

The Roman Catholic Church and the New Age Movement in Poland: The Dynamics of the Challenge

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Changes in the attitudes of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland to the New Age Movement are illustrated by comparing results of empirical research conducted in the early 1990s with a review of current titles in the Catholic press and relevant internet sites. The earlier study had shown a range of reactions by Catholics to New Age, from positive to decidedly negative. In the later study, responses were largely negative, focusing on phenomena such as demonic possessions, Harry Potter, The Da Vinci Code or specific new religious movements such as Scientology. Examples of such negative reactions are given, and reasons for the change in attitude of the Church to New Age are suggested.

The main aim of my paper¹ is to discuss and demonstrate the evolution of the attitude of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland to the New Age Movement – the dynamics of the challenge – by comparing the results of the research I conducted more than ten years ago (Olechnicki 1998)² with new research which deals with the situation more recently. In both studies, the fundamental part in which a theoretical conceptualization of the New Age is given was based on the theory of social movements (certainly, the unusual amorphism of this social phenomenon makes any widely accepted and common definition impossible). Because of the New Age Movement's (NAM) *differentia specifica*, i.e. the belief that it is possible to generate a global change through changing individuals, it was advantageous to analyze the NAM in terms of a sociological version of the theory of social movements, in which social change, change of the political and cultural *status quo*, collective behaviour, social institutions and the establishment of a new social order are emphasized. I have also applied the psychological version of the theory of social movements, in which such items as an individual's consciousness, personality or motivation (e.g. frustration caused by a particular social situation) are the focus of concern.

I understand the New Age Movement as a social movement that involves groups and individuals united by a set of shared ideas, which rejects the present shape of the world as techno-materialistic, and announces the coming New Age, an ideal form of society and culture based on principles of universal love, peace and personal growth, which will be achieved step-by-step through a fusion of individuals' spiritual transformations. The NAM is a huge social movement which unites all new religious movements and, moreover, also some ecological, feminist and peace movements. The specific character of the NAM is based on the belief that it is possible to change the world through changing individuals – the proponents of the NAM feel certain that if they perfect themselves, society will improve as well. The NAM is in fact a counterculture directed towards the future, with a particular worldview and value

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system which integrate its participants and comprise an alternative culture (Olechnicki 1998: 48-56).

My research on this subject began in 1992 and was concluded with the book *New Age: Kościół wobec wyzwania Wodnika (New Age: the Church And the Challenge of Aquarius, 1998)*. The book deals with the period from 1989 to 1995 – the first years of the extremely hard attempts at political and economic transformation in Poland. This was the most crucial process in the country, though there were also additional processes - particularly the changes connected with religious pluralization and secularization which came about as a result of the events of 1989, when the old political and economic system collapsed and a new one was born and when Poland and other post-socialist countries opened up completely to ideas produced by the West. A great part of these ideas dealt with religion, religiosity and spirituality, and were reflected in the activity and beliefs of the New Age Movement, which was becoming more and more popular in Poland, and whose success put it into conflict with the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), which before 1989 had had a religious monopoly in Poland. The presence of all these groups, members of a so-called ‘Aquarian Conspiracy’, changed the religious landscape of Poland. There was an important shift from a situation of religious homogeneity (the domination of Roman Catholicism) in the direction of religious pluralism.

The first study was based on extensive empirical research, including analysis of various Catholic publications published in Poland between 1989 and 1995 (articles from about two-hundred Catholic press titles, the majority of popular books and all official documents and proclamations), and on a survey of the largest Catholic youth movement in Toruń, Poland (this community belongs to the so called ‘Oasis Movement’ which operates under the patronage of the RCC). In the conclusion of my analysis, I stated that in Poland we can observe three different types of reaction of the RCC to the NAM:

The decidedly negative reaction: this was the most widespread reaction, the characteristics of which include the conviction that the NAM was anti-Christian and had a “diabolical” origin, and the vision of an occult all-embracing ominous plot, which was aimed at Christians and was going to build the Devil’s Kingdom. In this option, very often secret connections between the NAM and different secret associations like Freemasonry were suggested.

The negative-neutral reaction: its exponents recognized the existence of immanent and insurmountable inconsistencies between the ideas of the NAM and Christianity and therefore recommended that Christians avoid the former. However, at the same time they advised tolerance to this movement, they did not use any highly emotional argumentation and did not refer to any conspiracy theory.

The positive reaction: this was the rarest reaction – it did not propagate mixing Christianity and the NAM’s ideas but admitted the possibility of

peaceful coexistence and treated the NAM as a positive challenge to Christianity and the Church. In this view, the Christian churches should ask themselves why people, especially the young, were leaving Christianity and joining the NAM. The NAM was a chance for the largely petrified Christian churches; they could learn from it how to be 'attractive' and reinforce themselves in peaceful competition with the Movement. The NAM was an opportunity for the RCC to rethink its position in the modern world and in people's hearts. (Olechnicki 1998: 77-108)

My second study of the problem was conducted at the beginning of 2006. I wanted to find out how the situation had changed after 10 years. The socio-economical context is to some extent the same because Poland is still undergoing transition, but this is now at a quite advanced stage. Poland has joined NATO and the EU. The Church has had some time to adjust to the new circumstances and the NAM has had the possibility to mature and show its full array of proposals.

The second study is based on empirical research, too, but it is limited to the newest data. I have analyzed more than a hundred titles of the Catholic press (published in 2006), Catholic books published in 2005 and 2006 and Catholic web pages. The internet is a new source of data which was completely absent at the beginning of 1990s while I was conducting my first research. In most cases it is impossible to determine the precise date of publication on the internet, so in this case I have included all available data without discriminating, and assume it is just 'current'.

While analyzing the Catholic press I browsed through several hundreds of issues of such titles as *Rodzina Radia Maryja*, *Przegląd Powszechny*, *Rycerz Niepokalanej*, *Przewodnik Katolicki*, *Posłaniec Serca Jezusowego*, *OAZA*, *Milujcie Sie!*, *List do Pani*, *Któż Jak Bóg*, *Źródło*, *Gość Niedzielny*, *Wzrastanie*, *Wieczernik*, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, and to my profound amazement I hardly noticed any direct remarks on the NAM. While analyzing the press published in the period 1989-1995 I had found hundreds of articles, essays, interviews etc troubled with the NAM, but now these had almost disappeared. The only interesting data I found dealt with the NAM in indirect form, i.e. it deals with books and movies about Harry Potter, with Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) and with one of the most popular topics at present – demonic possession and exorcisms. My second surprise was that all these references to the NAM were categorically and definitely negative. I could not find any voices which were similar to the reaction I labelled as "positive" in my first research. Moreover, the negative reaction was narrowed to the most uncompromising one, which argues that the NAM threatens the mental and moral health of the Polish nation, wants to destroy Christianity, is a devilish temptation, and is created or supported by Freemasonry.

Current Catholic books interested in the NAM are a rare specimen, too. There are, certainly, numerous books concerned with Harry Potter, *The Da Vinci Code* or with sects and demonic obsessions, but not with the NAM directly. And even when they deal with the NAM, as in the case of *ABC o New Age [ABC of the New Age]* (Białowas 2005), it is rather a collection of separated essays on a variety of topics

than a more general approach. This particular volume includes an article by the popular Polish demonologist and Catholic priest Aleksander Posacki SJ on esoteric knowledge, occultism and initiation as part of the NAM's structure, which is defined by him as explicitly anti-Christian (Posacki 2005a). In the same volume Dr Piotr Tomasz Nowakowski argues how the New Age influences schools by claiming various educational activities (Nowakowski 2005). Another author, Dariusz Pietrek, from Centrum Informacji o Sektach [Centre for Information about Sects] in Katowice claims that yoga and other Eastern meditation techniques are impossible to reconcile with being a Christian (Pietrek 2005). An article by Joanna Jarzębińska-Szczebiot and Marek Szczebiota deals with magic and Harry Potter and argues that JK Rowling promotes the NAM in her books (Jarzębińska-Szczebiot & Szczebiot 2005).

As I mentioned above, analyzing content published on the internet is difficult because it is usually impossible to establish the precise date of the publication. I surveyed the content of the most popular Catholic-oriented sites (including some anti-cult sites), such as:

<http://www.katolik.pl>
<http://apologetyka.katolik.net.pl>
<http://www.naszdziennik.pl>
<http://sekty.net/>
<http://sekty.info/>
<http://www.sekty.iq.pl>
<http://www.kulty.info/>
<http://www.effatha.org.pl>

The body of evidence on the NAM is not very impressive in terms of quantity. Partially it is also quite old – usually these are reprints of articles originally published several years ago in the press. I acknowledge that such inconsistency makes a part of my research (and conclusion) disputable, but I think that skipping internet data would be even more questionable. As long as this content is available it has to be treated as the current Catholic voice on the internet. Interestingly, again, these are very negative voices only. Let me present some examples.

According to Krystyna Potyrała,³ the NAM is a pseudo-religious movement and a contemporary form of occultism. The NAM lacks any restrictions, especially moral ones, because its followers believe that these would limit their freedom, and consequently they accept sexual promiscuity, drugs and abortion. They are victims of collective manipulation, which leads to personality disorder.

In the interview “Zrozumieć New Age” [“Understanding New Age”], Aleksander Posacki SJ says⁴ that the New Age undermines basic Christian truths. He states that every initiation into the NAM (such as engaging in Transcendental Meditation, energy healing or a simple visit to a fortune teller) stands against the true Christian faith and constitutes idolatry, a false cult. Marcin Krakowski, in his article entitled “New Age z szatanem pod rękę” [“New Age with Satan at Hand”],⁵ perceives the

NAM as the biggest threat to Christianity. The movement is difficult to define, but includes esoteric knowledge, occultism, magic, theosophy, Anthroposophy and ideas of the Rosicrucian Order.

Andrzej Wronka, from the Effatha Association, makes the case for Nazi traits in the NAM's origin and ideology, supported by typical anti-New Age syllogistic inference: the NAM is interested in occultism and Adolf Hitler was interested in occultism, which means that the NAM equates with Nazi ideology. Wronka also argues that Hindu belief in reincarnation equates with racism. Moreover, "it should be emphasized that a very important thing in the New Age is initiation ... expressed in the cult of Lucifer. Thus, the whole NAM is designed as a systemic, planned and intentional action which aims to destroy the Catholic Church ... and in its place establish a worldwide ideology which subordinates people to a global government. The NAM's principles include not only aggression but also direct elimination, extermination of people who would not subordinate themselves to this government".⁶

The most numerous mentions on the NAM can be found in indirect form in evidence devoted to the problem of demonic possessions, *Harry Potter*, *The Da Vinci Code* or specific new religious movements such as Scientology. In the article by "MP", "Szatan istnieje widziałem go" ["Satan Exists – I have seen him"]⁷ we can read about Italian psychiatrist professor Simone Morabito, who believes that numerous cases of demonic possession are typical of people using such services as fortune-telling, participating in black masses, listening to Satanist music. He thinks there is a plan to capture the power over the world by La Vey's Church of Satan – a plan created in California and now expanding everywhere with the help of the NAM.

Who is potentially endangered by the risk of demonic possession? Most people who expose themselves to the activity of evil forces: Satanists, clients of fortune tellers, astrologists, palmists, energy healers, individuals engaging in esoteric knowledge, occultism etc (Woliński 2006: 14-16). Scientology, reiki training, TM and yoga pose a threat for us (Zięba 2006: 28-31). Satan's menace is perpetuated through different ways of fortune-telling, energy healing, Eastern meditation, martial arts and alternative medicine, including homeopathy – which are ways of contacting demons (Knie-Górna 2006: 20-21). Exorcists say that major reasons of demonic torment are also reiki training, energy healing, reading *Harry Potter* and the Satanic Bible, occultism, New Age, parapsychology, feng shui, homeopathy, wearing talismans such as the Atlantis Ring (Szaniawski 2006: 16).

Very similar opinions may also be found in such books as *Od magii do opętania* [*From Magic to Possession*] by Andrzej Wronka (2003), in which demonic games and stories such as *Harry Potter* are included, or in Aleksander Posacki's *Egzorcyzmy, opętanie, demony* [*Exorcisms, Possession, Demons*] (2005b) in which the author looks for numerous forms of evil in contemporary culture, show business, or even science (psychology).

Harry Potter has become the most popular object of discussions, with frequent references to the NAM. It has divided its Christian readers into two camps.

Opponents accuse author JK Rowling of – among other things – promoting dangerous New Age ideas, but strangely enough even her supporters and defenders share anti-New Age sentiments, and their argument tries to prove that *Harry Potter* has nothing in common with the NAM. Let me analyze some examples.

Sister Joanna AVD considers⁸ yoga, astrology, martial arts or predictions to be transmitters of New Age, but in her opinion mass media are of the most crucial importance. Most stories shown in the cinema or on television tend to model a new mentality in which God means cosmic power or energy and humans are able to possess unnatural powers. The most prominent examples are such cartoons as *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *He-Man*, *Batman*, *Pokémon* and – certainly – the *Harry Potter* movies.⁹ Robert Tekieli demonstrates that such techniques as tai chi or the Silva Mind Control share with *Harry Potter* some characteristics: they are not innocent at all and they pretend to be something other than they really are. Their second common attribute is promoting toxic spirituality and occultism (Tekieli 2005, 2006).

Gabriele Kuby argues that the *Harry Potter* series of books is a long-term and worldwide project that aims at the basic human ability to distinguish between good and evil. Rowling shows misrepresented evil which leads individuals and the whole society to the acceptance of magic and other occultist practices (Kuby 2006). Kuby's book is often advertised by quoting Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's (now Pope Benedict XVI) letter to the author in which he thanks her: "It is good that you enlighten people about *Harry Potter*, because these are subtle seductions, which act unnoticed and thereby deeply distort Christianity in the soul, before it can grow properly."¹⁰

Aleksander Posacki SJ, in his book *Harry Potter i okultyzm [Harry Potter and Occultism]* (2006a) concentrates on deep analysis of magic and occultism omnipresent in culture and, particularly, in literature. The main part of the book is devoted to *Harry Potter* and JK Rowling, but he also deals with other examples of the relationship – both manifested and hidden – between fantasy and occultism or Satanism. Posacki argues that Harry Potter is not an example of innocent imagination and entertainment because it refers to subjects typical of occultism, esoteric knowledge and even Satanic cults. According to Posacki, the *Harry Potter* books and films put under children's noses artefacts and signs associated not only with a magical kingdom of imagination but also with the realistic realm of practical magic. These two worlds are confused and the border between them is, in fact, very unclear.

The problem is that the realistic realm of magic is connected with the occultist reality of evil, sin and Satan, which tend to enslave human beings. For example, such magical artefacts as the wands used by Harry Potter and his friends are known to be used for conjuring ghosts and evil spirits – there is a photo of famous magician and Satanist Aleister Crowley with a wand in his right hand. Posacki thinks there is no difference between good/white magic and evil/black magic, because they both evoke evil spirits, and actually Harry Potter sometimes uses black magic while defending himself.

Stanisław Krajski refers to Posacki's opinion, and asks¹¹ why some Catholics, even priests, defend and promote *Harry Potter* in spite of the proven harmfulness of this story? Is it stupidity, thoughtfulness, lack of responsibility or maybe paganism that mean the way of thinking introduced by the NAM is becoming more and more popular among some Catholics and prevails over less attractive Catholic proposals?

There are as many Catholic defenders of *Harry Potter* as there are enemies, although their voice is less audible and less publicized. Sister Edyta Pielas CSC expresses¹² the most frequently used arguments. She rejects the demonizing of *Harry Potter*, and is scared by voices who want to forbid reading Rowling. She thinks that such words as "occultism" or "Satanism" do not fit this book, just as they do not fit Andersen's or the Brothers Grimm's fairytales. Pielas notices that children who read *Harry Potter* do not treat magic as something real and do not even concentrate on magic in the way adult readers sometimes do. For them it is just an adventure story about friendship, about the struggle against evil, in which readers identify themselves with the forces of good. Pielas also criticizes the selective citation which is characteristic of *Harry Potter*'s foes, and accuses them of manipulation.

Harry Potter's supporters give a considerable amount of thought to the Christian dimension of this book. For example Aleksandra Kowal writes, "In the kingdom of magicians friendship, loyalty, honesty and courage count the most. The sacrifice of Harry's mother, who saves her little baby's life but in return sacrifices her own, is rightly recognized by many readers as a Christ-like type of sacrifice."¹³ In Kowal's opinion, *Harry Potter* has nothing in common with occultism, magic and black sorcery in the form of New Age. Jacek Dunin-Borkowski, a Catholic priest, supports¹⁴ the Christian interpretation of *Harry Potter*, placing it in line with Tolkien's Frodo. He agrees that Rowling's books may affect some people in a negative way, but also writes that no good book is protected from stupid readers – some most criminal sects are based on the Bible, but this does not mean that the Bible is a dangerous book. Dunin-Borkowski denies any connection between *Harry Potter* and the New Age, which he judges as spiritual rubbish.¹⁵

Sometimes, the NAM is recalled in the context of Dan Brown's bestseller, *The Da Vinci Code* (2003). Aleksander Posacki's analysis of Brown's book and the movie ties together all his favourite topics:

- *The Da Vinci Code* is anti-Catholic and anti-Christian
- It supports gnosis, which is identical to Satanism
- This kind of ideology is also propagated by *Harry Potter*
- Brown preaches New Age lies (e.g. that the Church burned 5 million women at the stake, while in fact no more than 80,000 were sentenced)
- Brown glorifies Masonry – based on gnosis and occultism – which is nowadays represented by the New Age Movement
- Masonry has organized anti-Christian and pagan revolution – one of the stages of this revolution was the Nazi movement in Germany¹⁶

The NAM has also been mentioned several times in reactions to the announcement of Tom Cruise's visit to Poland and the official introduction of the Church of Scientology. For example, in one article (Posacki 2006b: 40-41) Scientology is defined as a form of Gnostic self-worship with occult roots which propagates Buddhism, Hinduism and belief in reincarnation (c.f. Freemasonry or New Age).

Conclusion

It is evident that decreasing interest, even indifference towards the NAM means that the RCC does not consider it to be an important player anymore (the Vatican document *Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life*, which was published in 2003, was overdue: it discussed issues which had already become a dead discourse). What are the reasons for this re-evaluation?

First of all, the NAM's followers have got rid of the "New Age" label by themselves, as a result of the 'wishy-washy' and too general nature of the New Age agenda. The second reason is the commercialization of the NAM. The NAM's ideas have been absorbed by commercial capitalist enterprises, which convert them into mass products of consumer culture (sometimes completely contradictory to the very nature of the NAM). The introduction of the NAM to pop culture has generated 'pop New Age' – naive, infantile and unreal, characterized by the pursuit of sensationalism, but it has also popularized some New Age ideas very strongly and to such an extent that they are no longer associated with the NAM itself (e.g. the idea of positive thinking).

The third reason, at least in Poland, is the relatively successful stigmatization of New Age ideas as anti-Christian and dangerous, which narrowed the New Age discourse. Unfortunately for more liberal and open streams within the RCC, any reaction that treated the NAM as a challenge, not as an appeal to close Christian ranks against Satan's seduction, was weak from the very beginning, and is now almost absent. In the Church a negative attitude towards the NAM has prevailed. When the Vatican issued the above-mentioned document on the NAM, Bartłomiej Dobroczyński was right in his comment, "At the moment, in spite of pretences of accurateness and durability, the 'new age' – as a category naming a cultural phenomenon – seems to be something rather stale and misleading. There is much evidence that the vitality of this label is much more reinforced by adversaries than former adherents of the 'Aquarian Age' who for a long time have been unanimously distancing themselves from it."¹⁷ Now, even the New Age Movement's fiercest opponents seem to have put the case on the shelf.

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Notes

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² Reviewed by Katarzyna Zielińska later in this volume.

³ Krystyna Potyrała, ed, "New Age Nowa Era", <http://sekty.iq.pl/katalog/newage.htm>.

⁴ "Zrozumieć New Age. Rozmowa z Aleksandrem Posackim SJ", <http://www.katolik.pl/index1.php?st=artykuly&id=946>.

⁵ Marcin Krakowski, "New Age z szatanem pod reke", http://www.effatha.org.pl/zagrozenia/newage_3.htm.

⁶ Andrzej Wronka, "New Age", <http://www.effatha.org.pl/zagrozenia/newage4.htm>.

⁷ MP, "Szatan istnieje widziałem go", http://www.egzorcyzmy.katolik.pl/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=503&Itemid=0.

⁸ Sr Joanna AVD, "New Age modnym złudzeniem", <http://www.effatha.org.pl/zagrozenia/newage2.htm>.

⁹ <http://www.effatha.org.pl/zagrozenia/newage2.htm>.

¹⁰ "Pope Opposes Harry Potter Novels - Signed Letters from Cardinal Ratzinger Now Online", 2005, <http://www.lifesite.net/ldn/2005/jul/05071301.html>.

¹¹ Stanisław Krajski, "Opinie ks. Gabriela Amortha i o. Alesandra Posackiego SJ o 'Harrym Potterze'", <http://apologetyka.katolik.net.pl/content/view/393/89/>.

¹² Edyta Pielas SM CSC, "Prawa Harry'ego", <http://apologetyka.katolik.net.pl/content/view/809/89/>.

¹³ Aleksandra Kowal, "Harry Potter - dzieło szatana?", <http://apologetyka.katolik.net.pl/content/view/805/89/>.

¹⁴ Jacek Dunin-Borkowski, "Harry, Frodo i Jezus Chrystus", <http://apologetyka.katolik.net.pl/content/view/808/89/>.

¹⁵ Jacek Dunin-Borkowski, "Odczarować Pottera", <http://apologetyka.katolik.net.pl/content/view/806/89/>.

¹⁶ Aleksander Posacki SJ, "Kod Leonarda da Vinci, czyli 'bestseller kłamstwa' w 'filmowej propagandzie'", *Nasz Dziennik*, weekend edition, 117.2527, 20-21 May 2006, <http://www.naszdziennik.pl/index.php?typ=my&dat=20060520&id=my12.txt>; see also: Mikolejko 2006; Olson & Miesel 2006; Welborn 2006.

¹⁷ Bartłomiej Dobroczyński, "Już po Nowej Erze", *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 8.2798, 23 February 2003, <http://www.tygodnik.com.pl/numer/279808/dobro.html>.