

**Seekers of the ‘Alternative’: Making Sense of the Self and the World
Through Spiritual Practices in Estonia**

By Marko Uibu

Submitted to

Central European University

Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Masters of Art

Supervisors:

Professor Vlad Naumescu

Professor Alexandra Kowalski

Budapest, Hungary

2011

ABSTRACT

Modern spirituality as an ‘invisible’ and ‘individual’ practice deprived of strong institutionalized or group support means that participants have to find themselves the most meaningful and authoritative teachings in the non-standardized maze of the spiritual marketplace. This thesis explores the process of becoming spiritually involved, its reasons and consequences from an individual and social perspective. The study is based on participant observation and in-depth interviews conducted in Estonia, the country where several comparative surveys show the lowest level of importance of religion in Europe or even the world. The importance of spiritual ideas, however, is high despite the prevalence of a scientific-materialistic worldview in the public discourse and mainstream media. The present study has an important mission to bring a different voice into the polarized debate between the spokespeople of the skeptical and the spiritual positions, emphasizing the importance of understanding the social meaning of spiritual practices.

My results show that despite of its ‘hidden’ popularity, spirituality remains marginal to the public eye and participants feel the threat of stigmatization. Unlike the skeptics who take belief in the paranormal as a kind of ‘disease’, this study demonstrates that the preference for the ‘alternative’ is rather a ‘symptom’ or even ‘cure’: the ‘symptom’ of decreasing authority and meaningfulness of the scientific-materialistic world-view and its ‘official’ institutions for many people; the ‘cure’ in the form of the spiritual field with its non-standardized and marginal teachings and very flexible frames which people can use to develop and combine their own meaningful practices. Importantly, participation in the ‘spiritual marketplace’ or adoption of such practices cannot be viewed as instrumental: in this multi-layered process the evidence (books, for example) generates the trust and support necessary for individual experiments to provide a final confirmation and guide people to feel and interpret things differently.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
LITERATURE REVIEW	5
Difficulties in defining the field of study.....	5
Participant level: functions, adoption and the sources of validation	8
Possible functions and roles.	10
Empowering or manipulating; resistance or subjection?	11
METHODS AND DATA	12
ANALYSIS AND RESULTS	15
CHAPTER 1. THE AMBIVALENCE OF ESTONIAN ‘SPIRITUALITY’: THE REASONS AND IMPLICATIONS	15
Spirituality as a ‘nebulous social phenomenon’	15
Social meanings and oppositions.....	17
Fights on the borderlands	19
A thin line between ‘spiritual’ and ‘crazy’	21
Popularity of these ‘hidden’ practices	23
CHAPTER 2: ‘SEEKERS’ ON A RELIGIOUS MARKETPLACE	25
All ‘seekers’ but with different aims	26
‘Religious marketplace’: how much freedom?	34
CHAPTER 3: ADOPTION OF PRACTICES, CHANGES IN PERCEPTION	37
Adoption of spiritual practices	37
Evidence supporting beliefs	42
CONCLUSION	45
APPENDIX: SHORT DESCRIPTIONS OF MY INTERVIEWEES	50
REFERENCES.....	51

INTRODUCTION

In an austere conference room, around 50 people sitting in the lotus position on the floor, eyes closed, are singing together, desperately trying to produce the sound of whales to awaken their ‘cell-consciousness’¹ – my first time in a spiritual training seminar was inspired by pure curiosity, it was an excursion to meet the ‘exotic’, the ‘other’, the ‘alternative’. Listening to the discussions among participants I felt that “there really is another globe inside the Earth, and much bigger than the Earth is”, a metaphor I had picked up from the title of an esoteric article about UFOs and parallel worlds.² This idea – logically impossible itself – describes well my impression of the ‘hidden realm of spiritual practices’ inside the ordinary ‘mundane’ world – so rich in meanings that it seems to be bigger than the outer one.

With the decline of the traditional ‘great’ religions, especially in Western secular societies, spirituality is often expressed in a wide variety of individualized forms. The *bricolage* of concepts from different cultural/religious traditions and (pseudo)scientific beliefs (Hervieu-Leger 2001), which people put together as their own ‘religion *a la carte*’, is usually not even perceived by them as religious (Van Hove 1999). The discrepancy between the decline in the importance of religious institutions and the remaining sacredness in contemporary societies is illustrated by the notion of ‘believing without belonging’ (Davie 1994: 94). As a result of this detraditionalization process that deprived people of the strong institutionalized support, they need to find ‘their own meaningful ways’ individually in the non-standardized maze of teachings and practices that are labeled either as ‘spiritual’, ‘esoteric’, ‘alternative’ or not labeled at all. This means choosing ideas and practices from a

¹ Awakening the cell-consciousness means to ‘open every cell in your body to the world outside’. This anatomically undoubtedly lethal practice was, however, not taken as a mere metaphor – people really tried to work with their cells to open them and many of them were sure that they had succeeded.

² The title of the Estonian newspaper article in question: <http://www.ohtuleht.ee/193899>

wide range of traditions such as pagan witchcraft, New Age or buying expensive international trademark therapies. The relative freedom and creativity on the personal level means that the studies about teachings or the organization of the spiritual marketplace are unable to answer several important questions about modern spirituality; for example, why and how spiritual practices are adopted and what does it mean to become spiritually involved in today's secular world, both from an individual and a social perspective? These questions are central to my study, which aims to give a voice to participants and to analyze their approaches to their practices and spirituality in general.

The proposed location of my research – Estonia – can be seen as an excellent example of a historically secular country: the position of traditional religious disciplines is marginal, religious institutions do not have a role in the decision-making and even the voice of the church(es) is weak. With only 5% of people attending church or similar religious institutions at least once a month (Altnurme 2011) it is not surprising that several comparative questionnaires about the importance of religion show Estonian results to be the lowest in Europe or even in the world.³ In spite of this marginal position (or maybe because of it), Estonians score the highest in Europe when it comes to spirituality: 54% of people report beliefs in some sort of spirit or life force (Eurostat 2005); around 75% of Estonians acknowledge special powers that some people use for healing and divination; and as much as 88% believe that all good and bad deeds that a person does come back during his/her lifetime (Altnurme 2011). These spiritual tendencies are becoming increasingly visible in the media and most clearly in relation to the recent emergence of different 'spiritual' practices: even without official statistics about this unregulated field, there were at least 524 healers, teachers, instructors in 2009 (Altnurme 2011) which is a large number for a very small country of 1.3 million inhabitants altogether. Therefore, Estonia is an excellent model for analyzing the

³ Some examples: according to a world-wide Gallup poll (2007–2008) 86% of Estonians reported insignificance of religion in their daily lives (Crabtree and Pelham 2009) and an Eurobarometer survey showed that only 16% of Estonians express the belief that a god is still there (Eurostat 2005).

transformation of religious or spiritual patterns in a relatively secular environment without the strong impact of traditional religions – a potential that has remained largely unused as research on this topic has been scarce in Estonia (Altnurme 2005).

My contribution to filling this gap was to explore participation in the Estonian ‘spiritual marketplace’ which is a “nebulous social phenomenon” combining spiritual training centers, courses, books, teachers and healers all representing “alternative meaning systems” (Van Hove 1999:161). For skeptics – the defenders of the prevalent scientific-materialistic worldview – all these elements of the spiritual marketplace are grouped under the category of popular superstition or ‘pseudo-science’ (Hess 1993). My study focuses on people whose regular spiritual practices are, according to the skeptical position, ‘bizarre’ or ‘pure nonsense’. These practices include the exploration of cosmic energies, channeling the answers from the Universe through divining rod(s), transformation of auras to fit better into our present ‘new age’ or most commonly some combination of these practices. The presence and increasing popularity of these ‘bizarre’ ideas in Estonia lead to passionate reactions in public discourse by skeptics who aim to debunk these principles in their endeavor to support the authority of academic disciplines of physics and other natural sciences. The present study has an important mission to bring a different voice into this polarized debate by focusing on the participant level and studying their social practices. Without aiming to debunk spiritual ideas, I ask the question: Why do people believe so willingly something that conflicts with basic knowledge taught in schools, knowledge which should be deeply rooted in the prevalent (in Estonian context, atheistic) understanding of the working principles of the world? I will look at how these ‘irrational’ individual practices are related to the wider social-cultural context, focusing especially on the relation with the prevalent skeptical position in Estonia. To this purpose, I conducted 12 semi-structured interviews, mostly with people whom I met at spiritual events in Estonia.

In the first chapter of the thesis I will examine the problem of defining the field of study and give some examples of mechanisms that operate to group these syncretic teachings and practices together. I will also analyze and illustrate the social position of the field with examples from skeptical discourse, Estonian mainstream journalism as well as with the participants' reflections on the risk of social misunderstanding or even stigmatization. The second chapter moves closer to the participants' level, analyzing motivations for participating with an aim to understand why spiritual practices are still so popular despite common hostility against spirituality. I will describe the role and the importance of spiritual teachings and 'alternative' knowledge construction for participants and ask the question: What does it mean to be a 'seeker', is it an expression of individual freedom or just another manifestation of consumer-capitalist values taking over people's private belief-systems as suggested by some authors? The last chapter explores how these practices are adopted and what are both the social and personal consequences of being spiritually involved. I argue that the strongest confirmation of these practices and beliefs comes from very personal experiences and subjective feeling rather than authority from outside such as arguments based on scientific explanations to support the beliefs. However, the path to personal recognition is guided and supported by different types of evidence like books, seminars or inner-textual authoritative arguments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Difficulties in defining the field of study

Many contemporary studies prefer the term ‘spirituality’ over ‘religion’ and understand it as a loose frame “in which individuals ‘pick and mix’ their religious beliefs and practices in a manner that is perfectly consistent with the fluid subjectivities of modern society” (Turner 2010:11). Spirituality has been described as an ‘invisible religion’ (Luckmann 1970) or ‘implicit religion’ (Bailey 2009) and consists in an extremely wide variety of different teachings and practices, which complicates attempts to name the phenomenon even further (see Van Hove 1999).

One of the most visible public discourse definitions that groups these teachings and practices together comes from holders of a scientific-materialistic view and an atheistic skeptical position (see Hess 1993). Skeptics see themselves as ‘anti-anti-scientists’ who bring together a wide variety of teachings like modern mysticism, New Age spirituality and parapsychology under the “category of popular superstition, occultism and ‘pseudo-science’ for which their social mission is one of debunking and demystification” (Hess 1993:11). For skeptical movements that involve influential public speakers like scientists, journalists or (surprisingly often) magicians, the goal is to “promote science and critical thinking”⁴, which echoes an aim to maintain (or establish) the public sphere in the Habermasian sense. Skeptics tend to amplify this threat pointed out by Habermas (2011) that ‘religious commitments’ and special language can be difficult to translate into the rational-critical argumentation in the context of the public sphere. Skeptics perceive themselves as guardians of ‘rationality’ and therefore claim the expertise to “occupy the cultural space of a scientific position on paranormal beliefs and popular superstition” (Hess 1993:12).

⁴ The slogan formulated by the popular web-portal Skeptic.org.

The conflict is inherent and inevitable: skeptical discourse is developed to debunk ‘irrational’ concepts and to extirpate the ensuing practices. The principle that skeptics follow can be found in Gieryn’s approach (1983) to boundaries and boundary-work that explains how the scientific field holds control over authority emphasizing the importance of the ‘other’ in distinguishing ‘science’ from ‘non-science’.

Apart from the skeptics who tie together a wide range of spiritual practices into the category of superstitious and pseudo-scientific ideas and practices, there are few theoretical suggestions on how to group and define the field of ‘spirituality’. Illustrative of the multitude of spiritual traditions and teachings that are all simultaneously available to pick and use for people is the ‘spiritual marketplace’ metaphor. Van Hove (1999:161), for example, suggests this term instead of ‘New Age movement’ to describe a ‘nebulous social phenomenon’ that combines spiritual training centers, courses, books, teachers and healers, all representing “alternative meaning systems”. Situated on the fringe of religion, it lacks an organization principle characteristic to traditional religions or sects/cults. The concept of ‘marketplace of spiritualities’ reflects broader cultural processes: the generalization of the market economy which has resulted in a formal pluralism and the primacy of individual preferences. Bowman (1999:188) proposes the term ‘spiritual service industry’ where “consumer choice has progressed from the ‘corner shop’ of resources previously available to the healing ‘hypermarket’ which is now such an important part of the spiritual marketplace”.

Pelkmans (2006) points out different meanings of the concept ‘religious marketplace’ in post-socialist contexts: the term can be used to refer to the newly gained religious freedom and the plurality of ‘new’ religions; ‘market’ can be also taken as an emphasis on a freedom to choose different religions; or simply indicates the resemblance to a market with ‘customers’ and ‘suppliers’. As Pelkmans (2006) shows, all these views are rather simplistic;

however, the metaphor is useful as a grouping principle not as a model that describes accurately the functioning of the spiritual field.

Another useful metaphor for describing the erratic type of participation in a 'spiritual marketplace' is the 'seeker', which has been proved relevant also in Estonian context (Altnurme 2005; 2011). Spiritual 'seekers' are very different: several studies about the socio-economic background, class or demographic features have never managed to give a credible profile of a typical participant; it is not a certain group or class of people that hold a spiritual worldview. For example, it has been assumed that poor and less educated people tend to believe more in the paranormal and the spiritual (Stark and Bainbridge 1980). However, recent surveys do not support this claim (Rice 2003). Furthermore, there are the portrayals of participants in Luhrmann's study (1989) about practitioners of witchcraft who are well-educated and have good jobs. There is however one quite clear tendency: women are much more involved in spiritual and religious quests (Altnurme and Lyra 2001). There are also different levels of involvement. According to Heelas (1996), participants can be 'fully engaged', 'serious part-timers' or 'casual part-timers'. So, the degree of participation may range from random contact to lifetime commitment. In addition, individuals often do not identify themselves as New Agers or spiritual people (Van Hove 1999), as suggested by Estonian studies as well (Altnurme 2005).

Given that it is rather impossible to define more clearly the field or portray the participants, and the concept of marketplace refers only to the place where different ideas and practices meet, many authors aim to grasp the essence or main working principles of modern spirituality itself (see Hanegraaff 1999; 2006). As a general idea these teachings rely on a self-centered worldview, among others the loosely connected family called 'The New Age', a name that is nowadays considered to be associated to rather consumerist and simplistic 'Hollywood spirituality' and, therefore, replaced by 'spirituality' or other similar terms

(Woodhead and Heelas 2000). If already New Age can be seen as ‘a label’ that is used freely and ‘indiscriminately’ by a wide range of movements (Hanegraaff 2006:1), then spirituality is obviously an even more vague category. Spiritual discourse is described by Lee (2007) as hybrid, combining Eastern and Western spirituality with self-help and popular psychology. Extremely high syncretism is very common: Hammer (2004) demonstrates how esoteric religious *bricolage* aims to incorporate different traditions to a grand meta-narrative using, for example, cultural heritage of India or legends of Atlantis. As a common characteristic to New Age or spiritual teachings, the institutional or the group level is usually rather weak or totally missing, which leads to religious ‘nomadism’ (Hervieu-Leger 2001), and individualistic spiritual journeys involving countless of spiritual ideas centers, books, courses and workshops which focus on the quality of life (Van Hove 1999). These tendencies demonstrate that the transcendent, spiritual, supernatural occupies an ambivalent position in the modern world, infusing the private and the public, the political and the economic, and thus complicating attempts to define the field in academic studies.

Participant level: functions, adoption and the sources of validation

Because of this individualistic participation, the ‘burden of proof’ is left mostly to the participants who pick themselves the practices that they decide to follow. The support by institution or the group is usually very weak so the individual has to overcome doubts him/herself, a process that Hervieu-Leger (2001:169) calls the “self-validation of spiritual beliefs” and which provides the believer with the necessary “subjective certainty”. Luhrmann (2007) concludes in her study about a ‘new paradigm’ Christian community in the US that believing is not automatic and requires constant reinforcement and support. This guidance and support is often given by certain practices or material evidence. Religion is never based only on purely transcendent ideas; there is always the material dimension of religion, e.g. some

institutions, books, tools that mediate the plane of ideas by different semiotic forms which are controlled by (religious) authorities (Keane 2008). In spiritual practices lacking organizational control the questions of authority and sources of evidence remain still very relevant.

In order to be accepted as meaningful and trustworthy, spiritual texts and teachings themselves contain elements that readers should take as evidence for validation: pointed out by Hammer (2004) as the appeal to tradition, personal experience and scientism. In Estonian spiritual teachings, the reliance on scientific language and concepts seems to be important as “the aura of what science represents” gives evidence for believers, it is re-enchanting the dehumanized secular reasoning and technological advancements with religious beliefs and practices (Murguia 2003:250). Legitimacy is sought for in the scientific language as well as other ‘paratextual markers’ such as academic titles or organizational structures and it is noticeable that the structures and styles of spiritual texts often resemble scientific treatises (Hammer 2004:502). Besides supporting the statements of New Age teachings, the rationalistic vocabulary of the scientific style widens the target group and makes it more acceptable to a secularized audience (p. 503).

Considering the emphasis on the self in spiritual teachings, the personal experience is logically the most authoritative out of the various validation mechanisms. This is illustrated, for example, by the ultimate ‘self-reliance’ in Douglas E. Harding’s teachings: “the only true, utterly reliable, source of authority becomes one’s own spirituality-inspired experience” (Woodhead and Heelas 2000:123). However, the process leading to this experience is often guided. Luhrmann (2007) observes the case of learning to ‘feel’ the presence of god in the Christian Vineyard Church – this complicated process is institutionally supported by guidebooks, group meetings/ praying together and different techniques like writing a diary. The successful members of this church start to hear the voice of God and to see his signs as a result of this active learning process which for outsiders seems to lead to “sensory deception”

and wrong perception of the world (Luhmann 2007). Beliefs and behaviors like these are outside of concrete religious discipline, they are considered to be ‘strange’ and ‘deviant’ demonstrating the porous borders between believer and psychotic.

Possible functions and roles.

There are several studies that offer some explanations of mechanisms that motivate people to participate in spirituality. Sawicki (1994) argues that spiritual practices of “self-care” have become deeply rooted in the Western social psyche. Spirituality as negotiation of self-identity can be seen as a project, the endeavor to ‘become someone else’; according to Foucault these are ‘technologies of the self’ functioning as a method that humans employ to understand themselves (Sawicki 1994). With the tendency of religion to be ‘this-worldly’ (Luckmann 1990), spiritual practices like New Age can be seen as an excellent example of one form of self-development: an individualistic quest for “perfection of the self” (Hervieu-Leger 2001:164) quite similar to body-building or other individualistic self-directed activities. In spite of its postmodern nature, the role of New Age can be paradoxically seen as a modernistic teleological endeavor for individual enchantment and salvation in this world.

From a more functionalistic viewpoint, it has been shown that spiritual teachings give philosophical support and use well-working therapies, which tend to increase happiness (Berg 2008), and attracts people because of its practical benefits. One of the few Estonian studies, by Teichmann, Murdvee, and Saks (2006), shows that spirituality is strongly related to the person's psychological well-being, particularly to positive feelings. Another research demonstrates that Estonians search mostly for concrete help and often find it because spiritual teachings offer different framing and rephrasing of their problems. Spirituality also helps to add meaningfulness to people’s life-experiences as it seems to be very difficult to bear unexplained sources of distress and suffering (Altnurme and Lyra 2001).

Empowering or manipulating; resistance or subjection?

Historically, spiritual teachings have carried forth ‘alternative’ ideas; New Age spirituality, for example, has been described as an opposition to a dominant discourse (Hess 1993, Hanegraaff 2000, Höllinger 2004). Hanegraaff (2000) argues that people attracted by New Age thinking are generally dissatisfied with Western ideas or way of living; they believe that the society could and should be different. Although New Age cannot even be counted as ideologically ‘alternative’ anymore, Höllinger (2004), for example, demonstrates that participants in New Age movements are more concerned with political issues in the US; they tend to take part in protests or solidarity activities more.

Several authors point out that the empowering of the self means that this ‘psychological freedom’ constructs actually a consumer who has the whole responsibility for his/her own life situations (Lee 2007). It is legitimizing the capitalist order and invading even people’s intimate spheres like religious beliefs and thinking: “...neoliberal ideology seeps into the very fabric of how we think, indeed into the very possibilities of our thinking to such an extent that people now live as if the corporate capitalist structures of our world are the truth of our existence” which means a “silent takeover of all aspects of life by the corporate world and the interests of capital” (Carrette and King 2005:170). Aldred (2002:72) argues that “New Age of enlightenment” is just another consumer capitalist manifestation, “business as usual”. This critique, however, is put forward mostly by scholars who have not delved into the participant level, studied the adoption processes or analyzed why people turn to alternative practices and what do they find there. This approach is over-simplifying the processes of participation and ignoring the surprisingly rich patterns that people actually use within the teachings – spirituality does not have to be taken as manipulation but as another way for people to improve their lives.

METHODS AND DATA

My interest is focused on participants and their approaches. Despite the rich theoretical literature about the role or the transformations of modern religion, there are surprisingly few empirical studies that give a voice to participants in spiritual movements. Comparing studies of New Age spiritual texts with approaches of New Age adherents, Hanegraaff (1996) concludes that participant concepts are vaguer, there are rarely found systematical theories with nuances. However, these interpretations and ‘translations’ offer an opportunity to study not only the teachings as texts but their social placement and adoption. Therefore, the empirical part of my thesis is mostly based on in-depth interviews with participants whom I established contact with at the events I was myself part of. In the process of my fieldwork, mainstream media emerged as a promising illustration of the social position of spirituality, so I decided to include three additional interviews with journalists who are themselves spiritual but work in mainstream newspapers/radio-channel. To analyze wider social positions and meanings, the interview that I conducted with the spokesperson of skeptics provided relevant and illustrative information.

My method of choice – semi-structured qualitative in-depth interviews – has been previously used to study similar phenomena: Hodder (2009), for example, looked at participants’ beliefs and well-being while Possamai (2000) studied their backgrounds and the process of ‘becoming to believe’. My study, despite its very short duration, follows to some extent Luhrmann’s research projects about modern witchcraft (1989) or Evangelical churches in the US (2007). I explore the participant level and give the participants a voice to provide a better understanding of Estonian spirituality as social phenomenon. In the research process I followed the methodological instructions given by Miles and Huberman (1992) for conducting in-depth interviews, coding and analysis.

Researchers drafting quantitative questionnaires to map religious belonging have acknowledged difficulties because of a lack of clearly formulated identity and sense of belonging in the case of 'spiritual' people (see Van Hove 1999; in Estonian context Altnurme 2011). This problem raises the necessity for more flexible and qualitative approaches, therefore, to explore the patterns that participants themselves perceive, this is the role that present study aims to fulfill.

My first contact with Estonian spirituality happened already 3 years ago when I participated rather accidentally in one spiritual training seminar. Since then I have been a subscriber to the thematic mailing-list of the spiritual web-portal *Vikerkaaresild.ee* and followed constantly both spiritual and skeptical (*Skeptik.ee*) web-pages. To compensate for the relatively short period of physical fieldwork, I started with an active research process in October 2010 when I collected and systematized background information: I read web-pages and descriptions of the spiritual events to map the field, listened to weekly radio-interviews with spiritual teachers and followed the skeptics' web-forums. Before the actual field-work, I conducted one test-interview with a person interested in spirituality.

In April 2011 I started to collect material on the field in Estonia. I observed altogether four different events, conducted 12 longer semi-structured interviews plus many brief discussions during the events. Out of my main informants 8 were participants in spiritual events, 3 were mainstream media journalists interested in spiritual practices and 1 the spokesperson of skeptics in Estonia. I interviewed 10 women and 2 men. These figures are rather illustrative of the gender ratio at the spiritual events I participated in and reflects the tendency that women are more involved in spirituality (Altnurme and Lyra 2001). It is important to point out that all of my interviewees are taking an active position: they are participating, searching and reading. Therefore, my study does not include the whole range of

different people who are just interested in spirituality or embrace some spiritual ideas – my interviewees have all taken the next and active step in their spiritual seeking.

Entering the field was easy because these seminars are open to everybody and spiritual groups do not constitute a closed community. For example, I was welcomed at a birthday party where I did not have any contacts before. For conducting interviews and observing spiritual events I had to consider my own position: how do I relate to spiritual teachings? Usually my interviewees did not ask it explicitly, they assumed that I shared to some extent their spiritual world-view, especially when we had participated in the same event before and I had shown clearly my interest in their stories. Considering the strong polarization between spirituality and skepticism, the fact that I was not skeptical classified me automatically as spiritual although I presented the aim and the nature of my study at the beginning of the interviews.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

CHAPTER 1. THE AMBIVALENCE OF ESTONIAN ‘SPIRITUALITY’: THE REASONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The extremely wide variety of practices under the vague and overlapping categories of ‘alternative’, ‘spiritual’, or ‘esoteric’ make it almost impossible to set borders and even find a good term to name the field of the present study. In this chapter I will examine Estonian spirituality from the perspective of social meanings and positions: How is this field named by people involved spiritually and their opponents – the skeptics’ critical voice and what are the tactics behind the giving of different definitions? I will discuss what consequences the spiritual position has for participants and how they cope with these social meanings. To answer these questions I will analyze the participants’ experiences and reflections, examples from Estonian mainstream journalists and, finally, the position with a critical voice – the skeptics.

Spirituality as a ‘nebulous social phenomenon’

The Estonian example supports the idea of ‘free-floating’ spiritual believers (see Hervieu-Leger 2001): Estonians interested in spirituality are usually not connected to certain groups or institutions but rather readers of thematic journals (e.g. *Tervendaja*), visitors of esoteric shops that also function as thematic billboards, or users of popular web-portals such as *Vikerkaaresild* (“The Rainbow Bridge”) – an important gateway to the world of spiritual events. These channels, however, are made up of very different practices starting from bread-baking courses to neo-pagan ritual events (it can be also the effect of the small size of Estonia where more segmented media would not have a large enough audience). All these channels

have their niches and a specific target group. However, there are spiritual topics that reach mainstream media, more regularly (starting in June 2010) in a weekly radio-show on a Public Broadcasting channel where spiritual teachers and spokespersons are interviewed. The show, called *Hallo Kosmos* is a good illustration of this mixed field. It covers travels “both in inner and outer space” and offers interviews with a very wide variety of people from witches to scientists, from UFOlogists to parapsychologists. Media, especially the possibilities of new media create opportunities for people interested in spirituality to find information and even more importantly, interact with each other. For example, *Hallo Kosmos* has a web-page providing access to all interviews and offering also an opportunity for interactive discussions in a web-forum, which is not, however, widely used by spiritual people. This supports the impression that there is an overall tendency for new media to take over mostly only the function of information channel in Estonia; the lack of active virtual communities indicates probably the tendency for individualistic participation.

The vagueness of this ‘nebulous social phenomenon’ (Van Hove 1999) is visible in the approaches of the interviewees: people see the field very differently, using terms like ‘alternative’, ‘spiritual’ or ‘esoteric’ as synonyms and sometimes reflect on the difficulties to define the borders: should yoga, for example, be taken as a spiritual practice? In the absence of clear borders, there are many practices in the so called ‘gray zones’ of spirituality – yoga or some forms of meditation cannot be taken as ‘esoteric’ or deviant nowadays. Van Hove (1999) argues, based on the similar example of yoga, that in the context of overall pluralism, only anti-pluralism can be considered deviant. This is exactly the position of my interviewees who are more actively involved in spirituality: we should be open to different views and practices without discriminating or labeling anything as ‘deviant’. This is probably emphasized so willingly because pluralism and the freedom of choice are perceived as important values in the Estonian context. The metaphor ‘spiritual marketplace’ refers also to

the freedom of choice in the ‘market’ situation which has a strong ideological dimension – especially in post-socialist countries, including Estonia (Pelkmans 2006).

Participants tend to give very wide definitions playing with this ‘pluralism’ and seeking spirituality everywhere. For example, both Marin and Kristel, educated and socially successful women, who have themselves organized spiritual events, say that for them walking in nature or watching water flow are meditative and spiritual practices. Spirituality in this sense remains all-encompassing and vague, labeling is not perceived as important for them. However, labeling is important when defining spirituality versus ‘mainstream’/‘official’; in the competition inside the spiritual marketplace, there are surely tactics to distinguish and promote different teachings. The construction of authority in relation to other players on the spiritual marketplace is very interesting but not analyzed in the present paper. However, even when participants admitted that some lecturers were disappointing for them, they still emphasized that these teachings are probably good for somebody else, so the value of pluralism seems to be high.

Social meanings and oppositions

To analyze the social position of spirituality in the Estonian context, it is necessary to consider the opposition with the prevalent scientific-materialistic ideology, which was historically popular even before the official cultivation and strengthening of the belief in scientific progress during the Soviet period (Altnurme 2005). The trust in science seems to have persisted: for example, Estonia has the highest number of believers in the ability of science to improve life in Europe (Eurostat 2005). Combined with the hostility towards religion, it is not surprising that spirituality is occupying a rather marginal position in the public discourse. Spiritual teachings are usually called in Estonian ‘alternative’ – a term that presupposes the existence of ‘mainstream’ that can be either the scientific-materialistic worldview, official medicine or ‘commonsensical’ understanding of natural sciences; as a

consequence, under the ‘alternative’ label are crowded together all the teachings and practices that conflict with mainstream scientific-materialistic understandings. The active group of skeptics are working to debunk irrationality claims that the ‘alternative’ field undermines the authority of science and rational worldview and at the same time trying to group those ideas under one category.

Compared to spiritual people who tend to see spirituality everywhere, skeptics perceive labels and boundaries as crucially necessary. It can be seen already in their language, where skeptics name the alternative-esoteric field *uhhuutajad* (to-who! – the owl’s phonation) or *umbluu* (which refers to nonsense). These expressions have a double-function – both naming and depreciating. Martin, the spokesperson of Estonian skeptics, compares the ‘spirituality’ with ‘real’, high and desirable forms of culture and knowledge.

New Age is like kitsch compared to real art; it is like comfort literature compared to real, artistic one; like a cheap ersatz next to the real sparkles of true intelligence; it is like a diluted wish-wash compared to rich and filling food...

But it is interesting then why people still prefer so often this wish-wash, it is often so.../

It does not have this sophisticated nuances of taste, it is like a hamburger. It relieves hunger, you have the feeling of a full stomach then. It has not a strong character. For example, dark chocolate, already, is something that not everybody wants. Or olives. Not everybody likes olives but only some say - yeah.

Surprisingly similar is Marin's discourse, the spiritual person, talking about skeptics. The construction of the Other follows the same pattern:

All kind of 40-year-old bus-drivers, who, I don’t know, hate all spiritual [in Estonian, *vaimne* – the term that refers both to spiritual and intellectual] and are eating hamburgers every day and, and are sick constantly and, what they think of foreigners, or homosexuals, religious believers etc. /---/ I myself do not have any anger-energy against them.

Both interviewees see a hierarchy: there are groups who do not care about ‘real’ values (either ‘complicated intellectuality’ or ‘healthy spiritual life-style’) and are using a the hamburger – the epitome of capitalist (cheap) consumption – as a symbol for this easier but ‘lower’ option. Another example of the same symbol that both interviewees use is the attitude towards

homosexuals: in the last quotation, Marin brings it in to demonstrate the narrow-mindedness and intolerance of these ‘skeptical bus drivers’. Martin, the skeptic, points out the potential for manipulation of the simple-minded and irrational crowd.

Yes, it is scary that there can be other irrational beliefs, another populist manipulation and more serious consequences probably if people are so willing to take this, then what else... It’s like fighting for family rights by being against homosexuals, which is a very direct threat to our civil society. At one point, there is another topic that polarizes people. Then, then, so, the society might become really messed up.

This opinion by Martin refers to the idea that irrationality in spirituality is threatening the basic functions of democracy: with people having such irrational beliefs and fallacious understandings of cause-effect logic, for example, the Habermasian rational public sphere can never be established. This position is common for skeptics: they perceive themselves as the defenders of democracy, their mission is to guard the borders, name the things with their proper names (see also Hess 1993).

Fights on the borderlands

Because of the strong position of the skeptical scientific-materialistic worldview in Estonia (especially in the official discourse), spirituality is seen as the ‘alternative’ and not part of the ‘mainstream’. A good example here is the main national newspaper where stories on spiritual topics are not usually published; and if they are, then they are labeled as ‘entertainment’ on the last pages. A popular radio-show *Hallo Kosmos* is broadcast at noon on Sunday to “disturb less people” as the host of the show explains.

Kristel, an experienced journalist who is deeply interested in spiritual practices, describes some tactics to bring ‘those’, more spiritual topics in a ‘quality’ newspaper which otherwise “takes a supercilious attitude towards the spiritual”. For example, Kristel has presented spirituality as ‘ancient wisdom’ “because nobody would say about the Dalai-Lama that he is a trickster”. She sees an especially good opportunity with those specialists who have

unquestionable authority and who can therefore legitimize spiritual practices that they are also practicing.

I've been especially interested in these people who have studied medicine and then have discovered something else like Chinese medicine. Undoubtedly they are experts, professionals in this field, but /---/ this choice still makes them *surra-murra* figures (laughing). You have to know then how to present them as authoritative, to emphasize that he has graduated from Medical School, that he is not really a crazy person (laughing).

There is clearly a perceived distinction between official medicine and *surra-murra* which is marginal and where people can be easily labeled 'crazy'. Those people are bridging the 'mainstream' and the 'alternative' by using their mainstream expertise and authority to enhance the position of the alternative. Martin, the skeptic, uses exactly the same example with a very different interpretation and meaning.

One such highly deplorable thing, I think, is when there is a real doctor who has studied in the university and like when his duties as a doctor are over at 6 pm, he puts on a different type of uniform and becomes a witch-doctor, promoting whatever, pH diet or other pseudo-things. It is extremely dangerous, a doctor is speaking... And if he wants to publish something then everybody looks: ok, he is a doctor, in the register etc., this must be competent guidance. But, actually, it isn't.

This quote demonstrates the idea of very clear borders: if a doctor steps over the border to the 'alternative' side then he loses instantly his competence and should lose also his/her authority. This case seemed to be rather important for both interviewees as they pointed it out at the beginning of our interview without my leading question. The quote by Martin illustrates the rather fragile position the skeptics are occupying – their boundary making is the way to maintain the belief in one coherent system (e.g. biomedical or scientific). Therefore, as an interesting tendency, 'boundary work' (see Gieryn 1983) is perceived as crucial for skeptics whereas spiritual people prefer to see these fields as intertwined to avoid rigid categorization and marginalization. As Ingrid demonstrates in her radio show, to be interested in spirituality means to be open to very different ideas in the world; she also has some scientists coming in

to talk about space research or artificial intelligence so this show does not belong only to the clearly bordered niche of ‘nonsense’ – or *umbluu* as Estonian skeptics name it. The field that is for skeptics very absolute (bizarre practices, crazy people) meets with a cardinaly different approach among spiritual people for whom ‘everything is interesting’, ‘spirituality is over encompassing’.

A thin line between ‘spiritual’ and ‘crazy’

As Luhrmann (1989) shows, people who practice magic are at one point inevitably confronted with some skeptical ideas. In the Estonian context, the potential threat of becoming marked as a lunatic is widely perceived. For example, Ingrid, the host of *Hallo Kosmos*, describes how the decision to broadcast this radio-show has affected her reputation among several people.

I know many people who think that it’s horrible that this show is broadcast. Even disdain! I guess that according to several people my reputation has dropped severely [*minu aktsiad on tõsiselt langenud*],/---/ there is this very negative feedback yes, inside Public Broadcasting as well.

Also, participants in spiritual events perceive the social meanings and are fully aware that involvement in esoteric practices can be labeled as ‘weird’ or even ‘crazy’. Sirle describes that every time she participates in these seminars, she is “kind of scared and actually looking around that maybe there are only crazy people around me.” The social dimension is important for her: when she sees that all (or almost all) of them are normal people then she gets her confirmation that this is normal event.

Another similar example comes from a socially very respected and successful lady who has now started to be interested in spiritual practices. Again, she clearly acknowledges perceived attitudes of her family but is willing to take the risk.

I know exactly what they think – that ‘old lady’ is getting crazy (laughing). When I walked around here last weekend with the special divining rods and tried to find energetically good and bad spots, they [the son and his wife] were all laughing. But really, I definitely felt something... how these rods are moving, there must be something!

Almost all my interviewees emphasized the distinction between ‘interested’ people and skeptical ones and acted accordingly. As a common strategy, they decided not to talk to those people who presumably cannot appreciate their practices. The most drastic example here comes from Marin who quit her very successful career and well-paid job in an international company to become a spiritual trainer. This decision has radically complicated her relationship with her father.

For him, yes, I should work again in the ministry of finance because then people said that I was so important. For him, the others' opinion is crucial and money as well, of course. Let's say, at the moment we do not have any contact, or yes, I will say ‘hello’ when I see him but really, last time he gave me such a long speech about how I'm retarded /---/ This is the problem with his intellectual capacity but he has gone so far and become so cruel that I just have to keep some distance.

From this conflict, she finds also positive aspects saying that all this critique directs her to analyze her choices and be more reflexive. If Marin's spiritual turn had serious results and she has basically lost her relationship with her father, then for Viivi it has been rather a benevolent agreement with her otherwise skeptical husband who does not share those ideas fully but accepts her interest.

My husband told me always that this was nonsense and pointless talk but now, when I had this health-problem this fall and he saw how I actually used mostly my mental power to get better, then now, yes, he has said that now, yes, I believe too. So yes, this stubborn man, who had this attitude that he would never believe in those things has now completely changed, although only following my steps, taking rather the role of listener but he is no longer ironic or critical. But yes, many things are funny for him, he is chuckling quietly, for example, now with these divining rods. Asking what the hell are you talking to these (laughing).

Crucial here is the legitimation by Viivi's personal experience: her husband accepted that these practices can be good for her. Luhmann (1989) points out similarly that the magical people in her study tend to justify their practices by indirect reference to the value and advantages of believing rather than aiming to defend magical ideas themselves. With spiritual practices it is probably even stronger because of overall self-centered validation mechanisms

(see the analysis in chapter 3): if it is the very personal understanding, rather than cognition, that these practices really work on, it is even untranslatable to the language of outward reasoning.

Another tactical move for participants is to assert that the spiritual self-development belongs to a very personal sphere: “it is only my business, I’m not talking to other people about these things”. This tendency supports spirituality as a hidden practice, as being ‘secret’ is the historical characteristic of Esotericism (Hammer 2004). Kristel, for example, knows that many people from the elite do not declare their involvement and interests publicly, mostly because of the fear to be stigmatized.

Popularity of these ‘hidden’ practices

Despite the public criticism and the overall marginality of the field, spiritual teachings and events are surprisingly popular in Estonia (Altnurme 2011). My very personal impression during my field-work supports this idea – when I mentioned my research project in random casual conversations, it instantly triggered many reactions; it was like a magic word: people often opened and confessed that they/their family-members/friends have participated.

There are several signs that indicate the popularity of spirituality in Estonia: for example, the impressively rich variety of best-selling spiritual self-help books. Also, all three journalists I interviewed in my study said that all their articles on spiritual topics got disproportionally more feedback. The newspaper journalist Kristel recollects that there were “so many reactions and it was probably so fascinating for readers that I had an impression later that I haven’t written anything else during my career”. She constantly got letters and calls, even much later when she had already left this newspaper. Ingrid, the host of *Hallo Kosmos* explains that the show was originally planned temporarily for the summertime but the surprisingly high number of listeners changed the plans and the show continued. In a very

short period it became one of the most popular shows on the radio-station despite its non-primetime broadcasting. She also points out how different people are interested in the show.

What really surprised me was how different types of people gave me feedback. It can be a senior who is saying how great it is; it can be yuppie-businessman who says: “Wow, I listened to it, it’s so cool!”. The friend of my friend who is in his early twenties – this type of a club-monkey [*klubiahv*] told me that he is listening and working currently with his higher self and this show has been a great help. The reactions from people whom you would never expect to have any contact with spirituality.

The tendency to stay hidden is most probably a consequence of prevalent meanings and the social position of spirituality. If we take the data from the survey where answers were not labeled as ‘alternative’ or ‘spiritual’ the results are surprising: for example, around 75% of Estonians acknowledge special powers that some people use for healing and divination (Altnurme 2011), which demonstrates ‘superstition’ as a very wide-spread phenomenon. There is a discrepancy between traditionally high reliance on the scientific-materialistic position and rationality as an important value in Estonian personhood (see Maimik 2011), and actual popularity of spiritual ideas – the ‘hidden’ interest.

Several spiritual people and the skeptic I interviewed agreed at least on one thing – the popularity of these practices (in their subjective view) has recently increased which may also indicate the higher visibility or logically, the combination of both. One spiritual teacher expressed the hope for a change in the position of spirituality: “If the majority of people become somehow involved then nobody can call it ‘alternative’ anymore.” This ‘mainstreaming’ process would threaten the prevalence of the scientific-materialistic worldview in Estonia and probably intensify the symbolic fight with skeptics. It raises also the question: Why do people decide to seek something from the alternative? This is discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2: 'SEEKERS' ON A RELIGIOUS MARKETPLACE

Participants in spirituality can be described as 'seekers' (Roof 1999). This type of 'seeking' is reported as a surprisingly widespread phenomenon in Estonia which indicates the need for spiritual practices (see Altnurme 2005; 2011), especially considering the risk of being labeled 'weird' or 'crazy'. In this chapter I will explore some motivations that lie behind the concept of 'seeking'. I will give an overview of the reasons why people go to spiritual events/teachings and some functions that they see there. The term 'seeker' indicates the freedom that seekers must have. However, in the light of critical authors (e.g. Carrette and King 2005) I will also reflect on the scope and the nature of this freedom and observe the relations with money as the metaphoric concept of 'marketplace' refers to the spiritual person as a consumer.

The present study supports an overall tendency that diverse spiritual practices attract very different people. For example, it is impossible to profile a typical participant based on social-economical characteristics; even participants in the same event had very diverse backgrounds and life-stories. As one overall tendency, we can say that spirituality in Estonia tends to be much more popular among women (see also the study by Altnurme and Lyra 2001). Although my study does not have a quantitative dimension, the impression based on my data strongly supports this idea. Also, my interviews proved that the idea of 'seeking' is a relevant concept for describing participant attitudes⁵: even brief discussions during the events demonstrated the importance of seeking in different formulations (for example: "I have been constantly restless and looking for something" or "I have felt that something is missing"). However, the category of 'seeker' is obviously far from homogeneity. I will give an overview

⁵ However, this should be taken critically as my study focused only on active participants which is clear already from the data selection process – the decision to interview people who go to the events and trainings means that 'seeking' as an active position is probably especially common for them. For example, some of my interviewees went to the seminar to learn how to use divination rods instead of inviting an expert to help them.

based on the functions that people ‘seek’ from spiritual practices. Firstly, it can be taken just as a hobby activity; secondly, it may develop into an ‘alternative’ life-style that offers excitement; thirdly, people may look for intellectual stimulation and spiritual endeavor; and fourthly, just concrete solutions and help.

All ‘seekers’ but with different aims

Firstly, in the sense of a **hobby-activity**, spiritual practices are taken without deeper interests in a spiritual dimension. Requiring extra free time and enough money to afford it, it seems to be rather a middle-class phenomenon. Illustrative here is Triin, a young woman who is involved in spiritual practices such as *feng-shui* and energy-work among her other interests: firstcourses of photography, then gardening and garden design, now *feng shui* and work with energies. “I don’t know, I just like this active life,” she explains. In this sense, spiritual practices compete on a marketplace of hobby activities or self-development. The private school where Triin studies *feng shui* offers, for example, also courses of Chinese and floristics. Triin’s practices can be explained as an attempt for the ‘perfection of the self’ (Hervieu-Leger 2001) be it body-building, Chinese language lessons or *feng shui* seminars. In terms of involvement, participants with this motivation are rather ‘casual part-timers’ (Heelas 1996), who often do not even acknowledge the spiritual dimension of their activity (pointed out also by Van Hove 1999).

The strength of this connection, however, can be transient and develop, for instance, into deeper intellectual interest as seen in Triin’s case. She has started to think more about the spirituality and to read thematic books after her *feng shui* classes. This example reveals a pattern of how practices that are on the border of spirituality (like yoga) may function as gateways: they do not require necessarily deeper involvement themselves but tend to create

and cultivate further interests (Marin's adoption process follows a similar pattern and is described in the next chapter).

It is difficult to tell when a spiritual practice turns from a hobby activity into a **determinant of life-style** with deeper involvement and a social dimension. It implies changes in life-style, redefining previous values and offering alternative ways of living or eating, for instance – a phenomenon that can be described even as counter-cultural (e.g. Hanegraaff 1999).

The 'alternative' offers freedom to be more open, to try new things when your previous life becomes too stable, boring and even depressing. There are different levels of involvement, of course, and how much is the previous life-style affected. Radical stories of spiritual turn, enlightenment which changes life-style very much. However, most commonly, the change is not total, people keep the 'best' part of their previous lives like good jobs/ money and take from spirituality some values and social practices. These are rather wealthy people who search for some extra excitement to help them get over boredom and their standardized roles. During my fieldwork I witnessed this dimension among a group of successful thirty-somethings in Tallinn whose spiritual involvement seems to be mostly social. For example, they are regularly going on extremely expensive trips to Hawaii to swim with dolphins. I met them at a birthday party of one of the most well-known spiritual teachers in Estonia – Crystal Ra – a well-educated young woman who has worked with different spiritual practices like Angel therapy™ or Aura transformations™. When I arrived at the party, everybody was running around and playing with colorful balloons in her 10th floor studio-apartment at the very center of Tallinn with a magnificent (and obviously very expensive) view of the old town and the new city. Balloons and bubblers, creative games – it was not a party that you would expect from people with this social-economical background.

They had found new dimensions that gave them more freedom, and they seemed to enjoy it. This type of participation redefines the perceived borders of 'conventional' behavior which was most clearly visible in its physical dimension. At the party, people were touching each other willingly, supported also by practices like aura-massage, or falling and trusting that you will be caught by others safely. They were also playing with their creative imaginations: for example, sitting in the circle with their eyes closed around an imaginary rocky mountain from Hawaii which was given to Crystal Ra as a birthday present.

This spiritual life-style is expensive and affordable only to people who enjoy enough spare time and money to pay for trips to Hawaii, for example. However, interestingly, the values that this 'alternative' approach promotes conflict to some extent with the materialistic world-view and can be described as 'post-materialistic', paradoxically available only to those people who possess enough money. Of course, there are also many examples of very radical turns to alternative living-styles that are based on spiritual ideas. However, this paper focuses on participants who are rather 'casual part-timers' (Heelas 1996) regularly attending spiritual trainings but keeping their 'secular' lives and regular jobs etc. The social dimension, interactions with other spiritual people are not so relevant for them: in seminars people usually even do not know each-other. They do not constitute a community but participate rather because of some certain aims that they want to achieve on the spiritual marketplace.

The field of spirituality and esotericism offers almost infinite opportunities for **intellectual stimulation**. People with very different backgrounds can find the most suitable teaching out of this incredibly wide variety of different theories and approaches. On the one hand it can be a highly intellectual journey of self-finding based on the Eastern spiritual tradition and more 'intellectual' side of New Age like for one of my interviewees - grad-student Kaspar. He orders books in English to dig deeper and has built a worldview that in

many aspects conflicts with the dominant Western paradigm starting from the questions of energy and matter to the social values and the meaning of life. On the other hand, there are seminars of mysticism inspired by science-fiction or fantasy books, exploring paranormal reality, telling striking stories about UFOs and extremely smart people who apparently do not have a brain. These topics, for example, were covered among others in one event I participated myself in: an overview of the recent studies from the ‘scientific conference’ in Moscow (as the lecturer – an elegantly-dressed gentleman who calls himself ‘Energoman’ – presented it). The setting was mimicking an academic lecture in almost every aspect with certain twists, of course. Primarily the topics (passionate discussions of how exactly the brains of newborn crystal-children are becoming pyramid-shaped) but also the principles which added value to a theory: the lecturer made fun of those “boring” presentations about Jung or Blavatsky by people who were not “brave enough to think with their own heads and were using some others’ ideas instead”. This apparent resemblance to the scientific institutions and discourse works also as an important validation (Hammer 2004). As the lecturer explained, the esoteric approach is even better than science because “it takes much more time for scientists to reach to the same conclusions” and joked that we should not worry about them because “they will also find their way, finally”. This patronizing attitude turns the question of authority upside-down; if participants accept this position, they feel themselves involved in something that is really important and ahead of their time. This idea of mystics and spiritual teachers as ‘scientists of the future’ [*tulevikuteadlased*] is also used by the host of the radio show *Hallo Kosmos*.

The examples given illustrate how the lack of formal rules and official authority allows people to easily find the topic and the expertise that fit their level and the nature of their interest. As Luckmann (1970) has said, if there is no more ‘objective’ criteria for judging that something is ‘better’ then everything becomes a matter of individual preference. As seen

from the given example, these teachings are creative: similarly to Murguia (2003) who concludes in his study about one Japanese cult that participants there are ‘re-enchanting’ the world and evoking creativity. Instrumental and specialized, expert-power.

Spiritual ‘re-enchantment’ (concept derived from Weber’s approach, used for example by Hammer 2004 and Murguia 2005) helps people to overcome the problem of the too sterile world created by the ‘cold’ rational science by adding subjective and mystical meanings to different phenomena. Spirituality and especially mysticism is a space where creativity and thinking ‘outside the box’ are highly appreciated, as seen from the example of the lecturer who made fun of these ‘boring’ and ‘timid’ presenters in Moscow talking about Jung, for example. The problem of the complexity of the highly specialized modern world can explain the popularity of teachings that play on mysticism. Interestingly, Martin – the skeptic – illustrates this tension the best.

Those real intellectual accomplishments that we have in literature, art or science – those [spiritual] people just cannot aspire and reach there, their hands are too short, maybe they even cannot see what is there, it is so high and so far and elusive for them. You really have to make an effort, to study hard, you have to go to the university and study higher mathematics, for example, to understand even the simplest aspects of quantum physics. But they, they did not have enough intellect already in the secondary school to work with simplistic quadratic equations!

These inevitably ‘too short hands’ would make it impossible for most of the people to understand how the universe works and to create their own connections. In Martin’s approach, there echoes the high reliance on science and his belief in it. We should take into account the Estonian post-soviet context here, where the scientific-materialistic utopia was an official platform for all the years of the Soviet period (Jürgenstein 2010). Martin also expresses deep frustration that ‘alternative’ teachings undermine the authority of science and create their own. According to him, this expertise belongs to “their own bubble, they do not understand themselves that they actually do not understand anything, this is so inadequate!” Participants, however, do not perceive themselves occupying only the ‘bubble’. Especially those people

who are interested in mysticism, seem to be similarly interested in scientific explorations and discoveries. For example, Liina reads regularly thematic periodicals: firstly the specific journal of alternative healing but secondly the one that popularizes science. She explains that she is just fascinated by all these new discoveries and theories which for her may be similarly well from the sphere of ‘alternative’.

Paradoxically, skeptics and mystics have much in common. Seekers either in spiritual sphere or science share an endeavor towards higher intellectual aims although the teachings are, of course, different. They both acknowledge intellectual hierarchies (the superior power either by professors or ‘gurus’) and worship knowledge which is not so universal in contemporary society at all – money, for example, is seen often as a much higher value. For spiritual people and skeptics, knowledge and intellectual self-development are considered worth the investment of both time and money. Despite the conflicting teachings, the basic mechanism that triggers this pursuit is the same. Similarly, both groups search for meaningfulness that is considered very important in Western culture (see Robbins 2006).

However, spirituality is even more efficient here because scientific narratives superseding religious ones cannot answer more ontological questions (Hammer 2004): Why do things happen and what is the meaning and the true nature of being? This leaves the vacancy, empty space that people try to fill with spirituality. Hammer (2004) explains this endeavor by developing Charles Taylor’s notion of *ontic logos*: „a view of the cosmos as a meaningful order, in which a natural one-to-one correspondence exists between the actual structure of the world, the knowledge we can have of it and the moral law we are to follow“ (p. 496). Spiritual practices are also seen as ‘a direct way’ as Marin described; it is an opportunity to feel this holistic order which takes away the need to understand it intellectually, the mechanism that is pointed out in the third chapter by Sirle.

The process of how participants find the best topics for themselves is interesting. I experienced this search with one of my informants – a 66-year-old lady. After we went from a practical divination workshop to a highly theoretical theosophy lecture she confessed that theosophy was actually far too complicated for her. “I had never thought that somebody can talk so much about death, I could not understand almost anything,” she told me later, her eyes still shining with excitement. In her case, spirituality offers unending way in seeking intellectual challenge, endeavor and involvement in intellectual development.

Involvement can also be **goal-orientated** and motivated by the need to find **solutions for concrete problems**. It is a popular practice in Estonia to seek help from the ‘alternative’ sphere (see Altnurme and Lyra 2001). As a common pattern, my interviewees found spirituality after severe setbacks in their lives: for example, Sirje and Ele searched help because of illnesses, Triin and Liina because of the loss of their jobs. Getting help in these difficult situations confirmed the effectiveness of the spirituality and now they continue with these practices that are not even connected to their former problems. Triin explained that she does not actually use these opportunities but it is reassuring to know that she can get help if needed. Many of my interviewees (e.g. Sirle, Ele, Kristel) were convinced that they would be most probably dead without spiritual practices. When they entered the field, they were motivated by extreme need or despair: it was a last and desperate resort solution. Of course, this process of getting involved is often combined: interest and openness to these ideas leads to the search for concrete solutions which themselves start to work as evidence and tie people more strongly to the practices.

Although some people like Triin and Ele got help to find new jobs, the strongest motivation for turning to spiritual practices was health problems. Several interviewees argued that medicine is not able to cure people in some situations. Similarly, Altnurme and Lyra

(2001) conclude in their study that searching for the ‘alternative’ was often motivated by previous disappointing experience with official medicine. Kristel describes her impression.

With all my respect for medicine, it tends to ‘write off’ the person with a certain diagnosis. I was myself in this case, my lung X-ray was really bad and I asked what to do now. And the answer was ‘sorry, but nothing can be done’ which basically means ‘just pass away’. But I took it rather as a challenge, I worked with myself, I don’t know if it helped, of course, but I did Reiki and liberation breathing and changed my life-style and these pictures really started to improve. You never know but I believe that if you have this attitude that everything is gone, it is very difficult to get better.

Kristel points out that already etymologically ‘hospital’ in Estonian - *haigla* (‘illness’ - *haigus*, ‘ill’ - *haige*) means the place where people are ill although it should be the place where people get better. Compared to official medicine, alternative practices set the frames for problems differently which may give unexpectedly good and unintelligible results, mostly because of subjective perceptions based on the flexibility of interpretations (see the next chapter for more examples). Sometimes the effect is there even from the point of view of mainstream medicine (on the reasons of placebo-effect, healthier life-style etc). Spiritual teachings encourage people to take more active positions as seekers and fighters. As Sirle puts it: “Do you want to be a victim or a creator?” – which illustrates well the ‘empowering of self’ principle that is the core of New Age teachings (Hanegraaff 1999). It is a different framing of the same problems, a mechanism that was pointed out also in the previous study of Estonian spiritual healers (Altnurme and Lyra 2001).

The tendency to search for help from ‘alternative’ sources can be taken as a critique towards the contemporary medicine system: none of my interviewees chose ‘alternative medicine’ because of the lack of health insurance, they just felt that official medicine cannot help them, medicine had lost its authoritative power for them. It should be taken as a cautionary example of how the loss of authority can affect the efficacy of medical treatment

(see how Sirje quit medical treatment in the next chapter). In these cases people decided to look around on the ‘spiritual marketplace’ and found practices that seemed to fit them better.

‘Religious marketplace’: how much freedom?

The Estonian spiritual sphere is very similar to a ‘marketplace’ as it includes a very wide variety of teachings and practices, all listed on websites or advertisements with price-tags. Participation is the process of seeking: all my interviewees had tried several ‘products’.... It has been pointed out that this ‘psychological freedom’ in people’s choices is illusory and means rather a “silent takeover of all aspects of life by the corporate world and the interests of capital” (Carrette and King 2005:170). Commodification is indeed an interesting aspect of the ‘spiritual marketplace’ and the Estonian case demonstrates that spirituality has a rather complicated relation with money. For instance, even the word ‘money’ is often not used, replaced by euphemistic term *kiillus*, which does not have a direct equivalent in English but can be translated as ‘plentitude’ or ‘prosperity’. Often, the seminars do not sell official tickets; participants are strongly recommended to share the ‘prosperity’, minimum of 20 Euros, for example.

The reason why you have to pay is sometimes quite specific. Ele explains that one of her spiritual teachers says that money you give is like a stamp: it adds a special power to the teaching or the practice. In the light of critical approaches these examples can be seen as a proof of the strategies of profit-oriented ‘gurus’. However, giving money may really function as a cognitive mechanism that adds reliability to the teaching: participants are paying just too much to take it as mere entertainment. This explanation is not valid only for spiritual practices: already several authorities in the long tradition of psychotherapy like Freud or Menninger have pointed out similar idea that the fee for the therapy reduces the patient’s resistance and prevents therapy from becoming a matter of indifference (Newman 2005).

It is usually rather expensive to acquire some expertise in the spiritual field: personal development has price-tags and getting to another level means often costly trainings or procedures like fixing your Aura. Some of my interviewees complained about high prices which make many of the practices inaccessible to them; the money they had spent, however, was seen as an investment in self-development and one lady referred to the Estonian proverb: ‘scrimping is not sensible saving’. Much of the expertise is supported by official hierarchies. For example, Ele declares proudly at the very beginning of our interview that she has taken courses and paid for inauguration and now she has a second level in Reiki. She admits later that this process has been very expensive and taken too large a share of her income but from her attitude it is understandable that the high cost emphasizes the significance of her achievement. It is a good example how spirituality means the investment in oneself and the high value that participants see in intellectual and spiritual development. Ele has spent her limited resources to Reiki and other spiritual practices instead of renovating her home, for example.

The flexibility of the field allows also for creativity. Spiritual teachings may establish often rather strict practice rules but it seems to be common for participants to test their own creative solutions. Ele, the Reiki-master, is again a good example here. She is combining different methods in a creative way: when charging water⁶, she uses both special Words and Reiki. She is also exploring alternative remedies to the commercially and officially available ones. This behavior disproves the idea of overarching commodification of spiritual practices.

Actually, do you know what really works well?! These! (showing rusty metal-rods) I found these from my old oven, they were holding the door and I thought that I will try, and discovered that these are working very well for divination! (laughing)

⁶ Liquids can be given special power and energy by simple rituals. It means, for example, making the otherwise ‘dead’ water ‘alive’ which is better for drinking and according to Ele, already tastes differently.

So, the amount of freedom that market-based modern spirituality offers can be debated but participants themselves do not perceive this as especially repressing.

Although the field lacks almost any control or rules and is thus highly susceptible for fraud, this was not acknowledged as a serious problem among participants. Malpractice is probably not perceived as a big threat because of individual relationship with the practices: ‘if I feel it, then it obviously works’. Some interviewees (especially more educated participants) admitted that there are obviously some teachers and trainers who are suspiciously much motivated by money. However, even then it was not perceived as too serious a problem: “In a small country like Estonia where everybody knows everybody, you cannot fool too many people”.

It is interesting that the same mechanism that makes it extremely difficult to define and detect malpractice – very subjective and relative confirmation whether the practice works or not – allows people to test different solutions in a rather creative way. The confirmation mechanisms are sophisticated as seen from the example of using money. However, my informants got from the ‘spiritual marketplace’ what they went there to search for. How this happens will be discussed more in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3: ADOPTION OF PRACTICES, CHANGES IN PERCEPTION

The metaphor of the spiritual marketplace can be misleading when analyzing the adoption of spiritual practices: it is not an instrumental act of buying a product but a complicated and specific process of becoming involved that requires support. The adoption and further absorption have specific consequences: for example, spiritual practices may change people's perception, as Tanya Luhrmann convincingly demonstrates in her studies about modern witchcraft (1989) or the Christian Vineyard church (2004). The last chapter explores some adoption practices, the process of how people get involved and how it changes them.

Adoption of spiritual practices

Different interviewees found their way to spiritual practices differently: they became either gradually more involved by moving from one practice to another (like Marin or Triin), or by sudden recognition of the presence and the power of spirituality. Marin emphasizes that her choices have been constantly rational. She started to practice yoga because she “found a book that explained very scientifically that if you take this position, then your blood goes to this part of your body, the oxygen is well-distributed which enhances its functions”. She says that these “rational arguments explained everything”, and gave meaning to yoga. After a while she felt the need to learn something new and worked with liberation breathing which “helped her much” but still she found that “this is not really everything”. And now, after trying some other teachings she found Aura transformations which are “much more radical”: she let her Aura get transformed and took courses to become a trainer herself. By this long process of 6-7 years she has totally changed her life – from highly-paid IT project manager to self-employed spiritual trainer.

Sirle's story is different. As a good example of sudden self-realization, she became interested in the spiritual world by reading a book and then started to work with her thoughts, deliberately changing them and getting confirmation from her subjective feelings during this process. She felt true moments of enlightenment – a cognitive recognition based on the intimate relationship with the body. In Sirle's self-exploring practices the recognition of spirituality is described like an enlightenment-experience, it is an extremely powerful sensation.

If you stop this constant suppression of energy and acknowledge it, this releasing... it clarifies everything, it is immensely clear what am I doing now. Moving this powerful energy in your body – this extreme contentment and even ecstasy which is amazing.

In both examples, either a 'rational' argument-supported approach or more cognitive and experimental ones get their final confirmation from personal feeling. The process can be seen, according to Hervieu-Leger (2001), as the search for the evidence. Out of the legitimating mechanisms that spiritual discourse offers (see Hammer 2004), personal experience is probably the strongest. Of course, other types of validating arguments can be important as well, especially when finding one's way to these practices. Scientism, for example, creates an authoritative and credible background like in Marin's description.

However, Marin's story is rather exceptional; other informants admitted that they do not even try to understand the difficult explanations spiritual teachers often give because they "never liked physics too much". Sirle, for example, connects the question of scientific explanations directly to her personal feeling. It is a emotional and cognitive rather than intellectual understanding.

All these vibrations that I feel too – for me, it has been experimental, one of my experience with [liberation] breathing, it was like Einstein tells... like all the things happening simultaneously, you just feel it – all your lives that you are living simultaneously. If someone has the ability to translate it into the language of formulas of physics, it is impressively powerful, Einstein had this skill. For me it is more like this feeling, this fairy-tale that I have it.

The evidence, therefore, does not come from outside but from the inner subjective feeling. It can be put into formulas like Einstein did but for ordinary people it is enough to feel. This illustrates another interesting aspect – the notion of understanding Einstein’s theory by feeling instead of studying it intellectually. Obviously, this ‘your own feeling’ is perceived as much stronger, it is the ‘real’ way to understand something.

Luhrmann (2007) concludes in her study about a ‘new paradigm’ Christian community that believing is not necessarily automatic and requires reinforcement and support. Of course, this validation process is not the same as testing hypotheses: the aim for a spiritual believer is to learn to use their senses and increase the level of participation to start to see subjective evidence everywhere around them (Luhrmann 2007). Based on my study, it is clear that the validation of beliefs and practices is a complicated and multi-layered process where outside sources of validation (pointed out by Hammer, for example, scientism, authoritative tradition and confirming stories about personal experience) are creating the willingness to get absorbed into the practices, to start to feel and perceive yourself. This evidence goes much deeper than ‘rational’ arguments about why somebody should or should not believe in some spiritual teaching. How my interviewees create the evidence is visible in their personal stories: interpretations of their life-events which are commonly successful medical treatments.

Ele, 59-years old, claims that she just has to believe because she managed to cure her breast cancer herself. The following story, however, reveals rather the freedom of interpretation than the real act of healing. During the regular mammogram-analysis a few years ago the doctor observed some flakes on the picture and asked her to come back after six months to re-examine the situation. When my informant went back to the doctor (after eight months) the mammogram picture was clear. “I cried only after this second picture, out of happiness, I had healed myself!,” she describes this situation emotionally. As I consulted with one Estonian doctor, he confirmed that if the first mammogram had really shown something,

nobody would have asked her to come back after such a long time but the follow-up procedure would have been totally different. The story of getting rid of such a serious illness as breast cancer works as a strong source of validation for Ele. She has shared her experience of this ‘miracle’ among people who are willing to accept this interpretation so she gets more confirmation herself and adds authority to those practices for other people.

The willingness to trust spiritual ideas and practices is very important. Sirle emphasizes this by saying “if you believe and are open yourself, you really experience something”. She used to suffer from a life-long form of anemia that requires regular injections. At one point she listened to her inner voice and decided that she can quit the prescribed treatment. She has not been injecting the drug for half a year now: “I wondered myself if I would live long enough to see if it really worked. And now, yes, according to the estimation the doctors gave me, I should have been dead already.” This experimental way of testing and getting confirmation might be obviously very dangerous but this danger adds credibility: the stakes in this game are high, no less than life or death.

Liina’s experience of miraculous healing demonstrates clearly the freedom of imagination and perception. She travelled by bus to an old manor-house where, according to the hostess and spiritual healer, the earth-energies have a power to cure severe illnesses. Liina was ready for the miracle and the miracle came.

I’m sitting on this bench there and what happened! This feeling that I have like a tar in my heel or feet, yes, exactly where I had this disease and then I put my fingers to this place and started to drag it, this tar-like, black, disgusting elastic thing. I’m dragging, dragging for so long, like a half an hour or something and suddenly it came away, I could remove it! Then I shook my hand to get rid of it, I couldn’t believe it later but this disease was all gone.

Similar to Luhrmann’s cases of the believers in the Vineyard church (2007) this story seems for an outsider to be a “sensory deception” and ‘wrong perception’ of the world. It is interesting how the metaphoric and cultural idea of illness as something “tar-like, black and

disgusting” becomes a real object in Liina’s interpretation. She has felt and seen it. Spiritual involvement reinforces this type of perception of participants who are probably rather creative and prone to this already before.

The period of the present research was too short to go deeper into this complicated and dialectic relationship of beliefs and practices (as seen in Tanya Luhrmann’s studies (1989; 2007), for example). However, many memories and experiences that could be interpreted as paranormal were described in the interviews. Characteristically, my interviewees recollected and willingly interpreted these situations (coincidences, moments of half-consciousness or hallucinations) as supernatural. This goes back even to their childhood; many of Ele’s stories are about a prophetic black cat, another cultural symbol that acts in her memories as a real being. Liina’s mystical experiences do not disturb her at all: she presents the story how the moon speaks to her during the night, for example, rather as a sign of the Universe being friendly and nice to her.

One night, two weeks ago or something, I woke up and it was a full moon and, oh god, I felt that the moon wanted to talk to me. I’m looking out of window, everything is so bright there and the moon has like eyes and nose and mouth and then I talked to him a little bit.

About what?

He asked how was my life, I said my life was ok, nothing special, told him that I slept so well this night compared to some previous nights. Yes, and then I went to the bathroom and then went back to sleep.

Liina is willing to interpret her experiences as paranormal in a similar way to Sirle who emphasizes the necessity to be open to different sensations to really feel something unexpected. This attitude is exceptional in the Estonian context where, in Mary Douglas’s sense, “bodily control” is a prevailing norm, especially when it comes to mental practices. As Douglas (1970) notes, this can be seen from the attitudes towards the practice of trance, both inside and outside religion. Trance as a symbolic breaking of bodily and social barriers is regarded in societies with a low level of bodily control as normal whereas in cultures with

strong control it is perceived as condemnable and fearsome (Douglas 1970). In Estonia, trance or even hypnosis are rarely practiced and seem to be something scary and ‘abnormal’. Strong religious and spiritual experiences are rare or even non-existent. Therefore, practices that support people to be open to new mental experiences have a great effect when practitioners really start to feel something. These experiences cannot usually be explained by previous knowledge or existing meanings and seem to work as a very strong confirmation for practices, a irrefutable affirmation that “there really is something!”.

Evidence supporting beliefs

However, besides the very personal immaterial dimension of spirituality, its validation requires support from other sources. Experience-based confirmation cannot come out of nothing; there are usually some other forms of support and ‘gate-openers’ that enable people to really start to feel something (as was seen in Marin’s and Sirle’s stories of finding spirituality). Keane (2008) argues that there are not only beliefs or prior experiences that constitute the ‘religion’; religions always involve material forms and evidence. Spirituality, for example, cannot exist without ‘vehicles of meaning’ like books or the infrastructure of ‘spiritual marketplace’ where teachings circulate. It can be also a specific language, the way of speaking that makes spirituality distinguishable. With my interviewees, it was visible an optimistic perspective and a very positive-curious attitude (“the world has so much to offer!”), Kristel points it out explicitly: “...positive thinking is the main thing, even if something bad happens you have to let it go!”. This special type of language and the way of speaking is similar to the religious genres pointed out by Keane (2008) as evidence supporting religious beliefs.

Especially important for spiritual individualistic practices are books: either the wide range of self-help literature or popular pseudo-scientific investigations. For spirituality as an

‘inner’ and ‘hidden’ phenomenon, books are practically necessary but also function as excellent cultural symbols: a book as a source of wisdom and reading as an individual ritual of acquiring this wisdom. Therefore, some authors like Hervieu-Leger (2001) call spirituality a book-centered network of individual readers. It is important, that reading does not mean taking over the ready-made-doctrines and principles but “it is a matter of understanding, that is, of finding out for oneself, on the basis of evidence, what is true” that was pointed out already among people considered as ‘fundamentalists’ or ‘evangelicals’ (Keller 2004:107). Because of emphasis on individualistic seeking in spirituality, books are probably even more important.

All my interviewees pointed out the importance of reading. In Ele’s home the contrast was extremely visible – bright and shiny covers of new self-help and esoteric books in the middle of timeworn Soviet-style belongings were the only sign of this true ‘new age’ that had entered into this household. When I expressed my astonishment of seeing so much literature and asked if it was really possible to read it all, Ele jumped out from her chair and brought me the pile of notebooks: “I’m not only reading but taking always notes as well!”.

As the amount of spiritual books and the repetitiveness of their content are impressive, it is intriguing why people keep buying and reading books (see Lee 2007). “These books actually do not have much to tell me, I have read so many of them,” says Viivi, who has shelves full of spiritual literature. However, it was visible how reading the same ideas over and over again works as a confirmation; it shows that people have the expertise, they know these teachings already so well. People also have a special way of reading which can be compared to the Kirsch’s findings of “literacy practice, particular hermeneutic procedures” cultivated by Jehovah’s Witnesses that created the community of readers (Kirsch 2007:517). When my interviewees described their practices with books, it was very similar to seeking –

spiritual literature seem to create a community of seekers: virtual, hidden, members meeting in front of the book-shelves either in book-stores or in the library.

As a very clear example of the direct link between books and practices, two of my informants demonstrated me proudly their “Uri Geller's crystal pendulum dowsing kit” that promises to “find wealth, health and well-being by dowsing and divining” – a book that contains very practical advice and comes with a pendulum and divining rods. This ‘beginner’s kit’ illustrates the process of becoming involved: the book explains and encourages to trust, offers the tools by which it is easier to get personal confirmation (“these rods are really moving!”) by experimenting yourself as the advertising slogan of the book declares: “With this amazing kit - go on, trust yourself!”.

CONCLUSION

My study in Estonia supports the idea of spiritual seeking as a hidden and individualistic practice (see the already ‘classical’ definition by Luckmann 1970) but demonstrates, however, how much this individualistic participation is affected by the social positions/meanings and the necessity to take these practices as an indicator of wider social processes.

The lack of a clear definition of the spiritual field, for example, indicates both the difficulties of grouping these very different teachings, but more importantly the symbolic fight over the social position and the authority of spirituality which is rather fierce in Estonia. While proponents of the skeptical position perceive borders and boundary work as crucially important (described also by Hess 1993), spiritual people see spirituality as a comprehensive phenomenon and tend to emphasize the cases in-between (like medical doctors who work also with ‘alternative’ practices) that challenge the existence of rigid borders between ‘mainstream’ and ‘alternative’. My interviewees also underlined the importance of different ideas either from the scientific or the spiritual sphere – the democratic pluralism which is perceived as valuable in the Estonian context – so that only anti-pluralism (e.g. skeptical position) should be considered as deviant (shown also by Van Hove 1999). From the skeptical scientific-materialistic point of view, on the contrary, ‘irrational’ and manipulable participants in spirituality constitute a great threat to the Habermasian ‘rational’ public sphere and to the Western type of democracy.

Unlike the skeptics who take belief in the paranormal “as a kind of disease” (Hess 1993:61), my study shows that from different perspectives it appears as a ‘symptom’ or even a ‘cure’ (from the participants’ point of view). The symptomatic existence of spiritual

practices could be taken as a manifestation of social critique. Despite the overall hostile environment where participants meet the threat of stigmatization or even broken relationships, these teachings are still gaining popularity. The fact that people turn to ‘alternative’ solutions shows that something is missing or not functioning in the ‘official’ sphere – for instance, the overcomplicated explanations of the ‘disenchanted’ world by ‘cold’ rational science are not seen as meaningful anymore and the authority and frames that the ‘official’ system, like medicine, offers just do not work with some people.

Spirituality can be taken also as a ‘cure’ that participants have found: this non-standardized and marginal field offers very flexible frames to develop and combine their own meaningful practices or change their life-styles. Spirituality gives people a chance to feel the working principles of the world instead of trying to understand impenetrably complicated formulas of contemporary physics; it offers existing and easily graspable teachings and theories that are accessible to almost everybody. Also, many people having disappointing experiences with official medicine seek alternative options, and spiritual practices are empowering the self, giving back the perceived control over life. Of course, this ‘cure’, picked up from unregulated and uncontrolled field, can be highly problematic, there are several dangers and drawbacks: people are easily manipulated, authority is often bought by money etc.

Spirituality is a complicated phenomenon indeed: participation in the ‘spiritual marketplace’ (Van Hove 1999; Bowman 2001) or concepts like ‘self-validation’ of belief (Hervieu-Leger 2001) cannot be taken as instrumental. Adoption is a multi-layered process: (material) evidence like books or authoritative lectures support individual experiments; the evidence creates the trust that is essential to becoming open and testing the teachings, to really starting to feel and interpret things differently, whether we talk of believing in a miraculous cure for breast-cancer or friendly conversations with the moon.

Individual confirmation seems to be the strongest of validation mechanisms (see also Hammer 2003): subjective feelings and experiences subvert arguments ‘from outside’ such as saying, for example, that scientifically the spiritual ideas and practices are pure nonsense. If people really have felt it themselves, the explanations are not even necessary. The Estonian (and probably wider Western) cultural background plays an important role here – experiments with mental processes like trance are very rare and stigmatized, so the seemingly ‘unexplainable’ experience tends to work as a very strong confirmation, an irrefutable affirmation that ‘there really is something!’.

Getting to this phase of individual confirmation, especially considering the rather skeptical environment, is not a simple process, it requires support and takes time. Participants in the pluralistic spiritual marketplace play constantly with the notions of ‘just interesting’ or ‘entertaining’ and it is fascinating to explore how this ‘just interesting’ becomes a world-structuring mechanism that changes one’s perception. The present study has clearly a limited approach here; based mostly on interviews, the research-period was too short to establish a deeper and long-lasting contact with the informants to get to know more about their background and explore the process of adoption and changing perception. My conclusions are drawn mostly on the retrospective stories my interviewees told me and do not allow me to study the process: when people really start to believe, when spiritual practices become really important.

Both spiritual people and skeptics offer rich material from a cultural perspective – an interesting direction for future research – how they construct and carry social values, where is the battlefield and what values are accepted by both. For example, the endeavor towards a meaningful world-order is very similar in both categories and this study demonstrated some common aspects already in their techniques: respect towards intellectual authority and hierarchies, the striving towards understanding the world, a process that requires effort and

resources which strong believers either in science or spirituality are willing to give. Only the means are different and characteristically, the ‘alternative’, spiritual way without control and official standards is much more flexible. For many participants, spirituality is the ‘religion of intellectual pursuit’ which is probably one of the reasons why spirituality comes more than religious disciplines under the attack of skeptics – the conflict is very direct as spirituality is often mimicking the scientific way of constructing knowledge.

From the scientific-materialistic point of view, spiritual practices seem to be just a form of escapism – creating its ‘false’ autonomous authority and legitimation systems. From the position of my informants, the spiritual ‘cure’ and potential are very real and indispensable both for individuals and the world as a whole: in this spiritual ‘utopia’ people are healthier and happier, relating to the environment and each-other harmoniously. It is also a question of social responsibility, finding an ‘alternative’ way in its wider and more fundamental sense which has become especially necessary as the prevalent scientific-materialistic utopia and its ‘official’ institutions have started to lose their authority for many people I interviewed. From this position, spiritual, scientific-materialistic, and religious world-views are seen as equal, competing – or co-existing – on the same ground in the context of overall pluralism; spirituality, however, hoped to be an expedient and even the catalyst for reaching to the better ‘new age’ – the idea that has been inherent to ‘alternative’ lifestyles for a long time already.

The position to take in this matter depends much on the understanding of the nature of science: Is it a basis, common ground or one possible way to create a meaningful world among others? It is questioning the belief that science, scientific discoveries and our modern lifestyle will make the world better. These fundamental considerations influence directly the ways in which people relate to spirituality: for the scientific-materialistic platform it remains deviant and bizarre ‘nonsense’, its otherwise unexplainable popularity comes only from the

irrationality of the manipulable crowd; for spiritual people it is a 'new' and more flexible opportunity to relate to and 're-enchant' the world, both individually and socially; for the present study it is an example of the alternative way to construct the world and legitimate authority – the reminder that even in the Western secular societies the scientific-materialistic world-view is not the only or even not necessarily so dominant option.

APPENDIX: SHORT DESCRIPTIONS OF MY INTERVIEWEES

Name*	Age	Experiences with spiritual practices	Occupation, education
Sirli	31	Found spiritual practices around ten years ago by individual testing which gave impressive results. Has continued with testing the limits. Participates actively and plans to become a spiritual trainer herself.	Specialist, higher education.
Liina	66	Has been interested in esotericism and spirituality for about 15 years now, got herself help several times and is open to different teachings (including mysticism). Reads journals and participates everywhere as possible (as much as her pension allows, complains that it is all so expensive).	Retired, secondary school education.
Viivi	40	Started to work more seriously with several spiritual practices last autumn because of health problems. Is now active participant interested in different topics, divining rods, for example.	Does not work right now. Took time off. Was entrepreneur before.
Janne	52	Has been moderately interested in esotericism and alternative ideas but has not participated many times, has now started to explore divining rods.	CEO of a small company, higher education
Ele	59	Interest begun more than 10 years ago from traditional medicine and herbs. Has studied Reiki and goes regularly to very different seminars. Practices as a healer, not for earning money but with people she knows. Reports several successful cases.	Specialist of social work. Secondary school education.
Triin	28	Has been interested in spirituality already few years. Now participates in <i>feng shui</i> courses and studies how to use divining rods. Has started to read more literature.	Specialist, MA student
Kaspar	32	Does not participate often, rather reads books himself. Has practiced meditation for a long time, is interested in Eastern traditions and 'alternative' ways of living.	Specialist, MA degree
Marin	30	Became involved in spirituality gradually: started with yoga but works now as a spiritual trainer and a consultant. Emphasizes her rational way of thinking and making choices, not interested in mysticism although she knows that all these things are there.	Working as a spiritual trainer.
Ingrid	33	Has been interested for a long time and has practiced yoga. Got an opportunity to introduce the topics that are interesting to her on the radio. Interested in very different topics from science to paganism.	Journalist, the host of <i>Hallo Kosmos</i>
Kristiina	25	Has been interested in spirituality but is not attending events regularly, mostly reading spiritual and self-help books.	Journalist at a mainstream newspaper
Kristel	44	Has been interested and involved already for a long time. Not practicing anything right now but has participated in many events and organized several ones herself.	Journalist at a mainstream newspaper

* The names of my interviewees are fictional.

REFERENCES

- Aldred, Lisa. 2002. "Money Is Just Spiritual Energy": Incorporating the New Age. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 35:61–74.
- Altnurme, Lea and Ahti Lyra 2004. "Tervendamine- misjoneeriv klientkultus" [Healing – missionary client-cult] in *Mitut usku Eesti* [Religions in Estonia], edited by Altnurme, Lea. Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus
- Altnurme, Lea. 2005. *From Christianity to own belief. A study about the religiosity of the Estonians in the 2nd half of the 20th century*. Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus: Tartu.
- _____ 2011. Eestlased usulises pöördes [Estonians and the transformation of religion]. Postimees, March 20th
- Askehave, Inger. 2004. "If Language is a Game – These are the Rules: A Search into the Rhetoric of the Spiritual Self-help Book If Life is a Game – These are the Rules." *Discourse and Society* 15:5–31.
- Baily, Edward I. 2009. "Implicit religion". In *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, edited by Clarke, Peter B.. Oxford : Oxford University Press
- Berg, Maarten C. 2008. "New Age advice: Ticket to Happiness?" *Happiness Studies* 9:361–377.
- Biddington Terry, *Spirituality in the Market-place*, in *The Way* 46 (2007) 4, 113-126.
- Carrette, Jeremy, and Richard King. 2005. *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*. London: Routledge.
- Crabtree, Steve and Brett Pelham. 2009. "What Alabamians and Iranians Have in Common. A global perspective on Americans' religiosity offers a few surprises". *Gallup news*. Retrieved on 2010-10-21 <http://www.gallup.com/poll/114211/alabamians-iranians-common.aspx>.

- Davie, Grace. 1994. *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Douglas, Mary. 1970. *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*. London: Barrie&Rockliff.
- Eurostat. 2005. "Eurobarometer 225: Social values, Science & Technology". Retrieved on 2010-10-21. http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_225_report_en.pdf.
- Gieryn, Thomas F. 1983. „Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science: Strains and Interests in Professional Ideologies of Scientists“. *American Sociological Review* 48(6):781-795
- Habermas, Jürgen. 2011. "Dialogue: Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor" In *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, edited by Butler, Judith. Columbia University Press.
- Hammer, Olav. 2004. *Claiming knowledge : strategies of epistemology from theosophy to the New Age*. Leiden; Boston: Brill.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. 1999. New Age Spiritualities as Secular Religion: a Historian's Perspective. *Social Compass* 46(2): 145–160.
- _____ 2006. "Introduction". In *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, edited by Wouter J. Hanegraaff. Leiden: Brill.
- Hervieu-Leger, Daniele 2001. "Individualism, the Validation of Faith, and the Social Nature of Religion in Modernity" In *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion*, edited by Fenn, Richard K.. Chichester: Blackwell Publishing.
- Hess, David J. 1993. *Science in the New Age: The Paranormal, Its Defenders and Debunkers, and American Culture*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Hodder, Jacqueline. 2009. "Spirituality and well-being: 'New Age' and 'evangelical' spiritual expressions among young people and their implications for well-being". *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 14(3):197–212.

- Höllinger, Franz. 2004. "Does the Counter-Cultural Character of New Age Persist? Investigating Social and Political Attitudes of New Age Followers". *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 19(3):289-309.
- Jürgenstein, Toomas. 2009. Poolskeptiline propaganda on jama [Half-skeptic propaganda is a nonsense] *Postimees*, 28th of Feb.
- Keane, Webb. 2008. The Evidence of the Senses and the Materiality of Religion. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 14 (1):110-127.
- Keller, Eva. 2004. "Towards complete clarity: Bible study among Seventh-day Adventists in Madagascar". *Ethnos* 69(1): 89-112.
- Kirsch, Thomas G. 2007. Ways of Reading as Religious Power in Print Globalization. *American Ethnologist*, 34(3):509-20.
- Lee, Helen. 2007. "Truths that Set Us Free?": The Use of Rhetoric in Mind-Body-Spirit Books. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*. 22(1):91–104.
- Luckmann, Thomas. 1970. *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society*. London: The MacMillan Company.
- Luhrmann, Tanya M. 1989. *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England*. Harvard University Press.
- _____ 2007. "How do you know that it is God who talks?" In *Learning Religion*, edited by Berliner, David and Sarros, Ramon. Berghahn Books: New York.
- Maimik, Andres. 2011. Millesse eestlane usub? [What does the Estonian believe?] *Eesti Päevaleht*, 23th of May.
- Miles, Matthew B., and A. Michael Huberman. 1994. *Qualitative Data Analysis* (2nd edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

- Murguia, Salvador Jimenez. 2005. Re-Enchanting a Religio-Scientific Experience: Understanding the Extraordinary within the Pana-Wave Laboratory. *Epoché: The University of California Journal for the Study of Religion*, 23(2):225-251.
- Newman, Stewart S. 2005. „Considering Fees in Psychodynamic Psychotherapy: Opportunities for Residents“. *Academic Psychiatry* 29(1):21-28.
- Rice, Tom W. 2003. Believe It or Not: Religious and Other Paranormal Beliefs in the United States. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 42(1):95-106.
- Robbins, Joel. 2007. “Afterword: On Limits, Ruptures, Meaning, and Meaninglessness”. In *The Limits of Meaning: Case Studies in the Anthropology of Christianity*, edited by Engelke, Matthew, and Matt Tomlinson. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Sawicki, Jana. 1994. Foucault, feminism and questions of identity. In *The Cambridge companion to Foucault*, edited by G. Gutting. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stark, R. and W. S. Bainbridge. 1980. Toward a theory of religion: Religious commitment. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 19:114-128.
- Teichmann, Mare, Mart Murdvee, and Kai Saks. 2006. “Spiritual Needs and Quality of Life in Estonia: Positive Psychological Perspective in the Study of Quality of Life”. *Social Indicators Research*, 76(1):147-163.
- Turner, Bryan S. 2010. “Mapping the Sociology of Religion”. In *The New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion* edited by Turner, Bryan S. Chichester: Blackwell Publishing.
- Van Hove, Hildegard. 1999. L'émergence d'un “marché spirituel”. *Social Compass* 46(2), 161–172
- Woodhead, Linda and Paul Heelas. 2000. *Religion in modern times: an interpretive anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.