

## **New Age: The Church and the Challenges of Aquarius**

*Krzysztof Olechnicki*

*New Age: Kościół wobec wyzwania Wodnika*

*ISBN 83-85505-75-X*

*Warsaw: Oficyna Naukowa, 1998 - pp127*

New religious phenomena have for several decades now drawn scholarly attention in Poland. However, in comparison to the popularity of this topic in North America and Western Europe, New Age is not widely discussed in Polish academic literature – which is not surprising considering that it is a relatively new phenomenon in Poland. Though Krzysztof Olechnicki's book was published a few years ago, for several reasons it still deserves attention. Firstly, the author gives an interesting insight into the topic of New Age. He introduces the reader to the existing research (mainly Western) that presents the ways New Age is conceptualised and theoretically approached. Secondly, he proposes his own reinterpretation and approach to the subject. Finally, he offers an interesting case study. The latter part makes the book a particularly interesting piece of work.

Olechnicki offers a short introduction to the theory of social movements as a background and justification for his own understanding of New Age phenomena as a new social movement and an alternative culture. He contrasts theories of so-called “old social movements” with theories built to explain the emergence and activities of “new social movements”. The former theories – which the author calls “sociological theories” – stress the structural and organizational aspects of social movements. According to these approaches, social movements were to be a response to structural inequality, the existence of socially underprivileged groups or conflicts of interest. The latter, “psychological” theories undermine the inability of the old institutional order to address the problems emerging from the processes of modernization and industrialization. These new problems – affecting all aspects of life and therefore difficult to classify into the private or public sphere – are the origins of new social movements. The aim of these new movements is to defend certain values and make steady, evolutionary changes to society (pp31-34).

In the second chapter of the book, Olechnicki shifts his attention to presenting the various aspects of the New Age movement. He discusses the internal contradictions of New Age – e.g. on the one hand condemnation of technology, and on the other its wide use for the sake of spreading the ideas of the movement. He also discusses the problem of membership. Is self-perception necessary for someone to be counted as a member, or is acceptance of some ideas of New Age culture sufficient to perceive someone as a member of the movement? The latter standpoint seems to be accepted by the author.

The most interesting fragments of this part of the book are those consisting of the author's attempts to construct his own definition of the New Age and those aiming to reconstruct an alternative vision of reality offered by the movement – elements of the alternative culture, as the author calls it, which is at its core. Before giving his own definition, Olechnicki provides a selection of existing definitions of New Age

offered by scholars interested in the topic. In relation to these propositions and referring to his earlier review of literature on social movements, he defines the New Age as a contemporary, new social movement that involves individuals and groups integrated by shared elements of alternative culture mainly of oriental origins. The movement rejects Western civilization as materialistic and hostile to people and the environment. It announces the beginning of a new era, a time when an ideal form of society and culture will be established, achieved by the fusion of evolutionary spiritual transformations of individuals. In other words, the change of the existing order will be a result of changes at the individual level (pp48-52).

The perception of New Age as a new social movement offered by the author stands in contrast to its interpretation in the field of sociology of religion. In the latter, New Age is treated as a phenomenon related to personal or individual experience, often described as self-spirituality. As Grace Davie points out, the sociological debate surrounding New Age and self-spirituality, "... is an area of enquiry in which the emphasis is personal rather than corporate – individuals are free to explore a wide diversity of beliefs and practices guided by internal motivations" (Davie 2007: 164). Olechnicki's definition, while an interesting and inspiring approach, does not elaborate on this topic, and various elements of it are not further explored in the part of the book dedicated to the existence and perception of the movement in Poland.

In the understanding of New Age as a new social movement there is also one element which is not sufficiently clarified. According to Claus Offe, new social movements are created by participants, undertaken actions, volunteers, informal networks of cooperation and donations. So there is no formal organization, roles or representatives, no fees and programmes, but still there are collective actions undertaken by participants (Offe 1985). These actions aim to change the existing social order and culture. This is an element missing in Olechnicki's understanding of New Age as a new social movement. According to his definition, the dawning of a new era will be the result of transformation of individuals. The mechanism of this change or the way in which the individual and social levels of action are linked is not explained.

In the second chapter Olechnicki also gives a short introduction to New Age's visions and values, constituting an alternative culture to that dominating in a modernistic society. The process of modernization, according to this view, has a self-destructive effect, leading to social and individual anomy, a feeling of despair and aimlessness in the life of individuals. All these phenomena are perceived as signs of crises that will result in transition to New Age (p45). Supporters of the New Age movement believe that, "... the emergence of the Age of Aquarius is related to the identified astronomical changes of the universe. The Age of Pisces, characterized by chaos, contradictions and domination of Christianity, is replaced by the Age of Aquarius, symbolizing wholeness, harmony and equality of all cultures and religions" (p47).

The New Age movement stresses the significance of ecology and a new, less aggressive and environmentally friendly way of using and applying science and

technology, elevates femininity and equal inclusion of feminine values in culture and society, and appreciates non-scientific ways of acquiring knowledge (e.g. intuitive, revelation). The most important element of this alternative vision of culture and society is so-called re-enchantment of the world. As Olechnicki stresses, “The New Age movement sacralises the entire reality, aims to make religious experience more individualistic and less ritualized ... rejects dogmas and Churches as hierarchized mediators between God and humans.” (p73)

This element of the New Age outlook is especially important in the light of the author’s further deliberations and research, developed in the third chapter of the book. This part concentrates on the attitude of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland towards the New Age movement. After the fall of Communism in Poland, the opening of the borders resulted among other things in the emergence of new cultural trends, various new religious movements and the phenomena of New Age and self-spirituality. These new trends did not pose a real threat to the dominant position of the Catholic Church in the Polish society, but their presence was perceived by the Church as a challenge requiring decisive action.

Olechnicki’s efforts to present a detailed picture of the Church’s attitude towards New Age analyse various materials – Catholic books, articles and official documents – using the method of content analysis. Additionally, the author conducted a survey among the members of the ‘Light-Life Movement’ Catholic youth group. An interesting picture emerges from the materials he analysed. For the description of reactions towards New Age movements Olechnicki develops the categories built by Peter Berger. The latter distinguishes two ways for a religious organization to cope with ideological/religious pluralism. The first position – rejection – means denial by the organization of the existing reality, stiffening its own position, fundamentalist reactions and attempts to discredit opponents. The second position means adaptation to the new situation, acceptance of the rights and existence of other actors on the religious scene (p79). Taking into account the results of his own research Olechnicki extends Berger’s typology. He divides the rejection category into two types of reactions, definitely negative and neutral-negative, and adds the ‘mixed’ category.

The results of the research show that the most common Church reaction towards New Age is a definitely negative attitude. This is visible in the publications of Catholics and priests as well as in the opinions of higher hierarchy. The critical voices undermine the anti-Christian character of the movement and its “devilishness”. Moreover, all new religious phenomena are included in the category of New Age. Excerpts and statements used by Olechnicki as illustrations of this standpoint clearly show an oversimplified and strongly negative picture of the movement. Even the generation of younger Catholics seems to share this negative attitude. Results of a survey clearly indicate that all respondents hold very negative opinions and refuse to converse and coexist with members of the New Age movement (pp80-95).

In the category of neutral-negative reactions, Olechnicki includes opinions which stress the insurmountable differences between Catholicism and New Age and warn

against participation in the movement, but recommend tolerance towards its members. The opinions included in this category are less demagogic and emotional than those included in the first (pp95-99). The third attitude, as Olechnicki points out the rarest, is treating the movement as a challenge to the Church requiring adaptation to the new, pluralistic reality. The Roman Catholic Church has a chance to learn from the movement how to become attractive and make evangelical actions more effective. All voices stress that, “the emergence and dynamic development of the New Age movement should become a stimulus for changes in the Church and start a spiritual transition of Christianity” (p104). Olechnicki also distinguishes a mixed category, in which he counts opinions including positive and negative attitudes towards the movement.

The results of the author’s own research are interesting, but what seems to be missing is a wider context. Granted, the strong negative reactions of the Catholic Church in Poland towards New Age do result from the history of the relationship of the nation and society with the Church. However, such a negative reception of new actors on the religious scene is not limited to the Roman Catholic Church in Poland. As Eileen Barker stresses, in many countries of Central and Eastern Europe hostility towards new religious groups and New Age stems from the fact that “the movements are perceived as foreign, as a threat to the security of the country and in direct competition with the traditional, national religions” (1997: 36). Putting the Polish case into a wider context would definitely complement the picture.

All in all, Krzysztof Olechnicki’s book is an interesting introduction to academic literature on New Age. Each part of the book concentrates on a different aspect of the movement and constitutes a separate entity. This gives a diverse picture and can therefore be seen as an advantage, but as a result the book gives the impression of being less coherent. Olechnicki also presents the reactions of the Roman Catholic Church, the dominant and most influential religious organization in Poland, towards the relatively new (at least in Poland) and scattered phenomenon of New Age in the first decade after the fall of Communism. This may serve as a good starting point for research on the contemporary attitude of the Church towards new religious phenomena and tracing the changes in the Church’s position. Certainly, the author should be commended for his role in being among the first to analyse this topic in such a detailed way.

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