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Prospects for Practicing the Sociology of Esotericism in Studies on the New Age. Characterisation of Selected Standpoints

ABSTRACT

The article consists of two parts. In the first, the perspective of practicing the sociology of esotericism is outlined and its major research issues are indicated, with particular focus on studies on the New Age. The second part comprises a brief presentation of selected standpoints of Polish researchers exploring the New Age and some of their sociological threads are highlighted. The aim is not so much to recapture the state of the research into the New Age in Poland but rather to highlight the motifs which are comprised within the prospective practicing sociology of esotericism in studies on the New Age.

KEYWORDS

sociology of esotericism, New Age, secrecy, conspiracy, counterculture

What may get the discussion underway is the justification of the need for practicing the sociology of esotericism. This might help to avoid an accusation of yielding to the tendency of excessive specialisation. Such a justification seems even more necessary due to the fact that the issues of the New Age have been present in sociological studies but discussing them within the sociology of religion or spirituality ignores some important threads which may be

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explored by the sociology of esotericism. This problem concerns not only studies on the New Age but also on esotericism itself – the Western esoteric tradition in particular. In his manifesto, an article dedicated to the outline of practicing the sociology of esotericism, Kennet Granholm notices that although the research into Western esotericism has become a specialised sub-discipline of scientific religious studies, it applies mostly a historical perspective and ignores the sociological one,¹ which Granholm tries to outline. Similarly to the sociology of religion, the sociology of esotericism would explore the following aspects of esotericism: 1) beliefs, 2) rituals, 3) religious experiences, 4) community.² As Granholm claims, the current studies on Western esotericism have omitted the demographic aspect (age, sex, social class). What is also worth analysing are the organisation, aims, rhetorical strategies and images as well as drawing attention to the relations between Christianity and esotericism or between secularisation and esotericism. After all, a very significant element of the sociological analysis of esotericism (referring to the New Age in a particular way) concerns the presence of esotericism in popular culture (films, books, music) and on the Internet. In this study, which involves the possible practice of the sociology of esotericism (exemplified by the output of Polish researchers dealing with the New Age), many of the earlier mentioned motives will be taken into consideration. At this point, however, due attention should be drawn to the definition of esotericism itself as it is of key significance in the prospective practicing of the sociology of esotericism. The aspects and subjects of analysis which Granholm distinguishes are analogous to those discussed within the sociology of religion. Therefore, any success in the project of practicing the sociology of esotericism consists of a precise differentiation between esotericism and religion. With some doubt whether

¹ K. Granholm, *The Sociology of Esotericism*, [in:] *The Oxford Handbook of The Sociology of Religion*, ed. P. B. Clarke, New York–Oxford 2009, p. 783. The expressions exposing in the name itself this sociological orientation towards studies on esotericism or occultism appear sporadically. One of the few exceptions is Edward A. Tiryakian, who used the phrases “Sociology of Esotericism,” “Sociology of Esoteric Culture,” and also “Sociology of The Occult Revival” (see: E. A. Tiryakian, *Acknowledgments*, [in:] *On the Margin of the Visible. Sociology, the Esoteric, and the Occult*, ed. E. A. Tiryakian, New York–London–Sydney–Toronto 1974, p. XI; idem, *Toward the Sociology of Esoteric Culture*, [in:] *On the Margin of the Visible...*, op. cit., pp. 257–280. The expression “Sociology of Occult” is also used by Marcello Truzzi (M. Truzzi, *Definition and Dimensions of the Occult: Towards a Sociological Perspective*, [in:] *On the Margin of the Visible...*, op. cit., pp. 243–255). “The Sociology of Esotericism” is mentioned by Wouter J. Hanegraaff as well (W. J. Hanegraaff, *On the Construction of “Esoteric Traditions”*, [in:] *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion*, eds. A. Faivre, W. J. Hanegraaff, Leven 1998, pp. 11–61).

² K. Granholm, op. cit., pp. 787–791.

such precision is possible, the research focus should be on the key issue (in all projects regarding the sociology of esotericism) – the sociological analysis of secrecy (what is secret, veiled with mystery). Exploring the subject matter of secrecy, the social generation of secrecy, the mechanisms for generating esoteric knowledge along with its transmission, seems to be a major task allowing for the differentiation between the sociology of esotericism and of religion.

Highlighting the category of secrecy also helps to distinguish the reflection on the New Age within the sociology of esotericism from undertaking this within the sociology of spirituality. The interest scope of the latter obviously comprises some cases of spirituality, including New Age spirituality; however, not each case of spirituality belongs to the area called esotericism. Despite the appropriateness of Edward A. Tiryakian's standpoint, according to which the sociology of an esoteric culture is a part of the sociology of culture,³ what seems equally apt is the proposal for sociological reflection on esotericism (with emphasis on research into occult knowledge) within the sociology of knowledge. It is of fundamental significance here to distinguish esoteric knowledge from exoteric knowledge. In his introductory remarks to *On the Margin of the Visible*, edited by Tiryakian, he introduces a suggestion for consciousness analysis in esoteric doctrines and occult practices. This is written in the spirit of the phenomenologically oriented sociology of knowledge. As Tiryakian writes: "A social order is organized around the knowledge of reality which is shared and accepted by the majority of its members [...]. It is the 'common sense' knowledge with which we interpret the world around us, our relations to the social and physical environments, and so forth."⁴ This knowledge comes from two kinds of sources: direct (provided by the senses) and indirect (for example, from books). It is the knowledge publicly shared and publicly accessible. Yet, there is another kind of knowledge – transcending the visible, knowledge not for everyone, simply put: esoteric knowledge. In the esoteric tradition, two kinds of this knowledge can be distinguished: safe and unsafe knowledge, owing to which the ultimate reality can be reached – the "Right Way" and the "Left Way."⁵

Such a broad understanding of esoteric knowledge, comprising both the "safe" and "unsafe" knowledge, is associated with the fundamental question: how to differentiate these two kinds of knowledge? The sociological dis-

³ E. A. Tiryakian, *Toward the Sociology of Esoteric Culture...*, op. cit., p. 263. Tiryakian also notices that studies into esotericism comprise many sociological sub-disciplines: sociology of knowledge, art, religion, or deviation (ibidem, p. 272).

⁴ Idem, *Preliminary Considerations*, [in:] *On the Margin of the Visible...*, op. cit., pp. 3–4.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 7.

course here consists in recognising that the answer is rooted in the “sociological power” of the group capable of imposing their definition of the situation. The term *esoteric knowledge* (or in the more narrow sense “dangerous” knowledge) is attributed to the knowledge which cannot count on the legitimisation of the dominating social institutions. From this point of view, the discourse in the categories of dominating culture and counterculture still seems to be attractive, provided it is conducted in the perspective of the sociology of esotericism rather than the sociology of culture. Thus, differently from Kennet Granholm’s standpoint, the attempts at defining esotericism in the categories of counterculture (or the cultural underground of society)⁶ are consistently recognised here as scientifically revealing. Yet, it is worth highlighting the category of secrecy in the analysis of esotericism understood in countercultural categories.

The sociological master of the issues of secrecy was Georg Simmel, who provided this category with some sociological elegance. His concept of secrecy as a “general sociological form” contains a kind of countercultural load. Simmel notices that: “Secret relations come into being especially in those epochs when new contents show resistance towards the ruling force [...]”⁷ Simmel was interested in the existence of secret relations, the sociological analysis of relationships between members of the group, the relations based on a particular kind of trust. Obviously, not every secret relation must be a relation in which esoteric knowledge (in its narrow sense) is passed down. As Dariusz Grzonka rightly remarks while developing Simmel’s concept, modern time secret relations can be divided into political and initiative.⁸ The latter, in which initiation to the sacral reality takes place,⁹ are focused on in this study.

It is hard not to associate Simmel’s analyses of secret relations, even quite frequently involving conspiracy, with the fundamental (for the development of the New Age itself) work of Marilyn Ferguson meaningfully entitled “The Aquarian Conspiracy.” The study constitutes a redefinition of the category of “conspiracy” as Ferguson writes about “open conspiracy,”¹⁰ specific conspir-

⁶ The approach to esotericism in the categories of counterculture is discussed in the works of Frances A. Yates, Marcello Truzzi, Gilles Quispel or Wouter J. Hanegraaff.

⁷ G. Simmel, *Tajność i tajny związek*, [in:] idem, *Socjologia*, tłum. M. Łukasiewicz, Warszawa 1975, p. 434 [trans. A. Cienciąła]. Simmel’s considerations dedicated to secrecy are also present in the book *On the Margin of the Visible...*, op. cit.

⁸ D. Grzonka, *Motywy ezoteryczne w programach i działalności XIX-wiecznych towarzystw tajnych na ziemiach polskich*, [in:] *Ezoteryzm, okultyzm, satanizm w Polsce*, red. Z. Pasek, Kraków 2005, p. 14.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ Ferguson refers here to the book *The Open Conspiracy* by H. G. Wells.

acy without conspiracy. The conspiracy about which she writes consists of the popularisation of the new consciousness, the new paradigm of thinking,¹¹ which is to bring about the transformation of the world.¹² Conspirators are everywhere – in hospitals, universities, or the government. The Aquarius ideas appear in contemporary media and therefore conspiracy acquires a specific character. Even though, from the sociological standpoint, the conspiracy in Ferguson's approach is of quite a different nature than that characterised by Georg Simmel¹³ – and surely this notion should be treated as a metaphor¹⁴ since analysing the New Age in the categories of conspiracy enables a broadening of the issues of esotericism with its links to pop-culture. What is undertaken in this way is the analysis of new social forms in which esotericism is manifested. Introducing the expression "Aquarian Conspiracy" into public circulation, Ferguson stresses that the sources of this conspiracy are "old and deep."¹⁵ Thus, in her interpretation, the New Age constitutes a culmination in the history of esotericism. The knowledge recognised as esoteric, transmitted within small groups of limited range and (in the times of the Aquarian conspiracy) applying the form of a global net – of SPIN in fact,¹⁶ is permeating into the cultural mainstream. The experience of seeking ways for inner liberation once practiced by the few initiated, as Ferguson notices, starts to be practiced today by many people from various social environments. Almost 35 years after the publishing of "The Aquarian Conspiracy," the New Age cannot be regarded as a conspiracy expressing resistance to the ruling force through new (*resp.* newly discovered) ideas – as Simmel characterised as modern secret relations. Yet, even today (or maybe primarily today) the New Age still remains a significant element of reflection upon contemporary forms

¹¹ The author writes, among other things, about conspiracy in science, politics, medicine, or education.

¹² M. Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy. Personal and Social Transformation in the 1980s*, New York 2009, p. XXV.

¹³ The features which Simmel attributed to secret relations are e.g. inner cohesion, centralisation, degrees of initiation, or consciousness of separateness. As regards the New Age, these features can hardly be attributed to it.

¹⁴ This metaphorical dimension of the notions of "conspiracy" and "network" draws attention of Zbigniew Pasek (Z. Pasek, *Nowa duchowość. Konteksty kulturowe*, Kraków 2013, p. 32). The term "conspiracy" appears in many contexts and relates to other terms: conspiracy of love (Pierre Teilhard de Chardin), conspiracy of hope (Jeremy P. Tarcher), occult conspiracy (Michael Howard).

¹⁵ M. Ferguson, *op. cit.*, p. XXVI.

¹⁶ "Segmented Polycentric Integrated Networks" – an expression introduced by Luther Gerlach and Virginia Hine. Ferguson also refers to this phrase (M. Ferguson, *op. cit.*, pp. 227–228).

of spirituality on the one hand, and on the other – of the permanence and evolution of esoteric ideas. These motives also attract the interest of Polish academics.

The history of studies into the New Age in Poland goes back to the 1980s.¹⁷ Although 21st century research is mostly discussed in this study, in those earliest works due attention is paid to the esoteric sources of the New Age – mainly theosophical, anthroposophical, or gnostic. Due to the limited size of this article and without going into lengthy disputes on definitions, it can be said that Polish researchers (since the 1980s) have treated the New Age as a phenomenon originating from esoteric sources, though applying different forms and resulting from an alliance with pop-culture. This thread of links between the New Age and pop-culture should be particularly highlighted as one of the most frequently explored by Polish researchers in the analysis of the New Age. Additionally, it ought to be stressed that this perspective is an important constituent of the sociology of esotericism, mentioned earlier.

One of the most significant works in the Polish “canon” of studies into the New Age is the book written by Bartłomiej Dobroczyński, a psychologist who has popularised the distinction into “The Low, Occult New Era” and “The High New Era,” which is frequently quoted in Polish literature. The first concerns “all undertakings aiming rather at mass perception and characterised basically by market or commercial perspective,”¹⁸ the second concerns the elite – as Dobroczyński emphasises – version of the New Age, not only suggesting a much more exquisite intellectual level (“Scientific Aquarius”) but also promoting planetary transformation.¹⁹ It is hardly possible to overlook that “The High New Era” is *de facto* a synonym of conspiracy under the sign of Aquarius. It is worth mentioning that Dobroczyński introduces two ways of understanding the New Age – a broad and narrow one – though they have nothing in common with Wouter J. Hanegraaff’s distinction into the New Age *sensu stricto* and *sensu lato*.²⁰ The broad understanding is identified by Dobroczyński with the neutral (sometimes slightly tinted with liking) approach to the New Age, the narrow – with a critical (sometimes even negative) attitude to this phenomenon.²¹ Some attention should be paid to another aspect of

¹⁷ This history, comprising the period from the eighties of the 20th century to 2005, is presented by Dorota Hall in a systematic but critical way (D. Hall, *New Age w Polsce. Lokalny wymiar globalnego zjawiska*, Warszawa 2007, pp. 134–159).

¹⁸ B. Dobroczyński, *New Age*, Kraków 2000, p. 92.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 93–94.

²⁰ See: W. J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture. Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, Albany, New York 1998, pp. 94–110.

²¹ B. Dobroczyński, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

Dobroczyński's point of view – his polemics with the popular thesis that the New Age is a kind of simplified gnosis (neognosis). As he writes “the ‘gnostic’ mentality is basically alien to the intellectuality typical of the followers of the ‘Aquarius Era.’”²²

What constitutes an important reference point for sociological analyses of the New Age is the category of post-modernity. This perspective is applied, among others, by Anna E. Kubiak, Janusz Mariański, Paweł Możdżyński and the author of this article. In one of her articles on the New Age, Anna Kubiak even writes about postmodern conspiracy (fr. *conspiration postmoderne*), treating the New Age as an expression of it. It seems interesting that the author makes use of an intriguing ploy, extending the term “conspiracy” from a more narrow phenomenon (the New Age) to a broader one (postmodern culture). However, she subsequently analyses the New Age in the perspective of post-modern culture. Still, the sense of such a manoeuvre can be doubted as the author does not actually explain what this postmodern conspiracy would consist of. Viewing the New Age as an expression of postmodern culture, Kubiak treats the following features as typical of the New Age: lack of a precise definition of the phenomenon, network organisation, blurring the opposition, holism and the feminine principle, transformation and the autonomy of elements.²³ The cultural interpretation of the New Age (in the perspective of anthropological and sociological concepts of postmodern culture, in the perspective of popular culture or consumerist culture) is developed by Kubiak in many works,²⁴ especially in the book *Jednak New Age* [New Age After All]. The researcher writes that the spirituality of the New Age results from the encounter with strangeness – with alien (for example, oriental) cultures on the one hand and – on the other – with the part of culture which “in modern times was marginalised, obscured, treated with silence [...]”²⁵ The analyses of the New Age in the perspective of postmodern culture (blurring the borderlines between high and pop culture, between religion and science) agree with the standpoint of David Spangler and of William Irwin Thompson, quoted by Kubiak, that the case of the New Age consists in the “planetization of esotericism,” “liberation of the ‘secret oral teaching’ from the rule of medieval societies and throwing it into the world of pocket books and rock music re-

²² Ibidem, p. 112. This concerns the rejection in the New Age of the anti-world character of gnosticism, the dualism God-man, or cosmos-nature.

²³ A. E. Kubiak, *Le Nouvel Age, conspiration postmoderne*, “Social Compass” 1999, No. 46 (2), pp. 138–141.

²⁴ The list of Anna E. Kubiak's publications is available on: http://www.ifispan.waw.pl/index.php?lang=en&m=page&pg_id=127 [access: 10.08.2014].

²⁵ A. E. Kubiak, *Jednak New Age*, Warszawa 2005.

cords.²⁶ This phenomenon can be also called the egalitarisation of esotericism,²⁷ which results from the permeation of the underground into the mainstream of culture.

Such a permeation was also the subject of my considerations in one chapter of the book *Wolność spod znaku undergroundu* [Underground tinted liberty.]²⁸ The subject of the discussion conducted in that study is not so much the idea of liberty (it is just a certain pretext) as the spirituality of cultural background, starting with the 19th century and ending with modern times. What I mean here is the phenomenon of popularisation of underground ideas through alliance with pop-culture. Particular attention is drawn to the meaning of Romanticism or the Romantic counterculture²⁹ – the term “counterculture” is used to characterise Romanticism, among others, by Peter Meyer, Maria Janion and Maria Żmigrodzka. What I notice in Romanticism is the presence of elements composing the western esoteric tradition (the relations between the Western esoteric tradition and Romanticism received due attention from Auguste Viatte, Georges Gusdorf and others), although I can also see many qualities in Romanticism which allow it to be described by the term cultural background. I treat the period of Romanticism as particularly significant for the birth of postmodern spirituality, of which the most famous example is the New Age.

Another researcher viewing the New Age as a part of postmodern culture is Paweł Możdżyński, who focused on the analysis of Reiki in Poland, treating this phenomenon as a part of the New Age. On the basis of his studies into the environment of Reiki, Możdżyński emphasises its consumerist dimension but stresses that Reiki is not a countercultural movement.³⁰ As regards the sociological analysis of esotericism, Możdżyński’s study contains a most interesting analysis of Reiki in the perspective of Mircea Eliade’s concept of initiation.³¹

A different point of view is presented by Dorota Hall. As she writes, the New Age is described in Poland in the categories of (post)modernity (the

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 89.

²⁷ A. E. Kubiak, *Le Nouvel Age, conspiration postmoderne...*, op. cit., p. 135.

²⁸ A. Kasperek, *Wolność spod znaku undergroundu. Duchowość (po)nowoczesna w perspektywie hermeneutyki kultury i socjologii religii*, Kraków 2012, pp. 137–174.

²⁹ See: idem, *Romantyzm i New Age: kontynuacje, podobieństwa, inspiracje*, “Studia Socjologiczne” 2012, No. 4 (207), pp. 65–85; idem, *Oczyszczając drzwi percepcji*, “Studia Humanistyczne AGH” 2013, Vol. 12, No. 3, pp. 31–48.

³⁰ P. Możdżyński, *Duchowość ponowoczesna. Ruch Reiki w Polsce*, Kraków 2004, p. 273. See also: D. Hall, *Porządek sakralny ery konsumpcji. O bogatych i biednych w popularnym nurcie New Age*, “Kultura i Społeczeństwo” 2002, No. 4, pp. 167–178.

³¹ P. Możdżyński, *Duchowość ponowoczesna...*, op. cit., passim.

author's spelling), individualisation, secularisation and globalisation, but this lacks the analysis in the categories of localness associated with specificity of the Polish New Age. Such a perspective is suggested by Hall, who puts forward the thesis that the Polish New Age environments investigated (by her) constitute a form of continuation of folk Catholicism (this mostly concerns the magical element, sensualism and miracular sensitivity).³² Thus, Hall pays attention to the existence of the alliance between esotericism and Catholicism. What is worth stressing in the perspective of the sociology of esotericism is that not only Hall but also Kubiak and Możdżyński characterise the environments which they examine in a demographic aspect.

Polish academics join the discussion on the social form which the New Age manifests. The view that the New Age is a kind of network is widely accepted (though Dobroczyński and Możdżyński do not avoid using the notion of movement).³³ Most of the researchers refer to the term *cultic milieu*, although Anna E. Kubiak and Dorota Hall focus on the difficulties associated with applying this term to describe the contemporary New Age, in contrast to its first generation.³⁴

Another important aspect of the discussion on the New Age within the sociology of esotericism is the debate over the relation between the New Age and secularisation. This issue is explored mainly by Janusz Mariański, who introduces the discussion on the New Age (as an element of a broader phenomenon of new spirituality) into the debate between supporters of secularisation and desecularisation.³⁵ However, Tadeusz Doktor – the deceased nestor of Polish studies on the New Age, understood the issues of Aquarius in the market model of religion, which is an alternative to the secularisation model.³⁶

³² D. Hall, *New Age w Polsce...*, op. cit., p. 365.

³³ As Olav Hammer writes, New Age is less a movement today, it has evolved from network towards collective behaviour (O. Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge. Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age*, Leiden–Boston–Köln 2001, p. 74). As he adds, it is hardly possible to talk today among the followers of the New Age about the consciousness of belonging to the coherent *cultic milieu*, although many manifestations of the New Age have survived, e.g. bookshops with sections “alternative health” or “spirituality.”

³⁴ Kubiak writes that the New Age is not a form of *cultic milieu* but rather a case of dispersed religion which develops in a similar way to this of the telephone network (A. Kubiak, *Jednak New Age...*, op. cit., p. 87). To describe groups created within the New Age, the author applies the term confluent communities developed from the term confluent love by A. Giddens.

³⁵ See: J. Mariański, *Religia w społeczeństwie ponowoczesnym. Studium socjologiczne*, Warszawa 2010, pp. 195–242; idem, *Sekularyzacja, desekularyzacja, nowa duchowość. Studium socjologiczne*, Kraków 2013, pp. 145–192.

³⁶ See: T. Doktor, *Innowacje religijne: ruchy, uczestnicy, reakcje społeczne*, Olsztyn 2002.

This article merely touches on the problems of studies into the New Age in Poland as it is impossible to discuss here all the researchers who explore this subject matter. The choice of authors is subjective, although it has resulted from the understanding of the sociology of esotericism applied in my research. What deserves mentioning again in the final part is the category of secrecy, which seems of key significance for all projects regarding the practice of the sociology of esotericism. Such projects comprise the issues of both conspiracy and deconspiracy, which to a substantial extent is an effect of the alliance of esotericism and popular culture. Against the dominating tendency, my standpoint is that the research into the New Age in the perspective of the *cultic milieu* is still an attractive reference point. Colin Campbell defined cult environments as the cultural underground of the society composed of all deviant systems of beliefs and practices.³⁷ The essence of the underground is secrecy, conspiracy, specific cultural marginalisation, countercultural character and opposition to the cultural mainstream. Obviously, many previously underground ideas have become a permanent part of the main current of culture; however, it is clearly seen that what attracts the next followers to New Age ideas is the specific charm of choice and the promise of change, which are typical of the climate of conspiracy. It seems that contemporary followers of the New Age have not lost the feeling of stepping into exceptional knowledge and becoming exceptional people.

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