

New Age

Michaela Moravčíková, ed

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The publication of collected works on New Age has taken place since the very beginning of the academic discourse on the phenomenon. Some of them have contributed much to the shape of what some of us today tend to call “New Age studies”, with *The New Age Encyclopedia* (Melton, Clark & Kelly 1990), which introduced a definition of New Age as a movement structured in the late 1960s, and *Beyond New Age* (Sutcliffe & Bowman 2000), which put the existence of the item called “New Age” in question, being just two examples. There is one thing that the majority of such anthologies have in common: they present papers by scholars from English-speaking countries or Western backgrounds and focus on the forms of new spiritualities in North America and Western Europe.

In this context, *Perspectives on the New Age* (Lewis & Melton 1992) is an interesting exception, for it contains commentaries on New Age in Nigeria, South Africa, Japan and Italy. Similarly, the *New Age* anthology edited by Michaela Moravčíková draws on the idea to present new spiritualities in their wide geographical scope. However, it was published more than a decade after Lewis and Melton’s collection, and perforce, is exposed to much higher expectations. What the Bratislava anthology puts forward can be described by diversity. This diversity can be observed on various levels of the book’s construction and content.

First, the anthology’s contributors come from various parts of the world and are affiliated to institutions located on different continents. There are 25 authors and 15 countries of origin: the USA, Brazil, Hong Kong, Japan, Australia, Russia, Italy, Slovenia, Slovakia, Poland, Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden and Spain. “This publication tries to show various aspects of New Age through diverse approaches and points of view” (Moravčíková 2005: 19) – the introduction might presage repetition of themes in various locations, but the geographical variety is indeed unprecedented, with each article offered with originality.

Second, the anthology is unique in its linguistic layering. The papers are published in two languages: each is in Slovak, and additionally in English (the case in the majority of articles), or Spanish or German. Perhaps there are practical reasons which have led to such an outcome – the multilingual volume has a potential to reach a broader audience. Be that as it may, the book presents itself as an attractive publishing experiment. A side-effect of this is that it reveals relations of power inscribed in academic discourse, or at least in the academic discourse on New Age. The international debate on the phenomenon goes on in English as a contemporary Latin. Those who publish in other languages set themselves on the outskirts of the main thought circulation and exchange (in truth, sometimes they condemn themselves to such peripheries, especially when they do not undertake discussion with English-speaking authors nor even recall their considerations – this is the situation I am familiar with in Poland).

The case of Christoph Bochinger is very instructive in that regard: it is very likely that his thorough study on New Age would not have been paid much attention in the international forum if Wouter Hanegraaff had not recalled it in his widely-known English-language publication – just sincerely, who of us knows Bochinger’s findings first-hand? Today, more and more scholars decide to present their reflections in the academic *lingua franca*, but it takes time to feel ‘settled’ in the foreign language reasonably well – this particularly applies to researchers from Central and Eastern Europe deprived of training in English. The anthology by Moravčíková does not let English-speaking scholars forget their casually-privileged position, and at the same time it enhances the situation of other-language-speaking authors and readers, which is not only politically correct but also responds to the authentic needs of those aspiring to be included in global discussions.

Third, closely related to the first and second points, the multi-national authors in their many languages speak on New Age in various parts of the world. Here one can find reports on New Age/new spiritualities in Brazil (Cantor Magnani; Weiss & Rosado Nunes), the Philippines (Kato), Vietnam and China (Lang & Lu), Russia (Vorobjova), Australia (Possamaï), Slovenia (Lavrič) and Switzerland (Stolz & Sanchez). The Brazilian papers follow Hanegraaff’s recommendations related to systematic research on the issue of globalisation of New Age.

Hanegraaff (2001) has postulated that studies on acculturation of New Age in non-Western societies should not focus merely on documenting the presence of Western esoteric groups or initiatives there, but rather on the question as to whether and how they interrelate with local forms of spirituality. Thus, José Guilherme Cantor Magnani highlights the fact that Brazilian neo-esoteric practices maintain surprisingly few links with the local tradition of Afro-Brazilian cults, despite the recent popularity of such among some sectors of the Brazilian middle class. In turn, new spirituality trends are easily conflated with local shamanic rituals, especially those stressing the use of means for altering states of consciousness, e.g. *ayahuasca*. Rosa Amelia de Almeida Weiss and Maria José F Rosado Nunes then present extremely interesting fieldwork material gathered by way of a survey and interviews with Brazilian practitioners of alternative therapies. And they show the complex relations between New Age ideas and the local Catholic outlook or identities taking into account mutual interactions between new trends and traditional cultural patterns.

Fourth, the diversity of the volume can also be observed on the level of the authors’ professional background. Scholarly contributors come from a range of disciplines: sociology, cultural anthropology, psychology, history, philosophy, religious studies, theology. The majority are lay scholars, but there are also some representatives of traditional Christian Churches: Manuel Guerra Gómez – a Catholic priest, advisor of the Bishop Board for Interconfessional Dialogue of the Spanish Bishops’ Conference on new religious movements; Werner Thiede – a minister of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Bavaria; Václav Ježek – a clergyman of the Orthodox Church in the Czech Republic; and Eduard Neupauer – a Slovak Orthodox theologian. (It is very interesting that viewpoints of Orthodox theologians are included, an idea rarely exploited by other anthologies’ editors.) Generally, their voice offers a more or less

friendly criticism which, in the case of Guerra Gómez's comments (2005a, 2005b) is additionally followed by a catalogue of pastoral suggestions.

In this context, however, it can be noticed that the anthology lacks the perspective of spokespersons from new spiritualities. This is a pity because, first, a great opportunity has been lost for giving a forum to New Age leaders from outside North America and Western Europe, and second, there is no one to somehow balance the distanced scholars' view and disapproving Christian outlook. As a result, the whole book has – just a bit but still – a deprecating hue. Perhaps I am too sensitive about this – because I know of similarly deprecating Polish publications.

A bad example here might be an anthology launched after an academic conference held in 1997 in Poland: one of the conference participants had addressed the issue of the “traps of New Age” (Grzegorzczak 1999), papers were presented not only by scholars but also by two priests. One of them simply called for “restoring the boundaries of the truth” (Węclawski 1999: 120), but the other was more radical – suggesting that New Age ideas will bring “horrible and dangerous, and not always reversible” results (Posacki 1999: 205). The whole volume was crowned with a question mark which imposes a cold reserve on the phenomenon - *New Age: The New Enlightenment?* (Brzezińska et al 1999). Of course, Moravčíková's anthology is not that biased, and perhaps the lack of standpoints of New Age adherents will not be noticed by other readers. Nevertheless, if I might express my fully personal attitude, I can read the volume only through the prism of prior Central-Eastern European publications.

Fifth – this perhaps is the case in the majority of anthologies, but here it contributes much to the general overtones of the volume in terms of its diversity – the papers vary in the extent to which they introduce theoretical perspectives. There are a number of theoretically elaborated articles, including reports or case studies, and a quantity of others which are more like a collection of miscellaneous remarks. The speculative strategy is clearly visible, for example, in the papers by William Sims Bainbridge or Liselotte Frisk. Bainbridge gives some remarks on measuring parareligious phenomena with quantitative sociological methods highlighting strengths and weaknesses of such an approach. Frisk, in turn, undertakes a discussion with concepts of New Age and calls for a retreat from the term *New Age*: “[I]t is time to ... instead focus on the dichotomy of institutionalized religion on one hand, and uninstitutionalized or popular religion on the other hand” (p117). Apart from papers like these, the anthology contains some interesting research notes, e.g. on the Marcos cult groups in Philippines (Kato), or reports from sociological surveys, e.g. conducted among students in Slovenia (Lavrič).

However, this kind of diversity also has its weak points: papers vary noticeably in the level of their academic refinement. They are diverse in terms both of the authors' tendency (or lack of) to anchor their arguments within those of previous scholars of New Age or other theorists' findings, and their skills (or lack of) to raise the audience's confidence in the methodology employed in the underlying research. Consequently, one can find in the book some comments referring to the item called

“New Age” but without any accompanying clarifications as to what exactly the term is meant to encompass – is New Age a social milieu? its publications? a kind of ideological offering? a bundle of some specific ideas? a global, homogeneous phenomenon? or its local manifestation? This confusion particularly refers to the short articles which are just miscellaneous remarks on the issue. Perhaps no charges of puzzlement or shortcomings of this kind would be levelled against the book if it had come out before many others books on New Age were made known. But it was published in 2005.

Perhaps the collected works edited by Moravčíková do not fully meet the high expectations of a reader familiar with prior academic considerations on New Age. But sincerely, which books are advanced enough to unambiguously manage this task? The Bratislava anthology still seems to have a great importance. Its unquestionable value lies in the fact that it, first, presents phenomena related to new spiritualities in an extremely wide geographical context, and second, begins to disperse the power of Anglo-Saxon reflections on New Age. It proves that there is a significant number of scholars engaged in studying many forms of recent religiosity, including those correlated with what has been described as New Age by English-speaking researchers. If history has a tendency to repeat somehow, and if we consider that the academic discourse on New Age flourished soon after the first anthologies by Melton, Clark, Kelly and Lewis were issued, Moravčíková’s collection bodes very well for the fate of “peripheral” centres of thought on the new spirituality.

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