hatha Yoga and are offered in terms of modern psychosomatic health-improvement. The experience of subjective body language gives answers to the question: Where do I feel tensions and which parts of the body lacks tension? Which of my body reflexes are vivid, which of them are blocked? How much time and energy do I have at my disposal?

Methods focusing on personal development often combine elements of Western psychoanalytical traditions, techniques of body awareness and esoteric approaches such as astrology or transpersonal psychology. Also here, the workshop descriptions generally highlight more the psychological and psychotherapeutic aspects than the esoteric aspects, and try to explain the esoteric dimension of the respective approach in terms of modern psychological language, as we can see in the following description of an astrology course:

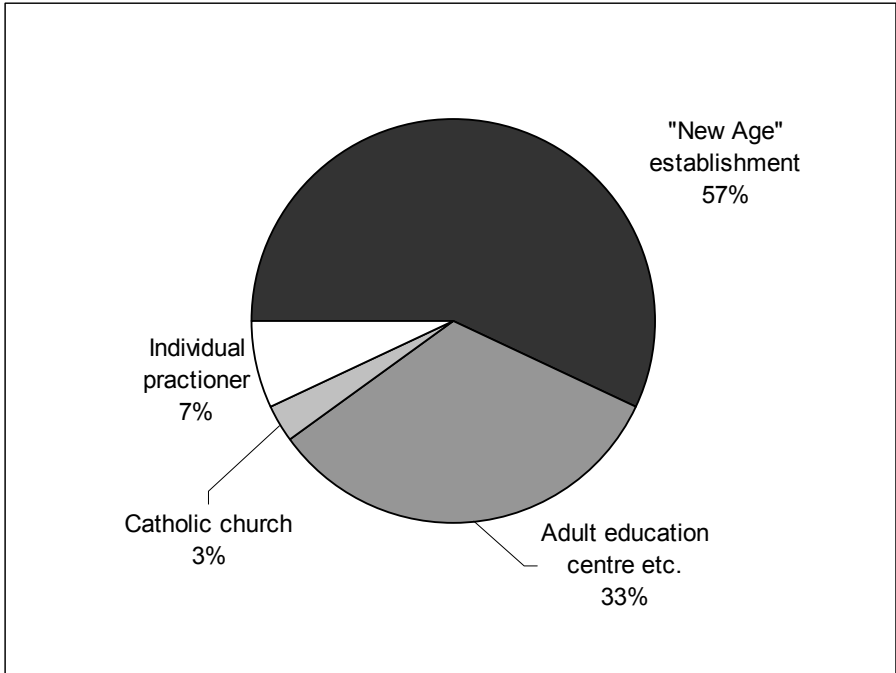
For modern humanistic astrology, the birth-constellation does not represent a static, unchangeable parameter with determinative effects, but the expression of the dynamic interplay of the human potential, which is in a constant process of development. The examination of the birth-constellation offers the opportunity ... of bringing hitherto unconscious parts of our personality into consciousness and integrating them.

The tendency to omit the spiritual and esoteric aspects of New Age methods or interpret them in the language of modern science and psychology can be ascertained in particular in the more commercially oriented New Age centres and in adult education centres and professional training centres, where New Age activities such as yoga, tai chi, shiatsu, Pilates, etc, are offered in the context of “body and health”, “massage techniques”, “functional and mental training”, “dance and body exercises” or even as “martial arts”. This finding corresponds to Wouter Hanegraaff’s characterization of New Age as a secularized form of esotericism (Hanegraaff 1996). It can also be interpreted in a somewhat different way: involvement in New Age activities is based on different individual motives. The majority of the participants of New Age courses are interested primarily or exclusively in the practical effects of the methods, i.e. the improvement of their personal wellbeing. Only the core group of New Age followers is concerned also with the goal of achieving spiritual knowledge (see Stenger 1993).

Less than 10% of the registered group activities are based on the traditional form of knowledge transfer by means of lectures and verbal information. The overwhelming majority of the courses focus on practical exercises and self-experience.

A considerable part of the courses (12% of the total) are offered as part of a professional training. The target group of such courses are people working in the areas of education and adult education, medicine and health, social work, psychotherapy and counselling.

*Chart 1: New Age group activities, by type of provider*



(percentage of groups offered in the respective category)

As can be seen in Chart 1, almost 60 per cent of the registered group activities are offered by private establishments (associations and firms) specialising in New Age activities. Altogether, 25 establishments of this type were registered. Seven of them are relatively large centres, each of them offering more than 10 courses in the observed period; the largest institution offered more than 50 courses (we did not verify whether all courses offered in the programme actually took place). Looking at the web pages of these centres, one gets the impression that several of them are well-organized commercial enterprises, which literally correspond to the image of an “esoteric supermarket”. They bear agreeable-sounding names, such as: “Panta Rhei – Centre for Holistic Growth”; “Dendera – House of Encounter”; “Atento – Impulse Studio for Higher Life Quality”; they offer workshops, courses and professional training in many different areas, and provide facilities for online registration or even online payment.

We were not able to investigate the development of the New Age market over time; it could be ascertained, however, that six of the larger establishments were founded during the last two to four years (between 2002 and 2005). This finding seems to indicate a significant growth in the New Age market during the last years; it also indicates the development of the New Age market towards a higher level of centralisation and professionalism. Practitioners, who had previously offered their courses and workshops independently from each other, are more and more working together in larger establishments.

Also, a tendency of applying New Age methods in the context of management training sessions (Heelas 1996) could be ascertained. The programme of some of the more recently founded centres is divided into two sections: New Age courses on the one hand, and courses for improving social and communicative competence in professional life, such as mediation, coaching and communication training, on the other. This mixed programme is addressed to the target group of managers and executives in private enterprises and public institutions.

In addition to the establishments which specialize in New Age activities, four established adult education centres, the vocational training centre of the Austrian Workers Chamber, the sport institute of Graz University (which offers sport and recreation courses for students from all faculties), and several cultural and social centres offer New Age courses and workshops as part of their programme. Summing up the courses of these institutions, they account for around 30% of the total number of registered courses.

In the ambit of the Catholic Church, we found only a rather small number of New Age-related group activities within the city of Graz. The majority of the clergy continues to maintain a sceptical distance from the New Age movement. Nevertheless, we found evidence that the New Age paradigms of ‘holism’, ‘personal development’ and ‘spiritual growth’ are incorporated, to a certain extent, also in the pastoral work of the Church. In the past few years, several Catholic monasteries in the province of Styria (of which Graz is the capital) have started to offer spiritual retreats, holidays in the monastery, abstinence weeks and related spiritual activities on a regular basis.

One of these monasteries offers, in addition to its general programme of spiritual activities, a series of specific courses for managers (“Inner quality management”, “Spiritual retreat for executives”, “Decision-making as a holistic process”, etc). The incorporation of the human potential ethic into the pastoral work of the Catholic Church can also be seen by the fact that a large part of the courses offered by the main Catholic adult education centre in Graz (Bildungshaus Mariatrost) deals with personal development, conflict management, and self-awareness rather than with biblical and theological issues.

### **3. The demand side of New Age**

In order to find out what kind of people are interested in New Age contents and activities and which are their specific fields of interest, we applied a short, standardized questionnaire to 140 people who were looking for New Age literature in esoteric bookshops or in the relevant section of general bookstores.

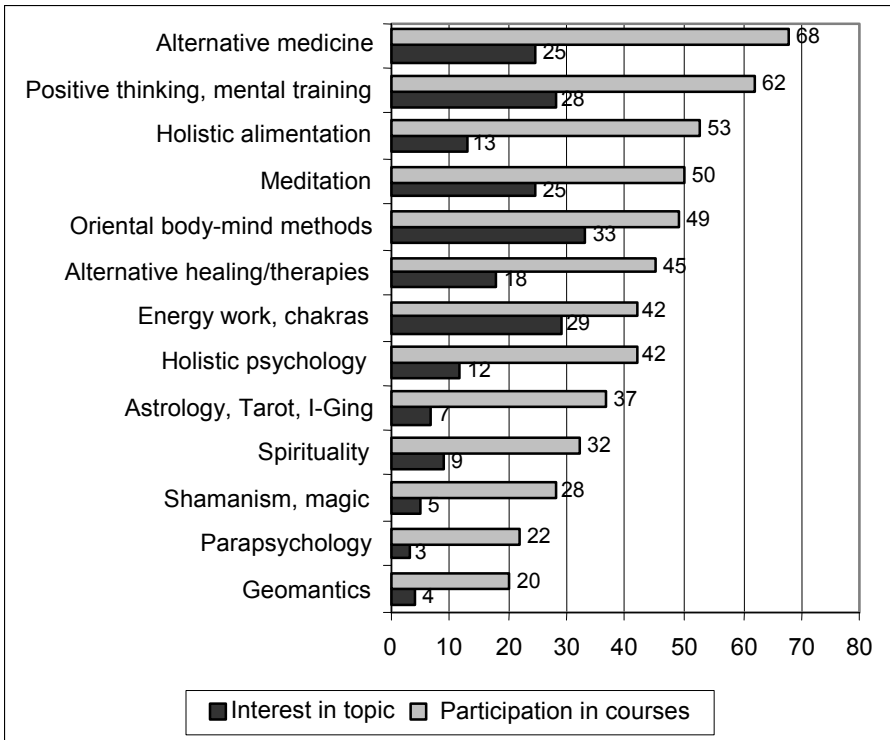
Two-thirds of the interviewed customers were between 25 and 50 years of age (20% were younger than 25, 33% between 25 and 34, 32% between 35 and 50). Only 15% of the respondents (as compared to 40% of the Austrian adult population) were older than 50. A clear majority of the interviewed customers were female (80%) and had higher education (70% had completed secondary level or university; the respective percentage in the Austrian adult population is only 30%). 80% of the respondents were employed, around half of them working in the sectors of health, education, counselling and therapy; 15% were students or school pupils, the remaining 5% were housewives or retired. Even if this is not a representative sample, it seems to come close to the social and demographic profile of New Age activists found in other studies (Mörth 1986; Höllinger 2005).

The questionnaire comprised a list of 13 New Age-related areas/topics. Respondents were asked to indicate which of these areas they were interested in and whether they had attended courses in these areas. Chart 2 presents the results of these two questions. It can be seen that the rank order of interests of New Age book-readers corresponds more or less to the relative weight of specific activities of the New Age course market. The rationale behind this rank order seems to be the degree of comprehensibility of the effects of the respective methods for the modern, Western mind: the most popular areas and interest fields are those which focus on the potential of the human mind and on the connection between body and mind, without involving belief in the existence of occult powers and spiritual entities. This is the case for the entire range of oriental body-mind-spirit methods and energy work, for holistic alimentation, as well as for most forms of alternative medicine and psychotherapeutic approaches.

Only a much smaller part of the respondents was engaged in areas which presuppose the existence of spiritual entities or paranormal, occult phenomena (such as Shamanism, spiritism, and parapsychology). In two of the New Age centres mentioned above, we also investigated the motives and experiences of course participants by means of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. This inquiry shows very clearly that tension release and relaxation, health problems, personality development and life problems/crises are the principal motives for participating in such courses. Only a small minority of those interviewed referred to religious or spiritual motives. (These findings correspond to the results of a study of Austrian New Age activists, carried out by Mörth in 1989.)

Chart 2: Interest of New Age book-readers in specific areas (in %)

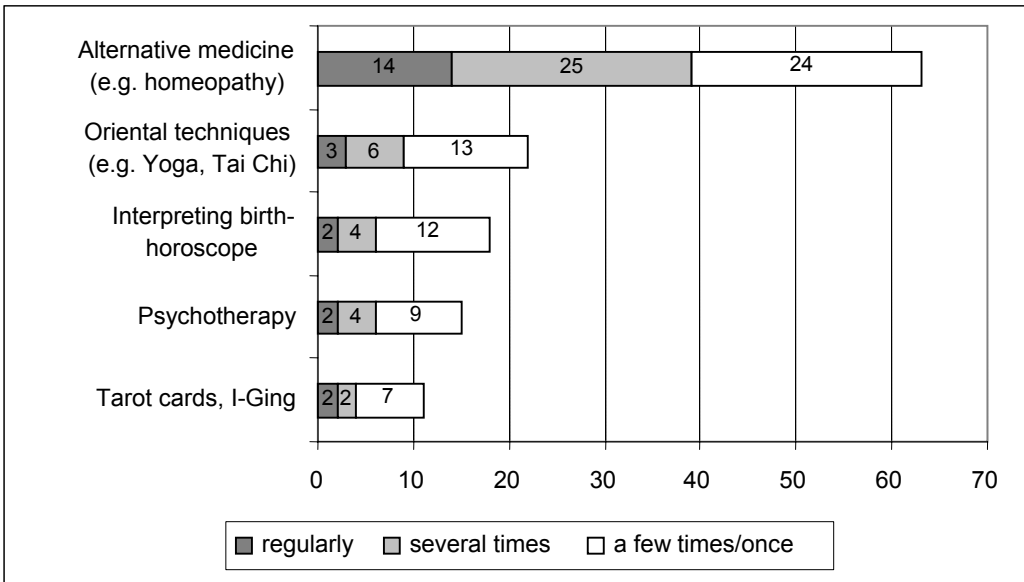
- a) Which of the following topics are you interested in?
- b) Have you participated in courses/workshops in these topics?



No extensive studies exist about the dissemination of New Age-related practices among the Austrian population. Some indications in this regard can be found in an attachment to the Austrian questionnaire of the last module of the “International Social Survey Programme 1998” on Religion (see chart 3). From the results of this study we can see that almost two-thirds of the Austrian adult population between 18 and 50 years of age have at least some experience with alternative medicine. 14% in this age group claim to use or to practice alternative forms of medicine regularly. Only a small minority – 2-3% – of the respondents also practise other New Age-related methods, such as Oriental techniques of body-mind consciousness (yoga, tai chi etc), psychotherapy, astrology or tarot cards, on a regular basis. However, a considerable part of the population has had some practical experience with one or several of these methods. Even if this study gives only rough indications, it seems plausible to estimate that at least 20% of the younger adult population today are susceptible to some extent to New Age-related issues and practices (a more detailed analysis of this study can be found in Höllinger 2005).

Chart 3: Practice of New Age-related methods in the Austrian population

How often do you practise/have you practised the following methods? (%)



Source: Austrian dataset of ISSP-1998, age 18-50, “Religion”, N=607

**4. Conclusion**

Our investigation of the New Age market in Graz illustrates in a striking way tendencies towards commercialization of New Age methods and their infiltration into mainstream society. Until a few years ago, New Age activities were provided mostly by practitioners working alone and small communities committed to specific esoteric or spiritual doctrines, such as the Astrologic Academy, the Theosophical Society, and a few Buddhist and Hindu groups. In the meantime, the increasing demand for holistic methods of healing and personal self-development has given rise to a considerable number of small enterprises which offer consumer-oriented packages of New Age commodities. Also general adult education centres and professional training centres have opened their doors for holistic methods.

The development of New Age into a ‘spiritual marketplace’ has often been evaluated in a derogatory way as a corollary and a reflection of the globalized consumer culture of late capitalism and of the cultural development of post-modernity, characterized by the hedonistic search for immediate gratification, consumerism, self-stimulation and a fascination with the exotic and unusual (Lasch 1979; Hemminger 1987). From this perspective, contemporary New Agers are considered as people looking for immediate, magical solutions to their life problems rather than devoting themselves to a more serious spiritual path (Stark, Hamberg & Miller 2005; Farias 2006).

Our study of the New Age market in Graz indicates that the search for spiritual knowledge and/or experience is not in fact a primary concern for the majority of the providers and clients of New Age workshops. Most workshops and courses turn their focus to the harmonization of the energy flow within the human personality and to the improvement of one's self-awareness and self-confidence. The workshop descriptions in many cases explain the effects of the respective method in the logic of modern psychology and psychosomatic medicine. They emphasise self-responsibility for one's own personal development, but they contain (almost) no explicit reference to the spiritual dimension of these methods. Furthermore, in relatively few cases do they stimulate the magical expectation that the respective method would lead to a rapid and almost automatic change of the personality.

It seems that the 'diluted' versions of New Age methods disseminated by the contemporary New Age market are less spiritual, but also less esoteric and magical than the core of New Age, to which most of the social scientific literature refers. Most New Age practitioners today are not in search of 'a path to illumination', nor do they direct their attention to occult forces. Their main expectations and concerns are to improve their psycho-physical wellbeing and to find ways of coping better with their everyday life problems.

## References

Bellah, Robert N, 1976, "The New Religious Consciousness and the Crisis of Modernity", in Glock, Charles & Robert N Bellah, eds, *The New Religious Consciousness*, Berkley, LA: University of California Press, 133-52.

Berger, Peter, Brigitte Berger & Hansfried Kellner, 1993, *The Homeless Mind*, New York: Random House.

Bochinger, Christoph, 1994, "*New Age*" und *moderne Religion: Religionswissenschaftliche Analysen*, Gütersloh: Chr Kaiser.

Bowman, Marion, 1999, *Healing in the Spiritual Marketplace: Consumers, Courses and Credentialism*, *Social Compass*, 34.2 181-89.

Farias, Miguel, 2006, "A psychological study of New Age practices and beliefs", *Journal of Alternative Spiritualities and New Age Studies*, 2, 105-15.

Hanegraaff, Wouter J, 1996, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, Leiden: Brill.

Heelas, Paul, 1996, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity*, Oxford: Blackwell

Hemminger, Hansjörg, ed, 1987, *Die Rückkehr der Zauberer: New Age - Eine Kritik*, Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt.

Höllinger, Franz, 2005, "Christliche Religiosität und New Age – zwei Pole des religiösen Feldes der Gegenwartsgesellschaft", in Schulz, Wolfgang et al, eds,

Österreich zur Jahrhundertwende: Gesellschaftliche Werthaltungen und Lebensqualität 1986-2004, Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 487-518.

Kemp, Daren, 2004, *New Age: A Guide - Alternative Spiritualities from Aquarian Conspiracy to New Age*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Knoblauch, Hubert, 1989, "Das unsichtbare neue Zeitalter: 'New Age', privatisierte Religion und kultisches Milieu", *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 41.3 504-25.

Lasch, Christopher, 1979, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, New York: Norton & Company.

Mörth, Ingo, 1989, "New Age: Neue Religion? Theoretische Überlegungen und empirische Hinweise zur sozialen Bedeutung des Wendezeit-Syndroms", in M Haller, HG Hoffmann-Novotny & W Zapf, eds, *Kultur und Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt: Campus, 297-320.

Possamai, Adam, 2005, *In Search of New Age Spiritualities*, Aldershot: Ashgate.

Russell Peter, 1982, *Die erwachende Erde. Unser nächster Evolutionssprung*, Munich: Heyne.

Stark, Rodney, Eva Hamberg & Alan S Miller, 2005. "Exploring Spirituality and Unchurched Religions in America, Sweden, and Japan", *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 20.1 3-23

Stenger, Horst, 1993, *Die soziale Konstruktion okkultur Wirklichkeit. Eine Soziologie des 'New Age'*, Leske: Opladen.

York, Michael, 1995, *The Emerging Network: A Sociology of the New Age and Neo-Pagan Movements*, Rowman & Littlefield: Boston.

York, Michael, 2001, "New Age Commodification and Appropriation of Spirituality", *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 16.3 361-72.