

Ingvild Sælid Gilhus, Siv Ellen Kraft, and James R. Lewis (eds): *New Age in Norway*. Equinox, 2017, 290 pp.

The anthology *New Age in Norway* explores how the New Age phenomenon has developed in a country usually considered one of the world's most secularized. The stated goal of the book is to make Norwegian-based research available to an international audience, while contributing to the theoretical discussion of alternative spirituality. *New Age in Norway's* twelve chapters set out to accomplish this in relation to their authors' particular topics and interests. The book ends with two afterwords, in which Liselotte Frisk and Mikael Rothstein discuss the Norwegian New Age milieu in relation to the Swedish and Danish milieus.

The introduction by Ingvild Sælid Gilhus and Siv Ellen Kraft offers an overview of how New Age ideas have spread and developed in Norwegian society since their introduction in the 1960s. While the New Age is a global phenomenon, it is always shaped by local influences. The book's strength lies precisely in its exploration of how global New Age discourses take on particular traits as they develop in a certain context. Concerning the Norwegian context, international New Age teachings are, among other things, spread and reshaped by domestic New Age celebrities, and blended with Scandinavian Sámi neo-shamanistic traditions.

Norway has a strong Lutheran tradition: more than 70 per cent of the population belongs to the Church of Norway. The first chapter, by Lisbeth Mikaelsson, explores how the protestant tradition has influenced people's perception of the category of religion, or what it should be. The church has seen the New Age as a serious challenge: scholars and officials have discussed the matter for decades. Although there have been polemical attacks against New Age spirituality, the main trend among church members is to combine New Age elements with the Christianity. A newer trend, likely to continue, is that the church has started to have an active dialogue with alternative milieus and diversified its activities to include retreats and blessings of haunted houses.

Margrethe Løøv's chapter deals with the role of the organization *VisionWorks* in disseminating New Age practices and beliefs. The organization has had a significant impact in spreading New Age spirituality: it organizes a fair attracting around 12,500 people annually. Siv Ellen Kraft contributes a chapter to the anthology about how the New Age has been portrayed in the Norwegian news and entertainment media. Kraft enters a dialogue with Stig Hjarvard's mediatization thesis, arguing that it has limited potential to describe the media treatment of New Age spiritualities. Although the media generally treats the New Age negatively, spiritual practices linked with Sámi shamanism and traditional folk

healing are usually presented more favourably. The most extensive media coverage of Norwegian New Age phenomena concerns Princess Märtha Louise's belief in and communication with angels. This and her establishment of the Astarte Education angel school were treated in the media as a national scandal. Angel spirituality is the focus of the chapter by Ingvild Sælid Gilhus, in which she discusses the relations between various angel discourses in Norwegian society. Angels cross the borders between Lutheran theology, popular religion, and New Age spirituality.

Both national borders and borders between the sacred and profane are treated in Torunn Selberg's chapter on spiritual tourism. Apart from trips to South America inspired by the *Celestine Prophecy* or to Bali in the spirit of the bestseller *Eat Pray Love*, Norwegian trip organizers have realized the national heritage is also open to spiritual commodification. Medieval Christian sacred sites like Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim can be reimagined and reinterpreted as 'places of energy' to cater to seekers who do not necessarily see themselves as Christian. Sites sacred to the indigenous Sámi people of Norway have also become places of New Age pilgrimage. In her chapter on contemporary Norwegian shamanism Trude Fonneland points out that shamanistic practitioners seek inspiration from many sources like literature on pre-Christian traditions, the core shamanism developed by Michael

Harner, popular culture, and various New Age courses. This in turn has the potential to create hostility among practitioners as they disagree about what real shamanism should be or resemble.

Bengt-Ove Andreassen discusses how the New Age was treated in secondary and upper-secondary religious education textbooks between 1996 and 2008. As the New Age is a diverse phenomenon, with no self-evident authorities or canonical teachings, it is challenging to summarize what it is about in the relatively short space devoted to it in textbooks. The generally dismissive tone towards the New Age and warnings about occultism and Satanism have given way to more nuanced descriptions. Nevertheless, textbooks still tend to portray the New Age as something connected with entertainment more than religion.

Anne Kalvig contributes two chapters to the book. One deals with alternative medicine; the other focuses on contemporary spiritualism. In providing a general overview of alternative medicine in Norway, Kalvig also discusses the field of alternative cures in relation to Jonathan Z. Smith's spatial model of religion. Alternative medicine is also very present in contemporary Norwegian spiritualism. Although a focus on spirit communication and haunted houses is relatively popular in the country, Kalvig chooses to focus on the more active forms of spiritualism – people and organizations actively offering contact

with deceased loved ones or other suprahuman entities.

Asbjørn Dyrendal discusses the hybrid of New Age belief and conspiracy theory. This phenomenon, referred to as 'conspirituality', gained prominence after the 2001 attack on the Twin Towers. The focus of Dyrendal's chapter is on a certain scene within the larger Norwegian New Age milieu in which conspiracy discourses took centre-stage. Dyrendal's investigation of the blog forum *Nyhetsspeilet* offers insights into the rise and decline of an online environment. One of the reasons for the decline of this scene, Dyrendal argues, was its links to the millennial ideas surrounding 2012. When the Mayan calendar ended with no significant global change or spiritual awakening, the conspiratorial scene seemed to diversify.

Inga Bårdsen Tøllefsen looks at three Hindu-inspired meditation movements in Norway. As with many Hindu-inspired movements in the West, meditation movements in Norway have developed more individualistically, with less emphasis on guru devotion. The third editor, James R. Lewis, contributes a discussion on the dynamics of the Norwegian alternative spiritual milieu in a chapter co-written with Oscar-Torjus Utaaker. The authors argue the New Age is a phenomenon that would gain much from larger longitudinal studies, with samples of seekers being studied over time.

As the New Age is a diverse phenomenon emphasizing the freedom of the individual to create their own

combinations of beliefs and practices, it challenges scholars to pin down and conceptualize what they are actually studying. When New Age beliefs and practices interlink, it is clear that chapters in the book will to some extent treat – and sometimes even repeat – the same subjects and matters. The index thus proves very useful. The book should be of interest to scholars interested in the New Age and New Religious Movements, and a general audience with an interest in these topics.

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