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The views of the leaders of the New Age movement on traditional religion

Abstract. This article presents how religion and its role in human life were understood by the creators of the doctrine of the New Age movement. Due to the fact that the New Age movement lacked formal structures and codified teachings, I demonstrate the views expressed by leading figures who contributed towards the doctrinal basis of this movement. They were: Marilyn Ferguson, Fritjof Capra, and David Spangler. I also refer to the authors from outside of the ranks of the New Age activists whose works became important sources of inspiration for the New Age doctrine. I present their main propositions regarding the nature and function of religion, as well as the end-purpose of its existence. However, in the course of the analyses of the views of those authors it was not always possible to ascertain whether they spoke of religion as such or one of its specific forms which is Christianity. So, I first discuss their position on problems caused, according to them, by the fact that religion is one of the fundamental elements of culture, and then, in the second part of this article, I reconstruct their views regarding one particular religion: Christianity.

Keywords: New Age movement, religion, Christianity, culture

Introductory remarks

A reviewer of my book on the New Age movement (Ptaszek, 2015), published a few years back began by asking a fundamental question: “Having in mind the failure of the idea of the ‘Age of Aquarius’ and the natural death of the New

Age movement in the 1990s., and witnessing, on top of that, all the astounding, violent shocks that the Western World is going through now, is there any sense in reminding of this particular subject-matter today?” (Stępień, 2016, p. 353).

In the further part of the review the answer was affirmative, because “the cultural consequence of the New Age movement was [...] a new concept of spirituality, inseparably linked to the contestation of the previous understanding of it, as well as the previous understanding of the role of religion in the Western culture. [...] The idea of spirituality without religion and conceiving of spirituality in purely psychological terms is in fashion today [...] even in the academic world” (Stępień, 2016, p. 353).

That is why I am going to present, how the leaders of the New Age movement understood religion and its role in human life. I will reconstruct their views on the nature and functions of religion and the end-purpose of its very existence. But before that, I will briefly characterize the movement itself. It will not be super-easy as the New Age movement was full of contradictions.

New Age movement – a brief characteristic

The movement proclaimed coming of a new era in the history of humankind: the ‘Age of Aquarius’. When defining the key ideas of the movement, Marilyn Ferguson wrote: “After a dark, violent age, the Piscean [that is, the Christian era – R.T.P.] we are entering a millennium of love and light – in the words of the popular song, ‘The Age of Aquarius’, the time of ‘the mind’s true liberation’. [...] A different age seems to be upon us; and Aquarius, the water bearer in the ancient Zodiac, symbolizing flow and the quenching of an ancient thirst, is an appropriate symbol” (Ferguson, 1980, p. 19).

Despite such grandiloquent declarations and particular popularity gained in the 1970s, already by the end of the 1980s the movement lost its cultural importance.

The specificity of the New Age movement consisted in the following:

1. The movement was lacking in formal structure. For this reason, one cannot point out the founders of this movement, only its leaders who contributed the most to the movement’s emergence and development. The views expressed by the most prominent of those leaders will be presented in this article.
2. The movement was also lacking in established set of statements and norms the acceptance of which would constitute a prerequisite for membership in the movement. In this case, what we had at hand was a range of individually advocated concepts and positions. Therefore,

what I call 'the doctrine of the movement' was not a coherent system of statements but rather a type of mentality that mixed scientific, philosophical, mystical, and religious ideas, views, and beliefs.

Two currents of the New Age can be distinguished as regards the aims pursued and methods used: scientific (also known as "high New Age") and commercial ("low New Age"). Representatives of the latter were mainly occupied with publishing tutorials and distributing props and tools vital for a person to conform with the New Age lifestyle. They were, among others, energy-providing crystals and pyramids, garments, vinyl records and magnetic cassettes with music that would help meditating, and selected groceries.

The scientific current of the New Age, which this article is focused on, brought together representatives of various disciplines. They shared the conviction that the coming of a new era is near, and it would be a time of profound transformation of both individual and collective consciousness. In other words, the New Age was a vision of reality created by authors mutually inspiring one another through a network of informal relations; a vision based on both openly disclosed and hidden philosophical assumptions; a vision that was meant to justify the rejection of traditional religions, as well as the need for new forms of spiritual life.

The best known leaders of the movement were Marilyn Ferguson, Fritjof Capra, and David Spangler. Exceptional role of Marilyn Ferguson was decided by the fact that her book, *Aquarian Conspiracy. Personal and Social Transformation in Our Time* (Los Angeles 1980), was the first comprehensive presentation of the movement, detailing not only the movement's objectives but also the means by which they were to be achieved. In her last book, *Aquarius Now: Radical Common Sense and Reclaiming Our Personal Sovereignty* (York Beach 2005), Ferguson attempted to demonstrate that, despite the passage of years and the changes that have taken place in the modern world, the goals pursued by the New Age movement are still valid. Only methods that allow for their effective realization need to be modified. However, this thesis of the author was not accepted and the book did not gain much popularity. Ferguson's proposal was considered an attempt to "enter the same river for a second time," which, as we know, is not possible.

Fritjof Capra, in turn, provided in his writings the most comprehensive exposition of the doctrine of the movement. With regard to this, three of his books were of particular importance: *The Tao of Physic. An Exploration of the Parallels Between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism* (Berkeley 1975), *The Turning Point. Science, Society and the Rising Culture* (New York 1982) and *Belonging to the Universe. Explorations on the Frontiers of Science and Spirituality* (San Francisco 1991). David Spangler was the author who became known not

only as an important co-creator of the New Age doctrine but also, at a later date, as an insightful critic of it. He authored many books concerning the New Age movement. I consider the following Spangler's books to be particularly important: *Revelation: The Birth of a New Age* (San Francisco 1976), *Towards a Planetary Vision* (Forres 1977), *The New Age Vision* (Forres 1980), *Emergence. The Rebirth of the Sacred* (New York 1984) and *The New Age* (Issaquah 1988).

The New Age leaders on religion

The New Age movement emerged within the Western cultural circle. For this reason, Christianity represented the 'template religion' for the leaders of the movement, as it constituted one of the foundations of the Western culture. This, however, caused a number of problems and misunderstandings. They all stemmed from the fact that Christianity, especially in its institutionalized form, is very diverse. Apart from the largest, Catholic church, it is made up of 350 other churches. This is the number of member-churches of the World Council of Churches – WCC.

When attempting the reconstruction of the views of the leaders of the New Age movement on religion, yet another issue appears: we cannot always establish clearly, whether those views concern religion as a part of human culture or religion in one of its concrete forms, that is, Christianity.

To arrange this issue in an orderly fashion, I will first discuss the views of the movement's leaders regarding the problems caused, according to them, by the fact that religions are embedded in the foundations of every culture. In the second part of this article I will discuss the accusations directed by those leaders against Christianity.

The leaders of the New Age movement were critical towards existing religions. The following were their three main objections:

1. Religions failed to make human beings better and achieve world peace. They are responsible for numerous conflicts and sufferings. Therefore, religion as such, religion in its very essence, has failed.
2. Religious institutions established in the West have irrevocably lost their culture-forming and inspiring role they had enjoyed in the past. Therefore, the time of religion is gone.
3. Religions are obstacles hampering the development of new forms of spiritual life. Therefore, the new spirituality should be of an individual and informal nature.

On this basis, the movement's leaders concluded that the continued presence of traditional religions in modern societies is redundant.

It is easy to see that the criticism of the social role of religion presented by the New Age movement referred to the views developed as early as in the 19th century, which considered religion as a means of enabling people to accept all the evil that happens to them in life, that is, speaking the language of Marx, as “opium of the people” (Marks, 1960, p. 457f). It should also be remembered that, in this perspective, religion turns out to be a phenomenon that is harmful to human beings. This perception of religion leads to the conclusion that it should be rejected as soon as possible.

Although the New Age movement accepted the main thesis of Marxist critique of religion, it sought to limit the influence of traditional religions on people's lives in a different manner. Marxism, which emphasized the primacy of economic factors, considered changing unjust social relationships the most effective way to overcome religion. According to New Age authors, in order to reject religion, the relationship between man and God had to be defined in a new way. By recognizing the human being as a being that is by nature divine, the doctrine of the movement indicated that this being was fully capable of finding the path of its spiritual development completely on its own. Such a being, such a person, does not need religion in its current form.

It should also be stressed that New Age authors often used the terms ‘religion’ and ‘mysticism’ interchangeably. In addition, they used definitions of religion that were general and imprecise. It resulted from them that religion is primarily “the encounter with mystery, something we remember from our peak experiences” (Capra, 1991, p. 13). Such a term became the basis for the New Age leaders to distinguish between private religion (shaping the spiritual life of specific people) and religion as a cultural phenomenon. As a result of such a distinction, the authors connected with the movement focused their interests on private religion, the one that was said to be subjective and emotional in its character. Less interest was shown in religions actually functioning in culture.. However, they emphasized the need to deal with this issue as well.

It has to be admitted that New Age movement set itself ambitious goals. It wanted to provide new methods by which people would express their spiritual experiences. Thus, it initiated the process described by Marilyn Ferguson as transition “from religion to spirituality” (Ferguson, 1980, p. 367).

One has to keep in mind, however, that Ferguson was thinking about the new spirituality which is usually called ‘the New Age spirituality’. This way, it is distinguished from the important element of the Western culture which is Christian spirituality, manifested most prominently in asceticism and mysticism.

The New Age spirituality was understood as the human ability to ask questions about where we come from, who we are, and where we are going, together with activities aimed at the harmonious, psychological and corporeal development of the human being. Furthermore, the end-purpose of this was different from that of the traditional religions: self-realization took place of salvation, and the emphasis was put on the material aspect of human life that included good health, longevity, and harmony with the environment and the cosmos.

According to the New Age doctrine, the key part of spiritual experiences was how powerful and unique they were. But in promoting techniques allowing to maximize such experiences the leaders of the New Age movement forgot that the quality of a religious/spiritual experience was never measured by its intensity but rather by the impact this particular experience had on the rest of a human life.

The reduction of religion to the sphere of spirituality allowed the creators of the New Age doctrine to consider their movement as a path of human, spiritual development that presents itself as an alternative to traditional religions. They believed that the New Age doctrine encompassed everything that was positive in Western religiosity and, moreover, enriched spiritual life with elements taken from Far Eastern cultures. They justified the need to refer to religious traditions of the Far East by pointing out that these traditions focused on the sphere of mystical experiences. Those experiences, in turn, were said to play a particularly important role in the spiritual life of man.

The position of the New Age representatives on the issue of religion can be described as "religious pluralism." It is based on the *a priori* belief that different religions speak differently about one and the same divine reality. According to this view, the differences between specific historical religions concern primarily the language they use when speaking about God, as well as culturally conditioned forms of reference to divine reality. So they are not important enough to grant any of them exceptional status or priority. All religions therefore constitute equal paths for man to divine reality. These paths are ultimately intended to lead to the discovery that, in seeking a distant god, people were actually seeking their true (divine) nature.

The acceptance of "religious pluralism" understood in this way caused the New Age movement to adopt a syncretic attitude, which manifested itself in the desire to combine beliefs and forms of their expression from different religions. The representatives of the movement tried to ignore important differences between them, concentrating on extracting from individual religions their common core, which, according to them, were the methods enabling contact with the generally and imprecisely understood *sacrum*. This allows

us to recognize that the search for ways to quickly and effectively get people in contact with the divine sphere is the essence of New Age spirituality. The value of these ways was assessed primarily pragmatically – the main criterion was their effectiveness. In their writings, New Age authors discussed and recommended numerous techniques of spiritual development, both mental and physical. They were particularly eager to use meditation and dance. Marilyn Ferguson in her book *Aquarian Conspiracy* (Ferguson, 1980, p. 77–87) presented a detailed list and description of the most important techniques of this kind.

However, the use of awareness-enhancing techniques recommended by the movement has led to numerous problems in practice. These were mainly due to the fact that the rapid spread of techniques of spiritual development, which have so far been elitist in nature, has led to the blurring of the differences between the actual religious experience – for example, the mystical state – and the various forms of imitation of this experience, usually limited to the creation of strong emotional states. People, entering *en masse* the world of spiritual experience which was hitherto inaccessible to them, and thus almost unknown to them, had no criteria which would allow them to distinguish between these two different kinds of experiences, which affect people in different ways.

The ultimate result of the syncretic fusion of various religious traditions, as proposed by the New Age, was such spiritual development of the human being that would “release a new spiritual force transcending religious, cultural, and national boundaries into a new consciousness of the oneness of the human community and so putting into effect a spiritual dynamic toward the solutions of the world’s problems We affirm a new spirituality divested of insularity and directed toward planetary consciousness” (Ferguson, 1980, p. 369).

According to the New Age leaders, the ‘conciliation of religions’ thus conceived of should have contributed to an ever faster decline of the traditional forms of religion in modern societies. While proclaiming such a thesis, however, they overlooked the fact that, apart from the doctrine (i.e. a system of proclaimed truths), every historically confirmed religion also involved a system of worship (i.e. the ways of contacting the deity) as well as institutions which integrated the worshipers by conveying the doctrine and principles of conduct.

But in the eyes of the New Age leaders those latter elements were of no significance, as the spiritual life of a human being was now supposed to be based on a direct and subjective experience of the divine. Marilyn Ferguson explained it as follows: “Ironically, every organized religion has been based

on the claims of direct experience of one or more persons, whose revelations are then handed down as articles of faith. Those who want direct knowledge, the mystics, have always been treated more or less as heretics, whether they were the medieval mystics within Christianity, the Sufis within the borders of Islam, or the Kabbalists within Judaism. Now the heretics are gaining ground, doctrine is losing its authority, and knowing is superseding belief” (Ferguson, 1980, p. 371).

New Age and Christianity

Although the Christian religion served as a reference point for the movement, it was a kind of ‘negative inspiration’. The leaders of the New Age assumed that Christianity – founded on the conviction that there is one, universal truth (the truth that comes from God) – is a form of religion unacceptable in a modern, pluralistic society. They believed that Christianity represented a form of religion belonging to the epoch that was about to end.

They also believed that Christianity had diverted from the original, pure teachings contained in the source that was crucial for the entire culture of the West, that is, the Bible. Thus, it “has become a religion about Jesus instead of being the religion of Jesus” (White, 1996, p. 359). This particular objection was not an original invention of the movement. It can be found in printed materials of Jehovah’s Witnesses and other, Bible-based alternative religious movements.

Randall N. Baer described the attitude of the New Age movement towards Christianity as a “complex of spiritual superiority” (Baer, Rouvillois, 1996, p. 257). This attitude was characterized by Baer as follows: “Generally, the New Age recklessly rejects Christianity [...] as a limited, exclusive and tight relic of the old era, which belongs to the past. [...] It is astonishing how little time New Age people devote to serious reflection on [...] theological differences between them and Christianity. With a smile of understanding on their faces and a few worn-out clichés, they reject Christianity as something outdated, limited and deformed, something almost undeserving of serious [...] inquiry” (Baer and Rouvillois, 1996, p. 256).

This explains why the leaders of the movement did not see any need for, nor any possibility of, dialogue with Christianity.

The desired state of affairs for them was that in which Christianity will no longer have any formal, institutional aspect to it, and will be limited to spirituality only. According to them, Christianity must be based on subjective feelings, and, on top of that, must resign of dogmatic statements, institutions,

and be contained exclusively in the sphere of personal and private experiences. I have serious doubts as to whether Christianity thus understood is still a religion.

Especially, given what David Spangler pointed out: “If the experience of inner God is not complemented with live experience of transcendental God, He becomes an idol carved in the image of our own personality. When this occurs, we become even more limited than before, having lost the sense of what could [...] help us transcend ourselves” (Spangler, 1984, p. 154).

Conclusions

As the author of a hefty volume on the New Age movement (Ptaszek, 2015) I'd like to leave you with the following thoughts:

(1) As regards religion, the position taken by the leaders of the New Age movement turned out to be influential and inspiring in three different ways:

- Firstly, against consumerism, they reminded of the importance of spiritual values for the proper development of every human being.
- Secondly, against traditional religions, they demonstrated the need for, and the meaning of, individual searches and experiments in the spiritual sphere of life.
- And thirdly, against the statements of classical philosophical anthropology, the human being was attributed by them with the unlimited (almost divine) ability to create and transform the world it lives in.

(2) This vision of religion was also significantly flawed. The main reason for it was the conviction adopted by the leaders of the movement that the area of influence of religion can be limited to the sphere of subjective, emotional experiences. This conviction is wrong (at least from the philosophical point of view), as it leads to the conclusion that the main purpose of religion is to provide people with pleasant and satisfactory spiritual experiences and developing human self-consciousness in such a way that human beings could discover God in themselves.

However, this oversimplified image of religion has led to serious problems. These were mainly due to the fact that the subjective religion was not subject to any external control mechanisms. Thus, any action that was an expression of a person's emotional experience could be included in the sphere of religion. This risk was limited in Christianity in such a way that individual human experiences were subject to control by external mechanisms developed by various religious institutions. The lack of such mechanisms in the New Age movement must have led to the emergence of falsehoods and abuse.

For, while remaining on the basis of the principles of the movement, no attempts could have been possibly made to verify the views expressed by various self-proclaimed teachers and prophets. Thus, the New Age movement often referred to the religious ideas of authors whose activities were subject to a number of specific accusations (e.g. Helena P. Blavatsky), or those who could not convincingly explain criticism directed against them. Such practices were collected and described by Martin Gardner in his book (Gardner, 1988).

(3) The fact that some elements of the New Age spirituality have earned a well-established place in the modern culture shows that Western societies of today have not lost the need to seek out ways of spiritual development. The New Age movement gained popularity because it was an attempt to indicate such ways. It lost its popularity when it turned out that its spiritual offer failed to deliver the promised results.

According to David Spangler, those who affiliated themselves with the New Age movement did so because they were inclined to continuously seek new and fascinating experiences and psychological sensations. In his view, this attitude was a result of the transposition of the consumerist model of life into their spiritual lives. Such a “spiritual consumerism” consists in “individuals and groups living out their own fantasies of adventure and power, usually of an occult or millenarian form. [...] The principal characteristic of this level is attachment to a private world of ego-fulfilment and a consequent (though not always apparent) withdrawal from the world. On this level, the *New Age* has become populated with strange and exotic beings, masters, adepts, extraterrestrials; it is a place of psychic powers and occult mysteries, of conspiracies and hidden teachings” (Spangler, 1984, p. 78).

Spangler also rightly evaluated the consequences of the position taken with regard to religion by the New Age proponents: “New Age may represent a danger, when it is accepted as a new ideology or an exclusive movement. By establishing a dichotomy of [...] the old age and the new one, it merely follows the pattern of errors committed the past. [...] It does not bring about any transformative elements, but only conflict and, ultimately, a failure” (Spangler, 1988, p. 11).

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