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## New Age: Religion, a Religion or Secular Religion?

### Abstract

Is New Age religion, a religion or a secular religion? Answering this question is very difficult, mainly because academics perceive New Age completely different than New Agers themselves. The very question surprises New Agers, as most of them feel proud that they do not follow any religion at all and often try to disassociate themselves from the concept of religion. How then could New Age be (a) religion? The word “secular” is another proverbial fly in the ointment, not only because “secular” is usually considered an opposition to “religion”. New Agers believe that all living beings have souls and a spiritual quest lies in the core of New Age, so how can a term “secular” be attached to their ideology?

The article aims to discern New Agers and academics’ points of view, establish the reason behind calling New Age “a movement” or “(a) religion” and to delineate the definition of the phenomenon of New Age.

**Keywords:** New Age, spirituality, esotericism, spiritual quest, shamanism, religion

### New Age as a part of esotericism

New Age is a part of Western esotericism. The term “esoteric” comes from Greek – *esōterikós* (εσωτερικός) meaning “inside, rear, obscure, inner”.<sup>1</sup> It means something hidden, available only to the chosen ones. In case of philosophical thinking in the West, it is associated with religious thought and personal spiritual experience. The term was created by Western European thinkers so it was first used to intellectual concepts in

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<sup>1</sup> Wouter Hanegraaff, Antoine Faivre and Roelof van der Broek, Jean-Pierre Brach (eds.), *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, Brill, Leiden 2006, p. 336; [www.ectaco.co.uk/English-Greek-Dictionary/](http://www.ectaco.co.uk/English-Greek-Dictionary/) (23.01.2017).

Europe. It referred to personal seeking of God, alchemy, occultism, gnosis, Christian Kabbalah, theosophy, Rosicrucians, Templars, Masons and other secret organisation whose members were on a quest to find “true God”, whatever the term “true” could mean to them.<sup>2</sup> During Romanticism, esotericists’ interest started focusing also on Oriental issues (reincarnation, meditation, shamanism, Oriental holy books). Romantics were fascinated by Orient, especially Indian philosophy, and perceived India as a “homeland and treasure house of a superior spiritual wisdom” but it must be remembered that all Oriental issues were understood and assimilated within Western thinking patterns and this means they were far from the original deep understanding of cultures that created them.<sup>3</sup> The ideas that captured Western hearts were the concepts of reincarnation, chakras (energetic centres in human and animal bodies) and the inner peace of Buddha’s teaching. A good example of European understanding of Oriental issues is the idea of reincarnation. In Hinduism and Buddhism it is a curse, a punishment for a soul that needs to come back to life on Earth again and again, as long as it sheds all earthly habits and desires and becomes pure and free. Western Romantics perceived reincarnation as a positive journey, a process that opposed Christian ideas of hell and punishment; it gave people hope for incarnating as long as they needed without a final condemnation promised by the Bible. In this way, reincarnation has become a process opposite to its original meaning, “antithetic to its original model”.<sup>4</sup> The process is still understood in such a way by contemporary Western esotericism, including New Age.

Searching wisdom in other than European cultures and adapting it to personal needs by individual understanding, prepared grounds to the birth of New Age, which aims to enhance spiritual growth of humanity as a whole and of each individual. The term “esoteric” started to change their meaning rapidly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, evolving from Western philosophy and sacred teaching available to intellectual elites, to a spiritual quest available for everyone via huge market of New Age books, films and self-improving workshops around the globe.

The name New Age comes from an astrologist era. New Agers believe that every two thousand years constellations change positions, and the Age of Pisces (and Jesus The Fisherman of Souls in Christian circles) is finishing and a new age, the Age of Aquarius, begins at our time.<sup>5</sup> This time is believed to bring great changes in human thinking, spiritual awakening and a peaceful co-existence of all beings.<sup>6</sup> New Agers

<sup>2</sup> Faivre Antoine and Voss Karen-Claire, *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religions*, “Numen” 1995, Vol. 42, p. 49.

<sup>3</sup> Daren Kemp and James R. Lewis (eds), *Handbook of New Age*, Brill, Leiden 2007, pp. 44-45.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> According to the New Agers I am in contact with (RSA, Brasil, UK, Poland) the Aquarius era started on 21st December 2012. The date is established on an ancient Maya prediction about the end of the world; a similar time was also indicated by of Kryon, who is believed to be an extra-terrestrial spiritual being channelling the message of peace, love and New Age via American engineer Lee Carrol, <http://www.greatdreams.com/aquarius.htm> (10.03.2017).

<sup>6</sup> Jannie du Prez, *The New Age* in Meiring Piet (ed.), *A world of religions (A South African perspective)*, Kagiso Publishers, Pretoria 1996, p. 205; Hanegraaff et al., op. cit., p. 855.

believe that everything emits energy, they also believe in the influence of the energies of the Universe on human lives and link the supposed shifts of energies in cosmos with changes on Earth. This changes are supposed to be most palpable at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The term “New Age” was first used in 1864 by Warren Felt Evans, an American pioneer of so-called “mental healing”. Evans was one of the patients of Phineas Parkhurst Quimby, the father of New Thought, a movement which promoted progressive thinking and the evolution of human mind – this was supposed to change religious thinking, philosophy and human psychic.<sup>7</sup> “Mental healing” has become one of New Age key concepts. Since the times of W.F. Evans, New Age has expanded around the world and is ever growing phenomenon.<sup>8</sup>

### **Methodology in studying the phenomenon of New Age**

Forming a definition of New Age is very difficult, if it is possible at all. Like in the case of all beliefs, the believers apply different measures than scholars. When one applies academic methodologies and tries to stay objective, the believers reject academic opinions as outside and superficial. It was proved to me many times during my survey on New Age in last four years. During my research among New Agers I applied methodologies of different fields: religious studies, anthropology, ethnography. I examined the influence of Asian, Southern African and South American cultures on New Age and New Age’s impact on so-called ethnic cultures. To do so I applied participant observation (both open and covert), open and semi-structured interviews and qualitative and quantitative analysis. I also used group questionnaires when I did research among South African New Agers. Short questions which required short answers often led to unplanned discussions, which in turn enriched the scope of questions in individual questionnaires and in-depth interviews. This resulted in excellent primary sources which help understand esoteric thinking, spiritual patterns and New Agers’ ways of life. As I will prove in this article, New Agers’ opinions could not have been more contradictory to academics’ ones.

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<sup>7</sup> “Mental healing” is based on the concept that body, mind and soul are one and when one of the three is sick, the others get sick as well; also many of those sicknesses can be cured not by medicines but by improving energy in a patient. Paul Heelas, *The New Age movement*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford 1996, p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> In a personal discussion at a student conference in Cambridge (February 2012), professor Timothy Jenkins admitted to me that twenty years ago the study of New Age was left to sociologists, who treated the subject as a temporary fashion. The last two decades have proved otherwise and today New Age as a phenomenon of study is present within academic curriculum and is a subject of dissertations. Many scholars admit that New Age has proved not to be faddish and childish whim but a social current found on every continent. New Age ideology is spread via the Internet, books and magazines which number is impossible to count. In 2003 global New Age literature market was worth approximately 3,43 bln dollars (Richard Webster, *How to write for the New Age Market?*, Lewllyn Publications, St. Paul 2003, pp. 12–15).

I conducted my study on New Age via personal contacts and over the Internet. I also took part in several New Age workshops. During my research I discovered two main groups of New Agers: 1 – people who intentionally call themselves New Agers, 2 – people who thought they just followed their own spiritual paths and were surprised to discover that there were millions of people who think similarly. Within the second group there were people who liked the idea of being a part of the global phenomenon and they started calling themselves New Agers. The other remained detached but still they fit into the phenomenon. When I refer to New Agers in this articles, I refer to the group of people who call themselves so.

I decided to compare testimonies of New Agers with opinions presented by academics on the base of Ryles and Geertz' opinion that every situation should be placed within the cultural context as it gives the meaning to the situation; culture is a framework for people's behaviour and this includes religious and philosophical beliefs.<sup>9</sup> Therefore I will compare opinions of scholars with those presented by New Agers to show the depth and diversity of the phenomenon. I will also analyse the New Age via its ideology and key-words which define New Agers.

### Ideology of New Age

New Age draws from all religions (i.e. the idea of Christ's total forgiveness) internationally known ideas like reincarnation, shamanism, holistic healing and pacifism. It does not impose which cultures or ideas are better and which are worse, hence its ideology differs in different parts of the world. It corporates ideas from local cultures so it will be different in a Catholic country like Poland, different in multi-ethnic South Africa, and different in secular China or Muslin Indonesia. New Age is very egalitarian, eclectic, sometimes contradictory within one ideology, offering self-acceptance, self-spirituality and self-sacredness and holism.<sup>10</sup> New Agers value the freedom of their philosophical, religious and spiritual views. Freedom is a cardinal value of New Age, the very thing that should never be sacrificed to any "higher" goal. It is freedom from dogmas and doctrines imposed by institutionalised religions and organisations, freedom from racism and intolerance, freedom to choose which ideas suit a person and help him/her in the spiritual quest.<sup>11</sup> However, within this freedom of choice, there are certain aspects that define New Agers and are the framework for ideas that can be incorporated from world's cultures. Lavrič proposes a set of ideas which he bases on the study of his own and other scholars:

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<sup>9</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, Basic Books, New York 1973, pp. 314–315.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Heelas, *The New Age movement*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford 1996, p. 2; Wouter Hanegraaff, Antoine Faivre, Roelof van der Broek, Jean-Pierre Brach (eds.), op. cit., p. 856.

<sup>11</sup> Heelas, pp. 26–27.

- The mystical idea of one's inner self, a kind of soul or spiritual element present in each living being<sup>12</sup>
- Millenarianism – the idea that the Aquarius Era will bring spiritual enhancement in human thinking, pacifism and more harmonious approach to life<sup>13</sup>
- Holism – the feeling of harmony and unity with each living being instead of analytical, scientific approach to life; when people start perceiving Universe as one and all beings (including trees, and other elements of nature) as interconnected by the same energy, they will stop destroying nature and will start living holistic life<sup>14</sup>

As we can see, several broad key-ideas make the framework for New Age ideology. Freedom for New Agers means responsibility, not acting on a whim, and this comes from holistic approach to life and a spiritual quest. These, in turn, come from the ideology of millenarianism concept, the age of enlightenment and illumination, which is to bring the Earth peace and self-awareness. This, in turn, is possible thanks to pacifism and holistic approach to life, and this results in ecology, taking care of nature, protecting animals rather than killing them, using natural medicines and treatments<sup>15</sup> instead of corporate-made drugs. Health and inner peace comes from the balance of three basic aspects of human beings: body, mind and soul. And once soul (or energy) is one of key-ideas of New Age, I will broaden Lavrič's summary by: reincarnation (or migration of energy), tolerance which opens New Agers' minds to so-called ethnic cultures and belief that people are responsible for their ideas and actions and should choose those which improve themselves and the world. This openness to enormity of ideas may seem chaotic but there was nothing chaotic in the beliefs of New Agers I co-operated with. Taking responsibility and choosing wisely the ideas that strengthen spiritual growth are key-words present on websites on each continent.<sup>16</sup>

What is a spiritual growth, the core-idea of New Age? Answering this question should be preceded by understanding what spirituality is. There are no methods to define someone's spirituality, it is even impossible to establish a commonly accepted definition because spirituality means so many different things to different people. It is as subjective as personal faith, yet it is important to understand what kind of spirituality lies at the core of New Age way of life.

<sup>12</sup> Flere and Kirbiš compare information from following authors: Hanegraaff, Heelas, Hervieu-Leger, Lyon, Melton, Rose. See: Sergej Flere, Andrej Kirbiš, *Comment on Houtman and Auperes. New Age, Religiosity, and Traditionalism: A Cross-Cultural Comparison*, "Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion" 2007, September, pp. 161–169.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem: Burrige, Ferguson, Russell.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem: Hanegraaff, Heelas, Knoblauch, Melton, Moerth, Siqueira, Stenger.

<sup>15</sup> Alternative medicine is very popular among New Agers and includes Reiki from Japan, acupuncture from China, Ayurveda from India, Ro-Hun therapy, shamanic healing etc., <http://mysticplanet.com/8DICTION.HTM> (12.02.2017).

<sup>16</sup> Chosen examples of websites: [www.newageselfhelp.com](http://www.newageselfhelp.com) (USA), <http://www.imaginarium.org.pl/> (Poland), <http://www.meetup.com/cities/ie/dublin/new-age-spirituality/> (Ireland), <http://panhuasca.org.br/> (Brasil), <http://terramistica.com.br/> (Brasil), <http://thenewagefoundation.org/> (India), <http://www.newage.com.au/> (Australia), <http://www.meetup.com/cities/nz/auckland/new-age-spirituality/> (New Zealand) – 18.08.2016.

For Eliade, a human is generally *homo religiosus* and this leads to spirituality. The world is not homogenous for people who live in it; they divide the world into two realms: physical, which is understandable, and sacred, which is a dominion of spirit and – as such – is impossible to be fully understood. This opposition of *sacrum* and *profanum* is an opposition between the more significant „energetic world” full of meaning and importance, and the surrounding mundane world that is only a chaotic, temporary place of living. *Sacrum* is revealed through hierophany, which can be rituals, special places of prayer, images of gods etc. For atheists, the world is homogenous and there is no spiritual realm which could be more significant than everyday reality.<sup>17</sup> *Sacrum* is supposed to give sense to realms surrounding humans, realms which are unknown and un-understood for them.

The Polish ethnographer H. Mielicka tries to define *sacrum* as something extra-sensual, elusive and much more powerful than human beings: transcendental spirituality independent from any religion is aimed at achieving perfection, unity with universe and “higher state of consciousness”.<sup>18</sup> It is imprinted in human minds. Psychology emphasises the importance of the psyche – people intuitively feel that there is something more in them than just a body and they feel that it is something divine, special, more important than flesh – it helps build a personal sense of worth. For sociologists spirituality is a form of religiosity but is not associated with *any* religion. Religion depends on culture and is something passed from generation to generation, spirituality is more individual: it is based on a personal experience, it works through somebody’s inner guidance when religion draws from external sources.<sup>19</sup> Extra-religious spirituality helps to understand personal abilities and understand the world according to personal preferences, exactly like New Agers do. New Age spirituality is not liked with religion.

If we ask New Agers what spirituality and spiritual quest means to them, we can get as many definitions as New Agers we question but I managed to extract a quintessence of the statements I received: spiritual quest is a search for a sacredness that resides in everyone, a soul or an energy that links all living beings to each other and to a Higher Energy, which can be called God, the Source of Life, Hindu and Buddhist Atman, a Soul Permeating Everything. These descriptions are not based on any academic definitions, these are words of New Agers who tried to explain their belief in a divine element in themselves and were interested neither in unifying the concept nor in making it academic. In their spiritual quest they try to work on another key-concept – energy. Their goal is to reject bad energy which causes violence, intolerance, suffering, and change it into good energy which allows all beings live in peace and harmony. And this can be done in various ways, depending on personal choices.

<sup>17</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Le Sacré et le Profane*, Polish translation: *Sacrum i profanum*, Wydawnictwo KR, Warszawa 1996, p. 15.

<sup>18</sup> Halina Mielicka, *Religijny wymiar duchowości*, in: Maria Libiszowska-Żółtkowska, Stella Grotowska (eds.), *Religijność i duchowość – dawne i nowe formy*, Nomos, Kraków 2010, pp. 50–51.

<sup>19</sup> Marcin Zwierzdzyński, *Religia – Duchowość – Postmodernizm. Problem znaczeń*, in: M. Libiszowska-Żółtkowska, S. Grotowska Stella (eds.), op. cit., p. 84.

New Agers draw ideas not only from cross-cultural ideas but from their local cultures. For example, South African New Agers have much easier access to sangomas<sup>20</sup> and their ideology than Chinese or Polish New Agers. Sangomas' holistic approach to life is very close to New Age concept of life. Sangomas emphasise the unity of body, mind and soul in all aspects: healthy eating, meditation, reincarnation, drawing wisdom from ancestral spirits and holistic healing. South African New Agers I spoke to declared either personal or Internet contacts with sangomas or at least their ideology. Chinese New Agers easily draw from Buddhist meditation, Tai Chi and I Ching philosophies and their access to sangomas is very difficult. South American New Agers draw from native American shamanism, take part in ceremonies which involve the usage of ayahuasca which is hardly available on other continents. Even though the inspirations are so numerous, their aim remains the same: find the true self and the divinity within oneself, and then expand all goodness that come from divinity towards other people. In this way, New Agers improve themselves as human beings and try to bring positive change promised by the Aquarius Age.

### **Delineation of New Age definition**

As I have proved above, the New Age phenomenon is a vast complex of philosophical and psychological concepts. It is practically impossible to examine it thoroughly because it undergoes continuous changes, every day new "enlightening" ideas can be invented. New Age is often called "a movement" but I find this qualification wrong. A movement is something organised, something that has leaders, certain number of members or followers and more or less unified ideology. This definitely does not apply to New Age. New Agers refer to many ideologies and spiritual practices but do not dictate which should be chosen and do not form any kind of organisation. Even when someone tries to make an organisation, it is still one of many and unimportant to the general public of New Agers. New Age should be rather perceived as a loose network of people whose ideas concentrate on harmony in the world and the inner one, mutual understanding of all cultures, rejection of violence, tolerance, freedom (both spiritual and national), holistic approach to life and spiritual quest that is not strictly defined (the definition is left to each individual to discover). New Age is hence not an organisation or a movement *sensu stricto*. Also, when I examined New Age websites on the Internet, I did not find any advertisement of movements or organisations, only meeting groups. What draws people to New Age is precisely the opposite of an organised movement: the fact that no ideology or structure is forced upon them. There are also no strict rules, obligations or directions how to become a New Ager. A spiritual quest and a peace of mind are key words but

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<sup>20</sup> Sangoma is a South African healer, diviner, psychopomp and a holy person, playing an important role in South African Bantu ethnic groups. To become a sangoma, a person is supposed to receive a calling from ancestral spirits, be trained and initiated by a fully pledged sangoma (Axel-Ivar Berglund, *Zulu Thought-Patterns and Symbolism*, C. Hurst&Company, Uppsala 1976, p. 136).

nothing indicating a certain programme can be found. All New Agers I spoke to and contacted over the Internet refused to feel a part of any movement. It leads me to accepting a statement of a South African New Ager: „New Age is a label for people who don't want to be labelled down”. They feel original and free in the choice of their spirituality.

Hanegraaff distinguishes two kinds of New Age: New Age *sensu stricto*, the one that grew from theosophy and is based on the awaiting for the Era of Aquarius and the changes it will bring to humanity (this can form some organisations), and New Age *sensu lato*, which does not require being a part of any secret or esoteric organisation and does not involve people in secret tuition, and it has a much broader meaning than New Age *sensu stricto*. New Age *sensu lato* is an attitude towards life: positive thinking, loving all living beings, holistic approach to life, ecology and working for the improvement of oneself and the whole Universe. Such kind of spirituality is not limited to chosen social groups or nationalities, it is open to everyone interested allowing huge choice of ideas and freedom in choosing what suits personal needs.<sup>21</sup> J.R. Lewis agrees with Eileen Barker and states that the New Age movement should not be called *a* movement because it is not organised. In his opinion it is not *a* movement and not *a* religion.<sup>22</sup>

Is New Age religion or *a* religion? The distinction was made by Hanegraaff. He describes religion as “any symbolic system which influences human action by providing possibilities for ritually maintaining contact between the everyday world and a more general meta-empirical framework of meaning”.<sup>23</sup> Religion however is not the same as *a* religion: the latter requires a “form of social institution”.<sup>24</sup> Hanegraaff does not regard New Age as *a* religion but as a kind of *religion* because it carries “another symbolic system, in terms of which another ensemble of objects, words, images, sounds, actions, etc. carry another complex of meanings. But it still fulfils the same function – it influences the actions of New Agers because it enables them, in the things they do and the things they refrain from doing, to maintain contact between their everyday lives and a larger, more general framework of meaning”.<sup>25</sup> Religion can become *a* religion when it becomes an institution, an organised system of beliefs and behavioural patterns.<sup>26</sup>

This article is too short to ponder the definition of religion, however some distinctions should be made to understand Hanegraaff's claim and it is important to tell the academic understanding from the popular one because New Agers definitely do not perceive their ideology in academic terms. The common understanding of religion, which I gained from about a hundred New Agers in last four years, is that (a) religion is a set of beliefs revolving around God or gods, usually in an organised way which gives power to selected people (priests), who in turn have a power to sanctify or not ways of life (i.e. living

<sup>21</sup> Hanegraaff et al., op. cit., p. 855.

<sup>22</sup> James R. Lewis and Gordon J. Melton *Perspectives on the new age*, State University of New York Press Albany, NY: 1992, pp. 6–7.

<sup>23</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Secularization*, “Numen” 2000, vol. 47 no. 3, pp. 295.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, p. 296.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, p. 296.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, p. 296.

within marital bonds or not); religions also have holy books or at least mythology that can be passed orally down generations. To such concept of religion New Agers referred when I asked if New Age was (a) religion and not a single person considered New Age (a) religion.

Geertz finds religion “(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic”.<sup>27</sup> He puts emphasis on the symbols of faith, God, a deity, the very symbol that is required by every religion. It does not need to be a physical symbol like cross for Christians; it can be Ramadan for Muslims or crop festivals in ethnic religions. Geertz points out that humans depend on symbols and symbolism, that emotions linked with religious symbols lead to anxiety, and attacking symbols lead to losing the sense of security.<sup>28</sup> I would add: lead to wars.

New Age lacks such symbols and such events. It lacks a deity, a main idea, a symbol, a festivity, a holy book and a leader. New Agers’ belief in some divine power, source of life or a primordial soul cannot be considered as such simply because each New Ager can understand the concept in his/her own unique way and there is no one to decide which understanding should be valid. This leads me to the conclusion that the ideas of religion and *a* religion do not apply to New Age.

In my opinion religion or *a* religion demands integrity New Age lacks, a core ideology revolving around God or a deity, a structure supporting ideological claims and helping believers follow certain religious path. None of them can be found in New Age. Looking from New Agers’ perspective, it is *in situ* to quote Kryon:

“The New Age is not a religion, and there is no accompanying doctrine for you to study. It is, instead, a world philosophy. There is no central building that New Age folks have built with common contributions. In fact, there is no centralized control or headquarters of any kind. That’s why we have no political clout to bring to bear against those who would ridicule us. We don’t have an organization! We have no lobby in Congress. There is no priesthood or ministerial program – no approved schools or even courses that graduate ordained New Age pastors. There are no elders or deacons, and no programs for teachers to be trained in the church. (...) We have no single person whom we call ‘leader’, whom we can turn to for advice when things get tough. We have no sacred shaman, present or past”.<sup>29</sup>

Hanegraaff and other academics characterize New Age as a secular equivalent of religion or a “secular religion”. As secularisation and religion sound oxymoronic for non-academics, for New Agers the claim that New Age is a “secular religion” is a proof that academics do not put an effort to study the phenomenon from inside,

<sup>27</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Religion as a cultural system. The interpretation of cultures: selected essays*, Fontana Press, 1993, p. 90.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 98–99.

<sup>29</sup> What is New Age? (From Chapter One of Kryon Book 7), [http://kryon.com/k\\_38.html](http://kryon.com/k_38.html).

that they neither understand nor try to practise New Age spirituality.<sup>30</sup> And here we come across the problem what thought is religious and what is spiritual, and how far from centuries old esoteric traditions New Age has ventured. Esotericism in New Age often equals spirituality, and for New Agers the spiritual quest is the most important task in human life. Hanegraaff is fully aware of this and bases his concept of “secular religion” on the concept of spirituality, and spirituality does not need to be linked to (a) religion.

The concept of secular spirituality was accepted as a part of human behaviour patterns as well as human well-being by C.G. Jung in 1938 and the term is still in use; it refers to spirituality that is not based on the faith in God.<sup>31</sup> Certainly, New Agers do not agree with combining “spirituality” with “secular” as they believe in a divine element in every living being. Hence, once someone’s ideology is based on a mystic awakening, it cannot be secular. This is yet another moment when New Agers’ understanding of their own ideology, the phenomenon they associate with, is understood contradictory to the academic analysis.

Hanegraaff compares New Age to a “spiritual supermarket where religious consumers pick and choose the spiritual commodities, and use them to create their own spiritual syntheses fine-tuned to their strictly personal needs”.<sup>32</sup> From the academic point of view Hanegraaff’s claim may accurately point out the idea of “secular religion” and unorganised beliefs. On the one hand, people are given total freedom in choosing their own spirituality (combined with faith in God or not), on the other, they are potential customers for those who earn money on their freedom. Authors like S. MacLaine, J. Redfield or V.C. Mutwa target them as buyers of their products. Products that are not only books, films or workshops but ideology and beliefs as well. The secularisation and freedom of choosing what to believe are such basic things in Western societies that Westerners take them for granted – it is quite natural that “secularised esotericism” or “secular religion” often replace institutionalised religions.<sup>33</sup> The terms may be justified within academia and the metaphor of a “spiritual supermarket” may seem to describe the trend accurately. However, nothing can be more offensive to New Agers than this statement. Because spiritual awareness is a core concept of New Age, calling their spiritual quest “a supermarket” strikes into the heart of the phenomenon. Such discrepancies are the main reason I decided to compare academics and New Agers’ understanding of the phenomenon. I quoted Hanegraaff’s words to New Agers from three continents and they were all aghast, both at the lack of understanding from the academic world and also the lack of simple human respect towards their beliefs and feelings. It may seem to Hanegraaff

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<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the term “secular religion” was used to regimes like communism and fascism which exchanged God with party leaders so it repels peace-orientated New Agers.

<sup>31</sup> Corine Hyman, Paul J. Handal, *Definitions and Evaluation of Religion and Spirituality Items by Religious Professionals: A Pilot Study*, “Journal of Religion and Health” 2006, Vol. 45.2, pp. 264–282.

<sup>32</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, in: Linda Woodhead, Paul Fletcher, Hiroko Kawanami, David Smith (eds.), *Religions in the World*, Routledge, London 2002, p. 258.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 260.

that New Age ideology is chaotic and therefore “supermarket-like” because there are no strict rules New Agers must follow but New Agers’ opinion should be taken into account as well. Such strong emotions caused by the statement and the amount of books helping to build self-awareness and spiritual growth on one’s own terms, only strengthen my opinion that the growing phenomenon of New Age is neither a movement, nor any kind of (a) religion but a philosophy and spirituality carefully chosen and cherished by its adherents.