

UNIVERSITY "OVIDIUS" OF CONSTANȚA  
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# **PHD THESIS ABSTRACT**

## **CONFIGURATIONS AND IDEOLOGIES OF THE NEW MAN IN POSTMODERNITY AND NEW AGE. MISSIONARY EVALUATION**

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## CONTENTS

### INTRODUCTION 4

1. Rationale and research objectives 4
2. The topicality of the theme in the context of current research 8
3. Summary structure of the PhD thesis 16
4. Scientific and methodological tools used in the elaboration of the thesis 17

### CHAPTER I - POSTMODERNISM AND NEW-AGE - REFERENCES OF THE ITINERARY OF HUMAN INDIVIDUALIZATION IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY 19

- 1.1. Postmodernity/postmodernism - trends of cultural, philosophical, religious, social reconfiguration 19
  - 1.1.1. Postmodernity - tendencies to invalidate modernity 19
  - 1.1.2. Postmodernism - a radical problematization of the meta-narratives of modernity 24
- 1.2. The re-patterning of religion by the impulse of secularisation 29
  - 1.2.1. The theories of rationalization and individualization 29
  - 1.2.2. Secularization as the fragmentation of religion at the level of personal choice 34
- 1.3 New Age - the paradigm of reinventing religion in pseudo-spiritual valences 42
  - 1.3.1 Brief history and referential principles of the New Age movement 42
  - 1.3.2. Subjectivised reinterpretation of religion in the pattern of New Age spirituality 49
- 1.3.2. New Age - the paradigm of secular religion 57
- 1.4 New Age as a religious expression of postmodernity 60
- Conclusions 64

### CHAPTER II - REDEFINING HUMAN IDENTITY IN THE FLOW OF POSTMODERNISM AND THE NEW RELIGIOSITY 66

- 2.1. Human Identity in Postmodernist Global Fluidity 67
  - 2.1.1. Religious identity - conceptual-theoretical approaches 67
  - 2.1.2. The acceleration of the social rhythm - adapting to the unfolding of everyday experience 72
  - 2.1.3. Human configuration in relational interconnectedness 74
  - 2.1.4. Constructing a new metamorphosed religious-cultural identity 76
- 2.2. The de-traditionalized human - the itinerary of human individuation as liberation from authority frameworks 82
  - 2.2.1. The abstraction of man by defining him as an individual 82
  - 2.2.2. Detraditionalization as a process of disintegration of the integrity of society in postmodernity 88
  - 2.2.3. The radical thesis: the undermining of authority frameworks and the proliferation of consumer culture 89
  - 2.2.4. Formulating the thesis of coexistence as retraditionalization 95
- 2.3. Rethinking man as a conscious subject in postmodernism - from person to social construct 98
- 2.4. Rethinking man under the ideology of religious nihilism 104
  - 2.4.1. Anthropological rethinking of the 'new man' in the Nietzschean paradigm 105
  - 2.4.2. The New Man Project in Marxism 109

- 2.4.3 The anthropological effects of secularisation: the religious desensitisation of man 119
- 2.4.4 The postmodern and secular profile of the 'nones' 122
- Conclusions 129

### CHAPTER III - THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE 'NEW' MAN IN THE NEW AGE: SPIRITUAL RESEMNIFICATIONS 131

- 3.1. New Age anthropological reconfigurations: religious individualism, eclecticism and the symbolism of the self 131
- 3.2. Man in the economy of New Age pseudo-spirituality 136
  - 3.2.1. The transition of a spirituality from meaning to the commercialization of the sacred 137
  - 3.2.2. Holistic transformation: beyond the sacred-profan dichotomy 139
  - 3.2.3. Transformative experience in the New Age - an evolutionary design of spiritualization 144
- 3.3 New Age spiritual technologies of human innovation in tandem with postmodernist consumption 156
  - 3.3.1. Postmodernist secularisation as a stimulus for human redefinition innovation 156
  - 3.3.2 The self in New Age interpretations - a product in consumer society 161
    - Deepak Chopra - spiritual expansion from ego to omnipotent Self 165
  - 3.3.4. Ken Wilber - resizing the self through Integral Transformative Practice 168
  - 3.3.5. Gary Zukav - the paradigm of the authentic self as the optimization of the "multi-sensory" human 171
  - 3.3.6. Shakti Gawain and the impulse of "enlightenment" or "self-realization" 173
  - 3.3.7. Pseudospiritual recipes for a limited man within the framework of consumerism 174
- Conclusions 177

### CHAPTER IV - THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH AND THE AFFIRMATION OF CHRISTIAN ANTHROPOLOGY IN THE POSTMODERNIST AND NEW-AGE-IST CONTEXT. CONTEXTUALIZATION AND EVALUATION 179

- 4.1 Missionary principles in the context of postmodernism 180
  - 4.1.1. Refocusing Christian mission on the apology of contemporary challenges. A missionary model relevant to the 21st century 180
  - 4.1.2 Postmodernity and the invalidation of Enlightenment tendencies to rethink man. The theorising of David Bosch 186
    - 4.1.2.1. The expansion of rationality 188
    - 4.1.2.2. Beyond the subject-object schema 192
    - 4.1.2.3. Rediscovering the teleological dimension 193
    - 4.1.2.4. The challenge to progressive thinking 193
  - 4.1.3. A missionary response to the humanist challenges of postmodernism 195
    - 4.1.3.1. The paradigm of the new man in Pauline theology 195
    - 4.1.3.2. Man as person in Orthodox theology 197
    - 4.1.3.3. The provocative apologetic effort to make Christian faith intelligible in the degeneration of modernity/postmodernity 198

4.1.3.4 Postmodernism reassessed in a positive sense for the construction of a contemporary Christian mission	201
4.2 New man and self-realization in the New Age - a perverted form of human perfectionism in pseudo-spirituality. Missionary evaluation	205
4.2.1. New Age - a sum of syncretism with proposals for reinterpreting man	205
4.2.2. The spiritual narcissism of the New Age	210
4.2.3 From the spiritual transformation of man to his sanctification in Christ. The Christological dimension of the meaning of humanization	212
4.2.4. The New Ageist Inner God and Theosis	220
4.2.5. A missionary and biblical response to new ageist spiritual transformation	223
4.2.6. An integrative Christological vision as a missionary response to the disillusionment of secular new-ageist humanism	227
4.3 New Age and Christianity in contrast: missionary proclamation of the authentic Truth that is Jesus Christ	229
Conclusions	238
CONCLUSIONS	243
BIBLIOGRAPHY	247
I. Literature	247
II. Webography	265

## **Argumentation of the topic and research objectives**

Any discourse about man, regardless of the religious, theological or philosophical culture of its typology, proposes a complex analysis that takes place on at least two interconnected levels: firstly, it aims at the definitional framing of anthropology, which aims at defining who man is, and secondly, it intends to present the socio-cultural context in which man is defined. This double valence also marks our research, with the clarification that our analysis focuses on current contemporary issues that influence the life and meaning of man. Accordingly, the present doctoral dissertation - *Configurations and Ideologies of the New Man in Postmodernity and the New Age. Missionary Evaluation* - is intended to be a pertinent presentation of how the current trends, namely postmodernism and New Age, introduce in their discourse a new way of understanding man in his identity, social, cultural and religious significance. It should be noted that this analysis is made from a strictly missionary perspective, with very slight hints of dogmatic theology.

What is the motivation for such a theological-missionary analysis? The answer, which is by no means easy, introduces us into the spectrum of how life unfolds in contemporary times and how man, as a social being, fits into the dynamic flow of this everyday life. The Church, as an agent of Christian mission, has the responsibility of proclaiming the truth, which in Christianity is the Saviour Jesus Christ (John 14:6). Unfortunately, today, in the absence of a spiritual discernment and authenticity that values man in his rightful dignity as a person created in the image of the Creator, with the theological vocation of becoming "partakers of the divine nature" (II Peter 1:4), man is assailed by a series of new cultural and spiritual trends that propose to reinterpret him in new ways. Among these challenges we note postmodernity and the New Age, on which our analysis focuses, seeking concrete and practical responses from a missionary point of view to the pattern of the new man promoted by them.

The main objective of the research is to argue the ideological metamorphosis in the transition from man as a theological and communitarian being, as proposed by Christianity, to his individualization in the logic of postmodernity, to his ego-ization through the idolization, without exaggeration, of the self in relation to the syncretistic and secular pseudo-spirituality of the New Age movement. Both of these trends of the 20th and 21st centuries reduce man to mere individuality, to the anguish of a meaningless existence by detaching him from Christian values. Christian anthropology presents five aspects that elucidate the nature of the human person: (1) the unity of the person; (2) openness to transcendence and uniqueness of the person; (3) freedom of the person; (4) the equal dignity of all people; and (5) the social nature of the human person. No matter how the issue is viewed, beginning with Enlightenment trends at the cultural level, there has been a shift from God to man. These are the present vector today. God is irrelevant in a world that no longer needs Him, considering that theological claims are part of a metaphysics invalidated by scientific developments.

It should be noted that postmodernity and the New Age are coupled in a remarkable synergy. Twentieth- and twenty-first-century society has responded to the crisis of modernity through postmodernist critique, a critique that paradoxically denies the meta-narratives of modernity and offers a new framework for hermeneutics on all levels. The polarisation of society in religious terms and under the direct influence of globalisation means that postmodernity creates the appropriate framework for a psycho-religious market, which is

extremely attractive to a de-Christianised, de-traditionalised man, but within the limits of a de-institutionalised free choice. Being born in an age of globalist hypercommercialism, New Age thinking has taken on the characteristics of the market and has begun to function in a way similar to market logic. It encouraged people to behave like consumers, choosing what they wanted. It became too focused on the individual and neglected the processes of social change. Many of these traits, which at times bordered on exploitation by religious cults and so-called gurus, were incompatible with authentic spirituality, which must be open and participatory, not based on a market model of paid religious experience. If both New Age thinking and anti-spirituality are overreactions to each other, the task now is to find a critical subjectivity that rejects the "dictatorship of the mind" - the belief that societies already know the direction or end point they are heading in. What would this critical subjectivity consist of? The key step is to reject the view that sees spirituality only in terms of individual experience and replace it with a spirituality that works around relationships between different people in tandem with a genuinely Christian discernment that enables a just assessment of human meaning in the accelerating pace of this 21st century.

In pre-modern times, people lived as members of communities with roles that were largely defined from the outside. In the modern era, they live as atomised but autonomous, self-directed individuals bound together by social contracts and institutions. Postmodernity, seen as a critique of neoliberal capitalist structures and meta-narratives, sees humans as individuals as increasingly fragmented and has developed a powerful critique of all the forces that have shown us that we are nowhere near as autonomous as we think we are, including our language and our power. But this process has also left us stuck as fragmented individuals without much sense of direction, always deconstructing realities but rarely reconstructing them with much success. So we are going through a crisis, but every crisis also presents opportunities for missionary reflection in the Christian Church.

The New Age movement can be seen as a response to the decline of traditional religion in the West. It conforms to the spiritual pluralism that many scholars, including Bryan Wilson, understand as a consequence of secularisation. From a New Age perspective, the various spiritual traditions of the world are now public property and no longer the private domain of the religious institutions they once were. Because in this process of open availability, the sacred becomes commodified, the general argument allows that it can be bought and sold and thus consumed according to basic free market principles. In the contemporary religious consumer market, the commodification of spirituality and its appropriation - especially from traditions other than one's own - stimulates an increasingly contentious issue. The questions that arise relate to ownership: is spirituality a private possession or does it now belong more in the public domain - making it free and accessible to everyone? If until the end of the 19th century or later, a person's religious conditioning was an automatic and accepted fact, since the 20th century, social, political, cultural and economic realities have led to mutations in the transition of the meaning of traditional religion into postmodern logic.

In contemporary and postmodern society, however, through globalisation, capitalism and large-scale migration, together with the decline of traditional religious institutions through secularisation, the Western individual is faced with an awareness of religious choices on an unprecedented scale. Today's "information age" allows for a familiarity with religions and religious movements beyond that of the condition of birth identity. Books, television

documentaries, social media platforms, the internet as a whole, technical mobility tools, have increased knowledge of different spiritual practices within a framework of options. In today's competitive capitalist world, they become possible options. By gaining more perspectives, the religious consumer can now more easily than ever choose to become deconditioned from the prevailing acculturation of his or her society and, in some cases, even reconditioned into a new spiritual practice of his or her own choosing. Much of this state of religious consumption choices is about the diminishment of traditional, institutionalised religion or what is often referred to as secularisation. All of these factors directly condition the way in which man is rethought as a new man by postmodernity and the New Age.

In an age of peer-to-peer production, where more and more individuals are socialised through the internet, a relational spirituality can emerge between people who cooperate with each other in a wide variety of networks. As we engage in communities of peers that produce collective value, the horizontal dimension of spirituality comes back into focus. This is the meaning of Christian spirituality: the relationship of people to one another on the basis of unity and community and the intersection with the verticality of love from God to people. Authentic spirituality is that of the Cross, which intersects the divine embrace of humanity awaiting salvation, an integrating and humanizing spirituality. In this new context, the view of human beings as fragmented is no longer a cause for despair. On the contrary, our inner multiplicity of interests is what allows us to contribute to a range of different projects that lead to existential Christian meaning. The individual psyche can then be built up by the contributions each person makes to the life of the whole and by the recognition they receive from the communities in which they participate.

After this summation of clarifications, we can state the objectives of our analysis: highlighting how postmodernism and New Age pseudo-spirituality impact the human transition from person to individual; arguing the psychological and religious constitution of the new man in the postmodernist and New logic as an individual limited to his own ego and social and spiritual consumption from the panoply offered by secular and spiritual ideological versions; the significance of the spiritual mutation from man to self in the New Age; elaborating theoretical and practical assessments from a missionary point of view to the reconfiguration of the new man.

### **Topicality of the theme in the context of current research**

The relevance of the theme is argued, first of all, on the premise that our research focuses on the issue of man, his condition in the context of postmodernity and the new way of thinking religion and spirituality in a secular sense, such as the New Age. An approach to how man is rethought under the configurations of these two cultural-religious trends represents a point of reference in rethinking missionary methodologies in order to affirm the authenticity and lucidity of Christian teaching about man. The relevance of the theme researched lies precisely in this reality: how under the secular postmodernist and new-age-ist impulses, the dimension, value and meaning of man are reduced to the limiting parameters of individualisation in a logic of unrestricted consumption of pseudo-spirituality. Discourse is shifted from man as an irreducible and personal being to the self as the only valid structure, which generates a closed subjectivization in the exploration of interiorization.

Beyond these aspects that frame the general theme of the research, an important aspect is that New Age and postmodernity are situated in an unquestionable congruence. Our arguments constitute reference points in missional theological analyses as modest intentions to prove that the common elements between postmodernity and New Age prefigure new frameworks for rethinking the human in the sense of innovation or novelty that correspond to secularity. For this reason, we consider such an analysis to be an argument for the relevance of the PhD thesis.

The New Age religious phenomenon and the social/cultural condition referred to as "postmodernity" seem to have a number of features in common, which are rarely analysed in the literature. The debate on postmodernity is open to 'religious' possibilities. This contrasts with modernity, one of the reasons for which has been the exclusion of religion. Moreover, both postmodernity and the New Age can be seen as responses to a perceived 'crisis of modernity' in the consciousness of people in the 20th and 21st centuries. Specifically, some of their supposed links are as follows: both refer to a new age, both abandon old truths, in both self and consumption are central issues, both are pessimistic about politics, both presuppose new modes of organization, both can be seen in terms of globalization, and both can be understood in end-of-century terms.

The sociologist Georg Simmel described the emergence of "post-Christian religiosity" as an aspect of the "conflict of modern culture", and the New Age certainly seems to fit that description. Clearly, it has little to do with the conventional transcendent monotheism of Christianity, but has much more to do with a commercial centre or mosaic of religious and quasi-religious elements focused on self and choice.

If so, then the New Age has strong affinities with the emerging contemporary features of society thought of under the rubric of "postmodernity," not least those centered on self and choice. However, the debate on postmodernity, which began in earnest in the 1980s, paid little attention to these apparent connections at that time, even though even in the 1980s New Age became a more prominent social and cultural phenomenon. After all, postmodernity and New Age, as two different ways, respectively secular and spiritual, of rethinking society and man in new ways, go in tandem. Postmodernity creates space for religious possibilities. New Age, like postmodernity, can be seen as a response to a perceived crisis of modernity.

Although hints of postmodernity and New Age began to appear in the 1960s - and their social, intellectual and spiritual antecedents can be traced much further back - both could be dated to the early 1970s when distinctive New Age books appeared, ashrams were opened and networks were formed, particularly in the US. Gordon Melton cites 1971 as the starting point of the New Age movement. Basically during these years, New Age became officially institutionalised as a spiritual version in the public space of society. In terms of postmodernity, Charles Jencks sees the postmodern condition as symbolically dating from 3.32pm, 15 July 1972, when the modernist Pruitt-Igoe public housing complex in St Louis was demolished, while David Harvey links it generally to the 1973 oil crisis.

The somewhat arbitrary dating of each phenomenon is accompanied by a corresponding vagueness about their key characteristics. With regard to postmodernity, although some scholars try analytically to distinguish its 'cultural' from its 'social' dimensions, for example, using the term postmodernism to allude to the former and postmodernity to the latter, it should be noted that, without mistake, the postmodern condition is both cultural and social. As



Zygmunt Bauman remarks, 'postmodernity can be seen as giving back to the world what modernity has presumably taken away, as a re-enchantment of the world that modernity has worked so hard to dislodge'. So while some accounts emphasize the supposed new social formation of postmodernity, and others focus on cultural shifts in art and architecture, music, film, and electronic media, the best analyses demonstrate their interconnectedness.

Three major questions indicate the scope of the debate on postmodernity.

a) One: are we entering a new kind of society? Relevant evidence from the 1970s would include changes in the mode of production linked to the adoption of new technologies and flexible manufacturing, closely geared to consumption and operating in a global market. This ties in with 1973 as marking the demise of the Ford-Keynes era and the decisive emergence of a new class of workers and services whose mobility depends on education and which spawns new social movements such as feminism and environmentalism. Postmodernity thus revises the debates about post-industrialism and the information society.

b) Two: have modern certainties collapsed? Jean-Paul Lyotard, for example, talks about the decline of the great narratives of the Enlightenment. "Meta-narratives" such as reason, democracy and progress are radically called into question. Philosophers' scepticism is directed at their own doctrines, leading some scholars to speak only of late or radicalised modernity rather than postmodernity. Science is diluted, truth is dismantled. Digital media, especially television and social media platforms, immerse us in circumstances that are disconnected from any reality they might once have represented. Political and religious choice, which boils down to Karl Marx's prophesied consumption that "everything solid melts into air...", takes on a societal aspect.

c) Three: what basis remains for political life and moral discourse when modern foundations have been eroded? F. Nietzsche is rehabilitated: progress is illusion, power is everything. Nihilism denies all horizons of meaning. Oppressive hierarchies of gender and race collapse, leaving 'difference' as the basis of a new political quest. But each group, or tribe, speaks only its own language, with no medium left to conceive the "common good". The risks of famine, ecological crises and nuclear threats, bequeathed by modernity, keep alive the question of what normative position remains "after virtue".

New Age particularity is no easier than trying to define postmodernity. Although New Age is often loosely referred to as a 'movement', it fails to encapsulate the phenomenon sociologically. Marilyn Ferguson states, "A leaderless but powerful network is working to bring radical change to the United States. Its members have broken with certain key elements in Western thought and may even have broken continuity with history.... There seems to be a shift in the consciousness of a critical number of individuals, enough to produce a renewal of society."

As far as conventional religions are concerned, the New Age manifests a convergence between the new Eastern and mystical traditions and the religious disillusionment of many Westerners. Pantheistic monism would describe in theological terms the New Age impulse: Creator and creature are one and difference is illusion. From Eastern sources there is a recurring emphasis on inner enlightenment (spiritual techniques such as chanting or meditation are vital for changing consciousness), gnosis or the idea that knowledge is ultimately experiential and the view that karma operates in all. 'Spiritual guides' can be consulted to deepen the experience

of a new consciousness. Above all, the self is central; the spiritual journey follows a path that leads emphatically inward.

It is all too easy to fall into the trap of trying to neatly categorise either the beliefs or the organisational features of the New Age. These phenomena resist such "modern" styles of classification. In addition to Eastern mysticism, New Age includes elements of human potential, Wicca and neo-Paganism. Groups such as Hare Krishna may have much in common with New Age without being part of it. Despite the name "new" in New Age, many religious elements are very old and it seems that the specific cultural milieu helps determine what traits will emerge in other spaces. British Druidism, for example, may have limited success in Canada. On the other hand, Native North American religions may be incorporated into the New Age in Canada and exported from there to Europe. Such ideas travel within the national and international networks of New Age adherents. New Age is not really a social or religious 'movement', at least in the more conventional sociological sense of that term, let alone an exclusive 'cult'. That is why 'network' expresses better than 'movement' how New Age works. Finally, under the name New Age there is a huge diversity of practices, from simple lifestyle asceticism to yuppie capitalist consumerism.

For Simmel, modernity was moving towards a kind of cultural interregnum in which the monopoly of old models was waning but the ability to create new ones was lacking. Post-Christian religiosity, Simmel said, would be a "formless mysticism" in which the soul would be "its own innermost metaphysical life, which is not shaped by any form of faith". In this remark one can feel impulses of new-age-ist expressions.

Current debates about postmodernity, some scholars even speak of a post-postmodernity, agree that religious renewal is an aspect of the postmodern condition, while they differ on the forms that religious renewal might take. A common theme is the critique of secularization, itself seen less as a description of religious decline than as part of the metanarrative of secular modernity. David Martin's early suspicion that secularization theory might be a "rationalist weapon" is now supported by others who see the "secular reason" of modernity as its origin.

Thus, the arbitrary rejection of religion, so characteristic of modern(istic) sociology, is abandoned in favour of a less abrasive approach. "F. Nietzsche's temporary 'breathing of empty space' rather than Weber's more permanent 'disenchantment of the world' seems more relevant. Re-enchantment and the infusion of symbol and meaning have a preferred place within postmodern discourse. Unsurprisingly, some theologians have been quick to seize the moment, turning their attention to these new signals.

Some sociological accounts of the emerging situation start from an empirical basis, showing that, for example, 'transcendent perspectives' are an important ingredient of new social movements, or that young people in advanced societies, while not passionate about traditional religion, show considerable interest in questions of meaning, purpose and ethics of life. Other, more theoretically generated accounts see the separation of the sacred and the profane as simply a phase of modernity. Postmodernity, which destabilises reality itself, denies such distinctions. De-differentiation is the order of the day, opening doors to a multitude of (impermanent) religious meanings.

In short, fewer theorists today look for signs of spirituality in institutional churches, except for those who fear fundamentalist revivals. New social movements are seen as sites of

spiritual activity, whether within feminism, green movements or those groups influenced by native religions. Concepts such as Gaia, for example, provide links between 'secular' environmentalism and 'deep green' spirituality. David Harvey suggests that "even religion and myth may have the greatest importance" for the new class of cultural producers, while Anthony Giddens also notes that a revival of religion may be a consequence of what he calls "late modernity".

One of the most palpable similarities between postmodernity and the New Age is that both are responses to - or even expressions of - a crisis of modernity. Enlightenment reason, which glorifies objectivity and abhors ambivalence, is questioned and attacked in both directions. Modernity and materialism, together with the doctrine of progress, are regarded with scepticism as misunderstandings of reality and therefore the cause of the malaise felt in its various forms: bureaucratic, nuclear, ecological and so on. As an example, Gaia, the Greek goddess of the earth, who now lends her cosmological theory name to former NASA scientist James Lovelock. His vision is as follows. That the climate and chemical properties of the earth have always been optimal for life cannot be put on the balance of chance. The Gaia mind, for Lovelock, is the intelligence or consciousness that directs all global and geophysical processes. The self-balancing system has only been disrupted by human intervention. Now, the ecological dimension of the crisis of modernity is often blamed on Christianity (!) and, in particular, on the apparently theological blessing bestowed *lido dominandi* by Francis Bacon. Rampant industrialism and militarism are seen as a consequence of this, thus identifying Christianity as a cause of modernity's malaise. Once this simplistic twist is taken, Christianity seems less attractive as a religious antidote than as Gaia. Gaia has the added advantage of being a goddess, thus converging with feminist overtones, also expressed in the name 'Mother Earth', taken from Gaia on each annual Earth Day. In terms of green movements, Gaia represents a turning point away from Enlightenment rationalities that can easily resurface as environmental reformism or worse, green consumerism, and towards a new peaceful and harmonious consciousness and practice. David Spangler, from the Scottish Findhorn community, sees Gaia as the basis of a new spirituality that inhabits and contextualises life. Gaia also resonates with the wider revival of paganism. Moreover, a goddess occupies a prominent place in the new social movements. The subterranean theologies of paganism, suppressed for so long by the official guardians of the sacred, are now surfacing as fragments of institutional religion, offering a new direct contact with the ancient spirits of the Earth. This pagan revival fits in with these postmodern trends, which denigrate logocentrism in favour of the image and the sign.

As mentioned above, some theologians are joining this project, reaffirming "the truth of God without abandoning the powers of reason", as D. Harvey puts it. Matthew Fox's "Creation Theology" combines New Age ideas with traditional Christian theology. David Griffin relies on A.N. Whitehead for a "synergistic theology" whose spirituality "cooperates with God", while Sally Macfague still uses a few recognized terms from Christian theology, full for "planetary priorities". Her "cosmocentric focus" is meant to correct previous theological anthropocentrism. Such earthly theological agendas should replace the old Enlightenment-influenced theologies in a "paradigm shift".

The New Age therefore seems to reflect some postmodern concerns about the crisis of modernity. Other examples could be chosen than the Green and Gaia movements, but it is important to note that none of them are without ambiguity. Most important, perhaps, is the way

in which the New Age both expresses postmodern conditions and at the same time offers antidotes to modernity. The crisis of modernity can be seen in the relaxed, fluid and undogmatic pastiche of nostalgia and kitsch - the New Age 'circus'. Solutions to the crisis of modernity, on the other hand, are visible in new techniques for overcoming materialism and resignation, in the new spiritual disciplines of meditation or channelling. Again, where postmodernism focuses on difference, New Age points to unity and harmony. There are limits to the affinities of postmodernity with New Age.

### **Summary structure of the thesis**

This PhD thesis is structured in four chapters, the first three of which are reserved for systematic and interpretative analyses of the ideological metamorphosis of the new man in postmodernity and the New Age. The last chapter is intended to be a critical missionary assessment of the configurations of the new man in the two cultural-religious trends analysed in the first three chapters. This last chapter also offers a series of theoretical and practical missionary solutions as an apologetic response in apologetically counteracting the postmodernist and neo-pagan secular trends.

The first chapter - Postmodernism and New-Age - references of the itinerary of human individualization in contemporary society - makes a historical and social radiography of the conditions created by postmodernism and New Age in the field of contemporary society. The main ideas addressed aim at clarifying as clearly as possible the religious and social context in which man is rethought: the radical invalidation of the meta-narratives of modernity, the theses of rationalization and individualization, the fragmentation of religion at the level of a personal choice through secularization, the subjectivized reinterpretation of religion in the pattern of New Age spirituality.

The second chapter - Redefining Human Identity in the Flow of Postmodernism and the New Religiosity - explores how postmodernity rethinks the human in contemporary everyday dynamics. Overall, I focus on the transition towards the individualisation of man in a consumer society that has consumed the stake of the certainties of modernity. A space of analysis is reserved for the issue of man's religious identity in postmodernist global fluidity, the itinerary of man's individualisation as liberation from the frameworks of authority, de-traditionalisation as a process of disintegration of the integrity of society in postmodernity. Two other themes are highlighted in this chapter: the rethinking of man as a conscious subject in postmodernism - from the person to the level of a social construct, and the rethinking of man under the ideology of religious nihilism. Ultimately, the thorny issue of the postmodern and secular profile of the 'nones' is examined.

Chapter III - The Transformation of the "New" Man in the New Age: Spiritual Resemnifications - delves into neo-pagan New Age pseudo-spirituality which has a very well established agenda: the transformation of man by accessing another state of consciousness. For this reason, we thought it necessary to present the valences of New Age spirituality as marks of a secular religiosity, and then to focus on the analysis of this transformation. This we have done through the following sub-themes: holistic transformation: beyond the sacred-profan dichotomy; New Age spiritual technologies of human innovation in tandem with postmodernist

consumption; and valuing the self in the thinking of New Age adherents (Deepak Chopra, Ken Wilber, Gary Zukav, Shakti Gawain).

Last chapter - The mission of the Church and the affirmation of Christian anthropology in the postmodernist and new-ageist context. Contextualization and evaluation - summarizes the contrast between the Christian theological perspective on man and the postmodernist and new ageist perspective. Also mentioned are the main lines of critical evaluation towards the new thought man in the contemporary secular pattern.

### **The scientific and methodological tools used in the elaboration of the thesis**

From a methodological point of view, I undertook a content analysis of the relevant texts in order to highlight the processes and methods prescribed by these New Age spiritual thinkers and postmodernist pioneers in the development of their meta-theories of the new man. The method of analysis was not applied to critique each specific 'truth claim' in the content of the theories, but to show how their processes align with the needs of people in post-traditional consumer society. Many other New Age spiritual thinkers and promoters present similar methods in developing the practices and discourse in their writings. The chosen method is an interpretive one and as such aims to highlight the parallels of meaning between how some social theorists explain post-traditional consumer society and the popularity of 'social products' such as texts written in the style of New Age spirituality. We do not claim that the analyses used are archetypal in their ability to analyse the methods of others writing in the field of New Age spirituality. Furthermore, the texts chosen for analysis are not necessarily representative of all the writings of New Age spiritual thinkers, they are minimal, but we consider them relevant for the purpose of ascertaining the spiritual and secular metamorphoses that man is undergoing in his current reconfiguration.

Last but not least, the dissertation is a descriptive-analytical analysis, describing and empirically analyzing the efforts of the Church in fulfilling its mission in the contemporary world. In addition, I have used systematic analysis to adequately understand and explain the repositioning of mission in the culture of postmodernism. The deductive-inductive method is used to formulate the idea of mission and postmodern principles with a conceptual framework used as a reference for repositioning the Church in the postmodern world, or even post-postmodern according to some scholars in the socio-religious studies spectrum.

The literature used is largely from the sphere of Western research, since the effects of postmodernity and New Age secular spirituality have been and are more strongly felt in this area. This literature is supplemented by the writings of Romanian missiologists (Pr. Gheorghe Istodor, Pr. Mihai Himcinschi, Pr. Gheorghe Petraru, Arch. Gelu Călina, Pr. Nechita Vasile, Pr. Vasile Leb, Pr. Cristian Sonea), writings that fit the theoretical or concrete experience with the trends of postmodernity and New Age reflected in the act of pastoralism.

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