

New Age in Poland: The local dimension of the global phenomenon

Dorota Hall

New Age w Polsce: Lokalny wymiar globalnego zjawiska

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Against the background of academic discussions about the concept and limitations of the notion of 'New Age', Dorota Hall's book is unique. It is the first academic publication published in Poland to undertake a detailed and systematic analysis of the New Age phenomenon and take into consideration its specific place in Polish society. We should emphasize that previous specialist literature, written mainly by Polish authors, has tackled rather general and universal problems of New Age and passed over research on the local dimension and Polish cultural context. Therefore, the most important aim of Dorota Hall's paper is to find the local specificity of the New Age phenomenon.

In her quest for this the author obviously does not agree with the conceptions which define New Age as a homogeneous and universal phenomenon for all Western cultures and civilisations. The main thesis arising from the assumption that the phenomenon has a different shape in different cultures is the conviction that methodology and epistemology of research are dependent on the local character of a phenomenon. Following this assumption, Hall accepts the thesis that ethnographical methodology (recognised by interpretative anthropology) is the best possible method.

Dorota Hall's book consists of five chapters, an introduction and a final conclusion. The first two chapters consist of a solid survey of the conceptions and theories explaining the New Age phenomenon and are a systematisation of the knowledge established and universally presented in the Polish and international literature on the subject. The rest of the chapters are dedicated to showing the results of research on the local New Age in Polish society. The research presented in the book was carried out between 2000 and 2004 in two projects: *The expansion in the culture of New Age* and *New Age – between knowledge and faith*. The author studied New Age centres in Warsaw, esoteric markets and therapy and fortune-telling rooms. The main research technique was interviews with practitioners of holistic methods.

Dorota Hall shows the ideological sources of New Age and the conceptions of its supporters (Alice Bailey, Marilyn Ferguson, Aldous Huxley, Fritjof Capra) and opponents, mainly the traditional Christian Churches. Crucially, she tries to picture New Age with the help of a diachronic prism. This means that she analyses and interprets the evolution of the phenomenon by placing it along a special trajectory moving from elitism to commercialisation. Therefore, New Age is recognised by the author as (at the beginning) an element of counterculture, and then (under the influence of social changes and development) as an element of the dominant culture.

In addition to *emic* presentation (a perspective 'from inside' the movement), the author breaks through academic reflections and empirical verifications and

systematises the conceptions of New Age presented by researchers (sociologists, psychologists or specialists in religious studies). Among many conceptions of the phenomenon, those of Wouter Hanegraaff and Paul Heelas are chosen first of all. Following the suggestions of these researchers, Hall seeks constitutive attributes of New Age which can be recognised as the hard core of the culture or the New Age's model culture. Importantly, Hall approaches the issue with caution. She acknowledges these attributes as important in terms of definitions, but she does not stop at this, and seeks individual explanations which can be more compatible with the Polish specificity of New Age.

The undoubted success of the author is that she has gone beyond the schematic reflections which place New Age only in the context of the pluralism of the culture and seek the sources of the phenomenon only within homogenous modernity. Hall clearly stands for the attitude of cultural relativism and criticises conceptions which concern cultures as homogenous and universal beings. She claims, "I distance myself from the conceptions which stress the rise of a new, uniformed world order that we experience thanks to the rapid development of the technology of communication and informing of the expansion of the consumer market" (p20).

This statement bears proximity to Roland Robertson's theory which, beyond the introduction of the term "globalisation" (unification and universality of modern societies), has introduced the term "glocalisation" (the reverse process to globalisation – expanding the universalities of culture). This assumption clearly determines the subject of research. The author looks at a global phenomenon (New Age) from the angle of local values – Polish religiosity, tradition and folk culture. She does not finish with finding the similarities of the phenomena which are the indicators of New Age, but mainly seeks the differences at the local level.

This perspective is also determined by Hall's research method. The ethnographic research understood by Hall (similarly to Clifford Geertz) as thick description determines the assumption that generalisation of the conclusions of global phenomena can be applied precisely only to local phenomena. Therefore, the author conducts field research, interviews and observations, finally presenting the results with the help of a multidimensional description. A very important element during the process of interpretation of the research is context. When context is perceived, this helps us to understand the phenomenon in question and leads to discovery of deep and hidden motivations made by individuals as acts which can be identified as New Age.

Dorota Hall's book also provides documentation of the prehistory of the New Age movement. She indicates the movements and characters from the past which promoted ideas very close to today's 'Aquarius conspiracy': the theosophical movement and many organisations which acted in Poland in the first half of 20th century (Metaphysician Society, the Circle of the Admirers of Mediums, or the Psycho-Physical Research Society). She mentions the thriving (especially in Silesian Cieszyn) spiritual movement and surveys esoteric newspapers from before the Second World War (p106). We find too little analysis of content, though, which

could have shown what New Age ideas were in these newspapers. Spiritualism was not only the practice of contacting ghosts with the help of a 'table'. It was also the non-orthodox and beyond-church movement of the moral and spiritual revival of the nation based on the Far East but also close to the ideas of Wincenty Lutoslawski and his society, known as 'Elsów'.

Particularly interesting in Hall's book is the attempt to compare Polish Catholic folk religiosity with New Age spirituality. In Hall's opinion the background of New Age in Poland and in the whole of Western culture was made up of the processes of modernity and desacralisation such as rationalisation (which desacralised social consciousness and increased the processes of innovation) and instrumental action (based on calculation and knowledge). Hall goes beyond this universally accepted thesis and claims that the most important factor which influenced the local dimension of the New Age phenomenon in Poland is folk culture and, especially folk religiosity.

This assumption of the influence of folk religiosity on contemporary spirituality is something which Hall tries to prove. She claims that the link between religion and daily life in folk culture created a special condition for the easy assimilation of New Age ideas in Poland. It was also made by a practical attitude (typical of folk magic), traditionalism and ritualism, or a need for social status fulfilled by religion.

The author, seeking the constitutive attributes of Polish New Age, goes further and contrasts the Polish situation with the Western one (where the world has become 'disenchanted' since modern times). New Age in the West is a kind of return to the lost unity of knowledge and faith. In Poland the range of this process was much smaller, because of the low level of process of secularisation and widespread Catholicism which 'conserved' the elements of magic thinking in society. Therefore, the very configuration of Aquarius in Poland is in Hall's opinion different.

In the West an emphasis is put on self-realisation and transformation of personality, whereas in Poland sensual contact with the sacrum is dominant. In Poland it is rarely said that a new era of humanity is coming (considered by Andrzej Wierciński (1994) to be an essential factor to qualify any phenomenon as New Age). This opens the discussion on the definition of New Age, because according to the narrow Wierciński view most of the phenomena described by Hall do not belong to New Age.

The thesis on the influence of folk religiosity on the development of the idea of New Age in Poland is for Hall the basis of the assumption stressing that the interpretative models and schemes constructed by Western researchers (e.g. Hanegraaff, Woodhead or Heelas) do not fit in with Polish reality. As far as in the West the New Spirituality is the result of secularisation and individualism, in Poland it is the traditional Catholic background (particularly mass and folk Catholicism). Focus on individualism as the only source of New Age is called by Hall the falsification of the movement in Polish society.

According to Hall, the language of “power” and “force” overlaps with Catholics “putting a spell on the world” (p384). In chapter four she exhaustively summarises her observations on the contexts of the word “energy” – one of the key-words for New Age. The care taken over the report from the fieldwork is worthy of notice. The large fragments of interviews and descriptions of people’s behaviour excellently illustrate the phenomenon.

However, it seems that in the part about interpretation of the results of the research a comparison of the folk understanding of “energy” with the Christian notion of grace is missing. The surface similarities beg comparison: in folk religiosity it is said that somebody “was given the grace of healing” (healing is a gift) and in New Age it is the cosmic energy which heals and adds up power. Hall shares with us her faith in long-lasting structures (pp365-7), which are related to the religious imagination linked with Catholicism. Further research on this topic would be very valuable. Hall has accurately noticed that the language popular in New Age of “power” and “force” has been strengthened by contemporary pop culture (for example the famous force from *Star Wars*). Its influence is multinational.

The author thinks that the same practices in Poland and the United Kingdom have a different meaning and role. She attempts to prove that Poland is the only country where there is such a clear continuity between folk and New Age outlook on life (p383). She did not conduct research on British spirituality, but quotes Anna E Kubiak’s work (where this comparison between Poland and Britain is made). Anyway, Hall’s bibliography is missing the work of Stuart Rose, which is very important for Kubiak. Convincing proof of the thesis that continuity exists between the ‘miracle’ religiosity of folk Catholicism in Poland and New Age is a very difficult task, and the author sometimes balances on the line of over-interpretation. Her thesis must be considered very critically because New Age has arisen against a Protestant background.

More doubts can be formulated. Esoteric festivals are organised in big cities, and there is a lack of evidence that ‘folk religious’ people participate in them. In villages priests have greater control on the local community and stigmatise the phenomenon of New Spirituality. It is a pity that the author did not mention the ‘Catholic’ New Age which was present until the end of the 1990s (meetings with purgatory souls, energised herbs made by Father Sroka, etc). With the passing of time these practices declined because of anti-cult propaganda or control of the Church and were transformed to more discreet forms. The visits of the famous healer Cleve Harris are mentioned by Hall only statistically (seven lines on p116), without analysis of the importance of these visits for almost four million people. This is a pity, because it has an important meaning for the thesis the author wants to prove.

Dorota Hall’s book is (in spite of interpretative doubts) a valuable work. It documents an otherwise unrecorded facet of New Spirituality, interprets it and gives scientific description. Her book shows how even in the modern/postmodern period ‘indistiguishedness’ is linked to rationality and is still coherent (p324). She mentions many examples of religious syncretism, such as when the leader of Reiki calls Jesus

for help (p349). This documentary dimension of the book is the most noticeable of all things. Numerous quotations are used to illustrate issues. There are some pearls among them. For example, an interview with a woman who practised Tantra in 2001: “Baba Jaga (*witch*) is Baba Joga (*yoga*). Why did she use a broom? Because healthy sexual energy looks like a broom. She levitated using her sexual energy” (p320).

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Reference

Wierciński, Andrzej, 1994, *Magia i religia: szkice z antropologii religii*, Krakow: Nomos.