

# **New Age: Philosophy, Religion and Parascience**

*Adam Zamojski*

*New Age: Filozofia, religia i paranauka*

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Adam Zamojski's book constitutes a significant contribution to research into the New Age movement. The scholar undertakes an attempt at profound analysis of this complex and multidimensional cultural phenomenon. The text is divided into four parts, which are subdivided into chapters devoted to more detailed issues. An advantage of the book lies in its systematisation of problems and terminology, in the form of diagrams and tables (9 diagrams and 12 tables).

The book begins with a chapter entitled "The Anthropological Concept of the Development of Human Outlook on Life". The author discusses the theory formulated by Andrzej Wierciński in his book, *Magia i religie: Szkice z antropologii religii* [*Magic and Religion: Essays in Religious Anthropology*] (1994). This text provides the basic source of inspiration for Zamojski, as he constructs and systematises his own views applying the key notions of Wierciński's theory. The essential role is played by the concept of the Ideological Controlling Subsystem, which determines man's cultural adaptation, mainly by creating a common outlook on life. Although Zamojski avoids precise definitions of the movement, he seems to accept Wierciński's and Jerzy Prokopiuk's (2001, 2003) concepts, often quoted in his book. The author writes:

In the case of New Age we are dealing with the entire range of alternative subculture oriented towards the future, in which the joining element consists of a common outlook on life and the related value system. This factor integrates its partisans into the movement and defines their practical activities (p32).

In this part of the book, the author analyses the main phases of the development of human outlook on life, as well as the perspective of further ideological evolution, which includes, in Wierciński's opinion, New Age.

Part II is devoted to the characteristics of the New Age movement. Zamojski classifies the phenomenon as a "precession era", indicating the sources of ideological inspiration. In order to systematise the problem, he applies the block scheme of the New Age doctrine genesis as formulated by Andrzej Wierciński. Among the most representative sources he mentions gnostic sects, esoteric Judaism (Cabala), occultism, spiritism, magic, neopaganism, theosophy, psychology, psychoanalysis, psychotechniques, and even masonry. An extensive chapter is devoted to a presentation of the life and Anthroposophy of Rudolph Steiner, who is considered an influential figure by most supporters of the movement. Teilhard de Chardin and George Ivanovich Gurdjieff are also mentioned as predecessors of the New Age. A valuable contribution to the research into the movement constitutes the presentation of neopaganism as a source of search for new spirituality, described in terms of "old

religions of the New Era". Zamojski focuses upon Celtic druidism, German Odinism, Wicca, feminine paganism, and shamanism. The next chapter is entitled: "Counterculture and Popular Ideas". The author, describing the characteristic features of counterculture, formulates the thesis that "It is impossible to mark the precise boundary between the New Age Movement and counterculture" (p126). Zamojski applies Wierciński's scheme, classifying functional elements of counterculture. Following Wierciński's opinion he concludes that most features of counterculture are present in mass culture, except for countercultural postulates of social changes.

Chapter III begins with a presentation of New Age spiritual centres. Zamojski mentions the Californian Esalen Institute, the Institute of Noetic Sciences, the Ken Keyes Center, and the Findhorn Foundation. Chapter IV includes an analysis of conceptual categories of the New Age. The discussion is based upon arbitrarily chosen notions which can be found in philosophy, religion and parascience. The author selects the following notions as the most typical ones: network, cosmisation, monism, pantheism, reincarnationism, divinised man, and also discusses such terms as occultism, spiritism and divination. Thus we can say that he successively moves from the theoretical considerations towards practical applicability of ideas. In this chapter he also describes the elements of occultism and outlines, in religious terms, the portrayal of Maitreya, the awaited Messiah of the Age of Aquarius. He claims that the concept of Maitreya was derived from the views of the Theosophical Society (Alice Bailey). Further, taking into account the findings of science, he presents the holistic concept of reality referring to Fritjof Capra and the bootstrap hypothesis formulated by Geoffrey Chew. New physics is supposed to provide foundations for a scientific outlook upon the world and the change of paradigm in science. In the framework of science, he extensively analyses the essence of holistic medicine and its related practices.

Part III of the book is entitled "Applications". It constitutes a continuation of former considerations concerning practical applications of the New Age ideas. The author discusses the practical aspects which have been widely promoted since the very beginning of the movement by its founders (Marilyn Ferguson), and thus contributed to its enormous popularity. Chapter V focuses upon psychotechnology of the New Era and the phases of consciousness transformation, as a result of which the new consciousness is finally shaped. The phases of consciousness transformation are shown in a relevant table. Moreover, in the same chapter the author explores selected psychotechnologies, such as autogeneuous training introduced by Johannes H Schultz, koan, EST – Erhard Seminars Training, Jose Silva's Mind Control Method, Gurdjieff's system, Wilhelm Reich's method, rebirthing, and others. Zamojski introduces the reader to the practical aspects of consciousness training methods. The next, sixth chapter of Part III is devoted to ethics. The author outlines the theoretical background of the contemporarily dominant ethical outlook. He provides interesting examples of motivation seminars for the staff of large corporations. On the basis of the collected evidence, Zamojski concludes that the impact of New Age can be observed even in the training courses of international corporations, which apply the ideas of creativity and success programming (e.g. the Pacific Bell

telecommunications company in the U.S.A. has organised Kroning courses). Within the general assumptions of New Age ethics, principles of moral relativity are highlighted, and the author indicates that axiological problems constitute one of the New Era's weaknesses. On the other hand, the ecological ethic is defended, as represented in Poland by Henryk Skolimowski (1999). The assumptions of Skolimowski's ecophilosophy and spirituality are opposed to the "ethics of the machine". As far as economic problems are concerned, Zamojski emphasises the New Age criticism of traditional economics with its glorification of economic expansion and material profit. In his criticism, the author refers to Ernst Friedrich Schumacher, concluding that we are witnessing an emerging (*in statu nascendi*) ecophilosophical outlook. Its characteristics are provided in a table devoted to the widely accepted notions of New Age, such as ecocentrism, nature as mother, cosmos as entirety, eco-development, technology subordinated to moral culture, decentralisation, balance of feminine and masculine elements, sense of transcendence.

In Chapter VII, the author continues his analysis related to disciplines "considered today as parascience in the circle of Western civilisation" (p298). He concentrates on the educational aspects of New Age. It was Capra who postulated the necessity of a holistic approach towards pedagogical problems, and Rudolph Steiner who applied these ideas in the school system, states Zamojski. He believes that holistic pedagogy is akin to the trend represented by Andrzej Wierciński, as the New Era society is to be oriented towards self-realisation which can be achieved, among other things, by educating young people. This process assures the internalisation of constitutive standards included in the Ideological Controlling Subsystem. Zamojski also refers to Prokopiuk's view that the Anthroposophical thought of Rudolph Steiner constitutes the cultural and civilisational essence of the New Age Movement. Comparing Anthroposophy with the New Age, the author tends to expose differences rather than common features. He claims that, "It seems that it is wrong to connect Anthroposophy with New Age. One can rather speak of appropriation by New Age of selected examples of Rudolph Steiner's Anthroposophical concepts" (p316).

Part IV of the book consists of Chapter VIII and the conclusion. In the chapter, the author moves back to Andrzej Wierciński's concept, and analyses the New Age in terms of the Ideological Controlling Subsystem. After Wierciński, he adopts the hypothesis of a new pan-universal evolutionary phase in religion development, which will embrace all mankind. This new pan-universal religion will find its foundation in new spirituality. Spirituality is understood by Zamojski as: "[A]n existential standpoint based on intuitive cognition and full acceptance of *Summum Bonum* (the highest value) through internal experience" (p318). The author even claims that the Ideological Controlling Subsystem of the New Age already exists *in statu nascendi*.

In the final section, tables comprising general characteristics of the New Age are presented. The following concepts are quoted: Aquarian millenarism, syncretism, holistic paradigm, feminism, complexity of human nature, the problem of divination,

occultism, self-realisation, alternative culture, global communication and commercialisation.

In conclusion, Zamojski sums up his analyses of the movement, performed in terms of philosophy, religion and parascience. Firstly, he concentrates on the philosophical aspects of New Age, grouping them in particular realms of philosophical investigation, namely metaphysics, epistemology, anthropology, axiology (ethics and aesthetics). He impresses the reader with his knowledge of New Age art, particularly music. Furthermore, he compares this movement to postmodernism, applying the similarity-difference key. However, in the conclusion he states, "It seems that within the trends mentioned there are concepts which make them both close and distant to each other. Therefore the total identification of these two does not seem justified" (p346). Zamojski offers no solution to the problem of whether the New Age is a philosophy. In fact, even though this movement aspires to become a "new philosophy", it is impossible to define the New Age in terms of a philosophical system or trend, as it only includes certain elements of philosophical languages selected arbitrarily from various competitive theories, in which they quite often possess radically different meanings.

Far-reaching changes have already occurred within European philosophy; not only the Copernican revolution initiated by Kant and continued in phenomenology, but also new trends have appeared, such as existentialism, personalism and philosophy of dialogue. All these philosophical theories share common ideas which confirm the subject-oriented viewpoint on man and the world. Zamojski does not answer the question whether the New Age will cope with the confrontation of two differentiated types of philosophising, represented respectively by Western – so much criticised by the New Age – and Far Eastern philosophy – one of the major sources of its inspiration. Will this 'new philosophy' adopt traits from both these trends, which it would be possible to translate into a common language of philosophical experience in hermeneutics? Or will it entirely subordinate itself to the fashion of postmodernism?

In the table related to New Age religiosity, Zamojski enumerates the following issues: eclectism, naturalism, attitude towards traditional religions, and – in perspective – universalisation. Following Wierciński, Zamojski assumes that the New Age will transform into a pan-universal religion, with its corresponding institutional forms. In his design, they will substitute the notion of relationship organised by the net of people united in conspiracy.

The concept of parascience introduced in the title of the book suggests a Western viewpoint, criticising the alternative approach to science originating in the Far Eastern tradition. From the alternative viewpoint represented by holistic sciences, the author analyses physics, medicine, economics, deep ecology, pedagogy and education, as well as system projects in the sphere of political science. Although we can consider as parascientific numerous disciplines mentioned by Zamojski, there are also some fields, like deep ecology and alternative medicine, which today are no longer treated as parascience.

In the New Age, the paradigm of holism is transmitted to the field of philosophy, religion and science, as an adequate way of perceiving and interpreting the world. In accordance with this holistic principle, the New Age aspires to create a new world. Yet, in this new world, neither new philosophy nor new religion and science can emerge out of nothingness – the New Age cannot bracket the cultural heritage of mankind. Taking into account the fact that the New Era evolution is dynamic and unpredictable, it is difficult to say which shape will be assumed by new reality: whether philosophy will become a new religion, or religion a new philosophy, and if science will prove the necessary character of the former disciplines.

The analysis of the text inclines us to conclude that the author's main postulates implied by the book's very title have been fulfilled. While describing the New Age in philosophical, religious and scientific categories, Zamojski does not definitely state what New Age is. Yet the impression is given that he is inclined to recognise it as a pan-universal religion based on spirituality.

The greatest value of the book lies in its objective way of presenting ideas. The other merit of the text is its original research method based on Wierciński's theory. The book will be of interest to everyone – both experts and people who are not yet familiar with the phenomenon. Zamojski's concluding remarks could become an inspirational source for further research questions:

The concepts of New Era are valuable. Yet, there occurs a risk of their commercial abuse which is more serious than anywhere else. They may be transformed into a specific "opium of the people". The New Age, aspiring to become a universal ideology, can become a mild tyranny, which will destroy all cultural and religious differences without making use of violence. Despite all its ambiguity, the New Age seems to indicate one thing. We are witnessing a complex process of changes in almost all spheres of human activity – philosophy, religion, science, art – a process which embraces the entire culture. (p358)

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