

Life-As Spirituality as the Third Option? A View from the Polish Perspective

Dorota Hall *

A survey of scholarly studies of New Age highlights the interpretative role of individualism, and in particular Heelas et al's (2005) distinction between "life-as religion" and "subjective-life spirituality". Reasons for a divergence between theory and fieldwork are suggested in the differing historical paths of new spiritualities in Western Europe and Poland. A report on fieldwork with New Age spiritualities in Poland illustrates this divergence between prior academic discourse and the Polish situation, with a call for local scholars to develop their own perspective on new spiritualities.

This paper addresses the issue of New Age in Poland. It is driven by my conviction of the need to show the local peculiarities of the phenomenon. In presenting the subject, I am not going to delve deeply into terminological discussions on the New Age. For the purpose of this article, suffice to say that I refer to the academic tradition shaped mainly by Wouter J Hanegraaff (1996) from the perspective of the history of ideas, and Paul Heelas (1996) from the perspective of cultural or social studies. I use terms such as New Age, holistic milieu(s), new spirituality, alternative spirituality or spiritualities (in the plural) interchangeably. In providing reflections on the presence of these phenomena in Poland, I draw mostly on materials gathered during my own ethnographic fieldwork carried out in places comparable to those recognised as New Age domains by Western researchers. These were predominantly esoteric fairs and shops (called esoteric galleries in Poland) as well as the consultancy rooms of the therapists and fortune-tellers advertised there.¹

Although the academic debate as to what the New Age phenomenon should be called, or whether it actually ought to be encompassed by a single moniker such as New Age, new spirituality and so forth, still continues, it seems to be indisputable that the subject under discussion has gained concrete connotations and has been associated with distinctive cultural trends. Therefore, certain characteristics of the phenomenon are hardly ever subject to controversy. The academic debate has its limits. It is formed by a stable set of subjects rarely gone beyond, subjects imposing ways for further reflections on New Age, or whatever this phenomenon should be dubbed. These are, above all: contemporary (alternatively "modern" or "postmodern") culture, individualism, secularisation (usually considered with sacralisation) and globalisation.

In discussing academic speculations on New Age and related issues, a question emerges as to the applicability of findings elaborated by Western researchers to what may be observed in Poland. The purpose of this paper is to underscore this difficulty. Therefore, the article comprises two general parts. First, academic writings on New

* © Dorota Hall. E-mail: dhall@hfhrpol.waw.pl

Age are recalled on the basis of Daren Kemp's guide *New Age* (Kemp 2004) and my own investigation into the topic. The short bibliographical review brings to light the fact that the issue of individualism (in its many manifestations) has been seen as a hallmark for New Age by scholars of the phenomenon. Second, some findings from my own research are set forth. This, in turn, enables the divergence between prior academic discourse and the situation in Poland to be highlighted. To make conclusions more precise, the historical paths of new spiritualities in Western Europe as well as in Poland are briefly presented.

Individualism

Individualism is an issue raised by cultural studies scholars, sociologists, and historians of ideas dealing with New Age. No matter which theoretical perspective they adhere to, generally they agree that the New Age or spiritual seeking phenomenon is closely knit with individualistic attitudes. This individualism is usually presented as opposing collectivism and is linked to the process of detraditionalisation, a term popularised by Paul Heelas (1996). As described by Heelas, New Age ideas mostly appeal to those who – while constructing their own identity and moral rules – distance themselves from any “external” tradition or authority:

[T]hose who think in terms of the ideology of the autonomous self, who attach very great value to being themselves, who attach equal value to expressing what they are, who have a ‘metaphysical dread of being encumbered by something alien’, are much more likely to be attracted to the (relatively) detraditionalized New Age than to other forms of religiosity, namely those which speak the language of externally-informed injunctions, directives: moral rules and regulations. (Heelas 1996: 161-162)

In Heelas' publications “unmediated individualism” (1996: 21), a result of the shift from the external to the inner authority, has become one of the central characteristics of New Age and its distinctive feature. Besides, the mere title of Heelas' most famous book explicitly combines New Age with a sort of individualistic attitude: *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity*. The “celebration of the Self” is crucial in this context. Similar links have been made by Wouter Hanegraaff:

In theory at least, the New Age recognizes no spiritual authority higher than personal inner experience. Genuine spiritual guides may give help and advice, but will never attempt to impose their views in an authoritarian manner. If one of them does, he should not be trusted: he may turn out to be comparatively unevolved and ignorant himself, or even to be a negative entity masquerading as a Master (Hanegraaff 1996: 201-202).

Many other scholars might be quoted here, for it seems that Heelas' and Hanegraaff's observations have been recognised by the research community with few reservations. Even Marion Bowman and Steven Sutcliffe, who loudly called for

the New Age to be problematised, have partially realised their own postulate. Although they rejected the term itself, they spoke of various kinds of “individualistic spirituality” instead (Sutcliffe & Bowman 2000: 2), thus they have not transcended connotations hitherto inscribed by scholars in the notion of New Age.

The conviction of academics as to the close connection between the New Age worldview and the priority given to the inner authority has been acutely articulated by those who operationalise New Age for the purpose of sociological surveys. Statements expressing full confidence in this kind of authority have been included in the “New Age Orientation Scale” elaborated by Pehr Granqvist and Berit Hagekull (2001). But even before, in one of the first surveys on the New Age “ideology” constructed by Michael Donahue, three of seven opinions meant to reflect the New Age worldview are related to individualistic attitudes: “Through meditation and self-discipline I come to know that all spiritual truth and wisdom is within me”; “I am in charge of my own life – I can be anything I want to be”; “An individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any church” (Donahue 1993: 178). These or very similar statements have been applied to analogous studies conducted by other academic researchers (e.g. Mears & Ellison 2000; Houtman & Mascini 2002).

The process of secularisation (bound together with the paradoxically parallel progress of sacralisation, as described e.g. by Luckmann (1967)) forms a perspective in which New Age individualism is often considered by academics studying new spiritualities. As the issue is extensive, suffice it to say here that the emergence of New Age is usually seen as a result of a retreat from traditional Church institutions (secularisation) and a turn towards the holiness that one should discover within (sacralisation).

Likewise, it often happens that scholars of new spiritualities associate the individualism ascribed to New Age adherents with attitudes and behaviours typical of contemporary culture. In this case, they consider, for example, market choices as embracing the sphere of ideas and religious convictions. Similarly, they bond the issue of individualism with today’s most important social and cultural processes, such as globalisation. The point is made that when information on various cultures is easily accessible, the assortment of ideas or practices potentially attracting New Agers enlarges. As a result, New Age adherents can choose elements from various contexts relying on inner authority and can construct their own myths and rituals (Kubiak 2005a). Some scholars perceive such activities as a sort of spiritual imperialism. Liselotte Frisk (2001) and Olav Hammer (2001) turn attention to the fact that New Agers appropriate various ideas without taking into account the entire context from which the given notions or images are derived. Consequently, New Agers do not see the difference between concepts such as *mana* and *prana* (Hammer 2001: 56) because they adjust them to their own cosmological and anthropological theories and to Western values.

In order to emphasise the importance of individualistic ideals for today’s New Agers, Massimo Introvigne wrote on a connected phenomenon called Next Age (Introvigne

2001). Next Age is an emic notion used in Italy to mark distance from the New Age's excessive commercialisation and utopianism. Its adherents are no longer attracted to the millenarian vision of the Age of Aquarius, being focused rather on individual than on social transformation. This individual transformation is supposed to bring personal happiness and self-realisation. Introvigne himself described the Next Age as "New Age's passage from the third to the first person" (2001: 62), from anticipating planetary changes to centring on the individual *self*, and more precisely, *myself*.

Other scholars have challenged the idea of New Age individualism seen as a sort of purely narcissistic attitude. For example, Franz Höllinger (2004), who conducted a survey on the matter among students from various countries of Europe, both Americas and Israel, proved that many New Age adherents are involved in political and social issues to an even greater extent than the rest of the population. Adrian Ivakhiv, meanwhile, who studied pilgrimages to the sacred places of Glastonbury and Sedona, has criticised scholars' tendency to associate the New Age absolutely with self-spirituality: "If New Age religion represents a form of 'self-spirituality', then, it would be appropriate to ask exactly what kind of 'self' is being 'spiritualised'" (Ivakhiv 2003: 108). He has argued that the New Age self is far less stable than any modern subject defined in opposition to the object, and that at least three different kinds of self can be identified drawing from the academic literature on New Age: a *bounded, essential self*, a *multiple self* and a *cosmic self*.

The first of the kinds of self listed is suggested for example by the emphasis on self-development and personal growth, and guards against the threat of depletion or impurity. The second kind of self embraces many components, among others, an "inner child", a "wild man" or "wild woman" within, and past incarnations. This concept of self echoes Jungian depth psychology. The *multiple self* seeks "openings" to the imagined community of nature or the cosmos. Finally, a *cosmic self*, sometimes referred to as a "higher self", is perceived as the inner guide rooted in the cosmos and stimulating one's spiritual development. Thus the general self, experienced daily, has little in common with the kinds of self postulated by New Age adherents. Ivakhiv argues that: "the claim that New Age spirituality is a 'self-spirituality' should be modified, qualified, or abandoned" (Ivakhiv 2003: 113).

Undoubtedly, Ivakhiv confronts those scholars of New Age who consider the issue of individualism one-sidedly. This is not really the case, though, with Heelas, who coined the term *self spirituality* and whose reflections on New Age individualism are quite sophisticated. Even the terminology he uses has its own history: primarily, before studies on New Age flourished, Heelas had spoken of *self religions* (Heelas 1982). Afterwards – possibly taking into account the emic critique of notions referring to institutionalised religiosity – he modified the term to just *self spirituality* (Heelas 1996). Subsequently, however, he rejected giving the "self" the central position in the phrase and wrote on *expressive spirituality* (Heelas 2000), and finally on *subjective-life spirituality* (Heelas & Woodhead 2005).

Moreover, in his famous book entitled *The New Age Movement*, Heelas alluded to Steven Tipton's findings and made the distinction between utilitarian and expressive individualism (Heelas 1996: 156). According to him, utilitarian individualists are those focused on calculating the best ways of maximising their own self-interests and needs, while expressive individualists consider such an attitude to be too superficial, and pay attention to discovering and cultivating their "true" nature, concentrate on the quest for creativity, personal growth, and meaningful relationships. Generally, Heelas linked New Age with expressivism, but occasionally he also used the term *utilitarian spirituality* to report on some New Age trends which respond to utilitarian needs. Also, Heelas spoke of two different kinds of self assumed by New Agers. Namely, he included in the *lingua franca* of New Age the claim that perfection could be achieved by moving beyond the socialised self ("ego", "intellect") and experiencing one's "true" nature, the "Higher Self".

Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005) later made the issue of individualism more precise, presenting new spiritualities as a result of the "subjective turn" in modern culture. The subjective turn is a retreat from conformity to external authority and a twist towards subjective-life, which has to do with states of consciousness, states of mind, memories, emotions, passions, sensations, bodily experiences, dreams, feelings, the inner conscience and sentiments. Within the subjective turn, the subjectivities of each individual have become the unique source of significance, meaning and authority. Nevertheless, the authors of the book stipulated that:

'Subjectivization' should not be confused with 'individualization'. Whilst it is true that the subjective turn sees individuals emphasizing their personal experiences as their source of meaning, significance and authority, this need not imply that they will be atomistic, discrete or selfish (Heelas & Woodhead 2005: 11).

Heelas and Woodhead claim that holistic milieus are the domain of "relational subjectivism", which underlines the exploration of the intricacies of the inner life, and develops relations of one's own subjective-life with subjectivities of others.

Additionally, the authors made efforts to work out a notion of spirituality set against religion that has appeared to be useful in their analyses. The opposition was formulated as: "subjective-life spirituality", which refers to inner sources of significance and authority and cultivates unique subjectivity, versus "life-as religion", which highlights transcendence of the source of significance and authority and the need for conformity of the individual to social norms. Then they observed phenomena situated between these two during fieldwork carried out in the town of Kendal, north-western England. To summarise their findings would be too extensive a subject for this paper. However, one thing particularly needs to be highlighted here: life-as religion was found by the authors of the book in the congregational domain, i.e. in the traditional Christian churches of Kendal, while subjective-life spirituality was found in the holistic milieu of that place, formed by many groups and one-to-one practices ranging from aromatherapy, yoga, massage and circle dancing to Reiki. At the same time, Heelas and Woodhead showed that the congregational domain and

holistic milieu constitute two largely separate and distinct worlds – very few participants of one of the groups take part in the activities of the other.²

Hence, in total, scholars of new spiritualities have said much on New Age individualism. Although a debate has been held as to the nature of this individualism and some academics have even decided to relinquish the term, or to replace it with another notion (like Heelas and Woodhead – with “subjectivism”), no doubts have been expressed regarding the significance of the process of detraditionalisation for the constitution of individualistic-like attitudes. Independently of whether New Age adherents have been perceived narcissistic or rather deeply and not selfishly engaged in various personal relations, they have been unanimously deemed to be individualistic/subjectivist at least in the sense that instead of obeying a transcendent God and traditional religious institutions they rely on their inner wisdom or intuition while seeking the spiritual and sacred.

Different historical paths

If we look at academic findings regarding the history of the New Age phenomenon in Great Britain or Western Europe, the following picture emerges: utopian visions of the coming Golden Age of harmony and developed spirituality were formed by adherents of Theosophy and later by Alice Bailey and her followers. After Bailey’s death, in the 1950s and 1960s her books remained very influential. Apocalyptic (more precisely, apocatastatic) events were expected, sometimes with unidentified flying objects (UFO) seen as their harbingers. Later catastrophic visions lost their vitality and a sort of soft millenarianism came forward. Convictions about the coming New Age were still held, but the anticipated changes were seen as gentle and peaceful.

This stage of New Age *sensu stricto*, as labelled by Hanegraaff (1996), was transformed into New Age *sensu lato* in the 1970s, which drew new power from American trends of ‘new spirituality’ with their strong psychological component. The utopian vision ceased to be central. Instead of this, ideas of individual transformation and spiritual development became extremely significant. At this point, the term New Age itself was popularised by the media, which firmly entrenched it in public discourse. During subsequent decades, New Age gradually lost countercultural power, and has ultimately attained commercial success by responding to the needs and spiritual interests of people with post-materialistic values, especially including ideals of individualism.

This is the historical course described by Wouter Hanegraaff (1996; 2005), mostly on the basis of publications published in English by New Age spokespersons. In general, other scholars have recognised this outline. Additionally, Paul Heelas (1996) highlighted the importance of the “expressive revolution” of the 1960s - or the “subjective turn” in modern culture (Heelas & Woodhead 2005) discussed above - and his findings have also become canonical for academic considerations of New Age.

It is true that Steven Sutcliffe (2003) opposed applying the umbrella term New Age either for the subsequent stages of the phenomenon or for any phase of transformations described by Hanegraaff. As a substitute, he concentrated on portraying successive generations of British “spiritual seekers”. However, as a matter of fact, the characteristics of leading ideas admitted by generations of those seekers were presented by him analogously: Alice Bailey’s millenarianism, catastrophic visions formulated in the 1940s and 1950s, the countercultural slogan to “do your own thing” leading to the turn to the self and to self-development meant to be accomplished “here and now”. He located the moment more or less in the times of counterculture, when ideas of spiritual seeking got underway in broad circulation.

If we look at the Polish history of new spiritualities, the picture will be significantly different from what I have just outlined. It is true that the beginnings were more or less the same, but subsequent developments diverged. In the inter-war period, millenarian visions sprang up in elite spheres largely inspired by the Theosophical tradition. They carried a local bias inexorably tied to the strong Catholic element in Polish culture. Polish adaptations of yoga were even authored and promoted by Wincenty Lutosławski and Józef Świtkowski, who combined Hindu threads with Christian components (for more on the theme see: Doktor 1990). Generally, however, Polish esoteric circles were comparable to what one would find elsewhere in Europe. After all, they were formed by people that maintained extensive international links with the various groups of spiritual seekers of the time.

Nevertheless, World War Two and the introduction of communism dramatically interrupted their growth. The state apparatus severely restricted spiritual experimentation, and security services harassed and even imprisoned their advocates. In the 1960s and 1970s, when the power of state control slightly weakened, trends that employed the language of natural sciences had an opportunity to increase. In the climate prevailing at that time of scientific atheism and hostility directed towards all irrational tendencies, spiritual seeking that did not care for justifications coming from scientific, or better scientific, formulas was seriously limited. Parapsychology was renamed psychotronics during the International Congress for Psychical Research in Czechoslovak Prague in 1973, and became the domain of engineering and cybernetics. Social circles interested in alternative spiritualities, while distancing themselves from scientific language, did exist (among them were Buddhists or Hare Krishna devotees), but continued living only in deep niches. Psychologically oriented techniques of spiritual enhancement were almost totally absent. This situation persisted until communism fell, when censorship laws were annulled and hitherto underground trends could, along with the new ones from the West, visibly express themselves on the social level.

For Western researchers, the counterculture of the 1960s was a starting point for the broad dissemination of New Age ideas. In Poland, however, this point should be shifted to the beginning of the 1990s, when ideological pluralism entered and free-market rules were introduced. It was only then that the real spiritualistic boom took place. Numerous periodicals and series of books that promoted so-called esoteric knowledge were published in this period. Psychotronic schools and centres for

esoteric knowledge came into existence across the entire country. Many alternative medicine fairs and esoteric festivals were organised. In larger towns, shops and galleries opened selling books, meditation music, incense, pendants, crystal balls, gems, ionisers, tarot cards, pyramids, and so forth. Social circles engaged in spiritual growth techniques emerged around these places. They became the target group for the abundant offer of courses, workshops and seminars including: yoga, visualisation, neuro-linguistic programming, feng shui, rebirthing, sacred song and dance, prosperity, various healing techniques (e.g. Reiki, polarity bodywork, Bach flower therapy, aromatherapy, reflexology) and so forth.

Therefore, when comparing the history of the development of New Age ideas and practices in Western countries, e.g. in Great Britain, to that in Poland, we can conclude that a very important difference lies in the lack of countercultural revolt in Poland. The hippie movement did exist, but was repressed by communist authorities and had no opportunity to develop, far less attain a mass dimension. This movement was – as in the West – anti-systemic, but while objections against the political system and middle-class values were apparent, not all these values were attacked to the same extent.

It is ironic that the Catholic Church, an apparent supporter of traditional standards, opposed the Polish communist-era authorities and therefore, paradoxically, became a natural ally of the hippies. The alliance was exotic, ambiguous, and even weak. It seems symptomatic, however, that annual hippie meetings took place in Jasna Góra of Częstochowa, a very traditional Polish shrine and pilgrimage centre. Consequently, the countercultural expressive revolution touched no more than individuals, and by no means had a broader social dimension. Ideas and catchphrases elaborated by this revolution came to Poland *en masse* at the beginning of the 1990s, together with freedom of speech and other freedoms. At that time, they collided with a society not accustomed to subjectivist ways of life, and – even more importantly – they collided with a society that bound its religious convictions tightly with the Catholic Church, the most powerful ally in the fight against the hated communist regime. The Church's contribution to the final liberation was unquestionable; this liberation, however, concerned with not individual subjectivities but the whole of society. As a consequence, people who began to practise New Age techniques in the liberated state were not emancipated from “life-as religion”.

At the same time, this life-as religion had popular appeal throughout the years, and therefore it could not retain its orthodoxy or promote its intellectual aspects. Mass rituals, patriotic content, and strong folk patterns that combined religious worldview with sensualistic practices dominated mass religiosity. Following the findings of a Polish ethnographer, Joanna Tokarska-Bakir (2000), when referring to sensualistic practices I mean all activities related to the idea of God tangibly present in the world and all those behaviours that affirm sensual contact with the sacred realm. Predilection for pilgrimages to sanctuaries – some of them not approved by Church institutions – to touch or kiss a holy icon, and narratives about miraculous, crying or bleeding effigies are relevant in this context. But so are stories about miraculous

curings, healings in shrines, and through the medium of folk healers who claimed that they healed with the power of God.

Magical New Age

In Poland, fertile ground had been formed for the reception of New Age practices. However, it did not have an individualistic or subjectivistic bias, but rather a magical one. As a result, today's Polish New Age social circles seem to have a peculiar character.

During the research project I conducted, the Christian or Catholic declarations of those interviewed were acutely and frequently manifested. I did not carry out quantitative sociological research, but Anna E Kubiak, who has carried out a relevant survey, confirms my observations. Kubiak disseminated questionnaires among participants of esoteric fairs, as well as meetings, lectures and workshops devoted to holistic ideas and practices in various Polish cities.³ She found that over 40% of people engaged in New Age activities declared themselves Catholic (Kubiak 2005b: 160). I think this figure cannot be interpreted merely in relation to the perennialistic viewpoint that equalises all religious traditions and does not necessarily lead to renouncement of traditional declarations, especially since many people I met in the field emphasised their attachment just to the Catholic Church in various ways and spoke about their participation in traditional religious rituals and Sunday masses.

I suppose there are quite regular Polish Catholics who make up the 40% figure indicated by Kubiak. They practise New Age techniques without thinking deeply about whether these techniques challenge their Catholic belief or not. They are heirs to very traditional patterns of relationships with the sacred. What differentiates them from traditional Catholics are some new accessories used and new language for description of the holy sphere – usually they do not speak about God but instead recall the notion of “energy”. Thus, for example, they replace traditional pilgrimages to sanctuaries to kiss a relic or wash with the water from a miraculous spring with pilgrimages to numerous power points to touch and draw their holy energy, e.g. from trees or ancient rocks. The language has changed, but patterns of behaviour have remained the same. After all, traditional Catholic shrines are also incorporated into the New Age map of power points. Likewise, icons of the Holy Mother are often situated at the home altars of Polish New Agers among photos of gurus or other objects said to be filled with “positive energetic vibrations”. The Holy Mother herself is perceived as a form of the subtle, highest energy.

Another observation from my fieldwork confirmed by Kubiak's survey research is the popularity of Reiki healing in Polish holistic milieus.⁴ Kubiak even claims that this is the most widely-known holistic technique in Poland (2005b: 151). I would say the reason for this is that Reiki is easily subjected to conflation with techniques elaborated by folk medicine. A Reiki therapist touches the body in need of a cure in order to transmit sacred energy from above. At the same time, Reiki practitioners I met often ask the transcendent God for this energy – for example before the healing

session they pray with the words of the Lord's Prayer. And sometimes they even say explicitly that it is God who heals. A conspicuous example of such rhetoric comes from an interview conducted as part of my fieldwork:

When you draw the energy are you aware of channelling it to another person?

No, I'm not, I just ask for as much energy as I need. And for the other person to take as much as they need. I'm only an energy channel and nothing more.

An energy conduit?

Yes, and nothing more. It is not my energy, it is just the amount that Providence gives me. And the other person will take as much as they need and Providence will grant them that energy. But then, after forty-five minutes or an hour I leave the activity conscious, not worn out. Because it is a huge effort, though, because these are impossible things, because we are not God.

One asks for the energy?

I ask God to help me, because I'm a person of faith.

It is God's energy?

It is the energy that comes down to us from above, yes. It is the energy of the Creator. Of my Leading Central Driver, who is always watching over me. My guide.

And he grants the request?

Of course, ask and you shall receive. At any time when you ask for anything you shall receive it. If it's for energy, you shall receive it, simply ask for it.⁵

Thus, the interviewee confirms she is a theist, speaks explicitly of the "Creator's energy", God, Providence, and even recalls an appropriate Biblical passage ("Ask and you shall receive"). The striking thing here is the very technical vocabulary set against this traditional rhetoric – the Creator has been plainly called "Leading Central Driver, who is always watching over me". However, the employment of such phrases does not imply here that the therapist's model of acting significantly differs from the one established in folk culture – God is asked for help, and finally it is Providence that decides how much energy should be granted to the person being healed. Thus, in short, close observation of New Age techniques practised in Poland reveals their continuity with traditional ways of thinking and acting. These traditional elements have blended with trends promoted in the esoteric galleries that came into view in the 1990s. New trends transformed the language of the sacred, adjusting it to recent global conditions. The power of God has gained new names: energy, *prana*, *mana*, *chi* and so forth. Notions from other contexts entered into the religious scene. The category of energy has become central. Parenthetically, the energy itself is a very interesting concept – it combines traditional ideas related to God and his tangible presence in the world with threads from various religious traditions. Additionally, it combines themes belonging to the sacral sphere with motifs from natural sciences, and therefore provides rationalistic justifications for ways of thinking and acting deeply rooted in traditional Polish folk Catholicism.

The people that constitute Polish holistic milieus are not the only Poles to perpetuate folk patterns that highlight sensualistic or magical elements. Other social circles cultivate similar folk elements, but remain traditionalistic to the highest degree – and

even xenophobic, closed to any news from abroad (for more on this issue, see Czachowski 2003 and Zieliński 2004). However, the people I generally reference in this paper are heirs to Polish religious tradition, who instead of acting as if defending a besieged fort enthusiastically say “Yes” to trends prevailing in the modern or postmodern, contemporary, globalised world. Their outlook could be characterised as individualistic to some extent – in a number of cases it has a utilitarian hue, and in some others it has more relational dimension. Nevertheless, it is not absolute that this kind of individualism draws its vitality from the process of detraditionalisation. Although I could also give examples of detraditionalised views expressed in Polish holistic milieus, the materials I presented in this paper indicate that God continues to be the ultimate point of reference for many Polish New Agers, as is the whole prior religious tradition with its rituals and folk beliefs.

Conclusions

Academic discourse on new spiritualities has acutely exposed the issue of individualism. In many scholars’ writings, the New Age has even become a paradigmatic form of religiosity appurtenant to individuated (or subjectivised) participants of today’s contemporary, late-modern or postmodern culture. I have not conducted research in Western Europe, so cannot comment on such observations. However, if someone were to question me as to the situation in Poland, I would say that interpretations of holistic techniques with reference to processes specific to “contemporary” or “postmodern” culture (like individualism) would be severely incomplete and one-sided. They would conform to Western conceptualisations of New Age and, as a result, would significantly deform the image of Polish manifestations of the phenomenon.

The subjective-life spirituality described by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead has little to do with what we find in Polish holistic milieus. It is not a criticism but a fact that the findings presented by these scholars are rather Western/Eurocentric and in this form they cannot be applied to Polish circumstances. Of course, social circles engaged in cultivating subjective, spiritual wellbeing do exist today in Poland. These are more psychologically-oriented groups that echo traditions of the Human Potential Movement. Nevertheless, their existence and visibility is dimmed by the trends I have outlined in this paper.

What is it, then, that we find in Polish New Age social circles? It is neither pure life-as religion, nor subjective-life spirituality. Perhaps it could be called life-as spirituality? This self-contradictory notion would reflect on new forms of spirituality, which at first glance appear similar to those reported from Britain (where holistic centres have similar accessories and offer similar services), but have emerged almost entirely apart from any “subjective turn” in culture. This is *spirituality* in the sense that it stresses an individual relationship with sacred forces, the energy, but this spirituality is *life-as* because it does not avoid looking for the transcendent source of significance, and is not free from the traditional “external authority” embodied by the Catholic Church. To be clear, I would not be attached to the notion of life-as spirituality, especially since it borrows from language applied to attitudes and

practices functioning in a different cultural context. One thing I suggest is that we – Polish residents and scholars – should elaborate on our own understanding of the phenomena of New Age or new spirituality.

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Notes

¹ The fieldwork was conducted under my direction by students of the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of Warsaw University over a period of four years. More specifically, these were two fieldwork projects: *Space in the New Age Culture* (2000-2002), and *New Age – Between Belief and Wisdom* (2002-2004). The research was based on participant observation held e.g. during meditations or healing sessions, and in-depth interviews with people met in the places studied (about 500 interviews and observation descriptions were gathered). All field materials are collected in the archive of the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of Warsaw University. For more detailed analysis of the gathered material and in-depth examination of the findings presented in this article, see Hall (2007).

² Although, of course, some groups of people exist who emphasise their affiliation to both Christianity and the New Age domain, and these have been studied by Daren Kemp (2003) in Britain.

³ The survey was carried out in the years 1998-2000, above all in the cities of Warsaw, Łódź and Krakow. 656 questionnaires were gathered and subjected to analysis.

⁴ For more on the issue of Reiki see e.g.: Melton 2001, Menegotto 2003. In Polish academic literature: Hall 2001, Możdżyński 2004, Sylwestrow 2004.

⁵ Woman, aged about 50, Warsaw, February 2001, interview conducted by Paweł Jurkiewicz.