

SOCIAL CHANGE ACCORDING TO BULGARIAN NEW AGE

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Abstract: *The modern world citizen today rejects Christian morality as retrograde. Thus, a modern, syncretic, and global alternative to the human self emerges – New Age movement, which is becoming more widespread and sought after by quickly solving life's problems and ensuring personal happiness.*

The cultural Christianity of the Bulgarians facilitates the spread of New Age beliefs and practices: the historically established "pagan Christianity" of the Bulgarians is manifested by latent religiosity, dualistic, rich mythological demonology, and oral patriarchal tradition.

At first sight, Bulgarian New Age is a liberal religion (according to Peter Beyer): tolerant and ecumenical, with the aim of including more people to work for the benefit of the world community. But more in-depth research reveals that the proximity in the doctrines of Bulgarian New Age and Bulgarian Orthodoxy in everyday life allow their conflict-free coexistence. Additionally, the sociological interpretation of Mark Satin's quadrant shows that, unlike the Western New Age, Bulgarian New Age beliefs and practices represent a conservative response to life's challenges, closer to monolithic institutions than biolithic ones: "the path of freedom = the path of suffering = the path of redemption". Therefore, both the Bulgarian "high" New Age and Bulgarian Orthodoxy are two conservative responses in a globalized and secularized world. Interpreted through Orthodox theology, Bulgarian New Age is a commune movement: "from below"; organic, informal, non-legal, non-institutionalized, non-hierarchical. In functional terms, it represents a "synthetic metanarrative" of traditional Bulgarian Orthodoxy and particularly Petar Danov's teaching, which derives its strength from the claim for Bogomil heritage and avoiding the "confessional curse", and the social change needs time and hard self-work.

Keywords: *Bulgarian New Age, Petar Danov's teaching, social change*

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Introduction

There is no consensus among academic scholars whether the New Age is a religious phenomenon that manifests itself as a new religious movement in post-Christian Western culture or it is a kind of “popular religiosity.” Similarly, there is no agreement on how the New Age is a cultural phenomenon: alternative, countercultural or mainstream: real or artificially created by the media and scientists. It has no organizational framework, it is expressed in the personal modus, but through the institutional forms of online platforms. In this sense, the social terrains for interaction with followers are books, websites, lectures, seminars, etc. (Frisk & Nynäs, 2012).

According to Olav Hammer (1997, cited in Granholm, 2008) the following features are often presented in New Age spiritualities: 1. A view of the entire cosmos as an interconnected whole. 2. A direction in existence: humans create their circumstances not vice versa. 3. The idea of everything in existence being permeated by a divine force or energy. 4. The idea that humans have mismanaged their existence, but the present condition is possible to mend. 5. A view of the earth as a living thing which has been abused by humanity. 6. The idea that individuals have their own unique part in existence. 7. A belief in reincarnation combined with a belief in spiritual evolution through the different reincarnations. 8. The conviction that there are better ways to attain knowledge than through science. 9. The sentiment that eastern and traditional nature religions contain universal and ancient wisdom. 10. The opinion that humanity is on the verge of a spiritual and societal revolution.

Steven Sutcliffe (2003, cited in Frisk & Nynäs, 2012) argued that New Age is a constructed ethical category, a code word for the heterogeneity of alternative spirituality, a subtype of folk religion, manifested by grassroots activism, everyday life strategies, ideals of spiritual autonomy and egalitarianism, and direct unmediated experiences. The new spiritual discourse in individual is expressed in: 1. To be a dissident, striving to find something more and better than institutionalized religion. 2. Being a layman in a domestic setting, which undermines the traditional boundaries between public and private space. 3. To be a populist, recognizing the primacy of individual’s will and functioning with short-term achievements and active creation of meanings in everyday life.

Jeff Levin (2022) claimed that a motivating force for the emergence and persistence of the New Age in the United States was the growing interest in mystical traditions in the 1960s. Many Catholics, Jews and Protestants, dissatisfied with their religion and in search of a more empirical spirituality, returned to the mystical core of their faiths. While the external expressions of these religions differ dramatically, their inner and fundamental aspects converge and express “eternal philosophy.” He mentioned the definitions of some scholars of this common inner path as: “primary tradition”, “secret wisdom”, “forgotten truth”, “ancient theology”.

1. New Age Politics

The main ideas of the movement are twofold: 1. Open consciousness in the New Age will lead to the end of racism, hunger, poverty and war. And this social transformation will be the result of a mass awakening of the entire population of the next generation. 2. Everyone could challenge the New Age through their personal spiritual transformation with the instruments of tarot cards, astrology, yoga, and meditation. The movement also targets sick and mentally injured people whom traditional medicine fails to help. Two branches can be distinguished in terms of the objectives pursued and the methods used: scientific ("high" New Age) and commercial ("low" New Age). Representatives of the latter are engaged in publishing lessons and distributing props and objects necessary for the New Age lifestyle (crystals and pyramids, clothes, vinyl records and magnetic tapes with music for meditation, specific foods). The scientific branch brings together representatives of different disciplines who share the belief that the coming of the New Age is near, and this is a time of profound transformation of individual and collective consciousness. (Ptaszek, 2020).

The New Age's entry into socialist countries before 1989 is due to the closeness between the ideologies of New Age and socialism. Not only on the basis of the idea for the "new individual", equality, justice, etc., but also the slogans turned into magic formulas for educating and ideologizing societies. The main differences between the two projects, however, are that, according to the New Age, social transformation will take place individually on evolutionary way. The socialist is "robotic" and the New Ager is free, it rather shatters the collective because of the danger of taking away freedom. In this way, freedom prevails over security. The movement is countercultural: as a critique of capitalism in the West and of socialism in the East. The strength of the New Age lies in its fluidity and mild relativism, which makes it extremely adaptable to different sociocultural contexts and especially beneficial as a worldview in societies in crisis or transition (Манова, 2022). Blurred, often changing and amorphous, New Age ideology can become both democratic and liberal, and nationalistic and authoritarian in its support for the family, ecology, and ideal society. Thus, in the future, a seemingly asocial structure may become a movement with political elements (Лункин, 2009). In the late 1990s, critics of the New Age questioned whether the movement's policies were too acquiesced in both capitalism and liberalism. As an ideology, it easily succumbs to conspiracy, turning many of its positive ideas into anti-scientific, anti-state, antipolitical, and anti-Christian. In the first decades of the 21st century, a number of connections were found between the spiritualism of the New Age and right-wing and far-right organizations (Peters, 2022).

Mark Satin (2015) argued that New Age politics is aimed at de-prisoning of the individual and building biolytic institutions. His three-level analysis shows that it is only at the third level, which neither liberals nor Marxists reach, where "six-sided

prison” can be seen. These six sides are: patriarchal attitudes, egocentricity, scientific single vision, bureaucratic mentality, nationalism, and the big-city outlook. It is difficult, he said, but still possible, to overcome it through a “transformation of culture”. But because it’s such a comprehensive process, political activists prefer to ignore it. That is why he argued that change should begin “now” and not “after the revolution” generally with a shift from materialism to post-materialism. New Age politics is the “third force” in American society that has always existed: the ideas of ordinary life, decentralization of power, and being a good world citizen. Therefore, this “hidden flow” could become a governing force. In this sense, if New Age politics is perceived as utopia or radicalism, it is a special kind of radicalism. It does not focus on the chain radical-liberal, but on the psychocultural roots of the problems, taking what is necessary from the old political ideologies with an attempt to move beyond them (transcend them). It do not seek a single best path for all people, groups, and governments, but a way to agree on living and working in synergy. Achievements are more in cooperation than in competition.

3. Social Change according to Bulgarian New Age

Some statistics related to New Age beliefs and religiosity among Bulgarians are presented in tables 1, 2 and 3. Although declaring religious affiliation, Bulgarians do not attend services or other religious practices – “latent religiosity”. Since the Middle Ages, the people have perceived it as inherently Bulgarian. Theological problems do not provoke interest, and people’s knowledge of the Bible is weak. There is no aspiration to possess the “supreme truth” and for globalization, the focus is on preserving local tradition and national emancipation. Bulgarians continue to believe in God and define religion as an important part of their lives (Marinov, 2022, Dulov, 2013, Kanev, 2002). Mario Marinov (2008) draws an implicit “Orthodox Christian” starting point in the stories of the adherents of the new religious movements, which he interprets within the secularization thesis, where traditional inherited religious identity is perceived as a culture rather than a faith. Therefore, Bulgarians can be defined as cultural Christians: “believing and belonging, without behaving” (by Grace Davie), **which corresponds to the studies of Western Christian societies.**

Table 1. Religious distribution of the Bulgarian population (% of all responds)

	Wave 3 (1995-1999)	Wave 5 (2005-2009)	Wave 7 (2017-2022)
Eastern Orthodoxy	52,2	72,4	58,9
Islam	11,8	11,2	13,2
Roman Catholicism	1,2	0,1	0,8
Protestantism	0,6	0,3	0,2

Other	0,4	0,4	0,3
Non-religious	33,1	13,9	25,7
Do not know/ no answer	0,8	1,7	0,9
Total	1072	1001	1566

Source: World Values Survey

Table 2. New Age beliefs among Bulgarians (%)

	1990	1999	2008	2017
Belief in reincarnation	25,3	30,2	30,0	28,0
Belief in some sort of spirit or life force	35,7	39,0	46,5	41,3
Belief in a personal God	10,2	35,8	33,8	41,8

Source: Atlas of European Values

According to some specific indicators, New Age views on contemporary social issues are found specifically among Orthodox and non-religious. Hypothetically, it could be assumed that the post-materialism index is a good complex indicator of New Age beliefs. The post-materialism index for Bulgarians is: 0,8% of Orthodox, 0,1% of Muslims, 0% of Catholics/ Protestants/ other religions, 0,4% of non-religious and total 1,3% of all respondents.

Table 3. Views among Bulgarians on contemporary social issues (% of all responds, by religious subgroups)

	Eastern Orthodoxy	Islam	Roman Catholicism	Protestantism	Other	Non-religious	Total
Confidence: Churches							
Quite a lot	22,5	8,7	0,4	0,2	0,3	2,9	35,1
Not very much	35,2	3,9	0,4	0,0	-	21,6	61,8
Do not know	1,1	0,6	-	-	-	1,3	3,0
(N)	58,9	13,2	0,8	0,2	0,3	25,7	(1566)
Abortion acceptance							
Low	16,9	4,4	0,4	0,2	0,2	7,8	29,8
Medium	28,0	5,2	0,3	0,1	-	9,7	43,3
High	14,9	2,9	0,1	-	0,1	8,8	26,9
(N)	59,9	12,5	0,7	0,3	0,3	26,3	(1404)

Homosexuality accep- tance							
Low	42,2	11,2	0,8	0,3	0,3	16,2	70,8
Medium	13,4	1,7	0,0	0,0	-	6,7	21,8
High	4,0	0,7	-	-	0,0	2,7	7,4
(N)	59,5	13,5	0,8	0,3	0,3	25,6	(1445)
Overall secular values							
0-0,3	18,0	4,9	0,4	0,2	0,1	3,3	26,8
0,3-0,7	38,2	8,1	0,4	0,1	0,2	17,3	64,1
0,7-1	3,3	0,5	-	-	-	5,2	9,0
(N)	59,5	13,4	0,8	0,2	0,3	25,8	(1533)
Relativism							
0-0,3	43,1	9,2	0,7	0,2	0,2	15,5	68,9
0,3-0,7	9,8	2,1	0,1	0,1	0,1	5,8	18,0
0,7-1	6,5	2,2	-	-	-	4,5	13,1
(N)	59,5	13,5	0,8	0,2	0,3	25,8	(1536)
Post-materialism index							
Materialist	25,8	8,9	0,1	0,0	0,2	11,0	46,2
Mixed	30,0	3,6	0,7	0,2	0,1	13,4	48,5
Post-materialist	0,8	0,1	-	-	-	0,4	1,3
No answer	2,3	0,7	-	-	-	0,9	3,9
(N)	58,9	13,2	0,8	0,2	0,3	26,0	(1566)

Source: World Values Survey, wave 7 (2017-2022)

My research interest was focused on what reason more than 82 thousand followers of the platform Portal 12 on Facebook are united and what is the doctrine of the teaching they share. The Facebook group was established in September 2015. At the beginning of March 2023, when I started my research – 75 892 followers, and at the beginning of November 2023 – 82 328; in You Tube – more than 84 thousand. It is noteworthy that the term “New Age” is not mentioned in any post on the platform. In the first place there are various thematic rubrics related to the “low” New Age: bookstore, festivals, astrology, workshops, trainings and so on. My study was a content analysis of some of the published conversations with Eleazar Harash. As he said, the name was given by the Teacher in 1987 after samadhi and he bears great responsibility with it. He is the second inheritor of Petar Dunov (Beinsa Douno, the founder of “White Brotherhood” movement) after Mihail Ivanov (Omraam). It is a “world-affirming” movement (by R. Wallis), criticized by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, which has been prohibited during the communist regime. After 1989 the

movement is reestablished and nowadays it is presented in most European countries, Brazil, Australia, Canada, and USA (Marinov, 2017). Svetoslava Toncheva (2017) defines the system of Petar Danov (1964-1944) as inscribed in the spirit of modern times (late 19 – beginning 20th century). The teaching offered ideas of all kinds, including solutions to seemingly small, daily life problems, but extremely important in the context of so-called “cultured peoples.” As a new phenomenon, it included opposition between old-new (tradition-modernity), offered a new spiritual system – a new vision of the world, a reinterpretation of traditional Christian models, combined with Eastern ideas, in line with developments taking place in the European cultural sphere. Transforming man, the teaching aimed to change the world through the creation of a new society built on the idea of brotherhood.

“The Portal is a connecting element”, as the creators of the platform define themselves, which in structural terms looks like communal-fraternal ecclesiology, or church-as-commune, interpreted through Orthodox theology. A spiritual-missionary center, where the ministry of each member of the community as part of God’s people is recreated. It is important that the communion movement is “from below”, it is organic, informal, non-legal, non-institutionalized, non-hierarchical. From the point of view of postmodernism and in functional terms, the platform is a “synthetic metanarrative” (by A. Dudarev) of traditional Bulgarian Orthodoxy and the teaching of P. Danov, which derives its strength from the claim to Bogomil heritage. But it resembles a denomination, since for the unprejudiced reader or listener is not clear that the main presented theses are from the teaching of P. Danov, as if avoiding the “confessional curse” (by A. Dudarev). Additionally, the organization of various festivals, camps, and lectures, are an additional example of a communion that aims to become a church with the main mission of teaching, i.e., inclusion of more people for an “active enlightenment.”

Tables 4 and 5 presents the differences found in the content analysis between New Age teachings in Western and Bulgarian societies, although they both search for ways for spiritual and social development. But the “spiritual consumerism” (by David Spangler) with main characteristics self-fulfillment and self-realization consequently leads to withdrawal from the world. On that reason New Age can pose a danger when accepted as a new ideology or as a social movement in the West, but for Bulgarians it is primarily a passive attitude to surrounding world, similarly as Bulgarian Orthodoxy with its historical rooted mysticism.

Table 4. Comparison between Biblical Christianity, New Age pantheism and Bulgarian “high” New Age teachings

	Biblical Christianity	Bulgarian New Age	New Age pantheism	Bulgarian New Age
God	Father	+	Force	-
	Personal	+	Impersonal	-
	Only good	+	Good and evil	-
	Created all things	+	Is all things	+
Man	Made like God	?	Is God	-
	Is evil	?	Is good	?
	Spirit/ body	+	Spirit only	-
	Resurrection	-	Reincarnation	+
Jesus Christ	Same person	+	Different persons (Jesus and Christ)	-
	God-Man	+	God spirit in man	-
	Death/ resurrection	+	Death/ reincarnations	+
Salvation	From moral guilt		From disharmony	
	By grace	-	By human effort	+
	Victory over sin	+	Victory over fear	
Faith	In divine power	+	In human potential	+
	Objective focus	-	Subjective focus	+
	To see God’s will done	+	To see man’s will done	-
Miracle	Done at God’s command	-	Done at man’s command	+
	Supernatural power (of the Creator)	?	Supranormal power (of creatures)	+
	Associated with good	+	Associated with evil	-

Source: Geisler, 1988

Table 5. Interpretation of Mark Satin’s quadrant

	Individual autonomy; community/ regional self-determination (biolithic institutions)		
Emphasis on individual experience and social service (prison-free)	New Age politics (for American society)		Emphasis on individual possessions and social status (prison-bound)
	Bulgarian New Age		
	Individual conformity; state/ institutional domination (monolithic institutions)		

Source: Satin, 2015

It appears in the public sphere more as an exoteric movement than as an esoteric. Their courses, lectures, camps, etc., are open and published. Their thesis are not in the occult sphere. So, it could be said that Bulgarian New Age is culturally shaped movement. Moreover, there could be drawn three elements which relate Bulgarian “high” New Age and Bulgarian Orthodoxy views: the prayer and the pilgrimage in functional plan, and the communion – in structural and where the gift of teaching takes place:

1. Prayer – creates a powerful energy field to project the world and even two people in the name of Christ can change the world, said the astrologer S. Doncheva (Дончева, 2020). And P. Dunov argued that only collective prayer can weaken natural cataclysms. Prayer is conscious work of oneself to become a creator of own destiny. On the other hand, V. Dukhanin (2022) discussed a special type of folk healers who uses Christian attributes, symbols and prayers from the Orthodox prayer book in their practice. What these healers do not have is serious spiritual guidance, they do not seem to be opponents of the Church, but are somewhat detached from it.” Prayer is the magic formula which can transform reality.

2. Pilgrimage – individual or group, “esoteric excursions” can be organized even by travel agents. It is an expression of postmodern religiosity. The most typical examples are complexes in Krastova gora, the Rupite area (where Vanga Petrichka/ Baba Vanga had lived) and the village Zlatolist (where reverend Stoyna had lived), which are object to both New Age and Christian pilgrimage. In fact, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church not only does not oppose the so-called “false teachings,” but also allows the construction of churches/ chapels of the cult places for the New Age. This can be explained by the function of pilgrimage to historical sites: strengthening the cultural and national identity of Bulgarians, identical for Bulgarian Orthodoxy and New Age (Troeva, 2016).

3. Communion – the primary form of organization and communication and life of the members of the church assembly. If a communion sets itself the task of being a church, it must organize “official and unofficial” meeting places where to interact with other communions. The common layers, who do not possess the gift of government, participate in the ministry with the gifts of reasoning and trial. But the most important gift is teaching, because without teaching the common people remain unenlightened, therefore devoid of grace. Which leads to a situation when the people are baptized, but not included, which is the main reason for the “dechurcing” (Dudarev, 2021).

Conclusion

For Bulgarians from analyzed conversations it could be only derived calls for patience to political elites and government, focus on individuals and self-improvement, and passive attitude to the surrounding world, because “evil is good.” Well, but on the other hand, “life is a fight: either you fight, or you run,” as S. Doncheva said. The main instrument is the Word because “the fight should be against ignorance; it is for people’s hearts and minds.”

In everyday life the New Age doctrine does not oppose Bulgarian Orthodoxy: from the point of view of an ordinary individual, the differences between the “high” New Age and Orthodoxy are two: the concept of karma, respectively reincarnation, and dualism. But since Bulgarian Orthodoxy has historically not opposed dualistic pagan beliefs, there remains a difference that is purely theological, it remains outside “everyday life” and therefore does not contradict religious faith, because postmodern individual has not got a “dogmatic consciousness.” The proximity in the doctrines of the Bulgarian New Age and the Bulgarian Orthodoxy allow their conflict-free co-existence. Sociological interpretation of the Mark Satin’s quadrant reveals that, unlike the Western New Age, Bulgarian beliefs, then reflected in practices, represent a conservative response to life’s challenges – closer to monolithic institutions than biolithic ones, because “the path of freedom = the path of suffering = the path of redemption.” Whether Bulgarian society would be “a synergic, win-win society” (by M. Satin) through prayer and self-work, is a question of the future. Especially when Bulgarian New Age nowadays could be interpreted as a Christian movement rather than a post-Christian one. “Time is needed and hard work” for social change.

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