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This is the published version of a chapter published in *New Age in Norway*.

Citation for the original published chapter:

Frisk, L. (2017)

New Age in Sweden

In: Ingvild Sælid Gilhus, Siv Ellen Kraft and James R. Lewis (ed.), *New Age in Norway*

London: Equinox Publishing

<https://doi.org/10.1558/equinox.28890>

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published chapter.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:du-16584>

— Afterword —

New Age in Sweden: A Comparison to Norway

LISELOTTE FRISK

Introduction

There are many cultural similarities between Sweden and Norway; they are neighboring countries and have a common history. In Sweden, the Swedish Church was the state church until the year 2000, when the church and state were separated from each other. Instead, *lagen om trossamfund*, (“the law of religious communities”), regulating registration of religious communities and state funding of these came into force. In 2013, 65.9% of the Swedish population were members of the Swedish Church, 48.5% of babies born were baptized, 30.1% of the youngsters went through confirmation, and the church performed 78% of burials (www.svenskakyrkan.se). Compared to Norway, the Norwegian church seems to have a slightly stronger position than its Swedish counterpart. Still, a majority of the Swedes are members of the Swedish Church.

As in Norway, New Age as a phenomenon has been a topic since the 1960s, with roughly similar waves of development, changes, and the influence of trends like globalization, individualism, and secularization. In 1972, the New Age book shop *Vattumannen* (“Aquarius”) was opened by Per Frisk, who together with his wife Monica Katarina Frisk are significant persons associated with New Age in Sweden. Between 1984 and 2014, they were the owners of the publication *Energivågen* (“The Wave of Energy”), renamed *Free—din ledstjärna* (“Free—your guiding star”) in 2010. This New Age magazine had originally been launched in 1982 by Tomas Frankell, another important person in the Swedish New Age milieu. Today *Free* is printed bimonthly in 25,000 copies, and is also available on-line. Per and Monica Katarina Frisk were the

owners of the publishing house *Energica* between 1984 and 2008, which published several New Age-related titles, some of them bestsellers like *The Power of Now* by Eckhart Tolle, or *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne.

A local mapping of New Age activities 2008–2011 (or, as referred to here, “popular religiosity”) in the county of Dalarna in Sweden, an area of about 277,000 inhabitants situated about 300 km northwest of Stockholm, showed that 1.6% of the population engaged in New Age activities at least once a week (Frisk and Åkerbäck 2013). The New Age arenas in Sweden are very similar to those in Norway, with “alternative fairs” (in Sweden called “health fairs” or “harmony fairs”—“alternative” not being used as much as in Norway) being very significant, often taking place in minor villages as well. As in Norway, health centers or health institutes where several New Age activities—sometimes mixed with mainstream health activities—share space are common. For a couple of years in Sweden, there has been the possibility of obtaining state funding for private enterprises, which probably has been important for the increasing number of health enterprises, often conducted by women. Additionally, retreat centers with different orientations are common in Sweden, and are significant arenas for New Age activities.

In this short paper I will discuss some similarities and differences concerning New Age in Norway and Sweden, based primarily on the empirical study mentioned above.

Mediums and communication with the dead

The Swedish empirical material in the study conducted in Dalarna was compared to a similar study in Austria (Höllinger and Tripold 2012). One important difference that contrasted with the Austrian material was that the number of mediums and the extent of spirit communication was about three times higher in Sweden. Mediums and communication with the dead seem to be very popular in Sweden, probably as a result of the many popular TV serials, such as *The Unknown*, *Spirit Academy*, *Haunted Houses* and *Ghost Hunters* (Frisk, Höllinger and Åkerbäck forthcoming). This situation seems to be very similar in Norway.

Yoga and mindfulness

Neither yoga nor mindfulness has been addressed to any great extent in this book about New Age in Norway. Especially regarding yoga, Sweden scored significantly higher than Austria when the two empirical studies were compared (Frisk, Höllinger and Åkerbäck 2014). Sweden scores lower on most religious indicators than Austria (www.worldvaluessurvey.org). One explanation for the popularity of yoga may be its capacity to be interpreted both as a secular practice as well as a practice with non-secular or spiritual dimensions.

Another interesting matter in Sweden is that local Swedish yoga styles have developed. The abovementioned Tomas Frankell has, for example,

developed his own style of yoga, influenced by the kundalini yoga of Yogi Bhajan. He calls this style *livsyoga*, meaning “yoga of life” (<http://www.devaneews.com/hem/startpage.php>). We also came across other local yoga styles in Dalarna.

The practice of mindfulness may, similar to yoga, be utilized on both secular and spiritual arenas. In Sweden, mindfulness is practiced in various Buddhist contexts, as well as in the New Age milieu, but also within the conventional health-care sector (Frisk and Åkerbäck 2013, 151).

Human potential therapies

A vast range of holistic therapies are closely related to and included in the New Age concept, a phenomenon which is discussed in the Norwegian context earlier in this book. Not specifically discussed, however, are therapies with a clear connection to the human potentials movement that originated in the U.S. 1960s, closely connected with the Esalen Institute in California. The human potential movement has its roots in the humanistic psychology, but is more practice oriented. Examples of these methods are encounter groups and gestalt therapy. The most significant characteristics of the human potential movement are: an ideological framework focused on the human potential, or the importance of being “authentic” and free from restraints, such as defense mechanisms and social roles; the expression of emotions through catharsis; body therapies; focus on here and now; group therapy; and syncretism (Frisk 2014). In Sweden, Lena Kristina Tuulse has been the front person for this movement, between 1976 and 2007 running Wäxthuset (“The Growth House”) outside Stockholm. One of her most important methods has been rebirthing, a therapeutic method using controlled breathing. Beginning around 1975, therapies from the human potential movement were integrated and used in the new religious movement led by the charismatic Indian leader Osho (1931–1990), at that time called Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. Today, the Osho movement and especially its successors have become the main practitioners of human potential therapies in Sweden. The most well-known institute is Ängsbacka, which among other activities each year hosts a one-week festival which attracts about 1,000 people. The focus of the festival is on a variety of New Age/human potential activities, as well as cultural events (Frisk 2002, 2014). Another retreat center with this background is Baravara in Dalarna, engaging about 1,000 people each year (Frisk and Åkerbäck 2013, 113).

Neo-Shamanism

Sami religiosity seems to be both more significant and more integrated with New Age in Norway than in Sweden. There are, however, also currents of Neo-Shamanism in the Swedish New Age milieu, but these were especially prominent during the 1980s and 1990s. Characteristic of Neo-Shamanism in Sweden has been connections with the academic world, as some of the

practitioners have been academics (Frisk, Höllinger and Åkerbäck 2014). Not much trace of Neo-Shamanism was, however, found in the Dalarna study.

Folk religiosity

Sweden has not had national folk healers like the Norwegian *Snåsamannen*. There are a few clairvoyants with no connections to the New Age who have attained a certain amount of fame. Some of these have their own question and answer columns in certain weekly magazines, mostly dealing with how to find lost items or animals. In Dalarna, we found only one such person, now in his 80s, specializing in finding lost animals. Not a single traditional healer was found.

Conclusion

Sweden is one of the most secularized countries in the world, independent of whichever parameters are used. New Age currents, however, seem to be as strong as in other countries. In comparison to other nations, some of these currents stand out as especially significant in Sweden. Practices in the cultural space between religious and secular arenas, like yoga, mindfulness, and human potential therapies seem to be especially prominent. Siv Ellen Kraft, at the University of Tromsø, describes how New Age arenas present many phenomena that are open to a number of interpretations. She calls these 'hybrid products', meaning that there are phenomena that can be understood as religious, but that each person can either choose, reject, or ignore these religious dimensions. Religious interpretations are thus but one potential choice for the individual among other choices (Kraft 2011, 78). Practices inviting this kind of choice seem to be successful in Sweden.

However, New Age currents are diversified in Sweden, and, as in Norway, come in different variations. Another strong current in Sweden deals with communication with spirits. This New Age current is closely connected to popular culture. As mentioned earlier, these phenomena seem to be as strong in Norway as in Sweden.

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Liselotte Frisk has been Professor of Religious Studies at Högskolan Dalarna since 2006. She has written several books about new religious movements and new age, and conducted several research projects in the same area of study. She is currently researching children in minority religions. Frisk is also chairperson of Finyar (the Nordic network for research on new religiosity) and is the co-editor of *Aura (The Nordic journal for the study of new religiosity)*. She was the chairperson of ISSNR (International society for the study of new religions) between 2010 and 2013, and was the co-editor of *IJSNR (International journal for the study of new religions)* between 2010 and 2013.