
SCIENCE AND RELIGION IN THE NEW AGE MENTALITY

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Abstract

In the context of current economic, political and social crisis, also cultural and religious space reconfiguration, New Religious Movements, especially the New Age, know a great success in European and American West. They include, among others, a mixture of science, Christianity, Eastern spirituality, ancient mythology and relaxation/recovery practice. In Romania after 1989, the New Age mentality manifests itself in subtle forms and relatively difficult cognitive. Why? How to explain the interest and success of these ideas and social practices? We speak of a future, 'knowledge-based-society', by the New Age?

Keywords: new religious movements, New Age, Christianity, science, religion

1. What is the New Age?

Etymologically, the New Age would be translated as 'the New Era', 'The Ark of the New Start' [1]. The spiritual cultural and historical beginnings of the New Age Movement are still controversial [2]. Nowadays, the New Age is a major social movement in certain parts of the European and American West, but with a composite character. It is placed "in the sphere of influence of environmental attitudes, but calls for a background of religion and paganism as old as the world" [3]. The New Age ideology combines psychoanalysis with meditation and Oriental contemplation, Sufism with yoga and ancient pre-Christian rituals in unprecedented formula.

It has as challenging cause "the lack of effervescence of ritualism, the quest for the affective element in a different sacredness" [4]. It is about a sacredness based on initiation and mystical techniques, on ecstatic experience and not only on the formalism of Christian dogma and on the exclusively social activities of the Church. It stimulates "the human unused potential" of the brain, but also the inner strength that live in the human being [4, p. 49]. Everything aims at creating a new human model, in line with the new cycle of time that will be, in astrological terms, under the sign of Aquarius.

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2. The astrological meaning of the New Age movement

The original meaning of the phrase New Age is an astrological one. The people from ancient pre-modern times knew well that the Sun goes through each constellation in about 2100 years. In order to pass through the entire cycle of the zodiac, the star would need 'only' 26.000 years. In ancient mythologies the figure was symbolically represented by 'The Great Cosmic Year' also called 'Platonic Year'. This one didn't identify itself with the secular year, which began on January, 1st. Thus, 'the cosmic year' folded perfectly on the yearly cycle of seasons. It started on March, 21st around spring.

From the astrological perspective, New Age would mean exactly the switching from the Pisces sign to the Aquarius sign. The symbols of Pisces and Aquarius are complex enough. From the Christian perspective, Pisces would represent Jesus Christ himself and the Aquarius would represent the Holy Spirit. 'The New Era', that of Aquarius would be represented exactly by the ubiquitous presence of the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Trinity. Thus, elements of Christianity are retrieved, interpreted and assumed without any formal consent of the Churches by the New Age movement.

At the same time with this passage, mankind will, in Damian Thompson opinion [5] enter into the forth Vibrating Plan. The direct consequence will be the rise of a new spiritual power. The long expected passage from *homo sapiens* to *homo spiritualis* will take place. It would fulfil a dream of European occultists and esoterists of many 'secret societies', mystical groups and Masonic lodges, [6] of the regeneration of the human whose destiny is marked by the fall into the guilt.

Even at this level there will be important risks. Having the Christian gift of freedom, one can choose right or wrong. There are huge risks: man can choose badly, uninspired, the path of his future. Therefore, the New Testament's prophecies regarding the new Heavens and the new Earth might not be fulfilled.

The situation announced by the visionaries of the New Era is much similar to the old Tibetan's *bardo state* and in this case the man who is in the passage between life and death is obliged to choose his own future. The exact timing of this destiny hand over between Pisces and Aquarius was and still is controversial. The New Age 'prophets' originally placed it in the period 1950-1997.

Their 'predictions' not being confirmed, it was recently promoted the year of grace 2012 as one of formidable changes. Why 2012? For the simple fact that on the 22nd of December of this year the calendar of the Maya civilization, the most mysterious of the whole pre-Columbian America will suddenly end. Many New Age publications in the 90's, as *The Mayan Prophecies* by Adrian Gilbert and Maurice Cotterell "also warn about the terrible misfortunes that will take place in 2012, although this time it is about some sunspots the Maya mysteriously anticipated" [5, p. 263].

3. The sociological components of the New Age mentality

Beyond all these apocalyptic versions of astrology type, the movement New Age, these days, is presented within the History and Sociology of religions as a denominational group structured on a histrionic assembly of scientific knowledge (Astronomy, Physics, Biochemistry, etc), astrology, and magic, esoteric and paranormal.

In this strange alchemy of recomposing a new cosmic time, there were mixed its arguable authors and absolutely respectable scientists. Some of the New Age 'prophets' we have already mentioned. Now is the time and to invoke and the respectable names assumed by the leaders of the New Era. They are Fritjof Capra and Theilhard de Chardin, Carl Gustav Jung and Marshall McLuhan, etc.

Why should appeal to them? In order to give more credibility to the philosophy of the New Era and to prove that in the end, all the remarkable minds converge towards the creation of the 'planetary consciousness' of the 'new man', as an inhabitant of the Earth in the third millennium. The latter will have to give up norms and prejudice, tradition and his own religion. They are ideologically embellished by the New Age movement, thus they would not argue with anyone and anything.

Regarding the social background of the New Age movement, the sociology of the religions considers that "until today, its' overwhelming white and *middle class* component of the New Age movement betrays the fact that its' roots come New England home both of spiritualism and theosophy" [5, p. 229].

Other authors go even further. Thus, the American sociologist of religion Robert Ellwood presents New Age as a *spiritual alternative* to the official culture in Europe which roamed through the catacombs of several Christian centuries [5, p. 230]. It would first manifest as Renaissance occultism and as the Rosicrucian Movement, as the eighteenth-century Freemasonry and as the spiritualism and theosophy in the nineteenth century.

Sociologically, the New Age has been interpreted - by Edgar Morin, for example - as a form of social reaction, clear and deep, towards Marxism and the current consumer society [6, p. 81]. Astrology would be a capital component of 'the new gnosis', typical for the age of Aquarius.

Another essential component from scientific point of view of the New Age mentality is the one that brings into focus *environmentalism*. The ecologist movement of the New Age movement is important and actual. Swearing on the Rousseau's *Social Contract*, the members of the New Age movement have developed an advanced millenarism which aims to the returning of man to nature, thus being reintegrated into the ecosystem. Intentionally the 'greens' as a New Age party, demanded protection of nature and sexual freedom, peace, but also the right to interruptions of pregnancy, anti-authority education and the legitimacy of freely expression of opinions. In one word, everyone wants today a new era of tolerance and a new type of man for this era [2, p. 141].

4. The religion in the New Age mentality. The representations of Jesus Christ and the motif of personal initiation

All together already configures the portrait-robot of the *New Age man*. This strange mutant destined to populate the Earth in the next millennium, cultivates remarkable difference compared to the classic man of the universal cultures and religions. How? First, by challenging the traditional Churches and the old, consecrated rituals.

According to New Age thinking, none of the great ecclesiastical hierarchy of the world did not have success at significantly changing the human society. According to New Age movement leaders, no traditional religion could change the essential human being. The preaches democratically expressed, say the New Era proselytes, did nothing but to bore the new generations. They do not say anything. They are just words thrown in the wind.

Then something else is needed. Among others, a single religion, universal, one that is corresponding to the expectations of all. In order to submit such type of religion was also the need of an efficient cultural and historical justification. Therefore, they appealed to the great names of the universal civilization.

A simple example. Among the New Age movement precursors could be situated also writers, great artists who refused “in fact all Judeo-Christian values and Greco-Roman or Renaissance ideals” [6, p. 71]. Is it, among others, about Baudelaire and Verlaine, Lautreamont, Rimbaud and Andre Breton.

In terms of Christianity, the New Age movement theorists have understood from the beginning that their success is deeply conditioned by recomposing the Christ figure and the reinterpretation of Christ’s mission in the world. Therefore, the classical model of salvation in Christ was strongly under the sabotaged by the taste for heresy of the New Age generations. Their ‘Christ’ is without the relics of the dogmas, ending by being put on the same level with all forms of spirituality in the world. The result is a ‘cocktail’ and an exaggerated pantheism that recomposed Christ’s figure in an absolutely unconventional manner. In order to have arguments it is sufficient to consult the ‘revealed’ texts of the spokesmen of the New Age movement: Helena Petrowna Blawatsky and Alice Bailey, Benjamin Creme and Marilyn Ferguson, etc.

The name of Helen Blawatsky is connected directly to *the Theosophical Society* and *the New World Society*. Christ is here especially invoked when the attention is on the ‘Great White Brotherhood’. It is a spiritual college, of a maximum refinement, composed of ‘chosen men’ who escaped from the unfortunate chains of the laws of reincarnation. Free and installed in a seraphim way, somewhere in the sacred geography of the Himalayas, these rule the world unseen, serving from the yet material bodies of some very special human beings. More specifically, Christ, The Universal Teacher, would be a spirit of the ‘Great White Brotherhood’, and Jesus his humble disciple, the human instrument of its presence in the world.

Alice Bailey also interprets in a cosmopolitan manner the figure of the celestial Son. The Christ preached by her is far from being one and the same as in the New Testament's texts. On the contrary, he captures by an unusual 'generosity', taking over into a soteriologic embrace the adepts of all religions and denominations in the world.

The 'prophet' Benjamin Creme keeps the classical distinction of the New Age school between Christ and Jesus. The former has already long been incarnated on Earth. His public epiphany should have taken place in 1982. It was however cancelled in the last minute because of the fact that the world's public opinion is not interested in it. Some time ago [5, p. 233], the same Benjamin Creme announced with maximum satisfaction the imminent arrival of a messianic figure: Maitreya. Once he would have arrived, all the bad in the world will end: "people will end these separations in a devised world; poverty and hunger will vanish; old wounds will heal; the mistakes of the past will be forgiven. And the sons of men will begin their journey towards the divinity." [5, p. 233]

The New Era religion still continues to be a very special one, absolutely unprecedented. Its creation recipe has long been published and known. They take a bit of Christ in Christianity and it is mixed with the cosmic vibrations of subtle energies. Then is poured a prophetic juice mixed with a few cubes of ancient gnosis. Then is mixed well with modern powder of environmental manifests, after which the whole combination is left to ferment into a 'spiritual darkness' until it is obtained a new 'soul of the world'. In the end, at the Great *new age style* Feast, each can eat after his/her needs, until they reach the state of enlightenment and liberation from the curse of Karma.

We are convinced that this religion of the New Era is a form of individualism based of religious ignorance and metaphysics and also is caused by the unfulfilled expectation by the traditional religions. This individualism might mark in an essential manner the social mentalities of the new millennium. Why individualism? For two reasons. On one hand, because the New Age tries to replace the classic figure of the living God, revealed, from Christianity. This will have the caricatured image of a cosmopolitan Christ, totally different from the neo testamentary character and which delivering *individual* recipes for salvation.

On the other hand, the *New Age* movement is individualistic because relies heavily on the motif of *personal initiation*. In the script of the New Age salvation, the Church and the ecclesiastical institutions have already become reasons for doubt and dissatisfaction. They would have simplified the sacramental liturgy and would have diluted somewhat the mystery of the sacred, ending by the heavily disappointing the spiritual appetite of the new generations.

This idea is also announced by Mircea Eliade [6, p. 65-90], when he talks about the rejection of the *religion – mystery* and the *personal initiation* when he speaks about the denominations of the western Christianity. This fact turned against Catholicism nowadays and against the forms of neo protestant Christianity meaning that more young people sympathise or are members of the

New Age movement and are fascinated by the old pre Christian practices, by the Gnostic elitism and witchcraft understood in the meaning given by Margaret Murray [6, p. 77] as a form of survival of the pre-Christian cults of fertility and fecundity. Always, New Age sympathizers were also fascinated by the initiating scenarios of the Eleusinian mysteries. Here, under the sign of the gods Demeter and Persephone, anyone might have come, but in the end remained only the best.

The salvation was absolutely *individual* and was obtained by the own spiritual effort. This is exactly what the New Age movement tries to bring forward when it invokes with urgency the motif of the *self salvation* through techniques and rituals gathered from absolutely every world's traditions [2].

5. Nowadays aspects of the New Age movement

For having success in attracting minds of good and very good quality, New Age has adjusted to the actual social and historical moment. Thus, the nowadays situation of the New Age movement is somewhat different from what happened between 1960-1989. Disappointed by the unfulfilling of the 80's prophecies many New Age adepts have left the movement.

Though, the apocalyptic ideas of the New Era exert a growing fascination. The leaders of this new religion have recently changed even their passions and strategies of persuading the public opinion. They are less interested in mass proselytise being more interested into individual marketing practices. They distribute books, video tapes, CDs, DVDs and correspondence courses. They often have – online or directly – seminars in which they privilege Philosophy, Science or Theology. They are oriented mainly towards the motif of the apocalypse and towards the fascination of the millennium's end.

As support for the refreshment of the New Age mentality, we believe we can point out the motifs that inspire the successful novels among the contemporary public all around the world. First of all, we take into consideration *Harry Potter*, Dan Brown's books and the cinema productions from Hollywood that cast famous actors in ordinary movies, but with topics absolutely non conformist: magic, theurgist, the imminent apocalypse, shamanic type initiations, astrology in a post modern manner, and especially, soteriologic techniques based on old magical – religious rituals from the world's most exotic places.

In conclusion, this eclectic offer (religion, philosophy, science) New Age type might be one of the serious challenges of the new millennium addressed to the modern man and/or post modern one. The presence of the New Age mentality might signify, mainly, 'the end' of the old world and maybe anticipates the new religious, scientific and spiritual forms that the third millennium will bring along.

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