

The New Age in Cultural Context: the Premodern, the Modern and the Postmodern

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This issue attends to a relatively ill-explored, albeit culturally well-established, topic. Serving to introduce the contributions, an initial task is to characterize the New Age. It is suggested that there is a dominant lingua franca, to do with 'self religiosity'. Another task is to locate the New Age with reference to the premodern, the modern and the postmodern 'conditions'. Arguing that the New Age has two main wings, and that it can also be used in consumeristic fashion, it is possible to tease out the various ways in which the three conditions have contributed to its development. Finally, attention is paid to the question of whether the New Age is of any real significance.

Introduction

This special issue of *Religion* began life with a conference ('Sociology of the New Age') held in an appropriate guest house (The Unicorn Light Centre) located in a heartland, namely Glastonbury.¹ As the organizer Tony Walter pointed out, this was probably the first time that British academics had met to discuss the New Age. What made this especially surprising was our surroundings. For we were convening in the midst of a great deal of relevant activity.

The present issue contributes to the relatively small, though expanding, body of academic research on the topic.² Four of the authors (Marion Bowman, David Lyon, Tony Walter and myself) participated in the conference; Linda Woodhead was subsequently invited to write on the significant topic of how the New Age intersects with Christianity. David Smith's paper, initially prepared for another purpose, is included as it bears on the main home of the New Age, namely India. Furthermore, it addresses the relationship between postmodernity and religion—an issue discussed by several other contributors.

With the exception of Lyon, all contributors are British inhabitants. Inevitably, much pertains to what is happening in our vicinity. However, contributors raise issues of more general interest. For example, the theme which probably best unifies the issue pertains to what the New Age has to do with the premodern, the modern and the postmodern. It would appear to have a great deal to do with the premodern, drawing much of its practices and wisdom from the great and minor religious traditions. Yet it has recently been argued that it is, par excellence, the religion of postmodernity. To complicate things further, it has also been claimed that the New Age is part and parcel of dynamics constitutive of modernity. It appears that the 'movement' (as it is commonly designated) somehow collapses the conventional periodization of change.

Deliniation

Before going any further, the movement is charted. It tends to mean different things to different people, academics included. This is not surprising, if only because New Agers would appear to turn to an extraordinarily diverse and apparently incoherent range of things. 'The Networkers Diary' of *Rainbow Ark*³ serves to illustrate the point. Among the hundreds of events on offer are: 'Astrology and the Flowering of Consciousness', 'Money Yin, Money Yang', 'Barefoot Boogie Alternative Disco', 'Creating Success in

Business', 'Getting to Like Yourself', 'We Are Not Who We Think We Are', 'Freedom' (Druid Order Meeting), 'Buddhist Xmas Retreat', 'Christianity in the New Age' and 'Creating Your Own Reality'.

Journals of this character, of which there are many, suffice to show that the globalization-cum-incorporation process has been comprehensive. It is difficult to think of what has not been drawn upon. It follows that there should be plenty of conflict of belief, for example, between Buddhism and Christianity. It should also follow that there are fundamental differences with regard to how activities like meditation, physical labour and hallucinogen-usage are assessed. In addition, it can be noted, New Agers would appear to diverge with regard to how they should run their lives. As Daphne Francis observes, 'People involved in New Age philosophies may embrace all sorts of lifestyles, from Jungian-based paganism to ecologically-sound yuppie entrepreneurship'.⁴

There is certainly diversity. But there is also a remarkable constancy, to do with the fundamental lingua franca which is employed by anyone who can reasonably be called 'New Age'. I say 'reasonably' because some New Agers—say of the gentle 'spiritual green' variety—would deny that Scientology, for example, belongs to the same camp. It is regarded as too harsh and controversial. Spiritual politics aside, the fact remains that even such apparently different ways of being New Age make much the same basic assumptions about the human condition.

William Bloom, of the (New Age) St James's team, Piccadilly, provides an excellent formulation of this lingua franca:

- All life—all existence—is the manifestation of Spirit, of the Unknowable, of that supreme consciousness known by many different names in many different cultures.
- The purpose and dynamic of all existence is to bring Love, Wisdom, Enlightenment . . . into full manifestation.
- All religions are the expression of this same inner reality.
- All life, as we perceive it with the five human senses or with scientific instruments, is only the outer veil of an invisible, inner and causal reality.
- Similarly, human beings are two-fold creatures—with:
 - (i) an outer temporary personality and
 - (ii) a multi-dimensional inner being (soul or higher self).
- The outer personality is limited and tends towards materialism.
- The inner being is infinite and tends towards love.
- Our spiritual teachers are those souls who are liberated from the need to incarnate and who express unconditional love, wisdom and enlightenment. Some of these great beings are well known and have inspired the world religions. Some are unknown and work invisibly.
- All life, in all its different forms and states, is interconnected energy—and this includes our deeds, feelings and thoughts. We, therefore, work with Spirit and these energies in co-creating our reality.
- Although held in the dynamic of cosmic love, we are jointly responsible for the state of our selves, of our environment and of all life.
- During this period of time, the evolution of the planet and of humanity has reached a point when we are undergoing a fundamental spiritual change in our individual and mass consciousness. That is why we talk of a New Age. . . .⁵

Essentially, this is all about what can be called 'Self religiosity'.⁶ The self, itself (henceforth Self), is held to be perfect, the natural source of all that is good in life. The spanner in the works concerns what Bloom calls the 'outer temporary personality'. This is what we are by virtue of the impact of the unnatural, notably capitalistic modernity.

Returning to the matter of diversity and conflict, the notion that 'all religions are the expression of this same inner reality' means that adherents can find the same (and therefore often esoteric) wisdom in apparently different traditions, thereby sidestepping points of disagreement between, say, Christianity and Buddhism. Likewise, differences between (most) practices are much more apparent than real. Whether it be fire-walking, spiritual therapy or sensory deprivation, the widely held assumption is that such activities are essentially alike. They provide means to the same end, liberating the Self from the contaminated 'outer personality' ('ego' and 'lower self' to use more common New Age expressions).⁷

Finally by way of introducing the movement, I do not want to leave the impression that it is homogeneous. In Britain alone there are thousands of New Age activities, ranging from the large to those run on an individual basis. Although there is a considerable amount of networking, people often participating in a number of different activities, the New Age is not an organized movement. Indeed, competition and rivalry is not uncommon. Overall, it is best seen as a collection of paths, playing out (sometimes quite different) variations on the theme of self religiosity.

Some paths, for example, emphasize an individuated form of spirituality, the primary locus of God—or the Goddess—being within the individual human subject. Other paths emphasize the spirituality which runs through all that is natural, and which therefore connects everybody with the cosmic order of things. And yet other paths combine New Age monism with beliefs to do with external spiritual agencies, transcending what lies within. Another point of contrast concerns the nature of the inner realm. Bloom, we have seen, writes of 'love' and 'wisdom'; others, as will become apparent, use the language of 'energy' and 'power'.⁸

But the most significant differences within the movement have to do with responses to the 'unenlightened' mainstream of society. Accordingly, I now trace the two main ways in which New Agers have come to handle those institutions, specifically capitalism, which can be taken to exemplify modernity. This also provides the opportunity to give a more detailed picture of what is taking place, as well as showing that the New Age (albeit in different ways) is bound up with, and exemplifies, longstanding trajectories.

Cultural Trajectories: Responses to Modernity

Counter-modernity?

I begin with the counter-cultural or 'heart-land' New Agers, namely those who approximate most closely to Bloom's characterization. As 'serious' Self religionists, affairs of the 'heart' (a common New Age term for what Bloom calls 'inner being') are held to prosper in reverse proportion to involvement with the capitalistic mainstream. Self-actualization or enlightenment is believed to be incompatible with ego-derived temptations and attachments. Accordingly, such counter-cultural new agers endeavour to liberate themselves from the institutions of modernity, in particular those involving commitment to the materialistic life.

During the later 1960s, when the New Age was widely known as the Age of Aquarius, hippies sought to escape from the contaminations of modernity by 'dropping out': living on the dole in squats, retreating to small-holdings or communes (often scattered along the Celtic littoral of Britain), or making the journey to premodern enclaves in the East.⁹ After a period of some stagnation, the counter-cultural wing is currently showing distinct signs of revival.

First, an increasing number of younger people are joining the bands of New Age travellers who roam from free festival to (sometimes) the not-so-free. For obvious reasons, this is largely summertime New Ageism. Appropriate music, communicating the great themes of 'The Pan Within' (to draw on one title), together with hallucinogen-usage, are central to the spirit of such events: a spirit captured by the name of the free festival held near where I live in the Yorkshire Dales, namely 'Cloud Nine'.

And second, there is an increasing number of (typically older) people who either practise the New Age directly, that is by running spiritual therapies, trainings, workshops and so forth, or who devote themselves to applying New Age principles and practices to change ('transform') mainstream institutions. Yet others attempt to provide alternatives to what the mainstream has to offer. Tony Walter's article in this issue looks at how the New Age is being applied to 'dying and death'; and Linda Woodhead's looks at how 'the New Spirituality' serves those who are not content with (patriarchal) Christianity. The New Age has also been brought to bear on such domains as education, social work and big business. In addition, the 'politics' of new social (or 'cultural') movements have been quite strongly influenced by New Age participation. One thinks in particular of the spiritual greens and feminists.¹⁰

Having introduced the counter-cultural wing of the New Age, how can it be addressed as a 'response' to modernity? In one regard, the answer is obvious: it is a reaction to the mainstream; a hankering for some premodern (perhaps, better, non-modern) sense of the natural. In another regard, however, the answer is more complicated. Modernity is not one 'thing', entirely dominated by those cultural values associated with materialistic capitalism and consumption. Instead, as Charles Taylor—among others—has argued, modernity is a complex of different moral orientations.¹¹ And from this perspective the counter-cultural New Age belongs to an important dynamic encapsulated by modernity itself.

Taylor's basic thesis is that 'Modern moral culture is one of multiple sources'; and that three such sources are of pre-eminent importance, namely 'the original theistic foundation', 'the dignity of disengaged reason' and 'the goodness of nature'.¹² The roots of the counter-cultural wing owe nothing (in any direct sense) to the first couple of these 'sources'. New Agers of this variety reject the authority of God theistically conceived; and their kind of enlightenment requires exorcising the hold of the Enlightenment project, which has to do with intellectual, that is ego, operations. But the counter-cultural wing has a great deal to do with the third moral source. Suffice it to say that all the major themes of the contemporary New Age can be found in the classics of the Romantic tradition. First Rousseau, then the Germans and the English, and finally those who contributed to what Matthiessen has characterized as the 'American Renaissance': the literature is replete with the values and thrust of Self religiosity.¹³

Pro-capitalism?

I now turn to the second major wing of the New Age, also bound up with modernity but in an apparently different fashion. In tandem with the triumphalist capitalism which developed during the 1980s, increasing numbers of avowed New Agers have become active in the world of big business. In Britain alone, there are now hundreds of training organizations promising to enlighten workers, in particular management. Generally speaking the lingua franca remains that of Self religiosity, talk being of liberating the manager from dependency habits (to do with the ego) thereby enabling the manager's Self—itself—to be put to work. But rather than the nature of the Self being envisaged in counter-cultural fashion ('love', 'tranquillity' etc.) the enlightened

manager is—supposedly—‘empowered’, ‘creative’, ‘energized’, more than willing to be ‘responsible’ and to act in ‘autonomous’ fashion. He or she also has ‘inner wisdom’; as Gerald Jackson puts it in the subtitle of his *The Inner Executive*, ‘access your intuition for business success’.¹⁴ Much of this discourse, it can be noted, resonates strongly with the language of individualistic enterprise culture—a factor which helps explain the popularity of the courses. And since these trainings have quite a strong conversion effect, more and more from within the corporate heartland of capitalism are becoming New Age orientated.¹⁵

I have yet to meet a counter-cultural New Ager who has felt that such trainers (and trained) are ‘genuinely’ on the path within.¹⁶ It is true that there are relatively secularized ‘New Age’ organizations which are little interested in nurturing spirituality, promising instead to tap the powers of the Self in order to pursue success defined in psychological or materialistic fashion. But evidence from a variety of sources suggests that many New Age ‘capitalists’ think that success in the marketplace is perfectly compatible with spiritual progress. Prosperity, for them, really does involve the best of both worlds.

Since little has been written about this important development, some illustrations are in order. First, the Inner Peace Movement, described by Gini Scott as ‘a highly organized international spiritual growth group’.¹⁷ IPM ‘ideals’, Scott reports, have to do with ‘attaining success and abundance through spiritual growth’.¹⁸ As she also reports ‘they [and there were 20,000 IPMers during the 1970s] believe the individuals should seek to advance in life to this end [“reunion with the divine”]; and they view abundance and success as a sign of evolution and growth’.¹⁹ A second illustration is taken from the Rebirthing movement, various disciplines being employed to ‘bring Spirit into the body’.²⁰ As Leonard Orr and Sondra Ray (the founders) write in their chapter ‘Money in Abundance’, ‘All human wealth is created by the human mind, and being wealthy is a function of enlightenment’.²¹

Influenced by Rebirthing, Phil Laut—author of *Money is My Friend*—criticizes the idea that ‘money and spirituality don’t mix’, and continues:

Having a prosperity consciousness enables you to function easily and effortlessly in the material world. The material world is God’s world, and you are God being you. If you are experiencing pleasure and freedom and abundance in your life, then you are expressing your true spiritual nature. And the more spiritual you are, the more you deserve prosperity.²²

Finally, from Rebirthing, Sondra Ray emphasizes that ‘the *soul* is what matters, and the exterior is not to be the top priority’,²³ but continues, in her *How to be Chic, Fabulous and Live Forever*, to make it clear that the ‘exterior’ can be enjoyed by way of the inner quest. Thus it is affirmed in the chapter on ‘That Art of Enlightened Shopping’ that ‘God is unlimited. Shopping can be unlimited’.²⁴

Similar ‘best of both worlds’ teachings have been formulated by a considerable (and increasing) number of New Age organizations. These include some of the ‘classic’ paths, for example, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh’s. His attitude towards capitalism is indicated by the slogan which became popular among his sannyasins during the 1980s; ‘Jesus Saves, Moses Invests, Bhagwan Spends’.²⁵ Again, Werner Erhard’s highly influential seminars (first est, then The Forum and other seminar-based events) have long emphasized the value of obtaining ‘results’ whilst questing within.²⁶ Nicheren Shoshu Buddhism proves another variant on this theme.²⁷

There are also any number of smaller organizations conveying much the same message. One, for example, is Denise Linn's 'The New Life Workshops': 'Learn to connect with your higher consciousness . . . Programme yourself to attain your goals'; another concerns the Dyad School of Enlightenment, one 'assignment' exploring 'Why you should make money and be rich'. Finally, to draw this portrayal of the prosperity wing to a close, it can be noted that it is now served by a large number of publications. To illustrate the character of this literature, the back cover of one volume, *Creating Money*, tells us that 'This step-by-step guide to creating money and abundance was given to Sanaya and Duane [the authors] by their guides, Orin and DaBen'.²⁸ Jack and Cornelia Addington's *All about Prosperity and how you can Prosper* provides another illustration, with its statements of the 'I am supplied from the Infinite Source with all that I need and to spare' variety.²⁹

In what way(s) is this wing a response to modernity? Prosperity paths, it should be apparent, are closely aligned with the mainstream goals and values. New Age managers would appear to aim for the same commercial results as conventional managers; more generally, new agers of the variety under consideration appear to be just as keen to make money—and enjoy what it enables them to consume—as is most of the population.

There is a strong utilitarian flavour about what is going on, in the sense that the Self is put to work; is treated as a means to materialistic and psychological ends. Prosperity teachings can thus be located in terms of that central trajectory of the cultural history of the self in the West: the development of the notions that something lies within; that it can be tapped and improved; and that it can then enable the person to operate more successfully in obtaining what the world has to offer.

There are, of course, a great variety of activities which promise self-improvement of this kind. In the main, however, they speak the secular (or quasi-secular) language of psychology. To cite from some adverts in the popular press, all of which involve engineering what New Agers would call ego-operations, one can consider: 'I know what makes people successful. Now with my incredible new powerfax self-development system . . .'; 'At last, it's possible to release the genius within you! Improve your memory, increase your income, even lose weight'; and 'Here's your way to financial freedom. If you'd like to . . . control your own destiny . . . develop your personality and power . . .'.

Although New Age prosperity courses and literature have much in common with this more psychological discourse—sharing the basic assumption that it is possible to 'unlock potential'—the key difference is that the utilitarian self has been 'spiritualized'. Thus in contrast with humanistic management development, HRD, sales trainings and so forth, what lies within now lies beyond the ego. Interestingly, however, this 'step beyond' is also rooted in a longstanding tradition of modernity, namely the tendency to instrumentalize religion. This is especially evident in the development of positive thinking (etc.) teachings in the U.S.A. Indeed, many of the authors and movements discussed by Louis Schneider and Sanford Dornbusch, for instance, go a long way towards relocating the Christian God—from without to within—and thus can be treated as direct precursors of the prosperity consciousness of the contemporary New Age.³⁰

It can safely be concluded that the wing under consideration is very much bound up with the utilitarian dynamics of capitalistic modernity.³¹ But at the same time it is something of a 'response'. No doubt there are organizations which simply treat the Self as a means to external ends,³² but the movements and authors introduced above would

insist that they do not devalue the spiritual dimension. Prosperity teachings, in other words, claim to combine the search within—basically the same search as that pursued by the counter-culturalist—with instrumental value. And precisely because of the spiritual component, the wing's 'best of both worlds' aspirations serve to differentiate it from the 'one world' philosophy of conventional capitalistic production and consumption.

The Trajectory of De-traditionalization

The two wings of the New Age, I have suggested, have different relationships with two major trajectories within modernity. This leaves us with a couple more, related, questions. What is the relationship between the New Age and the traditional? And what has the movement got to do with postmodernity?

Concentrating on the first question, the New Age is clearly inspired by premodern religiosity. Marion Bowman's paper in this issue shows how 'the Celts' and 'the Druids' enter New Age discourse and practice; similar papers could be written in connection with the numerous ways in which various domains of the past have been 'resourced', in particular Eastern spirituality.³³ It would appear that the new relies on the old, for 'wisdom', practice, and—the academic might add—legitimization.

However, New Age discourse (if not practice) is largely de-traditionalized. 'The traditional' is here defined as that which speaks with the voice of 'external' and established authority. De-traditionalization is the process whereby such voices lose their say. They come to be replaced by the 'authority' of the utilitarian individual. The New Age is de-traditionalized to the extent that it transcends voices from the past, as well as, for that matter, voices belonging to the established order of contemporary society and culture. The dictates of all supra-Self 'others', which help construct the ego, should be rejected in favour of that authority which comes from the Self itself. But precisely because of the role played by the Self, the New Age is by no means ultimately de-traditionalized. There is an Other, albeit lying within, which stands in a relationship of externality with regard to the utilitarian person (or ego) and which can thus serve as an authoritative foundationalism.

Lecturing at the Festival for Body Mind and Spirit, leading New Ager Sir George Trevelyan is reported to have said:

This is what things look like to me. If it doesn't seem like that to you, you don't have to accept what I say. Only accept what rings true to your own Inner Self.³⁴

The language belongs to what Steven Tipton delineates as the 'expressive ethic'.³⁵ What lies within provides the sole source of genuine ethicality. No one can exercise authority over anyone else. The doctrines, dogmas and encoded moralities of traditional religiosity count for nothing, at worst encouraging ego-dependencies, at best corresponding with what the Self knows to be true.

New Age discourse is replete with expressive ethicality.³⁶ A good illustration of how the Source within can operate with regard to traditional (theistic) religiosity is provided by the following extract from a pamphlet introducing 'Sea of Faith 1992':

In 1984 Don Cupitt's television series and book 'The Sea of Faith' traced the erosion of traditional religious belief and placed before a mass audience the vision of a future for religious faith as something entirely human, no longer either depending or focussed upon the independent existence of God, and centred in spiritual and ethical activity . . . Its [the Sea of Faith Network] basic attitude is encapsulated in our

Statement of Intent . . . of 'exploring and promoting religious faith as a human creation'.

This is post-traditional, in the sense that 'human' wisdom—alone—serves as the basis for 'creating' spirituality.

In summary, basic New Age themes—rejecting those externalities to do with 'beliefs' (which simply nurture the ego) in favour of spiritually-sourced expressivism—ensure that the traditional doctrines of religion are viewed in a negative light. However, such religiosity can still be drawn upon to provide practices. And indeed this is what has happened. New Agers are adept at drawing on traditions, often transforming activities (say shamanism as traditionally envisaged) to put them to use in terms of the search within.

Postmodernity

To a significant extent, New Age discourse is post-traditional. And as we saw earlier, much runs 'counter' to (and is therefore in a sense 'post') modernity, not least the Enlightenment project. Taken together with its agenda for a new future, it certainly makes sense to think of the New Age as postmodern. David Lyon explores such issues, together with other 'apparent articulations of the New Age with postmodernity' (as he puts it) in his contribution to this issue of *Religion*.

However, most accounts of postmodernity—whether philosophical or cultural—highlight the collapse of foundations.³⁷ And as we have seen, the New Age (generally speaking) retains a strong commitment to a form of foundationalism: which locks it into one of the great trajectories of modernity (the Romantic tradition) as well as into those aspects of great traditions which have propagated Self religiosity. The Self—individuated or 'cosmic'—provides a powerful meta-narrative, of a kind which stands in sharp contrast to the 'de-centred' self theorized by advocates of the postmodern condition.³⁸

Self religiosity is not postmodern. It is as ancient as the Upanishads, for instance; or, to take an example from the West, can be found in millenarian movements of the Middle Ages.³⁹ Nevertheless, it is still possible to argue that the way in which the New Age is sometimes used is indeed postmodern. In a nutshell, the argument is that 'the cultural logic of late capitalism', to use Jameson's famous expression,⁴⁰ has generated a postmodern consumer culture; and those involved can treat New Age provisions as 'consuming delights' of an appropriate postmodern variety.

Commencing with the 'experiences' of this consumer culture, Mike Featherstone writes:

It is common in depictions of postmodern experiences to find references to: the disorientating melee of signs and images, stylistic eclecticism, sign-play, the mixing of codes, depthlessness, pastiche, simulations, hyperreality, immediacy, a melange of fiction and strange values, intense affect-charged experiences, the collapse of the boundaries between art and everyday life, an emphasis upon images over words, the playful immersion in unconscious processes as opposed to detached conscious appreciation, the loss of a sense of the reality of history and tradition; the de-centring of the subject.⁴¹

We are in a world which is perhaps best exemplified by Disneyland, a fact beautifully brought out by a recent volume, *Vinyl Leaves*; more generally, we are in a world where 'people look upon products as if they were mood-altering drugs'.⁴²

Looking at who is involved, attention is drawn to those who are middle class, often 'post-industrial', and of a utilitarian-cum-hedonistic disposition. And the idea is that such de-traditionalized people, largely an assortment of hopes, desires and wishes, become more fragmented as they continue to be exposed to the intense, serialized and variegated experiences provided by consumer culture. As Douglas Kellner summarizes this view, 'the subject has disintegrated into a flux of euphoric intensities, fragmented and disconnected . . .'.⁴³

Assuming that there is some truth to this scenario, it is reasonable to argue that yuppie (like) people on occasion use New Age suppliers to provide them with 'experiences', of a more exotic variety than can be obtained from Disneyland. There is indeed some evidence that increasing numbers of the yuppie (like) have turned to New Age activities. But are 'postmodern experiences' of the kind listed by Featherstone to be found within the New Age? I think that the answer must be in the affirmative.

New Age workshops, seminars, retreats and experiential holidays **can** take people into strange worlds: worlds where they can experience 'virtual realities', perhaps what it is like to be a witch, a Druid, a Celt, a shaman, or a perfect being. There can indeed be 'playful [or not so playful] immersion in unconscious processes'. 'Immediacy' is facilitated by the compression of time, 'enlightenment', it is sometimes reported, being experienced after sixty or a hundred hours of seminar-work rather than after many years (or lifetimes) of endeavour as traditionally has been the case.

There is much more to be said about the New Age being treated as a postmodern resource, and I have discussed the matter in somewhat more detail elsewhere.⁴⁴ I want to emphasize, however, that I am not claiming that New Agers consciously set about providing 'spiritual Disneylands'. It seems to me that although that might sometimes be the case, those 'seriously' involved in the New Age are typically on a spiritual quest (and this despite the fact that their courses might be used in consumeristic fashion). I thus have reasons to doubt Jim Beckford's proposal, made in an illuminating article, that certain New Age groups are postmodern because (among other things) they involve 'A celebration of spontaneity, fragmentation, superficiality, irony and playfulness'.⁴⁵ One of his examples concerns the Neo-Sannyas movement of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. Granted the likelihood that yuppie (like) people take courses run by this movement for entertainment value, the fact remains that the sannyasins themselves are largely (to the best of my knowledge) dedicated Self religionists. In short, I do not think that available evidence supports Beckford's proposal that we allocate certain New Age groups to a new category, the postmodern. Further research (and how things could develop) might well show that I am mistaken. But evidence to date suggests that the New Age is only postmodern in the sense that it can be used in such a fashion. [In addition, it can be argued that the New Age ceases to be spiritual, in any significant sense of the term, if it loses sight of the grand meta-narrative to do with self religiosity. If this is true, there can never be a 'genuine' postmodern form of the New Age.⁴⁶

Finally, how does 'postmodernized new ageism' link up with modernity and the premodern? As Lyon suggests in his article, both the New Age and postmodernity 'may be understood in relation to the *fin de siècle*'. This is undoubtedly true. The picture conveyed by Huysmans—of an elite in later 19th-century Paris which scorned the bourgeois style of life, which was hedonistic and consumeristic and which dabbled in any number of 'occult' organizations—is grounded in what was actually taking place.⁴⁷ Although it cannot be documented here, much suggests that numbers were using 'New Age'-like activities to consume in the fashion of the postmodern consumer culture.⁴⁸ Finally, and thinking of the relationship between the postmodern and the

premodern, the reader is referred to David Smith's article. The supposed postmodern consumer culture (together with its bearing on the religious sphere) apparently does not have to be 'post' at all. And, it can be noted, the presence of postmodern elements in Hinduism helps confirm Lyon's thesis: the reason being that things Indian have helped set the tone for development in the West.

Significance

A little under one hundred years ago, Durkheim wrote about a 'cult of human personality on which all our morality rests'; and central to this 'cult', it is claimed, is the fact that 'man has become a god for men'.⁴⁹ Twenty years later, Simmel drew attention to the importance of what he described as 'the true religion of the soul [which] can only be its own inmost metaphysical life not moulded by any forms of faith whatever'.⁵⁰ And turning to recent times, Thomas Luckmann has argued, 'The span of transcendence is shrinking. Modern religious themes such as "self-realization", personal autonomy, and self-expression have become dominant'.⁵¹

Looking briefly at the evidence, there are indeed signs of the New Age coming into ascendancy. This is indicated, for example, by a survey carried out in the San Francisco Bay area. It is reported that 62% of the sample believe that people 'are able to transform their level of consciousness, to more fully realize their human potential, by using certain kinds of meditative practices and psychological therapies'.⁵² However, national surveys suggest that there are 'only' between ten or twelve million New Agers in the U.S.A.⁵³ Furthermore, it is to be doubted that many of these people are of the 'serious' variety, running their lives in appropriate fashion.

On the other hand, it could well be the case that considerably more than twelve million have encountered aspects of the New Age, and have incorporated them into aspects of daily activity and discourse. This is because the New Age is now firmly established as a cultural and practical resource. Anne Ferguson, for example, reports that in the U.S.A. 'the market for New Age books alone is worth \$100m', continuing, 'there are New Age radio stations and 100 New Age magazines'.⁵⁴ This must surely mean that considerable numbers of people hear the New Age 'message'. Neither is it without significance that companies annually spend between \$3 and \$4 billion on 'transformational consulting', it following that managers (in particular) are likely to adopt at least some new ideas and practices.⁵⁵

Bearing in mind all the other ways in which New Agers are providing services, for example, in connection with alternative medicine, it is highly likely that aspects of the New Age are becoming widely disseminated. It is also possible that some of those who turn to the New Age for recreational purposes end up adopting certain features. Furthermore, assessment of the significance of the New Age cannot ignore the fact that quasi-New Age ideas and practices are widespread in the contemporary West. Many of those belonging to 'the culture of narcissism', or who have adopted 'expressivist' and 'post-materialist' values, might well favour psychological rather than spiritual discourse.⁵⁶ But this does not prevent us from designating them 'partially' New Age. They have similar faith in that which lies within.

The conjecture is that 'the turn to the Self' has never before been so numerically important. Those who dismiss the New Age as a curiosity have, I think, got it wrong. Indeed, the cultural trajectories (discussed earlier) which have served to fuel the New Age—and associated developments—will surely continue to do so in the future. In particular, those forces of de-traditionalization—bound up with the increasing value

which has come to be attached to the self—are likely to be sustained, if not intensified, as time goes on.⁵⁷

Turning, albeit briefly, to the performative significance of the movement, a familiar criticism is that it simply caters for those who are narcissistically intent on pleasuring, or perfecting themselves.⁵⁸ Thinking of the denizens of the postmodern consumer culture, there is clearly some truth to this point. But as should be apparent, the New Age is also being applied to more serious ends. It has the capacity, or so it is supposed, to serve a variety of activities: the spiritual quest (cf. Woodhead's contribution); the treatment of existential crisis (cf. that by Walter); the enlightenment of managers; the empowerment of capitalism; and, for that matter, the empowerment of new social movements.

A great deal could be said about how the movement performs—supposedly to release a new world. For instance, it would be interesting to reflect on the capacity of the expressive ethic to sustain 'good' practice.⁵⁹ But to close on a different note, how is the New Age faring outside the West? The brief answer is that it has been exported to many parts of the globe, including Japan, West Africa and Russia.⁶⁰ But possibly the most interesting case of exportation concerns India. For the spiritual home of the New Age is now witnessing the arrival of 'Californianized' products.⁶¹ In any number of fascinating ways, such imports are interplaying with traditional Indian versions of the 'New Age'. On the one hand, imports are mingling with 'counter-cultural' forms of Indian 'New Ageism'; and on the other, with indigenous teachings of a prosperity variety.⁶² Arguably, India has always been the most important home of the New Age (Bloom's characterization corresponds pretty closely to much of Hinduism). And even if this is not the case, India is set fair to becoming the most important base of 'New' versions of Self (individuated or not) religiosity.

Notes

- 1 The conference (May 1992) was organized on behalf of the Ilkley Group.
- 2 Research to date has tended to concentrate on well-established organizations such as Scientology (on which, see e.g. Harriet Whitehead, *Renunciation and Reformulation*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press 1987). Probably the best researched movement is est, academic study (e.g. Steven Tipton's *Getting Saved from the Sixties*, London, University of California Press 1982) being complemented by such outstanding works as est 'graduate' Luke Rhinehart's *The Book of est* (New York, NY, Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1976). Gordon Melton has compiled a great deal of information on the New Age as a whole: see, for example, *New Age Almanac*, New York, NY, Visible Ink 1991. As yet, however, the movement has been little contextualized-cum-theorized.
- 3 *Rainbow Ark* (1 October 1992–1 January 1993).
- 4 Daphne Francis, 'Crystal balls', *Trouble and Strife* 22 (Winter), pp. 45–7.
- 5 Alan Bloom, quoted in Michael Perry, *Gods Within*, London, SPCK 1992, pp. 333–4. For a similar formulation, provided by Jeremy Tarcher, see Lowell Streiker, *New Age comes to Main Street*, Nashville, TN, Abingdon Press 1990, pp. 26–7. More illustrations can readily be elicited from an apparently diverse selection of paths, including Scientology and 'Californianized' Zen.
- 6 I have discussed Self religiosity in publications which provide more detailed information on a number of the issues (including New Age responses to capitalism and whether the New Age is postmodern) addressed in this article. In chronological order, 'Californian self religions and socializing the subject', in Eileen Barker (ed.), *New Religious Movements: A Perspective for Understanding Society*, New York, NY, The Edwin Mellen Press 1982, pp. 69–85; Judith Thompson and Paul Heelas, *The Way of the Heart*, Wellingborough, Thorsons 1986; 'Cults for capitalism? Self religions, magic and the empowerment of business', in Peter Gee and John Fulton (eds), *Religion and Power Decline and Growth*, London, British

- Sociological Association 1991, pp. 27–41; 'The sacralization of the self and New Age capitalism', in Nicholas Abercrombie and Alan Warde (eds), *Social Change in Contemporary Britain*, Cambridge, Polity 1992(a), pp. 139–66; 'God's company: New Age ethics and the Bank of Credit and Commerce International', *Religion Today* 8:1 (Autumn/Winter 1992(b)), pp. 1–4; 'The limits of consumption and the post-modern "Religion" of the New Age', in Nicholas Abercrombie, Russell Keat and Nigel Whiteley (eds), *The Authority of the Consumer*, London, Routledge 1993; and 'The New Age, values, and modernity', paper delivered to UNESCO conference on 'People in Search of Fundamentals' 1991.
- 7 The majority of New Agers today, however, reject hallucinogen-usage; many also frown on the supposedly harsher (confrontational, etc.) 'processes' used by a number of organizations.
 - 8 External spiritual agencies are most prominent in New Age circles which practice channeling; see Melton, *op. cit.* It can be noted that there are other points of contrast within the New Age, for example, between those who are anti-intellectualist and those who draw on the 'new' sciences. A good illustration of the latter is Margaret Donaldson's recent book, *Human Minds*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1992.
 - 9 See Frank Musgrove, *Ecstasy and Holiness*, London, Methuen 1983.
 - 10 Meredith McGuire (*Ritual Healing in Suburban America*, London, Rutgers University Press 1988) provides an account of the field of alternative medicine. More generally, Bernice Martin (*A Sociology of Contemporary Cultural Change*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell 1983) discusses 'the expressive professions'; and Andrew Ross explores various aspects of practice, including 'New Age politics' ('New Age technoculture', in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler (eds), *Cultural Studies*, London, Routledge 1992, pp. 531–56). James Beckford has drawn attention to the fact that 'spiritual characteristics', of a kind which I would call New Age, are displayed by various new social movements ('Are new religious movements new social movements?', paper delivered to the 15th Denton Conference on Implicit Religion, 1992; cf. Bert Klandermans and Sidney Tarrow, 'Mobilization into social movements' in Bert Klandermans, Hanspeter Kriesi and Sidney Tarrow (eds), *International Social Movement Research*, vol. 1, JAI Press 1988, pp. 1–38). Finally, it is interesting to note military applications of the New Age: see, for example, John Alexander, Richard Groller and Janet Morris, *The Warrior's Edge*, New York, NY, Avon 1990.
 - 11 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1989. For somewhat similar views of modernity, see, for example, Emile Durkheim, 'Individualism and the intellectuals', in R. Bellah (ed.), *Emile Durkheim. On Morality and Society*, London, Chicago University Press 1973, pp. 433–57.
 - 12 Charles Taylor, *ibid.*, p. 317.
 - 13 F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, London, Oxford University Press 1941; cf. Catherine Albanese, *Nature Religion in America*, London, University of Chicago Press 1990 (e.g. chapter 5).
 - 14 Gerald Jackson, *The Inner Executive*, New York, NY, Simon & Schuster 1989.
 - 15 Concerning the conversion effect of such courses, Finkelstein et al. provide a detailed review of research on what they call 'large group awareness training'. They concentrate on est (Erhard Seminars Training), a course which has generally been put on for the public at large. However, the research surveyed—which largely supports the claim that there is a strong conversion effect—relevant in that many of those involved in running New Age business trainings have been inspired by est-(like) principles and practices. See P. Finkelstein, B. Wenegrat and I. Yalom, 'Large group awareness training', *Annual Review of Psychology* (1982), pp. 515–39.
 - 16 Writing from the stance of academically/intellectually informed New Ageism, Anthony et al. are clearly sceptical. See D. Anthony, B. Ecker and K. Wilber, *Spiritual Choices*, New York, NY, Paragon House 1987 (e.g. pp. 133–4).
 - 17 Gini Scott, *Cult and Countercult*, London, Greenwood Press 1980, p. 4.
 - 18 *ibid.*, p. 46.
 - 19 *ibid.*, p. 27.
 - 20 Leonard Orr and Sondra Ray, *Rebirthing in the New Age*, Berkeley, CA, Celestial Arts 1983, p. xiv.
 - 21 *ibid.*, p. 196.
 - 22 Phil Laut, *Money is my Friend*, Cincinnati, OH, Vivation 1989, p. 14.

- 23 Sondra Ray, *How to be Chic, Fabulous and Live Forever*, Berkely, CA, Celestial Arts 1990, p. 125.
- 24 *ibid.*, p. 135.
- 25 See also Thompson and Heelas, *op. cit.*, 1986.
- 26 On the relationship between achieving goals and obtaining inner perfection, see Tipton, 1982, *op. cit.* (e.g. p. 211). [But compare Anthony et al. *op. cit.*] Similar teachings can be found in all those est-like seminars which have proliferated since the 1970s, and which are often specifically directed at businesses.
- 27 Having interviewed Lynn Frank, adept and high-flier in the PR world, reporter Sean O'Hagan concludes, 'Obviously, this particular brand of Buddhism allows spiritual awareness and material wealth to prosper side by side in perfect post-Thatcher harmony'. The *Weekend Guardian* (13-14 July 1991), pp. 12-4.
- 28 Sanaya Roman and Duane Packer, *Creating Money*, Tiburon, H. J. Kramer 1988.
- 29 Jack and Cornelia Addington, *All about Prosperity and How You can Prosper*, Marina del Ray, Devorss & Company 1984, p. 61.
- 30 Louis Schneider and Sanford Dornbusch, *Popular Religion*, London, Cambridge University Press 1958. In passing, it can be noted that it would be interesting to compare New Age prosperity teachings with those associated with Christianity.
- 31 See Bryan Wilson, *The Social Dimensions of Sectarianism*, Oxford, Clarendon Press (e.g. p. 288).
- 32 John Alexander et al. (*op. cit.*) approach this position.
- 33 Regarding the Celts, Ross notes that the *Llewellyn Times* claims, that 70% of New Agers are of 'Celtic' descent (*op. cit.*, p. 543); James Boon provides an account of how the Romantics drew on the East. See his *Other tribes, Other Scribes*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1982, chapter 7.
- 34 Cited by Michael Perry, *op. cit.*, p. 147.
- 35 Tipton, *op. cit.*, pp. 282-5.
- 36 The point cannot be documented here, but to give two more illustrations of the expressive ethic, consider: an advert in *Global Link Up* 51 (Spring 1992), p. 19, which states that 'Within each of us is the wisdom that, in essence, knows the answers to all our questions'; and a flyer advertising a course run by Tara for the Shambhala Healing Centre which runs, 'Share with me how to trust your intuition and let go of the beliefs and conditioning that have held you in set patterns throughout your life . . . '.
- 37 As Jean-Francois Lyotard puts it, 'I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives'. (*The Postmodern Condition*, Manchester, Manchester University Press 1986, p. xxiv).
- 38 Douglas Kellner provides a good account (and critique) of those who theorize the de-centred self. See his 'Popular culture and the construction of postmodern identity', in Scott Lash and Jonathan Friedman (eds), *Modernity and Identity*, Oxford, Blackwell 1992, pp. 141-76.
- 39 See Norman Cohn, *In Pursuit of the Millennium*, London, Paladin 1978 (e.g. pp. 172-6).
- 40 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism*, London, Verso 1991.
- 41 Mike Featherstone, 'Postmodernism, consumer culture and the search for fundamentals', paper delivered to UNESCO conference on 'People in search of Fundamentals', 1991 (p. 11).
- 42 Stephen Fjellman, *Vinyl Leaves*, Oxford, Westview 1992; James Ogilvy, cited by Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, London, Norton 1991, p. 522.
- 43 Kellner, *op. cit.*, p. 144.
- 44 See Heelas, *op. cit.*, 1993. Analysis should also consider the notion that the New Age is also used to help people construct life styles (cf. Featherstone, 'Lifestyle and consumer culture', *Theory, Culture & Society* 4 (1987), e.g. p. 59).
- 45 James Beckford, 'Religion, modernity and post-modernity', in B. R. Wilson (ed.), *Religion: Contemporary Issues*, London, Bellew 1992, pp. 19-20.
- 46 An argument developed in Heelas, *op. cit.*, 1993.
- 47 See J.-K Huysmans, *Là-bas*, Sawtry, Dedalus 1992 and *Against Nature*, London, Penguin 1959 (e.g. pp. 34-36). In terms of the secondary literature, see Eugen Weber's *France. Fin de Siècle*, London, Harvard University Press 1986, and Rosalind Williams' *Dream Worlds*, London, University of California Press 1982.
- 48 See especially Weber, *op. cit.* On the general point, as Kellner puts it, that the 'postmodern [is] an emergent cultural trend', see Kellner, *op. cit.*

- 49 Emile Durkheim, *Suicide*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul 1952, p. 334.
- 50 George Simmel, 'The crisis of culture', in P. Lawrence (ed.), *George Simmel: Sociologist and European*, Middlesex, Nelson 1976, p. 259; see also Ernst Troeltsch on what he called 'the radical religious individualism of mysticism': *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches, vols 1 and 2*, New York, NY, Harper 1960, p. 377.
- 51 Thomas Luckmann, 'Shrinking transcendence, expanding religion', *Sociological Analysis* 50:2 (1990), p. 138.
- 52 Don Lattin, '"New Age" Mysticism Strong in Bay Area', *San Francisco Chronicle* (24 April 1990), pp. 1, 8.
- 53 See, for example, Robert Burrows, 'Americans get religion in the New Age', *Christianity Today* 16 (May 1986), p. 17; cf. Catherine Albanese's interesting discussion: 'Religion and the American experience: a century after', *Church History* 57:3 (1988), pp. 337-51.
- 54 Anne Ferguson, 'Time to tune in to New Age ideas', *The Independent on Sunday* (14 October 1990), p. 23.
- 55 See Heelas, op. cit. 1992(a), p. 154.
- 56 See, respectively, Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, London, Abacus 1980; Donald Yankelovich, *New Rules*, New York, NY, Random House 1981; and Ronald Inglehart, *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press 1990.
- 57 A research agenda for the future concerns reflecting on the considerable number of theories which might be applied to account for the development of the New Age. Such an inquiry would have to encompass a sociology of knowledge of the cultural history of the self, addressing those values to do with Pelagianism, Romanticism-cum-contemporary expressivism, and other versions of 'perfectibility' ideology. Cf. the starting point of Lasch's recent book: 'How does it happen that serious people continue to believe in progress, in face of massive evidence that might have been expected to refute the idea of progress once and for all?' op. cit., p. 13).
- 58 See Lasch, op. cit., 1980.
- 59 See Heelas, 1992(b) op. cit.; Rachael Kohn, 'Radical subjectivity in "self religions" and the problem of authority', in Alan Black (ed.), *Religion in Australia*, London, Allen and Unwin 1991, pp. 133-50.
- 60 See, respectively, Waka Hamada, 'Companies sense profits in New Age movement', *The Japan Times* (31 July 1991), p. 4; Rosalind Hackett, 'New Age trends in Nigeria; ancestral and/or alien religion? to appear in J. Lewis (ed.), *The New Age in International Perspective*, Albany, NY, SUNY; Ross, op. cit., p. 532; and Rachel Storm, *In Search of Heaven on Earth*, London, Bloomsbury 1991, pp. 168-73.
- 61 An illustration is provided by a 'Human Potential Institute' in Bombay. See Luis Vas, *Dynamics of Mind Management*, Bombay, Jaico 1991.
- 62 Concerning the prosperity wing, slogans are of the 'Spiritual Enlightenment, Indestructible Affluence' variety. Swami Sivananda's *Sure Ways for Success in Life and God-Realisation* (Tehri-Garhwal, The Divine Life Society 1990) is one of the more influential publications.

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