

Man and Nature. A New Project on New Spirituality

Człowiek i natura. Nowy projekt nowej duchowości

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Abstract

This article is a prelude to a planned project aimed at researching new ways of understanding and redefining the concept of nature in the so-called New Spirituality movements. The authors begin from a theoretical context associated with the meaning, for religious studies, of the sacred – profane and culture – nature dichotomies, and show the changes religiousness undergoes. Today we see an increasing number of people turning away from traditional forms of religious cult with a simultaneously declared wish to develop their own spirituality. New spirituality is provisionally defined here as the worldly transgression of the human condition committed in the name of different values strongly associated with the physical (bodily) dimension of life and a holistic vision of the world. On the basis of examples, drawn mainly from publications based on the Deep Ecology trend, the authors discuss three aspects: (1) a new understanding of one's own nature, (2) a new understanding of the nature of the world; and (3) new forms of activity for changes in awareness. In the dimensions under discussion, the process of recently locating the element of the sacred in the profane sphere and the resacralisation of nature clearly emerges. In the conclusions we also consider to what extent the formative new spirituality on the ecological trait can help to popularise the sustainable development idea within the framework of changing the religiousness of man at the start of the twenty-first century.

Key words: nature, New Spirituality, Deep Ecology, the sacred, sacrum, the profane, sustainable development

Streszczenie

Artykuł ten jest zapowiedzią planowanego projektu mającego na celu zbadanie nowych sposobów rozumienia i redefiniowania pojęcia natury w ruchach z kręgu tzw. nowej duchowości. Autorzy wychodzą od kontekstu teoretycznego związanego ze znaczeniem dla nauk religioznawczych takich podziałów jak sacrum – profanum i kultura – natura, ukazując zmiany jakim podlega religijność. Współcześnie obserwuje się odwrót coraz większej liczby osób od tradycyjnych form kultu religijnego z równoczesnym deklaratywnym chęci rozwijania własnej duchowości. Nową duchowość roboczo definiujemy tu jako transgresję doczesnej kondycji człowieka dokonywane w imię różnych wartości, silnie powiązanych z fizycznym (cielesnym) wymiarem życia oraz holistyczną wizją świata. Autorzy na podstawie przykładów, zaczerpniętych głównie z publikacji z nurtu ekologii pogłębionej omawiają trzy aspekty: (1) nowe rozumienie swojej własnej natury, (2) nowe rozumienie natury świata i (3) nowe formy aktywności na rzecz przemiany świadomości. W omawianych wymiarach wyraźnie zarysowuje się proces umiejscawiania współcześnie pierwiastka sacrum w sferze profanum i resakralizacja natury. We wnioskach zastanawiamy się również, na ile kształtująca się nowa duchowość o rysie ekologicznym może sprzyjać upowszechnianiu idei rozwoju zrównoważonego w ramach przemian religijności przemian religijności człowieka początku XXI wieku.

Słowa kluczowe: natura, nowa duchowość, ekologia pogłębiona, sacrum, profanum, rozwój zrównoważony

Introduction

The emergence of the sustainable development idea in Western culture is closely related to spiritual and religious transformations. The background for the birth of many new religious movements and New Spirituality are the many transformations relating to anthropology (individualism), cosmology (holism) and axiology (supergenerational responsibility). As Lesław Michnowski points out *Eco-humanistic joint actions, concern for the weak and cooperation, instead of deadly socio-Darwinian rivalry destroying egoistic socio-diversity, become essential* (Michnowski, 2010). This cultural paradigm change occurs slowly and in different ways. Some of the postulates formulated in the second half of the twentieth century are *synthetic*, closely linking into the postulated programs, ecological and religious ideas. A good example are the philosophical works of Henryk Skolimowski who writes metaphors of *light as an energy, divine life, the Universe as an Artist, or the world as a sanctuary*. Discussing Skolimowski's views, Ignacy Fiut highlights the clear presence of religious influences through the use of religious language repertoire when formulating the postulates of change (Fiut, 2009). In our opinion, it was at the end of the twentieth century that attitudes inspired by New Spirituality strongly revealed themselves culturally in different ways, depending amongst others, on the understanding of such concepts as nature, the supernatural and sacrality, which were absent up to now. The measurable effect of these changes is to initiate actions aimed at realising in different areas the sustainable development project.

The key distinguishing feature of the religious sphere in classic religious studies was the separation of the supernatural from the natural – the sacred from the profane. Rudolph Otto's concept of a numinous experience is to be in communion with a sphere which cannot be rationalised, mysterious, awesome, but above all it is characterised by the coexistence of ambivalent elements, both fearful and fascinating (*mysterium tremendum* and *mysterium fascinans*) (Otto, 2004). This specific experience of the sacred, after being repeatedly emphasized in various religious texts, is associated with the distance it introduces towards the known world. The profane sphere becomes mediated by symbols relating to the sacred, which allows transcending (exceeding) everyday experiences. Émile Durkheim believed that the sacred – profane (supernatural-everyday) division is the extrapolation of fundamental dichotomy experienced by man, the social-individual. Hence the sacred sphere verbalisations are saturated with symbols which are expressions, amongst others, of the need to recognise the particular manifestations of reality in universal terms (Durkheim, 1995; Zwierzdzyński, 2009, p. 86-92). Currently, the trend is away from the sharp separa-

tion of the sacred from the profane, instead treating them as the poles of a continuum of an ordering system (Bowie, 2008). However, this division is still essential and retains its scientific usefulness, even in the latest religiousness changes.

The distinction between *natural* and *supernatural* was recognised and very often still is, but colloquially, that what is *supernatural* is precisely what is religious. This distinction was used mainly within Western European culture characterised by Eurocentrism and Christocentrism, closely associated with the Judeo-Christian tradition. The emphasis on God's transcendence in monotheistic religions, and separating him from nature, contributed to a large extent to the domination of this assumption. God of the *Old Testament* is radically transcendent, according to Peter Berger (Berger, 1967). This strong transcendentalism was in a certain sense weakened by the incarnation of Christ, but at the same time it *uplifted* man as an indirect, intermediate element, not belonging only to the Natural world. It should be emphasized that the theologies of such religions as Judaism, Christianity or Islam assumed the possibility of divine (external, extra-terrestrial) intervention in worldliness i.e. nature. Although they were rare, in addition, through their uniqueness they emphasised God's supernaturalness/sacrality. These interventions were described as miracles because miracle in the religious understanding means the temporary suspension of the laws of nature (Gadacz, Milerski, 2001, p. 62).

Attention can also be drawn to the different characteristics attributed to gods in the Eastern and Western religions. In the Western religions God's strong personification and anthropomorphisation is apparent, and God is treated as a source or cause of all energy and the world. However, in Eastern religions, the gods exhibit much more naturalness, often personifying the forces of nature; they are the media of ultimately impersonal energy (Campbell, 1988).

However, in the European pre-Christian religions, as well as in heterodox pantheistic movements, in terms of Christianity, nature is treated as *holy* in itself and the sharp distinction between the supernatural and natural is either not applicable or is completely abolished (Macnaghten, Urry, 1998). It must be emphasized that in so-called primitive communities nature was harnessed into intricate systems which were expressions of the sacralised reality experienced. To a lesser or greater degree, everything was connected with holiness – from its identification through to its radical contradiction. To illustrate the point, let us only mention terms such a taboo, axis of the world (*axis mundi*), tribal classification (e.g. totemism) as well as the division of clean – unclean, man – animal, our – foreign, dead – alive, which are so essential in traditional cultures (Szyjewski, 2001, pp. 60-71). The culture –

nature¹ division was extremely important, even as an element of complex classifications, but nature formed an important element of this relationship. Along with disenchanting the world (consisting of a number of factors such as the concept of a transcendent God, rationalisation, industrial development, and industrialisation), nature was subordinated under culture, whilst the sacred became the domain of mainly ethereal transcendence (Weber, 1988). Even if around the edges there were tendencies favouring nature, the above trend was dominant.

In the 20th century new movements began to grow strongly, trying to *charm* nature again, and *ipso facto* re-sacralising it in very different ways. We will define them here as the so-called New Spirituality movements, without doing into detail. As they constitute a (continuously growing) social *margin*, let us first look at the cultural context which accompanies them. Its main aspects include among others: technologisation of everyday life, institutionalisation and segmentation of society, digitisation of communications and transfer of its many aspects into virtual space (Castells, 2003).

The religiousness of present day man is also subject to the inevitable changes. In reflecting upon religion's place in the modern world over the past several years, it can be perceived that often, when describing religion, the term CHANGE appears which results from a series of transformations which social systems have been subject to (Borowik, 2004, p. 23). Sociologists, describing the transformation in contemporary religiousness, perceive a strong individualisation of attitudes toward religion, both in terms of content and their functions (Beckford, 2003; Hervieu-Léger, 2000). Regarding general trends, religions are seen to have lost their monopoly and the power to impose unequivocal judgements, guidance and interpretation of the world. Also, consumer orientation influences the individual's relationship with the sacred cosmos and the choice of the *definitive* meanings according to a private key. Thus religion becomes primarily a private matter – an *invisible religion*. The observed shift from heteronomy to autonomy, according to Janusz Mariański relates to religiousness outside the church, which although it cannot be generalized, *contains with itself something of a personal "profession of faith", of nonconformist religiousness and vague notions of God* (Mariański, 2007, p. 252)².

¹ The nature – culture split, similar to the previously cited sacred – profane split, is a very helpful distinction but does not have absolute basis (Chmurzyński, 1990, p. 78-81).

² In this context, Stella Grotowska's research is interesting. The axial term in her research is subjective religiousness, with the main parameters: freedom of choice, the search for meaning, the reorientation of identity, mosaicism, attitude to problem solving, providing a new sense

Another issue associated with changes in contemporary religiousness is secularisation. At its core are modernisation processes and progressive institutional specialisation which contribute to the disappearance of compliance with subjective systems of *definitive* meanings and the weakening of religious bonds (Kosela, 2003, p. 289). Thus, religion as a system institutionally separated, can by means of entering into relationships of various intensities with other social spheres, incline an individual to renegotiate internalised definitive meanings and influence the reaction, from a compromise to conflict, whilst the religion's *destiny* can be both fundamentalism as well as secularisation.

Finally, one of the signs of contemporary change is the steadily growing percentage of people who do not want to be described as religious, but declare that they lead a spiritual life (Wulff, 1997; Tylor, 2010). It is also possible to note the popularity of the word *spirituality*, as evidenced by numerous studies devoted to this phenomenon (Heelas et al., 2005; Grzegorzczak et al., 2006; Flangan and Jupp, 2007; Dobroczyński, 2010; Pasek, Skowronek, 2011). In this new meaning, spirituality embraces both traditional understanding of this word as *a deepened religious life*, and also as *fulfilling* or *aspiring* towards ethical, esthetical and other values in life treated as development and self-improvement. In the subject literature the notion of so-called New Spirituality is also differentiated (Herrick, 2003; Lynch, 2007; Gordon, 2007; Leszczyńska, Pasek, 2008), which we can provisionally define as transcending the earthly human condition in the name of various values. This understanding of spirituality is closely linked with the belief that this transcendence happens in close cooperation of man's physical and mental aspects (conditioning only development) and usually connects with a holistic vision of the world.

These contemporary forms of spirituality are an alternative to historical religions, rooted in tradition. On an individual level they are symbolised in new religious subjects, characterised by syncretism, vagueness and instability in comparison to the official model (Luckmann, 1967). The new content sources are also different. And right next to the traditional sources, which are the original institutions (e.g. family, the Church), other secondary

of everyday life and a sense for the individual, that the chosen religion is its own. Objective religiousness, according to the author, is that in which the individual grows, and subjective religiousness is the result of individual choice – the individual is strongly involved in the shaping process. It is not passively received, but very actively sought and individually processed. Describing the initiation situation to subjective religiousness the author cites as specific, next to the aforementioned freedom of choice: significant tension, orientation towards therapy, the reorientation of identity, existential crisis (Grotowska, 1999, p. 61-116).

determinants of meaning, often competing with each other, appear within the institutions.

The term New Spirituality is sometimes used interchangeably with the term New Age. However, let us note that it is becoming an increasingly pejorative and stigmatising term. In Poland this is due to the activities of numerous anti-cult centres situated next to churches as well as the fairly common identification of New Age with its so-called *low* trend, marked with marketplace magic and above all commercialism (Dobraczyński 2010, Kubiak 2005; Hall 2007; Leszczyńska, Pasek, 2008, p. 18).

This *new* attitude towards nature in Western culture is accompanied by changes in the understanding of the sacred, dependent on locating *that which is sacred* within the world of the profane. Using the examples below, mainly from Deep Ecology and the Raelian Movement, we have flagged some of the accents, typical of the social manifestations of New Spirituality.

First Accent: The nature of 'self'

The main emphasis in the New Spirituality movements is placed on a kind of self-diagnosis involving looking inside oneself and answering the question *Who is man and what is his true nature?* According to Paul Heelas, the researcher of these cultural changes, it is associated with the need to express individuality, primarily in the search for one's own unique, spiritual path (Heelas, 1996).

A change has been noticed in the way *soteriological procedures* have been understood. Followers of mainstream New Spirituality usually do not accept the mechanism of sacrifice and reject salvation *ab extra*, i.e. given from outside. These include for example the Christian concept of *Christ's sacrifice for salvation or the gift of grace*. Followers of New Spirituality are closer to Asian concepts, such as the Buddhist concept of self-improvement and inner development.³ The dominant belief is that salvation (self-salvation perceived as inner self-improvement) should take place here and now⁴. As for the method, two solutions are possible. In the first solution representatives of New Spirituality very

³ Here we see oriental soteriology's overpowering influences which, since at least the 18th/19th century have been impacting on European culture (Tokarski, 1984). One consequence of these interactions is, amongst others, the belief in reincarnation. According to CBOS (Public Opinion Research Centre) research from 2009, 12% of Polish society emphatically believes in the transmigration of souls, and 21% *sort of* believes (CBOS, 2009, p. 14).

⁴ In the works of Hermann Hesse, one of the New Spirituality *spiritual fathers*, a number of threads appear which New Spirituality will develop, such as salvation being life compatible with its nature in Narcissus and Goldmund (in the form of two development paths: the spiritual intellect and the sensual sphere), and the concept of self-development e.g. in Demian and Siddhartha).

often say that some people have a greater chance for full transformation, whilst others lesser. As noted by James Beckford, one of the common features linking diverse contemporary religious and spiritual phenomena is the search for ways to individual liberation from socio-cultural constraints, which are unfavourable for discovering one's genuine personality and the release of individual potential (Beckford, 2003). Now and again the development story is a reminder of the three-way gnostic split into somatics (hylics), psychics and pneumatics. Pneumatics are spiritual people and *fully initiated*, psychics can become spiritualised in time (after developing themselves), and somatics are completely buried in worldly matters. The second solution is more *democratic*; it depends on the belief in an infinitely large number of *salvation paths* available to everybody. They only need to be discovered by seeking them out and attempting the *process*, which turns out to be the best and the most effective for a given individual. Simultaneously, Steve Sutcliffe's observation regarding spiritual seekers who are seeking appropriate paths to self-fulfilment in relation to the needs of their own personality is interesting (Sutcliffe, 2003)

Christian mythology speaks of a cankered human nature, which previously was *like the gods* or *God-like*. After the fall in Paradise (the myth being the basis of the concept of original sin) human nature was destroyed (Protestantism), or weakened (Catholicism, Eastern Orthodox Church), from which Christianity evolved the idea of sin being man's second nature. Many times during history, this view has been rebelled against, including by reference to ancient tradition or other portrayals rejecting such a pessimistic view of man (e.g. Friedrich Nietzsche). Soteriological processes, as depicted by New Spirituality start in a similar way, that is with the diagnosis of one's own nature, but further interpretations and proposed *methods of salvation* are somewhat different. Proponents of New Spirituality state that *true or possible to realise* human nature has been *forgotten, smothered, unrecognised*, or would be *blocked* by the dominating culture. As formulated on one of the eco-philosophical blogs, there has been *a violation of the natural world and man himself*. Thus the author of the blog postulates, citing Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Henryk Skolimowski, that the alternative *for industrial society's arrogant humanism, humanism must be green* (www.ekofilozofia.blogspot.com). Consequently, various proposals using diverse *liberating* techniques have been put forward, which will be discussed later.

Numerous ecological movements have undertaken to answer the question of who man is, predominantly with reference to his relationship with the natural environment, the so-called subjective realism. Anthropocentrism is rejected in favour of ecocentrism, biocentrism and ecocentric economics. Human

spirituality happens to be understood, especially in the mainstream Deep Ecology Movement, without taking into account theistic elements. For example, Lesław Michnowski (the creator of cybernetic eco-development), referring to Al Gore's ideas, treats spirituality as the ability to feel empathy, that is compassion with the needs and threats of all entities on Earth, producing appropriate changes (i.e. sustaining life) by itself or through others, as well as intuitively perceiving their consequences (Michnowski, 1996).

The question of identity is also raised with regards to the man-animal relationship and also to research into artificial intelligence. In both cases *Homo sapiens* has been dethroned and no longer occupies a privileged place at the top of the Porphyrian tree. As an example, for many vegetarians the recognition/awareness of the value of an animal's life, not necessarily on par with human life, is an impulse to refrain from eating meat and to choose a new self-identification, which can be paraphrased, not only in the statement *I = man not eating aspects of life so similar to my existence*, but also in *I = man affirming the various aspects of life* (Dyczewska, 2008, p. 121).

Nevertheless, a strong emphasis in the New Spirituality movements seems to be placed on one's own *self* – my wellbeing, my way, my place on Earth (in the Universe), my choices, or finally my salvation. Therefore, the sacro-egoism concept can be brought up in which that *ego* (myself) becomes the highest and the holiest authority for an individual (Knox, 2008). The transformation of the ecosystem begins with the transformation of one's own nature, so is specific self-sacralisation and *self-cultivation* (Tae-hyun, 2009) as well as *spiritual ecology* (Tucker, 2002).

Second Accent: The nature of the world

Tendencies to desacralise nature are not unfamiliar to modern culture. Mircea Eliade believes that, when contemplating nature's majesty, contemporary man can be viewed as a degraded religious experience (Eliade, 1987). Within the activities of the New Spirituality movements, nature is treated as a *window* for that what is supernatural, this *window* is open, it is just necessary to look through it properly, which means – be equipped with the appropriate interpreting representations. Man himself becomes the most important creator of his own world, while simultaneously the accent falls on nature's role as master and guide (Zylbertal, 2010). Arne Naess, patron of Deep Ecology, summons to establish a closer contact with the environment (nature), because only there *can emerge a distinct feeling of who I really am* (Naess, 2008, p. 105). Nature, that which is on the outside of man, enables him to get to know himself and to fulfil tasks which we described in the first part.

Based on our analysis of numerous publications, it is often difficult to define sharp boundaries between that which is ecological and that which is parareligious. The respect which is bestowed on nature fluidly transfers itself into devotion, even without the authors' awareness. The concept of Gaia, Mother Earth, can serve as an example or by referring to Buddhism (Drengson, 1995). The followers of Deep Ecology themselves, frequently declare above admission. Janusz Korbel from the Pracownia na Rzecz Wszystkich Istot (Workshop for All Entities) in Bielsko-Biala (Poland), whilst discussing Bron Taylor's work stated:

the term "deep" and not "spiritual" ecology was introduced because people, who are followers of different religions and different philosophies meet on this level. They are afraid of religious terms, so as not to trivialise the basis of Deep Ecology to a pseudo-spiritual fashion of recent years, and also not to suggest any divisions. There is one nature which gives life to the followers of different religions (Korbel, 1996; see also Tylor, 1995).

Thus, the Earth, nature, the natural environment are regarded as the overriding value, which is expressed in the numerous ecocentric postulates (Metzner, 1991) and promulgated slogans, such as: *Earth First!* (Waloszczyk, 1996, p. 249-250). *Ipso facto*, man is one, not necessarily the most important, although in many respects unique, part of this world (Lynch, 2007, p. 36). Henryk Skolimowski, the creator of Polish mainstream ecophilosophy (ecological philosophy), author of numerous articles and books devoted to this subject, condemned the mechanistic view of the world and acknowledged life on Earth, which he treated as a life sanctuary (Skolimowski, 2003, p. 122; see also Dołęga 2006, p. 19). He summarised his views in a short sentence – *To venerate God in our time is to save the Planet* (Skolimowski, 1996, p. 21). Written with a capital letter, meant to him something more than an astronomical concept. Skolimowski advocates devotion and reverence for nature and the world, calls for the creation of eco-spirituality, because in today's age *that which is ecological and that which is spiritual become the same* (Skolimowski, 1996). Thus, in the New Spirituality movements, holism and monism are ubiquitous (Zamojski, 2002, p. 147). A pantheistic understanding of God also appears, whilst the forces of nature, both from under the signs of Eros and Thanatos, can be regarded as God's manifestations (Cranwell, 2010, p. 280).

Recognition of the natural environment as a key value is associated with a new positioning of man in the world. As Leszek Gawor says:

On the one hand, man and nature are a unity, in the sense that the sociosphere is a special case of the biosphere, and therefore these two elements of reality cannot be considered oppositional. On the other hand, the natural environment here has a

very wide connotation (...). In this context, the most important values are reverence for every manifestation of life, moderation in the use of the natural environment for human needs, and taking responsibility for man's presence in the natural world (Gawor, 2006).

The New Spirituality movements raise the global crisis issue in relation to various aspects. Eco-philosophy associates him with disturbing the ecological balance and breaching the resource regeneration of each ecosystem⁵. For some Deep Ecology followers, the attitude towards the future is marked with specific apocalyptic visions and prophecies of impending disaster (Hervieu-Léger, 2000). Thus, Deep Ecology movements primarily concentrate on what can/should be done first of all now and not in the future, since that is under a question mark (Naess, 1992, p. 612).

Third Accent: Call to action

Certain actions, subjects and experts play an important role in sustaining each *sacred universe* in its particular manifestation. Here we would like to just briefly discuss the first of these manifestations, the action aspect, since this practical dimension seems to be extremely important for the New Spirituality followers. There are different ways of self-realisation and self-improvement (frequently personalised, rarely communal). The diagnosis relating to the recognition of one's own (true) nature, described earlier, as well as recognising a specific state (redefinition of the natural environment) initiates actions with respect to both self-salvation as well as to overcoming the global crisis.

Amongst the mainstream Deep Ecology groups examples of practices similar to some neo-pagan movements can be found. These can be regarded as specific rituals whose aim is to change the attitude towards nature by rediscovering the lost unity. For example, the classes organised by the Workshop for All Entities from Bielsko-Biala, during which participants lie down on the ground in the forest, cover themselves with leaves, in order to then arise, symbolising their rebirth. A similar role is supposed to be fulfilled by embracing trees in order to *synchronize* and/or *strengthen* one's own energy with them, whilst the various tree varieties affect the human body through their specific properties in different ways. Such a *tree energy actions* list can be found in the first year *Materials from forest usage* class of

the Technical School for Forestry in Tułowice. Amongst other things, we learn, that birch:

Bestows positive feelings, calms, and comforts. The birch's gentleness can be used to alleviate any psychological shocks and traumas. This tree contains energies which help to calm down, to free in a mellow manner negative emotions like anger, fear, wrath, they support efforts to control one's ego and facilitate contact with the higher self. The birch also helps to balance the masculine and feminine element, combining them in such a way so that they will function creatively (uzytkowanielasu.zafriko.pl). We have now reached New Spirituality. The overall objective of these activities is *the restoration of harmony, determined at the beginning of the world, because only it is able to provide us with a taste of true happiness* (matkanatura.pl). Thus, it is not the breaking of connectivity with God but with nature, which is the cause of man's poor condition and various problems, whilst *connecting to the energy of Mother Earth* is a fitting antidote⁶.

For the functional interpretation of the cultural phenomena, the role of many practices, known to us from Deep Ecology communities, is similar and is associated primarily with being involved/an active witness (Rappaport, 1999). Although there is no explicitly expressed myth behind these actions, in these workshops/rituals one can discern references mainly to the myth of lost unity. It should be emphasised that the Deep Ecology movements decidedly distance themselves from linking their missions with the religious sphere, using the term spirituality to describe the area in which their work with man is carried out.

Finally, the habitual high importance of science and its achievements in the New Spirituality movements should be emphasised. In many cases, the mystique is linked with physics e.g. within so-called. cybergnosis (Partridge, 2005). However, the belief in the unfathomable possibilities of science prevails, although so far not fully known to the end. This happens in the Raelian Movement, whose members believe in the Rael's (Claude Vorilhon) revelations, describing his contacts with extraterrestrials (the Elohim) and travel to their planet which was to take place in 1975. They also believe in cloning as a possibility to prolonging human life. One could say that this is a new story about man's eschatological dreams about the afterlife. This story is devoid of wonder and is *natural* in the sense that it does not refer to anything else, but only to knowledge and scientifically recognised processes and phenomena. The messages proclaimed by the

⁵ It should be noted that historic churches also raise issues related to ecology. Peter Beyer, describing religious environmental movements, distinguishes several types: *the spirituality of creation* (ecospiritualism) – stressing the holistic continuity between the human world and the natural world; *ecojustice* – concern about environmental issues linked to social justice issues; *ecotraditionalism* – the call for the renewal of religious traditions in the face of ecological crisis (Beyer 1994, p. 206-223).

⁶ Written with a capital letters, Mother Earth likens herself to a living entity. James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis (1979) can be evoked here, about the unity of the Earth's ecosystem (living entity), as a specific biological unity of a higher order, capable of e.g. responding to climate change or human interference.

Raelians can be considered as a manifestation of a New Spirituality, which dispenses with the concept of the sacred. Extra-terrestrials are *natural* for them in the sense that they are not a *miracle*, whilst Raelian faith recognises them as an object of knowledge. We will consciously avoid the distinction between religious and nonreligious belief (faith), which clearly overlap here. The followers of this movement are convinced that in the future immortality will depend on trouble-free replication of personal DNA, for a given person (rael.org). Raelians however, do not stop at dreaming of futuristic vision, as is exemplified by the use of scientific methods in the implementation of espoused postulates; in this case the *Clitoraid* program affirms sexuality.

Conclusions

To the discussed New Spirituality we can include many different movements that are characterised by sometimes conflicting aspirations, from activities to *enchant* the world again (ecophilosophy) to the belief (faith) in the possibility of fully *decoding* nature's mysteries, maybe in the not too distant future (Raelians). Summarising the selected aspects of human – nature relationships, only outlined here, regarding movements under the banner of so-called New Spirituality, one may ask the question, why is this a new spirituality and in what way, in this context, would its *old* version be. This novelty is associated with a temporal caesura, whose origins can be seen in the ancient past, but with the twentieth century being a particular period of boom. The term New Spirituality refers primarily to a specific attitude, characterized by the awareness of the importance of one's (individual) existence and a solicitous mindfulness towards one's own self-improvement and intellectual (analytical) approach to the subject of *faith* which may be *old*. New Spirituality often resurrects the rites rooted firmly in the past, such as e.g. shamanism or a magical view of the world. It is therefore not surprising that in such a wide range of different types of spirituality we see the animation of nature treated amongst other things as a soul of the universe, the source of cosmic energy or a life force (Herrick, 2003). But this is not a simple attempt to restore the bygone views of the world, which in itself seems to be impossible. The followers of this trend, on the one hand refer to the past, whilst on the other readily draw on the achievements of modern science, by being the initiators of very bold forward looking activities. Is by no means an uncritical gaze into the achievements of the modern world, but often an emphatic protest against the many already existing *patencies*. Hence in the New Spirituality movements, in the approach to what is natural, a specific dialectic becomes apparent. It is not a pure admiration (affirmation), so-called first nature, nor its negation through em-

powerment (Roberts, 2004). It is a specific synthesis of these two attitudes – a self-conscious individual who keeps a distance with respect to cultural achievements, whilst simultaneously does not want to/cannot overcome the distance which separates him, as a *Homo sapiens* representative, from that which he is accustomed to call nature. One could go a step further and define this so-called New Spirituality as postmodern spirituality. In addition, a specific shift of the element of the sacred becomes apparent within the mentioned divisions of the sacred – profane and nature – culture in the direction of the sacralisation of the profane and resacralisation of nature. This renewed *enchantment*, of nature occurs by the power of man, stripped of his enchantment, no longer demanding strong transcendental justification. Strictly theistic elements are rare or non-existent, and if present, are mainly within the framework of pantheistic and gnosticising cosmologies.

In our opinion, the reflections above, only scratched the surface of an interesting topic on the change in perception or feeling *that which is holy* by modern man. It seems pretty obvious that the concept of the sacred, as the basic category distinguishing the religious sphere, should be decidedly redefined. As we tried to show, some of the New Spirituality movements refer to the pre-Christian unity and sanctity of nature, placing the sacred within the realm hitherto defined as the profane world. However, another group of followers of these movements, completely *eliminate* from their vision of the world the traditionally perceived sacred (or at least its tremendous dimension), adding paramount importance to e.g. human cognitive powers or forces of nature. The latest, broad understanding of spirituality generates an anthropology project, in which it is possible for man to realise his greatness by means of self-development and which has not been determined by the context of historical religions. Let us mention, that it also happens that it is achieved by referring to syncretic ideas, merging selected religious elements with those extra-religious.

Not wanting to pass arbitrary judgements and remembering, that *one person's sustainable activity is another person's unsustainable activity* (Russell, 2010), let us finally consider, but not dwell on, to what extent the postulates of sustainable development can be applied to the rich offerings from the New Spirituality movements. A strong similarity can be seen on a general level, since both the sustainable development and the New Spirituality postulates have an alternative character to the dominant options; they identify practical goals which they regard as being of indispensable character, but most of all propose measures which are to lead to profound changes whose effect is to be, amongst others, the harmonisation of the coexist of *homo sapiens* with the environment. However, the starting

point appears to be different, which for the sustainable development postulates is the human community, a *family of nations* (Udo, Pawłowski, 2010), whereas for New Spirituality an individual comes first. Yet, both these subjects, individual and collective, meet in a holistic (interdependent) vision of reality, pursuing *green metanoia* (Gawor, 2006).

This text served not only to describe certain, in our opinion, unusually interesting changes in the field of religiousness and contemporary mentality, but also to indicate areas for further research. A very general objective of the planned project is the attempt to investigate the understanding (construction) of the concept of nature, in different, often distinct New Spirituality groups. We are assuming that at their core lie certain anthropological and cosmological assumptions. Man and nature are interdependent concepts, having a strong relational character. Noteworthy are the constructive dichotomies for the man – nature relationship: natural – antinatural (unnatural, artificial) and natural – supernatural (spiritual, transcendental, extraterrestrial). Within the framework of this project our intention is to answer the general question, if there are common (basic) definition elements in the understanding of the human-nature relationship (and if so what are they), and which of them are specific and typical only for the selected groups. This opens further, specific research problems, such as those related with the semiotics of nature and assigned meanings by contemporary culture, and the functions fulfilled by New Spirituality – equally strictly religious and extra-religious, the cyber environment as a new environment, etc.

The methodology of this project will draw on the backing of qualitative research, both in terms of methods for data acquisition (in-depth interviews, participant observation, experiment), as well as data analysis (e.g. content analysis, the analysis of semantic fields of key words, analysis of biographical structure processes). Those wishing to be included in this project substantively, by providing their scientific work, please contact the Pracownia Badań Współczesnych Form Duchowości (Research Centre for Contemporary Forms of Spirituality), located in the Faculty of Humanities, AGH University of Science and Technology.

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