

Prospects for New Age Studies

Steven J. Sutcliffe

I close this chapter with a brief assessment of future studies in the field. In recent years a fresh wave of New Age studies has emerged to challenge the consensus discussed earlier, although some of its concerns are certainly foreshadowed in the multiperspectivalism of earlier collections like Lewis and Melton (1992), the categorial analysis of Bochinger (1994), the close textual analyses in Hanegraaff (1996) and Hammer (2001a), and Heelas's (1996) engagement with cultural theory. The thematic treatment of globalization theory and New Age in Rothstein (2001) is a case in point, particularly the critiques of globalization as covert Westernization by Frisk (2001) and of New Age globalism as a neocolonial ideology promoting "spiritual imperialism" by Hanegraaff (2001) and Salamon (2001). Hammer (2001) begins to unpack hidden constraints on the content of New Age culture, *pace* practitioners' rhetoric that "all and everything" is now available for consumption.

Often characteristic of this fresh wave of studies is a more ethnographical, historical, and comparative method, applied in turn to distinctive practices, discourses, and sites. Some of these I have already cited, such as Brown (1997) on channeling, English-Lueck (1990) on holistic healing, and Ivakhiv's (2001) comparative geography of Glastonbury and Sedona. Other contributions suggesting fruitful methodological development include Danforth's (1989) comparative analysis of American firewalking and Greek folk traditions, Bloch's (1998) qualitative interviews exploring the construction of popular American spiritual discourse, Prince and Riches's (2000) comparative anthropology of New Age culture in Glastonbury, and Wood's (2003) analysis of power in local English channeling networks. These promise to be the kinds of contextualized and localized case studies the field requires to develop and diversify its theoretical concerns.

Let me propose five avenues of outstanding research to elucidate this assessment. First, we require additional ethnographies to map the richly textured heterogeneity and subtle diffusions of contemporary practices. Three interrelated areas are germane: healing practices; domestic ritual and material culture (crystals, candles, incense, dreamcatchers, domestic shrines, *feng sui*); and the dynamics of small group practice, which defines the social nuclei of alternative spirituality and also now infuses popular American religion—43 percent of Roof's (1999: 126) interview sample of baby boomers had participated in a small group of some kind.

Second, New Age studies might usefully explore methodologies from the study of popular culture in order to recover what de Certeau (1984) calls the "practice of everyday life" and J. Rose (2001: 3), in relation to reading cultures, calls a "history of audiences." Radway's (1987) analysis of female readers' variegated responses to the superficially monotone romantic fiction genre is potentially instructive here with regard to the undertheorized relationship between the *content* of popular New Age texts—such as *The Celestine Prophecy* (Redfield 1994) and the *Conversations with God* series (Walsch 1997)—and the interpretive and practical *uses* to which it is put by readers. Also relevant is contemporary oral history: for example, Summerfield's (1998) exposition of the gendered dynamics of discourse and subjectivity in women's memories of the Second World War is readily transposable to oral histories of alternative spiritualities. The simple transcripts in Akhtar and Humphries (1999) offer a lead here, as does Bloch's (1998) more sophisticated treatment.

Summerfield's gender concerns introduce a third consideration: despite a well-established ratio of women to men (two to one) in the New Age field, with plentiful evidence of women's participation as healers and channelers, we have very little sustained account of the impact of sex as a social and cultural variable, and practically nothing on particular constructions of New Age gender. In this regard New Age studies remain by and large peopled by a fuzzy collective subject. Largely absent, too, is ethnicity. Bruce (2002: 89) charges that ethnicity is "trebly absent" from New Age: minority ethnic groups are underrepresented, practitioners largely ignore the issue, and so do academics. Certainly available demographic data strongly suggest a predominantly "white" constituency of practitioners, although here again we will find local, qualitative studies helpful in nuancing and retheorizing the big picture.

Finally, there is a need to develop the preliminary studies of the salience of age cohort and generation on the transmission of New Age values and practices, such as Heelas and See! (2002) sketch in England and Roof (1993, 1999) plots more extensively in the U.S. As I have argued elsewhere (Sutcliffe 2003: 112ff.), there is a strong correlation between the generational attitudes and mores of the "pioneers"—those active from around the mid-1930s to the mid-1960s—and the particular symbolic qualities (ascetic, transcendental, apocalyptic) of their early New Age discourse. Similarly, the more diffuse and idiomatic significations of New Age—this-worldly, therapeutic, sensual—that flourish from the 1970s onward in the wake of youth culture and counterculture correlate significantly with a "baby boom" generational profile. We need to know more about face-to-face encounters and transmissions between and within different generations of "alternative" spiritual practitioners, the auto/biographies of particular exponents in different historical periods, and the internal resistance of these vernacular cultures to

attempts to mobilize and regulate them through the power of specialist cadres. In this light it would be salutary to investigate what "spiritual" values and practices (if any) baby boomers are in turn passing on to the "Generation X" or "baby buster" cohort-those born between the early 1960s and early 1980s (Beaudoin 1998; Flory and Miller 2000).

In short, a renewed and sustainable agenda for New Age studies would include additional localized ethnographies, popular cultural analyses, and closer attention to gender, ethnicity, and age cohort as mechanisms of symbolization and demographic transmission. This reinforces an important potential function of New Age studies: to connect data about alternative spirituality and religious innovation to comparative cultural studies, thereby helping to place important but neglected and often devalued strands of Anglo-American culture in proper historical and anthropological context. This is particularly germane since I would argue that, for many scholars and students of the field, the ground under our feet is, auto/ biographically and culturally, coterminous with the footprint of New Age. That is, the field of practice labeled "New Age" is for many of us the vernacular religion of our own backyards and may thereby have influenced our own perspectives on religion-its study and practice-more than we allow.

(Steven J. Sutcliffe. *The Dynamics of Alternative Spirituality: Seekers, Networks, and "New Age"*, in: James R. Lewis. *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, Oxford University Press: Oxford-New York 2004, pp. 481 – 483)