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SPIRITUAL REVOLUTION IN FINLAND?

Evidence from surveys and the rates of emergence of new religious and spiritual organisations

Abstract

Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead with their associates have predicted a «spiritual revolution» occurring in the modern world. The article examines the Finnish religious landscape in light of this theory. Some recent surveys are first used to determine the extent of more spiritually orientated religiosity among Finns. The more specific hypothesis that the number of spiritual groups should be increasing more rapidly than the number of traditional types of congregations is tested by examining their relative rates of increase during the past century. The results of both survey and organisational data show that since the early 1970’s the spiritual scene has indeed expanded tremendously. However, simultaneous with such growth there has also been an even more remarkable growth in the number of Pentecostal and independent Neo-Charismatic congregations. Thus it is premature to predict a ‘spiritual revolution’ occurring in Finland. A more modest interpretation of the data is offered according to which non-democratic forms of religion are giving way to more democratic ones.

Keywords: spirituality, modernity, Pentecostalism, New Religious Movements

Introduction

The fate of religion in the late modern world has become an increasingly intriguing topic in the contemporary sociology of religion. There are those who see religion and modernity as deeply incompatible and thus claim that the classical secularisation paradigm still provides the best explanatory tools for contemporary religious situation (e.g., Bruce 2002). Others argue that the reasons for the fluctuations in people’s religiosity lie in religions themselves rather than in some exogenous factors influencing religious demand. These scholars argue that what is involved is a more or less cyclical process of degradation and revitalisation of religious organisations (e.g., Stark and Finke 2000). Then there are those who claim that rather than declining, people’s religiosity is currently under the process of transformation into a new social form. Paul Heelas’, Linda Woodhead’s and associates’ book The Spiritual Revolution (2005) is
one of the most thoroughly researched and systematically argued examples of this line of research. Taking this ‘spiritual revolution hypothesis’ as my starting point here, I shall argue from Finnish evidence that while the claim is partly justified, it also contains serious shortcomings.

Heelas and Woodhead with their colleagues argue in their book that under way is a great cultural change which they call the ‘subjective turn’ and which explains both the declining influence of traditional religion and the rise of new spirituality. Referring to Charles Taylor’s work (1989; 1991), the authors describe the ‘subjective turn’ as a widespread cultural shift wherein the emphasis has shifted from the life lived according to external expectations (‘life-as’ values) to life lived according to one’s own inner experience (‘subjective-life’ values). According to these scholars, subjective life has to do ‘with states of consciousness, states of mind, memories, emotions, passions, sensations, bodily experiences, dreams, feelings, inner conscience, and sentiments – including moral sentiments like compassion’ (Heelas and Woodhead et al. 2005:3).

Within this schema, religion is defined as sacralisation of ‘life-as’ values and spirituality is defined as sacralisation ‘subjective-life’ values (Heelas and Woodhead et al. 2005:5). In other words, religion is something that requires you to live your life according to norms set out by some external higher authority, while spirituality involves taking one’s inner experiences as one’s final authority. The spiritual revolution, to which the title of their book refers, is defined as a situation ‘when «holistic» activities having to do with subjective-life spirituality attract more people than do «congregational» activities having to do with life-as religion’ (Heelas and Woodhead et al. 2005:7).

In accordance with this theory, the authors set out two simple and testable hypotheses:

1. Life-as forms of the sacred, which emphasize a transcendent source of significance and authority to which individuals must conform at the expense of the cultivation of their unique subjective-lives, are most likely to be in decline;

2. Subjective-life forms of the sacred, which emphasize inner sources of significance and authority and the cultivation or sacralization of unique subjective-lives, are most likely to be growing. (Heelas and Woodhead et al. 2005:6)

To test these hypotheses Heelas’ and Woodhead’s team set out to investigate empirically the relative strengths of what they describe as the ‘congregational domain’ and the ‘holistic milieu’ in the small town of Kendal situated in North-West England. The researchers focused on the participation in the face-to-face associational activity on both sides of the divide. What they found out was that the spiritual revolution had not yet occurred – the congregational domain had about five times more acts of participation than the spiritual milieu. Despite this finding, the authors go on to argue on the basis of relative growth rates that the spiritual revolution will take place in about 30 years or so (Heelas and Woodhead et al. 2005:48). In other words, they claim that the spiritual scene is growing at a much faster pace than the congregational domain.
There have not yet been done any empirical studies comparable to the Kendal project in the Finnish context. Nevertheless, there are other forms of data that we can use to evaluate the two spiritual revolution hypotheses above. First I shall take a brief look at two recent surveys to determine whether there is any basis to the idea of spiritual revolution occurring in Finland. Having established whether there are any discernible indications of the change in people’s religious attitudes toward a more spiritual orientation, I shall next take a look at the situation at the organisational level. There has recently been started a project called Religions in Finland, which aims to gather information on religious organisations and religious voluntary associations operating in Finland. The information has been gathered into a database which can be used to test various kinds of hypotheses concerning religion in Finland. The compilation has only been started this year, but there is already in the database plenty of useful data by which we can examine the above hypotheses. In the present case, it will be examined whether it is the ‘spiritual’ groups and movements or the more ‘congregational’ types of religions that have been increasing more rapidly in Finland during the past century. By examining the numbers and rates of emergence of different types of religious/spiritual movements it is possible to give some tentative evaluations of the claims concerning broad patterns of religious change in the late modern situation.

Indications of spirituality in the survey data

Recent surveys of the Finns’ religiosity give striking support to the overall picture of silent religious transformation. For instance, in a survey of Finnish young adults (aged 20-39) conducted in the Helsinki metropolitan area in 2004 (N = 1000), altogether 69% of the respondents identified themselves as ‘spiritual’ (henkinen), while only 45% identified themselves as ‘religious’. A third (31%) of the respondents claim that they are interested in spiritual matters and are searching new items for their worldview. Roughly the same amount (29%) claim at least moderate agreement with the statement that ‘I eagerly adopt elements from different religions to my thinking’. About a quarter (24%) claims to be willing to buy ‘spiritual literature’.

In close approximation to the above figures, while only 50% of all young adults agree with the statement that ‘God exists’, an additional 30% believe in a ‘higher power’. The latter formulation, being a more abstract and general conception of the supernatural, can be seen as indicating a more spiritual orientation.

A sceptical attitude towards traditional religious authorities is clearly evident in these kinds of responses. Only a minority (14%) of the respondents expressed any agreement with the statement that ‘only one religion is true’. More than three quarters of the respondents disagreed with the statement. Thus, a large percentage of also those who identify themselves as ‘religious’, do not regard their religion in an exclusivist fashion.

Furthermore, according to the 2005 World Values Survey (N = 1015) about 3% of Finns indicated that they regularly practice meditation or some other method of spiritual development and an additional 12% claim to have practiced these things at some,
point in their lives. In other words, altogether one in seven Finns claim to have practiced something that they identify either as ‘meditation’ or as a ‘method of spiritual development’. This is a huge number of people when we take into account that the mere concept of ‘meditation’ was hardly known to anyone before the 1970’s. The increase in the numbers of people meditating is indeed so dramatic that the talk of a coming ‘spiritual revolution’ does not at first sight seem at all far-fetched.

Heelas, Woodhead and associates (2005) draw a rather stark contrast between the religious and the spiritual. The assumption is that they are based upon entirely different and incompatible world-views (see also Henriksen 2005; Woodhead 2006). The evidence from Kendal shows that there is not much overlap between the congregational and the spiritual domains of activity. It seems that these domains cater to entirely different sets of people.

The Finnish survey data does not entirely support this picture, however. Of all the people identifying themselves as religious, four out of five (82%) claims to be also spiritual. From those who do not identify themselves as religious, only about two thirds identify themselves as ‘spiritual’ (see Table 1).

Looking at the whole sample, the largest group, altogether 36%, consisted of those respondents who identified themselves as both religious and spiritual. The second largest group consisted of those who saw themselves as spiritual, but not religious (33%). The smallest groups were those who saw themselves as neither spiritual nor religious (23%) and those who saw themselves only religious but not spiritual (8%). Thus, at least in terms of self-identification, the ‘religious’ and the ‘spiritual’ identities do not seem to exclude each other completely.

We can see the same phenomenon in the World Values data regarding religious and spiritual practice. Among those who meditate regularly, 26% go to a religious service at least once a month (apart from participating in rites of passage). An additional 44% goes to church more seldom and only one third never participates. These numbers differ only slightly from the national average (14%, 61% and 25% respectively). Among those who go to church services at least once a month, almost one fifth (19%) has at least tried meditation or methods of spiritual development.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you regard yourself as being a 'religious person'?</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you regard yourself as being a 'spiritual person'?</td>
<td>Total (N=895)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
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</table>

$X^2 = 51.001$, df = 1; p = .000
In summary, all these figures clearly tell us of an ever more inclusive and relativistic attitude towards religious matters. Religions are thought to contain something valuable, even if no one religion contains the final and absolute truth. No one religion is regarded as the sole possessor of truth. Many people, especially the young and the educated, have a generally positive view on religion, while at the same time they seem to be distancing themselves to religious authorities. These findings support the idea that religion, in the sense of deferring to external authority in religious matters, is losing ground to an attitude that one should decide religious matters on the basis of one’s own experience and preferences.

However, the data does not support the idea that the religious and the spiritual orientations are completely at odds with each other. A large number of people identify themselves as both religious and spiritual. Furthermore, a significant number of people seem to partake of both types of activities.

Clearly the data at hand are vastly different in each case and no conclusive arguments can be advanced at this point. Yet it would be interesting to know whether surveys such as described here would yield different results in Britain.

Evidence from religious organisations

Operationalising ‘spirituality’ in terms of organisations turns out to be a rather complicated manoeuvre. While ‘religion’ seems to be easily identified by churches and other religious communities and their collective activities, it is not quite as clear what sorts of activities or organisations would unambiguously indicate the sacralisation of ‘subjective-life’ values. Heelas, Woodhead and associates provide a list of forms of ‘holistic milieu’ activities in Kendal that they consider as indications of spirituality in the appendix of their book (2005:156-157). The list includes seemingly religious groups, such as ‘Buddhist groups’, ‘Pagan activities’, and ‘Sai Baba group’ alongside a whole range of holistic therapies (‘acupressure’, ‘chiropractice’, ‘flower essences therapy’, ‘osteopathy’, ‘massage’ and so forth) and fortune telling (‘astrology’, ‘palm reading’ and ‘Tarot card reading’). It is not quite clear what makes Buddhists or Pagans more ‘spiritual’ than ‘religious’, but in order to make viable comparisons, these have to be taken as our lead when categorising our organisational data.

From the beginning of January to the end of May 2006 a team of three researchers has been combing through various kinds of sources to identify all religious/spiritual groups currently operating in Finland. In five months’ time the team was able to collect the basic data on more than 600 organisationally distinct religious and spiritual groups that are presently active in Finland. The list is not likely to be absolutely exhaustive at this point, but the search procedures have been systematised in such a way that the omissions in the coverage are likely to be rather equally distributed.

The organisations that have been found can be categorised according to their religious background into ten categories: 1) Indigenous and Neo-Pagan tradition, 2) Buddhism, 3) Neo-Hinduism, 4) Islam, 5) Judaism, 6) Christianity, 7) East Asian traditions, 8) Western Esotericism, and New Age, 9) Sikhism, and 10) Modern religions.
Taking the above considerations into account it seems expedient to take a liberal view that all groups except Islam, Christianity and Judaism belong to the category of ‘spiritual’. The solution seems justified in view of the fact that Heelas, Woodhead and associates list Buddhist, Neo-Hindu, and Pagan groups alongside various therapeutic and magical activities into the ‘holistic milieu’. In the Finnish case, most of the movements classified under Neo-Pagan, Esoteric, Neo-Hindu and East Asian categories, do not identify themselves as religions at all and they are usually organised as registered associations rather than registered religious community organisations. Buddhism constitutes an exception to this rule, however. A few Buddhist groups have sought official registration as religious community organisations and there are also two ethnic Buddhist communities. Most of these movements provide activities that are open to all irrespective of religious adherence. It is also true that quite a few of them also concentrate on spiritual practices aiming at immediate inner experience and emphasise the secular, this-worldly benefits of such practices, rather than the purely religious ends.

I am quite sure, however, that in many cases their characterisation as ‘spiritual’ in the previous sense could be contested, but the important thing here is simply to note that by using such a liberal classification we are thereby likely to overestimate the influence of spirituality. In other words, this sort of sample seems likely to be biased in favour of the spiritual revolution hypothesis.

The congregational domain, in turn, is best represented by Christianity, since Judaism and also Islam are mostly defined along ethnic lines. From within this category, it is sufficient for the present purposes to concentrate on just two subcategories, namely, the Pentecostal and independent Christian congregations. The latter category excludes all the established denominations that have their origin in the 19th century or earlier. Although this leaves out of count a large number of Christian churches, it does not really affect our analysis, since in most cases their growth has been levelled out quite some time ago (the only real exceptions being the Jehovah’s witnesses and the Evangelical Free Churches, which are still growing). Again, the important thing is to notice that we are thus likely to underestimate the real strength of the congregational domain rather than the opposite.

The analysis assumes that the Christian local congregations can be compared to the spiritual groups typically organised as registered associations. There are some complications to this comparison. The forms of organisation are rather more heterogeneous in the spiritual domain. Most of the movements have organised themselves as registered associations on a local basis. Thus there are such organisations as Helsinki Zen Center or Ashtanga Yoga Turku. However, some organisations are national in scope. In these cases, I have included in the count all the local branches if they have been organised as registered associations.

How fast are the religious and the spiritual groups growing? The results presented in Figure 1 show that even with such a restricted sample of Christian congregations and correspondingly liberal sampling of spiritual groups, the growth rate of the congregational domain equals to, or even exceeds that of the spiritual domain. The only difference is found in the time period when the growth initially started in each group.
The first 20th century religious movement to start its growth was Pentecostalism. It is without doubt the most successful religious movement of the 20th century Finland. With its roughly 250 congregations today, it has been growing at the rate of more than 2,5 new congregations per year during its 95 years of evangelisation in Finland. The first Pentecostal preacher (Norwegian Methodist pastor Thomas B. Barratt) came to Finland in 1911 and the first congregation was formed in 1915 in Helsinki. By 1950 the movement had grown to 15,300 members, and by 1985 the movement totalled in 42,500 members. Today there are about 50,000 baptised members. Throughout the past century the movement has thus grown at the rate of about 500 members per year. Today it is the third largest religious grouping in Finland. However, the national organisation of the Finnish Pentecostal Church was only founded in 2002 (registered in 2003). Until that time there was no umbrella organisation and each Pentecostal congregation was autonomous. At present only 15 congregations have joined the national organisation. The others are independent and typically organised in associational form.

Alternative spirituality started its growth fifty years later, in the early 1970’s. The growth rates of the number of registered associations teaching various forms of spiritual practices have been quite rapid ever since – about four new groups per year. We also have to keep in mind that typically their forms of social organisation differ dramatically from a traditional congregation. The spiritual groups do not usually demand explicit and lasting commitment to the organisation as a prerequisite for participation and many of them do not form into clearly distinguishable congregations. In fact, they can more aptly be described as ‘client religions’ (Stark et al. 2004) than religious communities in the traditional sense. For this reason they can reach out to vastly greater numbers of people than their active membership would suggest.

The third distinguishable phenomenon to consider is the rapid growth in the past two decades of the independent Christian congregations. Most of these new congregations represent the so-called ‘third wave’ of Charismatic/Pentecostal Christianity.
How to explain the findings?

The central claim of Heelas, Woodhead and associates is that the ‘subjective turn of modern culture’ favours and reinforces those forms of sacralisation which resource unique subjectivities and treat them as primary sources of significance, while simultaneously undermining those forms of sacralisation which rely on a relationship to external authority (2005: 2-3). The evidence presented here indicates that this sort of explanation may be somewhat one-sided and perhaps misleading.

Heelas, Woodhead and associates take notice of similar phenomenon in their data. Using a slightly different conceptualisation from their earlier work (Woodhead and Heelas 2000), they discuss the relative resilience of what they call ‘congregations of experiential difference’ (Heelas and Woodhead et al. 2005:62-64). Congregations of experiential difference are defined by their orientation towards the higher, external authority along with greater stress on direct experience of the divine through the Holy Spirit. While allowing greater amounts of subjective experience, these types of congregations clearly represent ‘life-as’ religion. Citing studies such as Shibley (1996) and Tamney (2002), they affirm that these kinds of congregations have been very successful. However, they then speculate that their success is due to these congregations’ being somehow more subjectivised than other congregations. This, however, is highly implausible as a generalisation. Judging from the Finnish data on such movements, they are generally nowhere near being ‘subjectivised’ in the sense postulated by the theory. On the contrary, they seem far more resolutely ‘life-as’ than many of the more established congregations, which tend to give far more ‘leash’ for their members’ subjective interpretations of religious norms. In short, the success of conservative religion is difficult to account for by the subjectivisation thesis and in any case invokes unnecessary complications to the spiritual revolution hypothesis.

We may agree that modernity challenges religion by undermining institutional authority and empowering individual search for meaning (see Kääriäinen et al. 2005). But the emergence of spirituality may be only one aspect of a broader religious change that can be more accurately described as accommodation of religion to modernity through religious democratisation. All sociologists agree that modernity involves democratisation as one of its distinctive features (e.g., Inglehart 1997; Sanderson 1999). What is often not recognised is that modernity is therefore quite compatible with types of religion that involve various kinds of democratisation of the means of access to the sacred and the supernatural.
From the present analysis it appears that democratisation of religion can be reached through two principle means. On the one hand, the empowerment of individuals in their religious quests may take place through what may be called ‘religious individualism’. The term denotes a pattern of religiosity where the religious goals are sought through individual effort rather than through collective means. This is characteristic of spirituality (in the broader sense), which tends to empower individuals to seek their own private methods of making contact with the supernatural, such as magic, meditation and yoga.

On the other hand, the empowerment of individuals can also come through the means of ‘religious egalitarianism’. This concept denotes a style of religiosity in which everyone is seen on an equal standing in religious terms. The religious goals are therefore seen as accessible without the mediation of a hierarchy of theological or ritual specialists. This strategy characterises Pentecostalism, which is resolutely democratic in its emphasis on priesthood of all believers and in its emphasis on the direct and unmediated contact with the supernatural through the gifts of the Spirit. The Pentecostal congregations are, in contrast to many spiritual groups, highly collectivistic forms of association. In contrast, the spiritual groups often shun collectivism but may involve strict hierarchies. Thus we get a four-fold typology of religiosities (see Fig. 2).

**Figure 2. A typology of modern religious orientations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious equality</th>
<th>Religious individualism</th>
<th>Religious collectivism</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religious hierarchy</td>
<td>Popular magic</td>
<td>Pentecostalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spirituality</td>
<td>Traditional churches</td>
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Presented thus, we can perhaps begin to understand why both Pentecostalism and Spirituality fare so well in modern societies. Both involve democratised forms of religion, although they achieve the democratisation somewhat differently. Pentecostalism emphasises the equality of all believers, but stresses also collective means of achieving religious goals. Spirituality, however, emphasises religious individualism, but also often involves conceptions that entail a hierarchy in the individuals’ capacity to achieve the religious goals. There are masters and students, adepts and novices, qualified practitioners and their clients. Only popular magic seems to involve a thoroughly equal and also individualistic means of access to the supernatural. A thoroughgoing individualism combined with strict equality may, however, be inherently so unstable a form of culture that its cultural success is forever likely to remain rather limited.

**Conclusion**

Although at this point it has not been possible to use data from Finland that would be strictly comparable to the Kendal project in Britain, the results from the Finnish data point to broadly similar observations. Expressed in terms of the spiritual revolution theorists, the associational activities that tend to fare best under late modernity are the ‘subjective-life’ spirituality and ‘religions of experiential difference’. The Finnish data
seems to point to the latter being the stronger one, while the spiritual revolution theorists claim that the former is growing more rapidly. Whichever is the case – and it is pointless to argue on this point, since the data does not permit such a close comparison between the two countries – it is nevertheless important to recognise that the obvious strength of the experiential religions poses a serious challenge for the spiritual revolution hypothesis (1). It is simply not the case that experiential religions of difference are on decline, as the hypothesis leads us to expect. Neither is it obviously the case that they represent more subjectivised versions of ‘life-as’ religion. While acknowledging the strength of experiential religion, the spiritual revolution theorists fail to give a satisfactory explanation for it.

Religion, thus, is not simply giving way to spirituality in Finland. What can be said, however, is that traditional non-democratic forms of religion are giving way to more democratic ones. This seems to suggest an environmentalist explanation, in which modernisation plays a central part. This is not to say that endogenous religious factors do not have a causal role in the success of conservative religion. It is just a reminder that there are ongoing deep structural changes in society causing cultural patterns such as ‘subjectivisation’. Late modernity results in the empowerment of individuals in many areas of life, religion included. This, in turn, results in the weakening of traditional institutional religions, but it may also cause the appearance of new forms of religion that are more adapted to the modern conditions. Pentecostalism may be no less a paradigm of late modern religiosity than spirituality.

References


