

Introduction

The New Age movements that emerged chiefly in the second half of the twentieth century constitute together an expression of the personalization of religion that has characterized modern Western spirituality in the wake of an increasing decline of institutional religious influence on social concerns, the increase of secularization as a non-religious option and the growing search for individual solace in the face of cultural uncertainties and bureaucratic hegemonies. In the ever-expanding pluralism of the West in which the individual possesses multiple affiliations and social identities, many people are concerned with developing an identifiable empowerment of self to counter the confusions arising from a surfeit of choice as well as the expanding macro-contexts that continue to dwarf individual independence. The religio-spiritual often appears to offer a last domain in which a person retains the feeling that some freedom of self-determination is not only a possibility but is necessary to any viably sustainable location of value and meaning. Personalized religion takes many different forms (New Age, paganism, implicit religion, sectarian choice, evangelism, secular ideology, etc.), and part of this proliferation is the consequence of the “age of information” that has emerged and in which the individual is confronted by knowledge and awareness of other religious possibilities beyond that in which he/she has been born and acculturated.

In modern times, the West has been characterized by periodic religious revivals or “Great Awakenings.” At the same time, an alternative and eclectic metaphysical tradition has always persisted in the West that has offered a range of contrasting possibilities to accepted ecclesiastical tradition. This occult potpourri or “cultic milieu” has provided a

perennial source for Western alternative religious inspiration, including both contemporary Western paganism and New Age spiritualities.

Early American expression of counter-traditional spiritual interest appears with the rise of transcendentalism in the New England states of the late nineteenth century that promoted an interest in Eastern spirituality, especially Hinduism. Perhaps more of a literary development than a full-fledged religion, Transcendentalism became a leading instigator behind the American or Western metaphysical tradition with its concern for healing and its emphasis on the reality and immanence of the spiritual. As the alternative spirituality of the nineteenth century, the Metaphysical Tradition stressed not only the reality of the spiritual world and the importance of the mystical experience, but also the healing value of reputedly invisible forces that operate on the mind and body. Between them, such people as Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815), Phineas P. Quimby (1802-1866), Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and Warren Felt Evans (1817-1887) created the common language of the transcendentalist and metaphysical traditions in America.

It was Swedenborg who first stressed for the modern West the importance of exploring the supernatural personally and directly rather than simply accepting the lackluster mediation offered by mainstream churches. His own alleged communication with angelic forces or beings, as well as his out-of-body experiences, laid the foundation for a revival of gnosticism's prioritization of spirit over matter and its consideration that spirit is ultimately the only reality. Emerson, in turn, was deeply influenced by Swedenborgian ideas, as well as by the spiritual notions embedded in the Hindu *Bhagavad Gita*. He advocated as a consequence an understanding of a unified world as an expression of mind or God. His philosophy's nature mysticism attracted such other thinkers as Henry Thoreau, Margaret Fuller and Amos Bronson Alcott. Beside stressing a Unitarian reaction to Calvinist doctrine, New England Transcendentalism promoted a reliance on intuition and a development of human potential that together became the hallmarks of the American metaphysical tradition and eventually the broad congeries of New Age movements that emerged in the twentieth century.

To understand New Age spirituality, it is also necessary to consider the developments of spiritualism, New Thought and theosophy that grew out of Swedenborgianism and transcendentalism. New Thought in

particular owes much to Mesmer and his teachings concerning animal magnetism and, eventually, the dynamics of hypnosis. The power of the mind becomes the central affirmation, and illness, poverty and misfortune in general are considered illusions that a proper *gnosis* and mental acumen will dispel and eliminate. With Quimby, the spiritual orientation that led to New Thought focused on healing—whether physical, mental or spiritual—through the power of suggestion.

While spiritualism leads to such peripheral New Age emphases as channeling and other forms of discarnate guidance, and theosophy—itsself an offshoot of spiritualism—provides another range of cosmetic additions such as the Eastern spiritual notions of karma, reincarnation and ascended masters, it is New Thought which lies at the core of New Age identity and its fundamental assumptions. Often working still within an essential Christian framework, Jesus is now seen as the Way-shower rather than a necessary cosmic Redeemer of original sin. He is instead the one who indicates the way toward personal regeneration *par excellence*: Jesus exemplifies the mind-in-action and its power to shape the world and life toward spiritual achievement and emancipation. Instead of atonement, the goal is now “at-one-ment” between God and humanity through which each person regains and unfolds his/her essential divine nature. New Age interprets its Christian heritage of biblical metaphysics metaphorically, while expanding its Christianity with various Eastern concepts. Reincarnation is now accepted as providing the steps that lead to eventual immortality. As an assisting practice that augments spiritual growth and progress, basic Hindu and Buddhist predilections toward vegetarianism are also frequently incorporated.

As a product of the cultic milieu that comprises transcendentalism, the metaphysical tradition, New Thought, spiritualism and theosophy, the New Age movement or collection of movements is a specific development of the 1960s counterculture that abandoned the notion of any set spiritual script that must be followed. Spiritual resources become available utilities rather than dogmatic injunctions. They may be sampled, experimented with and incorporated or rejected as their usefulness is demonstrated to the individual. But on the global as opposed to the personal level, the counterculture demands a restructuring of the world in conformity with its utopian potential rather than simply maintaining its dominant corporate and national divisions. As such, the legacy of the 1960s counterculture includes both contemporary Western paganism

and New Age. The former wishes to restructure the world in line with environmental and ecological holistics. The latter would redesign the global polity to reflect a transcendental hegemony. The one reflects the immanent animism, pantheism and polytheism of ancient paganisms; the other is a recasting of heretical gnosticism commensurate with the spiritual consumer market of today.

Both New Age and contemporary Western paganism draw their adherents from the broader religious exchange market in which religions themselves, as well as their various artifacts, practices and beliefs become marketable commodities. *Vis-à-vis* mainstream canonical religions, New Age and paganism are natural allies. They represent essential democratizations of religion, but not only are they generally condemned as heresies, they also encourage individual exegesis that is anathema to doctrinally established forms of belief. Both also incorporate a pervasive fusion between the religious and the psychological.

The difference between New Age and Neo-paganism lies foremost in the realm of theology and the respective attitude toward the tangible, physical and/or natural world. Pagan ways of thinking understand the sacred as all-pervasive—including, if not beginning with, the material dimension. New Age, in contrast, and following its gnostic and transcendental heritage, posits the corporeal—whether consciously or implicitly—as an obstacle to spiritual progression. Nature is an illusion that must be sundered and bypassed. If it is considered a *bona fide* reality, it is nonetheless a secondary reality at best and ultimately worthless when placed into the grander scheme of things. The final spiritual goal is transcendence of the mundane, a transcendence of the impediment that the material presents to ethereal self-fulfillment and not the pagan aspiration to honor, cherish and celebrate the substantial as part of the pleasures of life. New Age seeks to regain an original state of gnostic grace and re-find the spark of divinity latent within each individual. Paganism avoids the ladder metaphor for that of the ascending spiral—cyclical but advancing. What lies ahead is not a return but an evolution.

Apart from their contrasting theologies, New Age and paganism differ also in their social compositions or expressions. New Age manifests chiefly through what sociologists Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge understand as the audience and client cults, only occasionally as a full-fledged cult movement. The primary venue is the lecture theater—whether a borrowed church, hired hall or New Age center

meeting space. Almost as important for New Age is the client consultation with a service provider—whether an astrologer, yoga teacher, therapist, psychophysical trainer, geomancer, mediumistic channel, etc. For contemporary pagans, by contrast, the venue is a private home or garden, a leased university hall, a summer camp, a private woods, a public park, a tavern or an ancient site depending on whether the occasion is social, initiatory, ritual or a festive fair. The pagan occasion is less that of an audience gathering with little that is characteristic in terms of the client-consultant relationship. While both movements have little in the way of hierarchical structure, let alone bureaucracy, and both movements are composed by relatively high numbers of solitary practitioners, the group coalescing that does occur and their subsequent trajectories as well as the *raisons d'être* behind them are different.

Another major difference between New Age and contemporary paganism concerns theodicy. While both orientations tend to dismiss the reality of sin and evil, they nevertheless take different positions on what the negative is. For New Agers, misfortune is a figment of the imagination. Unhappiness, disease, poverty and so forth are all mental aberrations. The purpose of spiritual progress is to acquire the *gnosis* or understanding that allows one to neutralize and/or eliminate the power of faulty thinking. For pagans, however, the negative is not a product of ignorance as much as it is one strictly of illness—whether an imbalance in the natural and organic equilibrium or the result of an invading pathogen. Rather than enlightenment, the emphasis is one that seeks to cure an imperfect situation. If New Age emphasizes the acquisition of knowledge or understanding, contemporary Western paganism is primarily concerned with the development and exercise of will.

But if paganism and New Age have many similarities and contrasts, in practice they often tend to fuse and incorporate mutual elements on an *ad hoc* basis that make any operative differentiation between them difficult at best. Many scholars of religion, in fact, see Neopaganism as a part of the wider New Age umbrella. From an outsider's perspective, New Age is often an eclectic amalgam of appropriated elements from across the full religious spectrum and frequently seemingly without rhyme or reason. The very issue of appropriation is greatly contentious according to New Age critics and has raised the question of integrity and respect within the global spiritual arena. What is at stake here is the problem of spiritual ownership. The mix-and-

match conglomeration that often results can appear not only superficial but also an insult to those from whom various elements have been appropriated—especially if this involves a people such as Native Americans or Australian Aborigines—who perceive themselves under threat of losing their own self-identity.

But the appropriation issue aside, understanding New Age spirituality as essentially a continuation of New Thought, despite the many different cosmetic additions that have been fused to it—sometimes permanently—allows a realization that New Age is much more consistent than might otherwise appear the case. This detectable consistency beneath its many multifaceted individual forms allows one to approach New Age as a legitimate and distinct spirituality, permits a mutual recognition between adherents and provides a common language, a sort of New Age speak, of spiritual nuance and vertical metaphor. The focus is almost invariably on healing—healing the body of infirmity, healing the mind of doubt, confusion, uncertainty and anxiety and healing the spirit from separation and darkness. In this quest for the *higher* state of being, for the higher mind and higher self, it is *gnosis* that breaks apart the chains of ignorance for a greater, more holistic, more integrated, more dynamic and more effective and ascending state of being. The acquisition of *gnosis* is to achieve enlightenment, and along with the up/down framework in which New Age chiefly operates, there is also employment of a pervasive light-versus-darkness symbolism.

Some New Age critics deplore what they perceive as New Age's exclusive exaltation of light. Among these are Neo-pagans whose more pantheistic approach honors both luminescence and darkness. New Age's light-fixation can be decried as one that leads ultimately to the praise of nuclear oblivion. More typical, however, of a general anti-New Age consensus is an attitude that sees it, perhaps less threateningly, as simply lavender-scented and pastel-colored, a mishmash of incense and crystals and the ultimate in self-pampering. New Age narcissism is certainly a criticism that is often leveled against spiritual consumerism in general, and the "airy-fairy" proclivities of New Age are often fair game for ridicule and dismissal by outside viewers.

But New Age frequently refers to itself as, or part of, the Wisdom Tradition. Its essential thrust represents an attempt to uncover hidden, esoteric and occult knowledge that reputedly belonged to the mages, sorcerers and secret societies that have flourished beneath mainstream

spiritual traditions. Along with these, New Age includes the spiritual truths believed embedded in the mythologies and practices of indigenous peoples. In fact, New Age seeks to discover the common denominators linking *all* religions—whether mainstream, endangered, extinct or esoteric. In its quest for a “new age,” one that is generally associated with the astrological notion of an Age of Aquarius, New Age spirituality advances the idea that spiritual property is no longer an exclusive or private concern of any privileged elite but is now part of a public domain accessible and potentially usable by everyone. The Wisdom Tradition that formerly survived *sub rosa* is, in the Aquarian New Age or Information Age, increasingly manifest. And it is this very Wisdom Tradition that New Age believes transcends any and all religion.

But it is not only this innovative declaration of the sacrosanct and independent integrity of this tradition that distinguishes New Age, it is also the insistence that this tradition is directly accessible. From a New Age perspective, there is no need of a middle person to mediate between the individual and a sacred reality. Gurus and teachers are instead guides: helpers rather than indispensable agents, wayshowers rather than magical surrogates. Consequently, New Age repudiates priests, prophets and other institutional authorities who presuppose that they can tell others what to believe and what to do that is mandatory in obtaining spiritual grace. Instead, it is the individual himself/herself who becomes, if not a self-authority, the self-determiner in regard to spiritual matters. Mistakes that a person makes become learning experiences, and it is this very experiential approach that constitutes the *sine qua non* experimentation and discovery of New Age identity. Even in the case of more institutional New Age sects such as the Church Universal and Triumphant, the locus of final authority is still believed to rest with the individual adherent who chooses to subscribe to a particular regime and spiritual framework. To the degree that New Age can be identified as championing the absolute freedom of individual self-determination concerning spiritual matters, it includes contemporary Western paganism. It is instead when considering what is spiritual that the two orientations are to be differentiated.

Consequently, New Age reveals a long legacy that stretches from ancient gnosticism, the Masonic and Rosicrucian lodges from the middle ages, ceremonial magical pursuit of the Renaissance, New England transcendentalism, spiritualism, theosophy, New Thought and the

American metaphysical tradition. For the most part, it occupies a middle ground between such differing expressions as the Holy Order of MANS (HOOM) and Heaven's Gate. The former, originally a typical New Age liberal blend of various traditions, slowly transformed into a conservative Christian institution. Its women were forced to surrender their holy orders. Membership developed into village-like enclaves, and in 1988 its remaining 750 members underwent baptism and joined the Holy Orthodox Archdiocese of Queens, New York. The group assumed its new name of Christ the Savior Brotherhood. Along with most remaining parishes, the Brotherhood later joined the more mainstream Orthodox Church in America. It is now dedicated to converting the world to Eastern Orthodoxy, and the remnants of its former New Age expectation have been channeled into preparation for Christ's Second Coming.

Heaven's Gate developed from the nomadic spirituality of Marshall Herff Applewhite and Bonnie Lu Nettles—originally known to followers as Bo and Peep; later as Do and Ti. The two established a UFO cult in the American southwest that combined science fiction elements with biblical prophecy—seeking redemption in an extraterrestrial “Kingdom of Heaven” and accepting a gnostic theology in which human bodies are merely “shells” or “vehicles” antecedent to The Evolutionary Level Above Human (TELAH). The arrival of the Hale-Bopp comet was interpreted as a marker and arrival of a spacecraft from the higher state, and this culminated in the suicides of thirty-nine residents of Rancho Santa Fe in San Diego on the 26th of March, 1997, who believed that through the death of their mortal bodies, they would achieve TELAH. While the Heaven's Gate narrative is expressive of the extremes of New Age thought, it is not typical of the more moderate mix of ideas that constitute the bulk of the New Age movement. Both HOOM and Heaven's Gate are difficult-to-locate expressions within the more popular New Age spirituality that the present dictionary hopes to illustrate.