BOOK REVIEWS

New Age in Norway, edited by Ingvild Sælid Gilhus, Siv Ellen Kraft and James R. Lewis. 2017. Equinox Publishing. Hb. £75.00/\$100.00, ISBN-13: 9781781794166; Pb. £30.00 / \$40.00, ISBN-13: 9781781794173; eBook £30.00 / \$40.00, ISBN-13: 9781781795101.

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Before Spotify infiltrated my life and succeeded in restructuring my relationship to music through its seemingly endless supply of single-serving songs, my mental calendar was studded with album release dates. On these special occasions, I would emerge triumphantly from the record store, neon yellow bag in hand, and hurry home so that I could, after defeating the diabolical plastic seal that separated me from my new purchase, press play and prepare to enter the gates of paradise.

If I have not already done so, I will now doubtlessly draw attention to my age immediately by making the following comparison: an edited volume is not unlike a record album. As many of us know, regardless of whether we associate the term with a perfect circle of glossy vinyl, a silver frisbee, or something far less tangible, not all albums are created equal. Some will fall into the shadows of oblivion almost immediately, destined as they are to be remembered only by the drummer's mother or some future custodian of forsaken coolness. Others serve as nothing more than launching pads for radio hits, the rest just so much superfluous padding. Every so often, however, magic happens, and one comes along where each and every track is a gem, albeit some more polished than others. Immanently readable, often entertaining, and even at times surprising, if *New Age in Norway* were an album, it would be one belonging to this latter category.

Keywords New Age, Norway

Starting at the beginning, my initial impression of the work was informed by a wave of scepticism that its title caused to wash over me. This was due to a general uncertainty I harbour regarding the usefulness of the term “New Age.” Upon reading the introduction, my concerns were temporarily laid to rest as the case for its employment is well argued therein. Nonetheless, I found myself returning to the book’s opening passages again and again because, as interesting as what follows them is, I kept getting lost and needed to reconnect with the reasoning presented therein.

My misgivings surrounding the use of the term “New Age” are related to the very loose boundaries it is often given, as is admittedly the case in the volume in question. If caution and vigilance are lacking, a situation can easily develop in which everything that falls into its path gets subsumed by it. On the other hand, it can at times—and here I will use a phrasing that strikes me as almost absurdly understated—come in handy. For instance, the collection of people, places, ideas, and things that have commonly come to be associated with the term “New Age” are by now, and have been for a long time, familiar to many people. If, for instance, a new shop were to open up in my hometown and if I upon opening the door were to be greeted by a display table covered with or surrounded by angel statues, meditation cushions, tarot cards, dream catchers, and books by Louise Hay, I would immediately know how to describe the place to a friend in a presumably mutually intelligible way. However, if I may invoke the words that United States Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart (1915–1985) uttered in 1964 as his threshold test for obscenity in response to what was termed “hard-core pornography,” I am not convinced that the “I know it when I see it” approach is always a good one. That being said, I am at a loss in terms of being able to offer a reasonable suggestion for an alternative. Perhaps someone in the future will come up with a tidier delimitation, but considering the fact that the term has been defined in incompatible ways since the first scholarship on the New Age was produced, the prospects are hardly encouraging. The difficulties surrounding the issues of definition and delimitation are touched upon in the introduction, and the ways in which the term is defined and its use demarcated are at least on the surface neatly summed up in those same opening pages by Ingvild Sælid Gilhus and Siv Ellen Kraft. “New Age” is tripartitely presented as a relational term serving to refer to a global discourse consisting of a largely unpacked “recognizable cluster of ideas and practices”—itself a demarcation which largely remains unpacked—which have particular organizational forms. Nonetheless, the amorphous nature of the concept will likely ultimately prove to be unsatisfying to those looking for something tidier.

If we flip past the introduction and continue on to the rest of the book, what we find is a selection of texts that covers a wide range of topics, making for a rewarding reading experience. We learn, for instance, of how Christian and New Age currents have periodically become strange bedfellows as boundaries are renegotiated in a time marked by a declining interest in the institutions of yesteryear. We witness the rise and fall of an organizational empire, *Vision Works*, that has left a lasting mark on Norway's alternative landscape. We encounter angels multiple times, and we are even introduced to royalty in the form of Princess Märtha Louise of Norway and her claims regarding contacts with such beings. Unsurprisingly, "Indian-oriented" groups make an appearance and are discussed in terms of how they are informed by what may, somewhat generalizingly, be called local cultural contexts. Other topics include trends in tourism catering to New Age seekers; the changing ways in which textbooks and curricula engage with the challenges New Age currents pose to how religion is studied in Norwegian schools; developments that take place when New Age spirituality is crosspollinated by conspiracy culture; Sami neo-shamanism; contemporary spiritualism in Norway; and the fluidity that exists in organizational cultures mistakenly thought to be fixed and stable. People may belong to several groups simultaneously in an apparently unproblematic way, often eluding the attention of researchers fixated on one particular period of time or area.

Some of the contributions share a more descriptive flavour while others are more theoretical pieces. While the frameworks with which they most often engage—Stig Hjarvard's theory of mediatization and a modification of Jonathan Z. Smith's model of where (in society) religion is located and how it is practiced—are indeed useful and illuminating—it forces me to return to my album comparison. It is not an uncommon occurrence for a band to become enchanted by an instrument that is new (to them) and to then release a string of tracks that feature it. Maybe someone learned how to play the flute or went to India and discovered the wonders of the sitar. While the flute might be a sublimely lovely instrument, and while a flute solo can often be a welcome addition, it is arguably not always a suitable one. Some of the contributions lent themselves well to the model. Others seemed, in contrast, strained by it. While it never felt utterly out of place, like the sound of a didgeridoo might in a polka, I cannot help but wonder if the rich material that was presented might in a few cases have been better served by a different perspective.

The final two chapters of the book concern the situation of New Age in Sweden and Denmark, respectively. Despite the fact that they are the work of outstanding experts in the field of the study of religion, Liselotte Frisk and

Mikael Rothstein, they seem like unnecessary additions that detract from the Norwegian context, although their inclusion is understandable for the purposes of comparison. On the other hand, this highlights how remarkable it truly is that such a great deal of research has been conducted in this particular area in Norway by such a large number of talented scholars. It is upon such a note that the producers of any anthology (or album) should strive to end—one that leaves its audience wanting to press repeat or to open the book to page one again.