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## Ecosophy and the New Age Movement in the Transmodern Society

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## ECOSOPHY AND THE NEW AGE MOVEMENT IN THE TRANSMODERN SOCIETY

**Abstract.** The main aim of this paper is to present the phenomenon of religiosity in transmodern society. The concept of transmodernity has recently come to be used in the works of the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, the Russian philologist Mikhail Epstein and the Belgian philosopher and theologian Marc Luyckx Ghisi. The main elements of the transmodern vision of the world are identical to the propositions of the social and religious phenomenon of New Age and its ideology.

**Keywords:** anthropotheism, ecosophy, Gaia, Ghisi, New Age, transmodernity

1. Introduction. 2. Transmodernity as a global paradigm of change. 3. Anthropotheism. 4. The value of health in the holistic approach. 5. The world as a value in the pantheistic ecosophy. 6. The Gaia Hypothesis. 7. Conclusions.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the important features characteristic of contemporary Western societies is transmodern religiosity. What does this new form of experiencing the phenomenon of religion consist in? Can the term be reasonably used at all? What is the role of ecosophy and the New Age ideology in transmodern religiosity? How can transmodern religiosity be characterized? The main aim of this paper is to present the pheno-

menon of transmodern religiosity in the context of the New Age ideology and the ecosophical spirituality.

The concept of transmodernity has recently come to be used in the works of the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas and the Russian philologist Mikhail Epstein. In the analyses proposed by these two scholars, this term is used to capture the key elements of the identity of our age after the “death of postmodernism”<sup>1</sup>. The concept of transmodernity was first introduced into the public domain by Habermas during the 21<sup>st</sup> World Congress of Philosophy in Istanbul in 2003.

Andrejk Rajský believes the German philosopher understands the concept as a return to the spirit of modernity by trying to find a reasonable consensus in the centre of a multicultural world, without giving up on various joint projects. The adjective „transmodern“ means a dynamic way of designing and describing social structures, with emphasis on such categories as „communication, feedback and sustainable growth”<sup>2</sup>.

Before Habermas, the concept was already used in 1997 by Mikhail Epstein in his essay on *The Place of Postmodernism in Postmodernity*. He believes the concept of transmodernity, being more sophisticated, should replace the problematic and reductionist concept of postmodernism. The concept of transmodernity emerges out of difficulties in describing the present time, in which we can see a certain continuity with the preceding ages of modernity and postmodernity on the one hand, and certain substantial differences compared to other historical periods on the other, becoming more and more apparent today. New phenomena emerging from the exceedingly diverse and dynamic space of public life require an adequate analysis by philosophers and representatives of many other academic disciplines.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. A. Rajský, *Súčasnosť. (Moderna – postmoderna – súčasnosť. Historické vymedzenie obdobia)*, in: *Európske pedagogické myslenie od moderny k postmoderne po súčasnosť*, ed. B. Kudláčová, A. Rajský, Trnava 2012, 29.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

## 2. TRANSMODERNITY AS A GLOBAL PARADIGM OF CHANGE

One of the authors who have accurately diagnosed the phenomenon of transmodernity is the Belgian philosopher and theologian Marc Luyckx Ghisi. In his philosophical analyses, a significant role is played by the axiological and religious dimension. His studies and papers reveal the axiological and ideological foundations of transmodern religiosity. Ghisi defines transmodernity as a profound social transformation, which involves culture, politics as well as economics, and encompasses the religious experience of the world.

The Belgian philosopher and theologian understands this process as a change of paradigms, a step beyond postmodernity. He believes this transformation signifies a rapid demise of the Western model of capitalism dominated by industry and a patriarchal social structure, and the beginning of an entirely new, post-capitalist, post-industrial and post-patriarchal transmodern society. „If humanity continues its industrial, capitalist, patriarchal growth and development strategies, it is in danger of a collective suicide. It was already true when only the West was polluting and externalizing its trash elsewhere. The modern patriarchal, industrial and capitalist paradigm in which we currently exist is coming to an end, because it appears incapable of providing us with a solution for our survival. Patriarchal values are also in a deep crisis, because they cannot provide a framework of values for our survival. Transmodernity is an entirely new matrix of values. Politics and economics are changing below the surface“<sup>3</sup>.

Ghisi claims that the birth of a new transmodern society is a very broad phenomenon, which introduces more changes into the social, political and economic life than the process of globalization. „Patriarchal values of ‘command, control and conquer’ are obsolete, because they do not enable an inclusive and sustainable world in which humanity might survive. Those values may have allowed wonderful developments in science and technology (landing on the moon), but they can’t

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<sup>3</sup> M.L. Ghisi, *Towards a Transmodern Transformation of our Global Society: European Challenges and Opportunities*, Journal of Future Studies 15(2010)1, 39.

protect planet Earth. So we are searching for a new set of life-enhancing values, which are post patriarchal”<sup>4</sup>.

The Belgian philosopher and theologian charges modernity with intolerance and violence. He believes modernity has, on the one hand, announced the idea of liberty and equality for all, and, on the other, identified with an epistemology and concept of truth, which have led to destruction of other cultures and civilizations. „Transmodernity is based and built on a completely different epistemology. Truth is in the empty center of the common table around which all cultures are sitting on an equal footing. Women and men are also equal. The urgent scope of life is to care together for our survival. But the main goal in life for everyone is to reach the center, the ‘divine light’ or the ‘absence of light’. And the more you approach the center, the less you can define what the illumination is. You are only able to experience it. And nobody owns or controls this ‘empty’ truth. It is impossible. Transmodernity thus also means the end of dogmatic religions. Animals and plants are respected because they are, like us, part of the cosmos. Transmodernity has a radically tolerant epistemology”<sup>5</sup>.

Ghisi rejects the geopolitical concept of the clash of civilizations developed at the beginning of the 1990s by the American political scientist Samuel Huntington. According to Ghisi, the fundamental problem is not in the conflict between various cultures and religions, but rather in different interpretations within each model of civilization. Transmodernity offers a new opportunity for cooperation and peace, and postulates a new attitude to the contemporary world of science and technology.

„Transmodernity provides a completely different concept of science and technology. The modern ‘divine’ status of science no longer has reason to exist. Citizens will no longer accept all of what science offers and sells them. Science and technology, as with all human actions, have to be reoriented towards world citizens’ desire for a sustainable and socially inclusive world. They have to respond and become

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

responsible. They have to recuperate their human status and contribute to the common Good<sup>6</sup>.

Ghisi points out the new type of relationship between politics and religion. „Religions are returning to the political stage. The ‘Forward Studies Unit’ of the European Commission has convened a high level conference on the subject of ‘Governance and Civilizations’ in May 1998. One of the main conclusions is that the most difficult conflicts are not between religions as Harvard Professor Huntington (1993) stated, they are rather inside each religion, between the premoderns, the moderns and the transmoderns. So we are involved in a clash of paradigms, instead of civilizations. Another very important conclusion proposed by Prof. Ziauddin Sardar, editor of ‘Futures’ and an expert on the Islamic world, is that inside the Muslim group, there could be more than 20% of transmoderns, silently preparing the future of Islam in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A third important conclusion is that political authorities worldwide will, as soon as possible, have to shift to a transmodern vision and recognize openly the existence of a spiritual dimension in every human being<sup>7</sup>.

The main elements of the transmodern vision of the world developed by the Belgian philosopher and theologian are identical to the propositions of the social and religious phenomenon of New Age and its ideology. The phenomenon may be defined as a “cult, religion, a quasi-religious or pseudo-religious movement, or as a broad current in the contemporary culture which emphasizes the spiritual<sup>8</sup>. We may see this phenomenon as a metaphor of the changes, which occurred in the social sphere at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Like Ghisi’s analysis of the ideological bases of the transmodern society, New Age groups are based on the belief that our world has entered a phase of transition in which an authentic transformation of man and the world will be accomplished.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>8</sup> J. Mariański, *Religia w społeczeństwie ponowoczesnym*, Warszawa 2010, 226.

The great religious traditions are being rejected, and people are more and more permeated with individual spirituality, resulting in a sacralization of one's subjectivity. The new spirituality is revealed in the development of various ecological, feminist or psychological movements. They include the same values, which are of fundamental importance in the transmodern vision of the world according to Ghisi.

### 3. ANTHROPTHEISM

An important feature of the ideological concept of New Age is anthropotheism, which says man and his abilities become a value of overriding importance. Anthropotheism emphasizes the huge potential residing in the inner consciousness of every human being. In the anthropotheic vision of the world, each individual becomes their own god, judge, and autonomous creator of their own life. Man is perceived as the summit of creation, the source of all values, and the measure of all things.

The emphasis on the value of man is also visible in the entire ideological orientation of the New Age movement. The values it prefers are related to man's spiritual development, possibilities, physical and mental health, and the development of a "Higher I", or a form of divinity in man. This is a holistic vision of reality, a concept in which everything is perceived in the categories of an integrated whole.

Holism is the opposite of all dualist or reductionist theories which emphasize the differences between the spirit and matter, the creator and creation, the flesh and consciousness. A holistic approach is based on a criticism of a vision of the world, which belittles its spiritual element. It proposes a new vision of "unity": its main element is a shift in the positioning of man, who should be seen as part of a greater whole<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. W.J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, New York 1998, 119.

#### 4. THE VALUE OF HEALTH IN THE HOLISTIC APPROACH

The holistic vision of the world and man also finds its expression in the area of medicine. Health, in this concept considered to be one of the most important values, undoubtedly represents one of the canons of the holistic paradigm. It is not perceived here from the instrumental point of view, i.e. if I am healthy, I can work, for example. In the holistic concept, health is a value in itself, and is related to a positive and healthy lifestyle. The role of education in area of medicine is strongly emphasized. Various trainings and courses are developed to teach people how to improve their physical or mental health.

The first step of this transformation consists in becoming aware of the falsified image of the body as a machine, deeply rooted in our culture. In this false concept, the mind has been separated from the body. Consequently, sickness is understood as a defect in the functioning of the biological mechanism of our body, and health is classified as non-existence of any sickness.

Such false picture should be replaced with a new paradigm, a new vision of reality. The most important change should occur in our thinking, our perception of values<sup>10</sup>. Such change entails a return to the holistic and ecological vision of the world in which all of the existing reality forms a coherent vital system, not a machine. Such concept stresses the mutual relationships between all phenomena, which create one great, universal node of connections<sup>11</sup>.

The development of the New Age movement has brought about a marked rise in the social awareness of various forms of holistic medicine, in which an individual is perceived as a unity of the body, mind, and soul. The advocates of a holistic approach to therapy believe an individual should be approached as a quantum of energy, and not a biological machine whose broken parts can be replaced<sup>12</sup>. We must not perceive illness as a mechanical failure. As far as treatment is concerned,

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. F. Capra, *Bod obratu*, Praha 2002, 16.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 293–294.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. A. Zamojski, *New Age. Filozofia, religia i paranauka*, Kraków 2002, 199.



the body must not be separated from the soul and the mind, because a sick person is a unity of all of these spheres. And since an individual is by nature a unity of various elements, an individual's health may also be preserved only if all of these elements remain in a harmonious unity.

In consequence of such approach, new treatments of many kinds of diseases have been developed in the New Age movement. In all of these alternative therapies, man's inner sphere plays the most important role<sup>13</sup>. Treatment is not only a method, but a state of mind; a relationship to other people and the world as a whole<sup>14</sup>. Thus, the treatment of man becomes endowed with a religious dimension, and salvation in the religious sense becomes a radical form of healing. The natural affinity between the sphere of religion and the treatment of diseases is based on the deeply rooted belief, found in many religions, that the most important religious symbols "are very often also a source of healing"<sup>15</sup>.

In holistic medicine, natural forms of healing are preferred, and the negative effects of pharmaceuticals are underscored. The advocates of alternative medicine believe any treatment should be based on a healthy lifestyle, a healthy diet, or a healthy approach to sickness and the reality as a whole. There are many alternative methods of treatment offered to customers worldwide on a very large scale. They include, among others, homeopathy, herbal medicine, crystal healing, colour therapy, acupressure or acupuncture<sup>16</sup>.

## 5. THE WORLD AS A VALUE IN THE PANTHEISTIC ECOSOPHY

New Age is not only anthropocentric, but also biocentric in its nature – man's responsibility for life is not limited to humankind, but extends to the entire planet. New Age questions the old thinking paradigm in which the world was perceived as a huge machine. In the new

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. P. Heelas, *The New Age Movement. The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity*, Oxford 1996, 208.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. A. Kubiak, *Jednak New Age*, Warszawa 2005, 44.

<sup>15</sup> W.J. Hanegraaff, op. cit., 44.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. A. Zamojski, op. cit., 214.

holistic and biocentric perspective, the world is understood as a global form of unity.

This vision of the world is related to the so-called concept of pantheistic ecosophy, typical of the green movement within New Age. The concept of ecosophy was developed by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess as part of ecological ethics, as a kind of strategy which says it is time to take action for the sake of life in the planetary dimension through our identification with all possible forms of life existing on the earth, understood as our Mother Gaia<sup>17</sup>.

Many well-known intellectuals have contributed to the development of ecosophy, including the British scholar James Lovelock (the author of the “Mother-Gaia” theory), the French thinker Teilhard de Chardin, or the Polish philosopher Henryk Skolimowski. Much more than simple ecology, ecosophy is a wisdom-spirituality of the earth. „The new balance“ is not so much between man and the earth, but between matter and spirit, between spatio-temporality and consciousness. Raimon Pannikar used to say that ecosophy is not simply a „science of the earth“ (ecology) or even „knowledge of the earth“, but the „wisdom of the earth itself that occurs when man knows how to listen with love“.

The role of spirituality in the context of ecosophy has been pointed out, among others, by the Polish philosopher and aesthetician Maria Gołaszewska. She believes spirituality should be considered an existential standpoint based on intuitive cognition and the natural acceptance of the *Summum Bonum* within the context of inner experience. Ecosophy or deep ecology are not merely limited to taking care of the natural environment and protecting it against various threats from the technological civilization; they try to shape a new vision of the world and man, in which all reality is endowed with a new, spiritual dimension<sup>18</sup>.

According to Skolimowski, ecosophy is a coherent doctrine, and at the same time an intellectual background in which the most important issue is the relationship between man and the environment. The world in this concept is a “spiritual sanctuary” of all life. In a sanctuary, one

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 274.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. E. Kohák, *Zelená svatozář: Kapitoly z ekologické etiky*, Praha 2002, 121.

shows reverence and respect. Man should therefore take good care of the world of nature. This vision opposes the approach in which the world is seen through the prism of industrialization and exploitation. Ecosophy believes man has forsaken the primal bonds which once used to connect him to the world of nature.

Skolimowski claims that man, as the being with the greatest potential – who may use both reason and knowledge – has the duty to protect the diversity of life. And not for pragmatic reasons (such as economic interests), but because of respect and empathy for all beings which should always accompany man. Such concept of ecosophy goes beyond the protection of environment. It is inseparably connected to cosmology, ethics, social and political views, and a stern judgment of the Western civilization, particularly science and technology. Skolimowski calls for a great change, the creation of a new model of humanity, which he refers to as the ecological model, and which will make it possible to achieve a balance between all species<sup>19</sup>.

In ecosophy, the feminist element plays an important role as well. Ecosophical spirituality is in its essence a feminist spirituality. Fritjof Capra affirms this vision: “The spiritual essence of the ecological mentality is perfectly manifest in the spirituality of women described by feminist movements. There is a natural affinity and similarity between feminism and ecology. For thousands of years, nature was identified with woman and the feminine element. Feminist spirituality arises from the cognitive approach to the unity of all forms of life and their periodical rhythm of birth and death. Such approach to life in feminist spirituality is profoundly ecological”<sup>20</sup>. According to some feminist authors (B. Bruteau, J. Warren, S. Griffin), this spirituality precisely shows the essence of divinity, which emphasizes harmony between God and the world.

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. H. Skolimowski, *Účastná mysl*, trans. D. Micka, Praha 2001, 230.

<sup>20</sup> F. Capra, op. cit., 459.

## 6. THE GAIA HYPOTHESIS

The Gaia hypothesis was developed in 1987 by the British scientist James Lovelock. He believed all living things on the earth worked together to maintain optimum living conditions on our planet. The British scientist claims the earth is capable of reacting to the changing conditions, and adjusts to them so that life may continue to develop. Lovelock called this system Gaia, after the Greek goddess personifying Mother Earth<sup>21</sup>.

In this hypothesis, our planet is a great, organic whole, which includes the biosphere, the atmosphere, oceans and soils. Lovelock says it is the organic nature that creates the atmosphere, and not the other way round. It was not the natural environment that enabled the appearance and development of life: it is the living organisms that produce the gas which makes it possible for them to survive, so the biosphere has the ability to control its natural, chemical and physical environment.

One of the propagators of the Gaia hypothesis is the Polish geologist and evolutionist Marcin Ryszkiewicz. He believes such concept shows God in a pantheist, deistic and impersonal way. God is one with nature. The Gaia world is a huge, cosmic order in which all living organisms participate. It is a world which was not created, but which has been continuously creating itself. The Gaia world is not controlled or sustained in its existence by external, divine strength, but exists on its own and has appropriate mechanisms of self-regulation within it which guarantee its development and secure existence<sup>22</sup>.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

The most important elements, which ecosophy and the New Age ideology have in common, include such phenomena as a holistic vision of the world and man, a pantheist spirituality combining feminism and ecology, meditation techniques, and emphasis on a healthy lifestyle

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. E. Kohák, *op. cit.*, 133.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. A. Kubiak, *op. cit.*, 34.

in harmony with nature. Some ecosophers distance themselves from New Age, however, believing this social and religious movement still contains some anthropocentric elements.

Even if New Age is partly inspired by the ecosophical spirituality, it is also commercial in nature and is not devoid of the spirit of consumptionism. New Age derives much benefit from the development of modern technologies, including state-of-the-art information technologies. Such phenomena are unacceptable for the advocates of ecosophy and deep ecology.

Followers of the New Age ideology claim that a global change of the civilization paradigm is approaching, but such revolutionary metamorphosis will not be accomplished in a short period of time. Harbingers of such changes can already be seen in science, in the way people live and approach values, or the natural environment. Such metamorphosis will lead to a profound transformation of the entire society and culture.

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