

## **New Age After All**

*Anna Eleonora Kubiak*

*Jednak New Age*

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During the last decade, despite a decreasing active social interest in the New Age movement, an increasing interest in it among social scientists has been noticeable in Poland. When the scent of freshness and novelty of New Age had fallen down, many sociologists, cultural anthropologists and psychologists were interested in the matter in Poland, among whom Tadeusz Doktor (1994, 2002), Bartłomiej Dobroczyński (1997), Dorota Hall (2007), Krzysztof Olechnicki (1998) and Anna E Kubiak should be mentioned. Each of these academics has his or her own, individual perspective and uses different research methods, thus making academic discussion in Poland on the problem of New Age even more interesting and fruitful.

Kubiak's book consists of: an introduction, four major parts, closing remarks, a bibliography and an additional list of New Age literature (called by the author "the Little Library of New Age"). The author maintains the proportions of each of the four parts, entitled as follows: Part I: New Age paradigms, Part II: Cultural foundations of new spirituality, Part III: New Age in Poland, Part IV: New Age – episodes.

In the introduction, Anna E Kubiak describes her understanding of New Age as "embracing various contemporary phenomena, that developed from the second half of the 1970s: interest in unconventional therapies and psychotherapy deriving from humanistic psychology, parapsychological, soothsaying and astrological practices, extra-religious cultivation of religious and philosophical traditions of the East (e.g. Taoism, Buddhism, Sufism, yoga) and West (e.g. Theosophy, Anthroposophy, Rosicrucianism, Gurdjieff's teachings), the traditions of North America's Indians, shamanism" (p12). The author clearly considers New Age "as a phenomenon separate from so-called New Religious Movements" (p12).

Later on, Kubiak briefly introduces anthropological and sociological understandings of the term "New Age", and characterizes the sociological and anthropological academic discourse on New Age in Poland as well as abroad. There is also a very brief presentation of the roots of New Age in Poland. The author finishes the introduction with a short sketch of her research project. She states the general method – "a hermeneutic approach, where the researcher is the research tool" (p20) – and goals of research, which were collecting data on New Age centres, their activities, the social characteristics of the participants, changes in the participants' consciousness and activities influenced by new experiences, social bonds within Aquarius circles and the religious aspects of practices. In this part the author also presents the research methods used in the project, which were participant observation and a questionnaire.

The first part of the book is divided into three chapters: “The Teachings of New Age”, “Healing cosmology and anthropology”, and “Vitality and psychologization of New Age”. Each of the chapters consists of particular subchapters. Firstly, Kubiak wonders if it is correct to discuss science in the context of New Age’s teachings, or whether it may be better to use the term “para-science” in this situation. She concludes that using “para-science” in characterizing New Age teachings would be a subjective, negative evaluation of the phenomenon, and suggests using “science” as a more neutral term. After these considerations the author describes a New Age paradigm characterized – according to her – by synthetic thinking, holism, the presence of an ultimate source of reality, an evolutionary vision of the world as a system and organism, a dynamic vision of human organism, and the importance of immanent transformation of consciousness.

The second chapter on New Age paradigms is devoted to practices of healing present in the New Age movement, treated by Kubiak as Luckman’s invisible religion. The author considers healing not only as treatment practices, but also as a particular vision of humankind and the world constituting people’s lifestyle and identity (p51). The last chapter of the first section is on the psychological understanding of the body in New Age, human power and the body’s processual character.

The main subject of the book’s second part is, the author argues, the most important aspect of New Age: new spirituality, which is considered in the context of a postmodern culture (p69). In understanding postmodernity Kubiak refers to Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of postmodernity as modernity liberated from false consciousness. However, Kubiak, when writing “it can be said that New Age is and is not modern or postmodern” (p76), states that New Age cannot be reduced only to one of these cultural orders and that it represents some elements of modernity and postmodernity as well.

Kubiak agrees with Paul Heelas (1996) that New Age is a continuation of European culture, yet she seeks new elements in the phenomenon. She considers planetization – the presence of New Age concepts in almost every place in the world in multiplied and differentiated forms – to be such an element in New Age. This process is possible because of globalization of contemporary culture and mass communication. Kubiak then mentions some features of postmodernity present in New Age, such as: absence of subject, time and space limits, autonomy of particular elements, holism, transformation, humour and confluent communities.

In the next chapter, the author analyses elements of tradition and the process of detraditionalization in New Age with reference to Paul Heelas. New ways of treating or using traditional religious and spiritual plots like individualization, selectivity and consumption are also characterized in this chapter. Additionally, Kubiak writes about religious and spiritual innovations and relativization as new elements in traditions present in New Age. The chapter is completed by a brief description of New Agers’ identity as fragmented, fluent and temporary.

In the third chapter of the second part the author focuses on the spirituality of New Age, starting by considering whether the term ‘religiosity’ or ‘spirituality’ is more appropriate in describing humans’ relationship with the sacred; ultimately she says that the second term “can show the experience of *sacrum* in postmodern culture in a better way, that [the experience – MZ] is characterized by fragmentation, discontinuity, uncertainty, ambivalence, constant asking and doubting, increase in the possibility of choosing between dogmas, traditions, fractions and interpretations of tradition” (p104). However, after this statement she seems to use both terms interchangeably. Kubiak characterizes New Age spirituality and/or religiosity as privatised, *à la carte*, religiosity of experience, patchworks, bricolage, invisible religion, describing briefly each feature of the phenomenon.

The last chapter of the second part of the book is entitled “Languages of a new spirituality: Tower of Babel or glossolalia?” In this short (8 pages) chapter Kubiak depicts New Age language as: “mixed poetics: religious, scientific, magic, artistic, advertising, psychotherapeutic” (p120). She considers language in a wider perspective of common thinking and popular culture. Eventually she comes to the concept of dissolved myths, which she characterizes as: stereotypical, snap, empirical, distributive, generic, individual, occasional, a confluence of myths and symbols of various traditions. Concluding, she states that the language of New Age is just like glossolalia, expressing an experience too emotional to be expressed in any other established religious language (p127).

The third part of the book is mainly based on Kubiak’s own empirical research, both qualitative and quantitative. She starts from drawing some portraits of possible combinations of New Age elements composing the identity of a person. The representation of combinations was inspired by Kubiak’s observations of real New Agers. Later she describes two places representing New Age in Poland: first, the foundation “In service with life”, and second, the “Mandala” centre. In these descriptions Kubiak uses her observation material and interviews with people engaged in these two activities.

In the second chapter, entitled “Circles, initiation paths, understanding of spirituality”, Kubiak refers to her quantitative research, conducted between 1998 and 2000 mostly in three large Polish cities: Warsaw, Łódź and Krakow. 460 questionnaires were analysed, each consisting of 22 questions. The author discusses the results of her research, comparing them with other research conducted in Poland in 1999 by an independent research institute (SMG/KRC). The research analysis focuses on eight major themes: the beginnings of New Age interest among respondents; the important, known, living leaders of New Age in Poland; recognised New Age literature; social contacts; communication with other New Agers; ways of understanding spirituality; belief in the New Age; and religiosity. In conclusion the author also mentions some features characteristic of New Age in Poland that differentiate the phenomenon in Poland from that in the USA or UK.

The next subject described by the author is the consumption aspect of New Age present mainly at many festivals organized in big cities in Poland. Kubiak limits her

considerations in this chapter to a description of the wide offer of different kinds of goods available to consumers, such as: healing tools and other remedies, treatments, workshops, lectures and education courses, recreation opportunities, books, and works of art. New Age art is also the main subject of the last chapter of Part III; it is omnipresent, according to Kubiak, in almost every field of New Age – art of healing, art of therapy, art of breath and many others (p171). The author describes several features characteristic of New Age art, like absence of sharp limits between art and other phenomena, eclectics, humour, to mention but a few (pp171-172). She then distinguishes four New Age paths of art: path of cultures of ‘the Other’, path of forbidden culture, path of counterculture, and path of culture for sale.

In the last part of the book, Kubiak focuses on and characterizes some other important themes of New Age like: death, feminist spirituality, UFOs, New Age heroes, and elements of the tremendum in New Age. In her concluding remarks, Kubiak emphasises some features she considers the most important for the New Age phenomenon: characteristic spirituality open for all traditions based on individual experience, using psychological and psychotherapeutic methods, characteristic symbolism, paradigms of unity, evolution, mutual relations and dependences, and a new *élan vital*. She also stresses the postmodern character of New Age manifested not in a new mythology or other new contents but in a new way of treating and using the old ones in creating an individual bricolage.

After this quite detailed summary of the book, some evaluating comments are necessary. The book *New Age After All* by Anna Eleonora Kubiak should be considered as a very important contribution to Polish academic discussion on the contemporary New Age phenomenon.

First of all, the author brings the worldwide sociological and cultural discussion on New Age closer to the Polish reader, describing and discussing the concepts of contemporary academics among which only two – Heelas and Bowman – will be mentioned. Secondly, she puts the theoretical concepts in the specific empirical context of Polish society and tries to name some specific, characteristic features of New Age members and phenomena in Poland, using empirical data. Thirdly, Kubiak shows in the book a very wide perspective of various elements that can, or even should, be treated as New Age themes, which is very inspirational for the reader.

Unfortunately, the author has failed to avoid some imperfections, among which terminological inconsistency when writing on religion and/or spirituality should be noticed. From the text it appears that the author considers the term “spirituality” better in describing the New Ager’s approach to the sacred, but later in the text the terms “religiosity” and “religion” are used for this purpose interchangeably with “spirituality”. This gives the impression that the differentiation of these two terms is really not important for the author, even though she devotes a whole chapter to this problem.

Secondly, I had the impression that the results of such a long, combined qualitative and quantitative (the combination as such is an obvious advantage of the research

project) research should be used more widely in analysis and interpretation in the book. Instead of a deep interpretation and analysis we only find a brief presentation of the results, in one part of the book. This gives a sense of insufficiency in this matter to the reader because we can presume that the empirical material was rich and gave more opportunities for interpretation and deeper reflection. These imperfections, though, should not discount the obvious advantages of the book.

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