

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF ‘NEW AGE’

It is . . . not the religion of the professionals, religion in its doctrinal purity, that I have sought to recover, but rather concrete religious phenomena with all the impurities of a specific social context.

(Obelkevich 1976: vii).

Different kinds of practice and discourse are intrinsic to the field in which religious representations (like any representation) acquire their identity and their truthfulness. From this it does not follow that the meanings of religious practices and utterances are to be sought in social phenomena, but only that their possibility and their authoritative status are to be explained as products of historically distinctive disciplines and forces. The anthropological student of *particular* religions should therefore begin from this point, in a sense unpacking the comprehensive concept which he or she translates as ‘religion’ into heterogenous elements according to its historical character.

(Asad 1993: 53–4)

This book proposes a thorough deconstruction and reconfiguration of ‘New Age’ in which both the label itself and the phenomena associated with it are subjected to critical scrutiny or a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ in the sense identified (if not endorsed by) Ricoeur (1970: 32–3). My general argument runs as follows. First, I unpack the concepts ‘New Age Movement’ and ‘The New Age’. That is, I take issue with the hegemonic view that ‘New Age’ is a ‘movement’ of some kind or even a homogeneous entity at all. Such formulations essentialise a set of mixed, meandering, even divergent social processes more akin in presentation to Deleuze and Guattari’s (1988: 3ff.) proliferating ‘rhizome’ than to a unified organic entity. I also question the covert metaphysics informing the reifying expression ‘The New Age’, which effectively periodises manifestations by assigning them to a homogeneous cultural epoch or astrological era. Both terms are unsatisfactory: ‘New Age’ as a ‘movement’ is, as I will show, a false etic category and a formulation such

as ‘The New Age’ simply reproduces an emic agenda.¹ In fact, ‘New Age’ represents at its narrowest a specific millennialistic emblem, and at its most diffuse – at its most symbolically overdetermined – a loose idiom of humanistic potential and psychotherapeutic change that could be, and has been, called anything from ‘human potential’ to ‘mind body spirit’, from ‘holistic’ to ‘spiritual growth’. Asad’s call to recover the ‘heterogenous elements’ of particular religious formations is apt here, for little else in the history of modern religion turns out on close inspection to be as variegated and diffuse in character as ‘New Age’.

To deconstruct ‘New Age’ in this way is also to engage with the long-standing debate in Religious Studies on the analytical purchase of broad categories such as ‘world religion’, ‘religion’ and ‘religions’, even particular constructs such as ‘Hinduism’ (Baird 1971, Fitzgerald 2000). Such debates have called the universalism of this vocabulary of religions into question, underscoring the specific historical circumstances of its genesis and development. ‘New Age’ is no exception here; indeed, it exemplifies an enduring mystification in category formation in Religious Studies.

Approaching the subject through a hermeneutic of suspicion also raises the question of whose interests are served in classifying as ‘New Age’ the Fortean diversity of phenomena typically associated with the term.² Through taxonomic sleight-of-hand the phenomena have been accorded a homogeneity and concrete presence that the historical record simply does not permit. But this does allow ‘New Age’ to be set up like a stooge to be knocked down by a variety of vested interests. For example, it has been demonised by conservative evangelical Christians, particularly in the US, as is evident in the very titles of Constance Cumbey’s *The Hidden Dangers of the Rainbow: The New Age Movement and Our Coming Age of Barbarism* (1983) and Texe Marrs’ *Dark Secrets of the New Age* (1987).³ In other constituencies, ‘New Age’ is sniggered at as ‘touchy-feely’ spiritual consumerism. Parties with axes to grind here include rationalist sceptics (Basil 1988) and paternalist social scientists (Bruce 1998), for whom ‘New Age’ is a codeword for a shallow, self-indulgent, even – one senses – *plebeian* and *vulgar* spirituality that should not be given scholarly oxygen. This unlikely confluence of critics shows that ‘New Age’ has triggered curiously exaggerated and intemperate reactions in very different social power bases. This only reinforces an important but largely occluded function of ‘New Age’ studies: to connect data about alternative spirituality and religious innovation to comparative studies in the sociology of knowledge and anthropology of culture, rather than remaining a pocket of colourful anecdotalism tagged on to the end of Religious Studies.

Deconstructing ‘New Age’ has a second major revisionist function: it contributes to the wider process of recovering and reassessing ‘lost’ expressions of religion, for ‘New Age’ flourished as a major current within a much broader field of popular religious practice. When William Bloom, an influential activist in 1980s and 1990s Britain, describes ‘New Age’ as

the visible tip of the iceberg of a mass movement in which humanity is reasserting its right to explore spirituality in total freedom.

(Bloom [ed.] 1991: xvi)

we can identify some typical concerns of religion in a popular mode: grassroots activism, strategies for everyday living, ideals of spiritual autonomy and egalitarianism, and – not least – an ideology of direct, unmediated access to ‘experiences’. Nevertheless, I shall be arguing throughout this book that the cultural arena within which such voices are raised has no overarching purpose, no compelling agenda, beyond that of expressing whatever ‘spiritual’ values are deemed appropriate for the moment and – through a radical tolerance – upholding the rights of others to do the same. That is, what debate there has been among practitioners on the meaning of ‘New Age’ has most often amounted simply to a nexus of conversations, occasionally arguments, within a decentred and theoretically unbounded matrix of viewpoints and pressure groups, here locally-focused, there widely-dispersed, but almost always mutually tolerant and hence diffusive rather than regulative. Rather than constituting a social movement or a new religious movement, then, ‘New Age’ was originally an apocalyptic emblem whose encoded semantics were sufficiently rich and multiform for a later generation to take it over as a codeword for currents in post-1960s popular religion.

And this is the third point in my argument: ‘New Age’ is not a distinctive empirical formation but a (now rather stale) codeword for the heterogeneity of alternative spirituality, best classified as a sub-type of ‘popular religion’. Here are two simple definitions of ‘popular religion’. The first is from Thomas (1995: 387):

If ‘official’ religion [is] defined as religion founded on authoritative documents and propagated by religious specialists, priests or hierarchy, then the term ‘popular’ can apply to any layperson, whether peasant or ruling-class, who adopts beliefs and practices which may be at odds with the religious specialists’ views.

A clear illustration of this can be found in the rhetoric of David Icke, a former footballer, broadcaster and Green Party spokesman, now a prominent contemporary advocate of ‘New Age’. In his early memoir-*cum*-manifesto *The Truth Vibrations* he writes:

The new spirituality involves a one-to-one relationship with the Godhead and the higher intelligences. We will no longer believe that all our sins can be forgiven by a priest appointed by the church hierarchy. Why do we need a human to arbitrate between ourselves and God when we have our own link?

(Icke 1991: 127)

Icke's is an unusually combative declaration of anti-clericalism and anti-institutionalism. But of course the problem with this definition of popular religion is that it reproduces a crude dichotomy between 'official' and 'popular', which – although clearly attractive to Icke, for example – may not always, or even typically, obtain in the field. This is particularly the case in 'New Age', where to the extent that Thomas's 'specialists, priests, or hierarchy' can be found at all, they exist in secondary institutions with relatively high-turnover user groups. Although a strong strain of neo-Christian piety and mysticism has flavoured the arena, the stance is less one of being 'at odds' with Christianity than with the hegemony of 'institutional religion'. At the same time such disdain for 'tradition' does not prevent practitioners from co-opting historical formations deemed fit and useful for everyday spirituality, including popularising mystics of the Christian churches as spiritual rebels. Hence a second working definition of popular religion teases out some important social psychological dimensions underpinning 'New Age's disdain for institutional religion:

Popular religion is the quest for (a) *more simple*, (b) *more direct*, and (c) *more profitable relationships with the divine*.

(Maldonado 1986: 6; emphasis in original)

The field is replete with evidence of appeals to less complex, less mediated and more rewarding ideas and practices. The aforementioned William Bloom urges readers to 'do something, anything, to deepen your relationship with the sacred' (Bloom 1993b: 18, 19). Gill Edwards, one of a plethora of independent workshop leaders in 1990s Britain, writes in *Stepping Into The Magic*: 'It is time for *everyone* to become a shaman, a metaphysician, a dream-weaver, a walker-between-worlds – each in our unique way' (Edwards 1993: 192).

This brings me to my fourth and final point, one that is in fact applicable to all academic study of religion. Obelkevich's conceptualisation of his subject as 'concrete religious phenomena with all the impurities of a specific social context' precisely describes my own view of religion as a cultural institution among others. The special interest of 'New Age' manifestations is that, by dint of their fluidity, ephemerality and heteroglossia, they compel us to reassess the implicit boundary maintained by most scholars between 'culture' and 'religion'. I would argue that this differentiation functions to safeguard the agential purity of the latter from the contaminating contingency of the former. 'New Age', however, is contaminated – that is, hybrid and syncretic – culture *par excellence*, and proper comprehension and extension of this insight dissolves the scholastic illusion of 'world religions' and their sub-types. In the dizzying field of cultural hybridity that opens out before us once the 'New Age' umbrella is collapsed, we can glimpse the truth of Deleuze and Guattari's (1988: 7) application of the rhizome to linguistics 'there is no language in itself . . . only a throng of dialects, patois, slangs, and specialised languages'. In Religious Studies this amounts to

Martin's (2000: 282) reconceptualisation of religion as 'the ubiquity of locally contingent and syncretistic formations', which is to say that 'local variation *is all there is!*'

**Fieldwork, history, text:
methodology in the study of 'New Age'**

Any theory of religion must be able to deal adequately not only with structure but with change and must include within its stipulations historical as well as contemporary data.

(Martin 1990: 112)

The qualitative researcher is not unlike the detective in the classic murder mystery. Starting with a few clues, the detective questions persons connected with the case, develops hunches, questions further on the basis of those hunches, begins to see a picture of 'what happened' start to emerge, looks for evidence pro and con, elaborating or modifying that picture – until finally the unknown is known. The murderer is caught; what was once a mystery is now understandable.

(Wiseman 1979: 113)

Since I am concerned in part with the methodological shortcomings of the field, a brief review of my own methods follows in the interests of transparency and reflexivity. To begin with I employed ethnographic fieldwork and textual analysis, with Denzin's (1970: 307–10) well-known principle of 'methodological triangulation' in mind – meaning the generation of multiple measures or profiles of one and the same phenomenon. This is particularly germane to the study of religion, which – *pace* the efforts of anthropologists and ethnographers – still tends to be dominated by analyses based largely on texts. That this is still largely the case in 'New Age' studies is suggested by Heelas's admission (1996: 7) that 'academics . . . simply do not know much, if anything, of the thousands of different things that are going on'. One aim of the present study is to map historically and ethnographically the sheer variety of people's popular practices and interpretations, which scholars can find when they start to look for religion in its proper habitat.

I conducted the bulk of my fieldwork in Scotland. Given my rationale for a multidisciplinary approach to the subject it seemed realistic to tackle an accessible arena. In the end, most of the fieldwork was done within a few hours of where I live in central Scotland, some of it in 'old haunts' mentioned in the introduction. Doing ethnography 'at home' in a compact European country (population *c.* 5 million) that is also a keenly theorised cultural–political community (Paterson 1998, Sutcliffe 2002) certainly encouraged serendipitous connections between people and places that kept warm my autobiographical stake in the field. For example, while browsing for primary sources in an

Edinburgh second-hand bookshop I discovered that the proprietor was a nephew of Peter Caddy, co-founder of the Findhorn community and one-time husband of Sheena Govan, the charismatic teacher of the proto-Findhorn group in 1950s London. Later I found that, at the time of her death, Govan herself had been lodging in the same village in south-west Scotland where I myself, a generation later, had lived during my shoemaking career. Not only this, but a certain Alice Bailey had in 1895 first encountered her spiritual 'Master' at an aunt's country estate in the same locality (Bailey 1973: 35). I interpreted these developments as pleasing coincidences, although they were later reinterpreted by one or two informants as Jungian 'synchronicities' which demonstrated that, esoterically, I was 'meant' to write this book. That aside, some details were clearly chance incursions into the area: Sheena Govan had no previous connections with the south-west of Scotland, and Alice Bailey came from a very wealthy Manchester family and could presumably just as easily have met her 'Master' at another country seat. Similarly, the colony that became the Findhorn Foundation community might have sprung up in the Trossachs if the staff group of Peter and Eileen Caddy and Dorothy Maclean had been laid off there, instead of in the north-east of Scotland. Indeed, but for Sheena Govan's family connections in Scotland, the proto-Findhorn group would have had no reason to move to Scotland at all. And yet, as I will show, Sheena Govan is a key figure in the genealogy of 'New Age', Bailey its chief theorist and the Findhorn colony an international site of 'New Age' practice. The contingent turns out to be essential.

There is an additional reason for restricting the ethnographies to Scotland. The distinctiveness of Scotland within the UK, demonstrated on educational, legal and ecclesiastical grounds since 1707, presents an opportunity to remark in passing upon the differing acculturative potential of 'New Age' in a society that still retains a Presbyterian cultural resistance to Anglo-American popular culture (Hight 1972, Brown 1997). The demographic profile of Scotland's prime 'New Age' site, the Findhorn colony, demonstrates this by default: founded by English and Canadian nationals, Findhorn has been dominated by American, German and English people, with Scots scarcely represented at all. But notwithstanding the residual cultural resistance of Presbyterianism, the contemporary profile of 'New Age' in Scotland appears to be coming into line with other countries in the grip of globalising and postmodernising forces: the rest of mainland Britain, Western Europe, North America and Australasia. Hence at the same moment that Hight (1972) was arguing for the distinctiveness of Presbyterian culture, the directory *Alternative Scotland* (Wright and Worsley 1975: 114) reported 'a great upsurge of non-Christian religion' and 'an increasing number of groups simply interested in borrowing from any religion or none for the purpose of developing the potential of the individual'. By the 1990s the Church of Scotland (1993: 44) was reporting 'active promotion of New Age ideas and practices in Scotland' with Drane (1993: 57) now claiming that 'most unchurched people in Scotland today are more likely to construct

their worldview from aspects of the New Age outlook than from elements of mainstream Christianity'. And a founder-proprietor of the successful 'Body and Soul' bookshop in Edinburgh told me in January 2000 that the 'New Age' idiom was now diffused through the general culture and was actually 'more widely accepted' in Scotland than in England, where he thought it had become a middle-class preserve.

Overall the Scottish experience serves to emphasise the ability of 'New Age' to override certain indices of social and cultural difference through trafficking in a common currency, a point reinforced by Hanegraaff's (1996: 13) observation on 'New Age' discourse in The Netherlands and Germany as 'an English-American affair by any standards'. The Scottish ethnographies presented in Chapters 6 to 8 can thus be read as a particular – a Scottish – case study in the dissemination of an Anglo-Americanised praxis. That is, their Scottish markings represent a vernacularisation of a common stock predominantly moulded by Anglo-American popular cultural values. These in turn reproduce a model of 'spirituality' in which reflexive and interactive agents work within a web of egalitarian social relationships, drawing upon a cluster of populist beliefs and practices.⁴

The emics and etics of New Age

All notions of replicability and testability fly up the chimney when the world as seen by the observed is capriciously muddled with the world as seen by the observer.

(Harris 1969: 33)

The final product, it seems to me, should reflect a kind of biculturalism in which the ethnographer understands cultural phenomena in both emic (native) and etic (outsider) ways.

(Wagner 1997: 90)

Earlier I referred to the 'emics and etics' of 'New Age'. This terminology refers to the epistemic frame of the interpretations we hear in any particular account of cultural events. The neologisms 'emic' and 'etic' were first used in print in the 1950s by a linguist, Kenneth Pike, who dropped the prefix from the conceptual pair 'phonemic/phonetic' to develop a more parsimonious, higher-order terminology derived from linguistics but applicable to culture in general (Headland 1990: 15). According to Pike 'an emic unit' is 'a physical or mental item or system treated by insiders as relevant to their system of behaviour and as the same emic unit in spite of etic variability' (Pike 1990: 28). An etic unit, on the other hand, is an 'outside disciplinary system' (ibid.) formulated for the purposes of scanning and then de-coding an unfamiliar emic system (ibid.: 34). In Pike's view, 'etics' – or cross-cultural 'science' – is the means to emic – indigenous – ends.

In the 1960s the anthropologist Marvin Harris began to theorise the emic/etic distinction in a way that challenged Pike's prioritisation of 'emics' (Harris 1990: 48–50). Harris accepted Pike's basic understanding of the emic unit but introduced a strong etic agenda: namely, 'the task of building a diachronic, synchronic, comparative, and global science of society and culture' (ibid.: 49). For Harris, etics are something more than emics writ large; indeed, if etics can be shown to be merely artificially extended 'local' categories, they fail the test and remain merely emic. In Harris's view etics provide the basic epistemology of academic knowledge: they are literally that which 'makes the social sciences possible' (ibid.). They are 'accounts, descriptions, and analyses expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the community of scientific observers' (Lett 1990: 131).

Clearly the emics and etics of culture go to the heart of contemporary debates on the flaws in the so-called 'Enlightenment project' of generating universal categories and explanations. For my purposes, it is the cognitive, and specifically epistemic, dimension of emics/etics that is particularly stimulating: as Lett (1990: 132) notes, 'it is our *understanding* of the phenomena, not the phenomena themselves, that is either emic or etic'. Emics and etics are not a fixed dichotomy of representation but dynamic and symbiotic frames of discourse: emics can transform into etics and back again. The important point is making the epistemic shift a conscious, predictive and transparent act, which underscores the active or operative nature of the distinction between emics and etics. That is, while etics cannot but be emics at their point of origin, etic viability lies precisely in the ability to function as cross-cultural explanatory units. In claiming to have achieved this, etics lay themselves open to testing as 'fakes', and indeed may be exposed as such. In this sense, an etic formulation is falsifiable whereas emics simply are not. Purported etic formulations such as 'The New Age' or 'New Age Movement' are a case in point: as we shall see, they are fakes.

Hence I would agree with Wagner's 'biculturalism', quoted at the head of this section: that is, an appropriate academic agenda for an intercultural, polycentric world is to obtain and 'broker' *both* kinds of knowledge – emic and etic, 'insider' and 'outsider'. This strategy is particularly applicable to the task of reconstructing the subjectivities of religious discourses on the one hand, and locating these in historical and cultural context on the other, such as I attempt to do here with 'New Age'. However we juggle the precise weighting of emics and etics in the final reckoning, what is crucial is to preserve the creative epistemic tension between them. This functions to preserve alterity or 'otherness' in social life because it builds in cognitive difference. This in turn exposes the 'moccasin-walking' model of 'empathetic' Religious Studies as a hollow, even mystified, metaphor: we can never 'get into someone else's shoes' in any useful academic sense. By explicitly and transparently differentiating between emic and etic 'voices', then, we can avoid this 'capricious muddle' of categories and explanations.

This brief excursus into emics and etics benefits 'New Age' studies twofold. First, it allows a real emic history of the 'New Age' emblem to be envisaged and recovered, something impossible before, because the (false etic) discourse on a 'New Age Movement' erased traces of difference. Second, the genealogical approach I use also throws light on the wider field of alternative spirituality in which 'New Age' has been deployed (Sutcliffe and Bowman 2000). Neither of these benefits is available in extant portrayals of the field, which overwhelmingly homogenise 'New Age' by collapsing emic and etic differentials, as we see in a brief review of the secondary literature to follow. In short, throughout the book I counterpoise emic and etic categories to generate a dynamic, reflexive and transparent account of 'New Age' and its location in a broader field of alternative spiritual practice.

Fieldwork: roles and ethics

Fieldwork practice invariably shades off into a grey zone in which the line between the 'informed' and 'uninformed' consent of practitioners becomes blurred (Richardson 1991: 64). As Fine (1993: 268) bluntly asserts, 'the world is secured on secrets'.⁵ Taking into account these realistic constraints on a theoretically 'pure' fieldwork, I nevertheless almost always worked openly rather than covertly: that is, telling participants who I was, what I was doing, and – if I knew at the time – why. Usually I mentioned my own thoughts and feelings on the practice or issue at hand. But sometimes I was vague about my motives and opinions since – as Fine (1993:274) shrewdly puts it – 'not only are we unsure of the effects of explaining our plans but often we do not know what we want until well into the research project'. An open or 'overt' approach allows for a degree of negotiation, accommodation and – if necessary – disillusion on all sides. Consequently the difference between emic and etic perspectives that a covert approach would collapse through concealment is stimulated in overt work:

There can be no question of total commitment, 'surrender' or 'becoming'. There must always remain some part held back, some social and intellectual 'distance'. For it is in the 'space' created by this distance that the analytic work gets done,

(Hammersley and Atkinson 1992: 102)

We can now grasp emics/etics as a cognitive correlate to the fieldworker's embodied marginality. Instead of the alterity of researcher and researched – and of emics and etics – being a problem, it becomes a boon, a positive tool for comparative knowledge and theory. Nevertheless, the indeterminate nature of the role of participant–observer, the dynamic relationship between emics and etics, and the fluid and deregulated arena of practice that constitutes the 'New Age' field created an ambiguous experience of fieldwork, since my presentation

to other practitioners was hard to distinguish from the exploratory, 'taste it and see' tactics adopted by novices, the 'creative exploitation' of opportunities for spiritual growth practised by the dedicated 'seeker' (Straus 1976). Drawing on her own experience of research with a small spiritual group, Wagner (1997: 91) explains a delicate situation well:

To me, I was a member of the group because I was studying it. To the group, I was a member who was also studying it. Although the group leaders and most of the members knew I was a student of the group, they insisted from time to time that I was undergoing spiritual growth, just as they were. If I did not protest, I would be uncomfortable. If I protested too much, it would make the group uncomfortable.

This, of course, replays the esoteric interpretation of a *hidden purpose* behind my research mentioned earlier. Such a 'cosmic' level of unfalsifiability defies all attempts at transparency and disclosure and suggests that Shaffir's (1991: 77) conclusion is realistic: 'Despite a commitment to conducting research overtly, deception is, nonetheless, inherent in participant observation'.

History and genealogy

People who profess to ignore history are nevertheless compelled to make historical assumptions at every turn.

(Tosh 1984: 1)

The search for descent is not the erecting of foundations: on the contrary, it disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself.

(Foucault 1977: 147)

Factoring emics and etics into the methodological equation convinced me that historical perspective, in particular a Foucauldian genealogical analysis, was also required to complete the reconstruction of 'New Age'. As I have said, my approach conforms to Martin's (1990: 116) call for histories of religion to be 'conceived in an ethnographic grain'. This is in one sense simply to follow Baird's (1971: 33) theory of history of religions as a 'temporal study [which] attempts to locate religion in its cultural setting, and to reveal sequential connections'.⁶ But the special problem of the 'New Age' field lies in the fact that its boundaries are highly indeterminate, its empirical history is largely unknown and its celebration of subjectivities corrodes a steady morphology. I cannot therefore simply 'read off' the

history of an agreed phenomenon. 'New Age' must be reconstructed from scattered and internally inconsistent sources. To do this properly we must in the first place acknowledge as serious empirical evidence spiritual practices and ideological motifs that until recently have been disparaged and marginalised. It also means taking seriously Foucault's call for genealogy to maintain 'passing events in their proper dispersion', which means identifying 'the accidents, the minute deviations – or conversely, the complete reversals – the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things' (Foucault 1977: 146). Following the lead of cultural studies in restoring subcultures, countercultures and popular culture to the scholarly agenda, not only is there intrinsic interest in recovering the history and ethnography of 'lost' spiritualities but considerable theoretical pay-off accrues in understanding the cultural dynamics of religious change and innovation. The sum is that this book is not a celebration of 'colourful' marginality or eccentricity but a genealogical reconstruction that leads us from an 'exteriority of accidents', through murky arenas and surprising contiguities, to the heart of contemporary religious expression.

Popular sources

Alongside my ethnographical and historical work, I trawled the field of 'New Age' writing and publishing. An important body of evidence lies in correspondence, newsletters and mailing lists, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s. Much of this is by nature ephemeral or held in private collections and is thus difficult to trace. From the outset I interpreted 'texts' very broadly from the conviction that a search for a 'canon' is particularly inappropriate to this field. For while most practitioners – Findhorn residents, UFO contactees, spiritual healers – continually test their experiences against written material of all kinds (including their own) they have little use for textual 'closure', preferring to study what comes to hand through personal recommendation and network culture. An idea of the voracious appetite for popular printed material can be had from the pages of the bulletin of the New Zealand-based *Heralds of the New Age*, begun in the mid-1950s. An editorial in 1964 reveals the domestic storage and dissemination of group texts:

Completely unpaid, our librarian runs what amounts to a suburban library (housed in her home). She selects, wraps and despatches hundreds of books monthly.⁷

An article by the librarian herself lists her most borrowed stock, ranging from the Christian Bible and the Bhagavad-Gita to Shakespeare and Swedenborg, the Theosophical writings of C. W. Leadbeater and H. P. Blavatsky, the Oahspe and Urantia bibles, the spiritual healers Edgar Cayce and Harry Edwards and assorted popularisers of 'Eastern' spirituality such as Paul Brunton and

Paramahansa Yogananda.⁸ That the library content remained ‘open’ to new spiritual trends is proved by material in later issues: a 1986 bulletin gives considerable space to the Indian *guru* Sai Baba whose teachings, we are now told, ‘many of our readers have come to accept’.⁹

Searching for a fixed canon in this popular marketplace of ideas only perpetuates an implicit model of Christian biblical exegesis. What is required in ‘New Age’ studies as elsewhere in Religious Studies is the contextualisation of textual exegesis in an ethnography of readership. This will certainly include analysis of textual content but it must pay attention to popular rather than elite hermeneutics and it must address the material culture of texts. In short, what is of interest to me is less what the texts ‘say’, ‘defer’ or ‘elide’ than their conditions of production and distribution, and the ways in which their audience *uses* them. This point refers not just to the manufacture and circulation of ideas typical of this domain but to the physical properties of the material in which discourse is inscribed and transmitted. In ‘New Age’ groups of the early period, talks were taken down in shorthand, letters typed (with carbon copies kept and filed), newsletters and information sheets crudely duplicated, contact rotas maintained, mailing lists up-dated on card files, and – in larger groups – several hundred envelopes stuffed and posted by hand. The resulting ‘endless typing’ – in the words of the editor of the *Heralds* bulletin – indicates the ‘home industry’ conditions under which ‘New Age’ discourse gestated and circulated, suggesting a degree of physical time and effort which lessened markedly once fax and computer culture began to kick in in the 1970s. This also hints at the powerful, if masked, material base of discourse, since it suggests that the earlier career of ‘New Age’ as a specific social emblem reflects in part the pioneers’ substantial investments of domestic space and elbow grease. Once the material gets into the hands of its audience, a new set of problematics arise, for as Avryl Lambert, the *Heralds*’ librarian, herself put it: ‘There are hundreds of books to help stretch your mental horizons, but we must all seek to digest and to PUT INTO PRACTICE the wisdom of authors’. Only an ethnography of readership can gauge how, if at all, this norm translates into practice. There are some indications of the fruitfulness of such an approach in the ethnographies of Chapter 6 and 7.

So I draw upon a spectrum of popular primary sources, including an extensive private archive of the foremost international ‘New Age’ organisation, the Findhorn Foundation. As a reflexive ‘check’ on these I also draw on my own occasional correspondence and conversations with practitioners over ten years or more. Since I am principally interested in the corroborative value of these sources in tracing the genealogy of ‘New Age’ and in their function as populist modes of expression, my discussions of textual content *per se* are restricted. But I do provide a broad discussion of Alice Bailey’s texts of the 1930s in Chapter 2, and I discuss the popular hermeneutics of ‘New Age’, encoded in some seminal texts of the 1970s onwards, in Chapter 5.¹⁰

Hunting the snark: the 'New Age Movement' in secondary sources

If the genealogist refuses to extend his faith in metaphysics, if he listens to history, he finds that there is 'something altogether different' behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms.

(Foucault 1977: 142)

There is now a vast literature on 'New Age', including Christian theological assessments (Saliba 1999) and rationalist debunking (Basil 1988), neither of which I will treat here. Nor will I consider anthropologies of distinctive practices or sites classified as 'New Age' – for example, Danforth (1989) on firewalking, Brown, M. (1997) on channelling, or Prince and Riches (2001) on Glastonbury – although clearly these are the kinds of contextualised study the field urgently requires. But here I am interested in the bigger picture, and so I will focus upon a handful of major texts that, from the late 1980s to the present, have manufactured the academic orthodoxy that there is an identifiable religious movement known as the 'New Age' or the 'New Age Movement'.

J. Gordon Melton has provided several wide-ranging accounts of 'New Age' as a 'new popular religious movement'.¹¹ In his view 'New Age'

is a genuine *movement* – it has no central headquarters, and its adherents hold widely varying opinions concerning its exact nature and goals. . . . The movement is, however loosely, held together by its very real transformative vision of a new world and of new people who will transcend the limitations of narrowly chauvinistic cultures, religions, and political systems, and will surpass the outmoded thought-forms of 'old age' theologies and beliefs.

(Melton 1988: 35–6)

Actually Melton is describing no more than a collection of individuals with a common utopian ideal. Ironically the absence of just those empirical variables appropriate to a new social movement (NSM) or new religious movement (NRM) – leader, headquarters, prescribed text, boundaries, public policy, common goal – is seen as confirmation.¹² Certainly when it comes to questions of doctrine and belief, Melton acknowledges some discrepancies:

The ideas of the New Age Movement are difficult for many to grasp, as they grow more out of intuition and experience than doctrines or logical reasoning. Moreover, the movement tends to embrace mutually contradictory ideas, and among its spokespersons are people

who voice opinions completely unacceptable to the movement as a whole.

(1988: 45–6)

This representational indeterminacy also colours the collection of essays entitled *Perspectives on the New Age* (Lewis and Melton 1992) which contains a vast range of phenomena said to constitute ‘New Age’, as a brief tour of chapter contents makes plain. ‘New Age’ is variously linked to humanistic and transpersonal psychology, to Hinduism, to Spiritualism; it interacts closely with New Thought, Pagan witchcraft and alternative spirituality in general; it penetrates corporate business; and it permeates popular arenas of healing and channelling.¹³ The editors’ introduction identifies ‘narrow’ and ‘broad’ definitions of ‘New Age’ (Lewis and Melton 1992: x–xi) linked with a ‘spiritual subculture’ on the one hand and media stereotyping on the other. To confuse matters they say that the ‘spiritual subculture’ includes people who would ‘explicitly *reject* this particular label [New Age]’ due to perceptions of media stereotyping. They also say that ‘one of the traits of the New Age is that major subjects of interest vary from time to time’; hence ‘New Age will persist in some form (though perhaps under a different name) into the foreseeable future’ (ibid.: xii, x). The sum of these generalisations is a remarkably chameleonic ‘movement’, one that can apparently change its corporate stripes, shift its principal interests and synthesise everything from witchcraft to corporate business while simultaneously cohering as an empirical collectivity. Lewis (1992: 2) even claims – without explanation – that researchers ‘can no longer simply ask respondents in a straightforward manner whether they consider themselves part of the New Age’. But what kind of viable movement – save for one in enemy territory or with illegal or clandestine aims (clearly not the case here) – would be put in jeopardy by simple public affiliation? The data presented under Lewis and Melton’s editorship in fact suggest a far more amorphous phenomenon of collective behaviour that is insufficiently institutionalised to be certain of goals, ideology, or even formal identity. Their attempt to make the expression ‘New Age Movement’ – or even ‘New Age’ – stick to this diffuse collectivity is pursued in the teeth of the evidence.

An assumption has been made and a trend set. Most accounts of the 1990s accept *a priori* the existence of some kind of movement connected to ‘New Age’: the main task is now assumed to be identifying the *kind* of movement it is. For example, in the introduction to his pioneering study *The Emerging Network*, Michael York explains that his aim is ‘to arrive at some understanding of what the New Age Movement is; how it is formed; who is involved, who its leading spokespersons are’ (York 1995: xiii). But elsewhere York’s account is interestingly contradictory, for he also correctly says that ‘New Age’ is ‘an umbrella term that includes a great variety of groups and identities’, that adherents ‘drift between a range of meetings, workshops, lectures or ceremonies’, that it is ‘not doctrinaire and consequently means many different

things to many different people', that it is 'largely composed of short-lived groups' and hence is characterised by 'ephemerality' and, finally and crucially, it does not 'formulate any clearly expressed idea of religious or organisational boundaries to be maintained' (ibid.: 1, 26, 35, 148). But while York is prescient in stressing the field's network properties, his ultimate solution to the definitional problem is to subsume 'New Age' under an impossibly inclusive higher-order category, the 'holistic movement' (York 1995: 330), which includes

New Age, Neo-paganism, the ecology movement, feminism, the Goddess movement, the human potential movement, Eastern mysticism groups, liberal/liberation politics, the Aquarian Conspiracy, etc.

That Fortean 'etc.' gives the game away: 'New Age' is still an open case.

York's hyper-inclusive 'holistic movement' bears some resemblance to Paul Heelas's *The New Age Movement* (Heelas 1996), in which the term 'New Age' is uncoupled from emic usage and read back into twentieth-century alternative religion as a whole. Encouragingly, Heelas (1996: 5) understands 'New Age' as a 'cultural and practical resource employed in everyday life' and presents 'a study of "popular" values, aspirations and endeavours'. Chief among these is 'interest in the self, its values, capacities and problems' (ibid.: 173). But Heelas compromises this important enquiry by extravagantly extending the boundaries of 'New Age': his 'key figures' are Blavatsky, Jung and Gurdjieff, while men as diverse as A. R. Orage, Carl Rogers, Prince Charles, Aldous Huxley, and Paul Tillich are yoked in; even NRMs like Transcendental Meditation, Soka Gakkai and the Church of Satan are incorporated. The problem is that there is no useful boundary to Heelas's 'New Age Movement'. He himself admits this when he writes that 'the word "movement" should not be taken to imply that the New Age is in any sense an organised entity', but his alternative definition – 'the assumption that humanity is progressing into a new era' (ibid.: 16) – is not convincing, an 'assumption' being far too weak a term to evince a sociocultural movement. By uncritically adopting 'New Age' as an etic term, the very real emic career of the emblem is lost. It is then only a short step to conflating 'New Age' with modern alternative religion as a whole. Consequently the analytic purchase of the taxon, and the empirical history of the field, are severely compromised.

In contrast, Chrissie Steyn's phenomenological investigation *Worldviews in Transition* (Steyn 1994) patiently reconstructs emic content and categories. The bulk of her text stems from thirty extensive interviews in South Africa in the early 1990s with activists and purveyors of 'New Age' services. This attention to 'insider' accounts yields a very different profile. Steyn finds that a diffuse Theosophy structures 'New Age' in South Africa (ibid.: 27). In particular, two-thirds of her interviewees 'had been markedly influenced by the [Alice] Bailey teachings' (ibid.: 101). Heelas (1996: 45), in contrast, claims that Theosophy is

‘not especially significant today’ and makes only passing reference to Alice Bailey. Consequently Steyn models a gently other-worldly, millennialistic approach against Heelas’s (1996: 16) humanistic ‘inner spirituality’. Like Lewis and Melton, Steyn acknowledges the controversy attending ‘New Age’ self-identification among practitioners, observing that many of her interviewees ‘were reluctant to use the term’ and some were ‘appalled at the idea of being labelled “New Ager”’ (ibid.: xiii). She also problematises the ‘movement’ tag: ‘it is not an organisation which people can join and it has no creed that everyone should confess’ (ibid.: 6). Nevertheless, she uses the construct ‘New Age movement’ throughout the book and even concludes with a profile of an ‘ideal-typical New Ager’ (ibid.: 302).¹⁴

In *New Age Religion and Western Culture* (1996) Wouter Hanegraaff depicts ‘New Age’ as a commodification of Western esoteric thought for a secular culture. The text is thus in part given over to an historical discussion of ‘esotericism’. Hanegraaff’s argument for its impact on modern alternative spirituality is potentially instructive but his presentation of ‘New Age’ suffers from the by-now familiar definitional a priorism:

Whatever the nature of the New Age movement will turn out to be, the absence of generally recognised leaders and organisations, normative doctrines and common practices effectively distinguishes it as a whole from the many movements which do have these characteristics.
(ibid.: 14)

‘New Age’ is rendered a priori unique. But how could a ‘movement’ exist without the kinds of feature repudiated by Hanegraaff? He finds a solution to the problem of fuzzy boundaries in Colin Campbell’s (1972) notion of the ‘cultic milieu’, meaning the alternative spiritual subculture which has been a persistent feature of modern urban societies. Hanegraaff conflates ‘New Age’ with this ‘cultic milieu’ (op. cit.: 17, 522), suggesting that the latter became at some point self-consciously aligned as ‘the New Age movement’. But he advances little evidence for how, why, when, where, and by whom this transformation came about. The bulk of *New Age Religion and Western Culture* consists of detailed expositions of ideas and themes culled from over one hundred texts selected by Hanegraaff from ‘leading New Age bookstores’ (ibid.: 17). This certainly provides a rich digest of the popular religious imagination in post-1960s Anglo-American culture. But since he asserts rather than demonstrates his bold claim that ‘a considerable part of the literature is little more than the written reflection of New Age practices’ (ibid.: 18), and since the tag or emblem itself – ‘New Age’ – scarcely features in the titles of his representative publications, Hanegraaff’s model of ‘New Age religion’ remains curiously decontextualised.

Finally, I come to Jon Bloch’s interesting but restricted sociological study, *New Spirituality, Self and Belonging* (Bloch 1998). Despite the fact that this is the slimmest volume on offer and is based entirely on a small sample of interviews,

it takes emic discourse seriously, a position sorely under-represented in other studies.¹⁵ Bloch's method is qualitative ethnographic interviewing, from which he develops an argument that what he calls the 'new spirituality' is a style of popular discourse constructed by participants to minimise the social strain they experience between diverging needs of self-autonomy and collective belonging. The performative function of this discourse is well-observed by Bloch, but his argument that this amounts to 'a fluid, modern social movement' is constrained by the book's brevity and the lack of sustained examination of wider sociocultural factors moulding the discourse.

What can we make of these key secondary sources? They share a consensus that beneath the outward diversity of 'New Age' is a substantive core of ideas and values. Holding to this almost as an article of faith allows the authors to speak either of a 'New Age Movement', thereby aligning themselves with a major sociological sub-industry on NRMs, or of an entity or timespan, 'The New Age', in which case identifying with emic metaphysics. Melton and York represent this homogeneity largely in terms of a family of networks; Heelas via an ambiguous relationship with the values of modernity; Steyn through Theosophical lineage; Hanegraaff in terms of textual ideas; and Bloch through innovative communication codes. The sum is a complex overview that – as one might expect – is strong on texts, beliefs and ideas, but less sure, even contradictory, on ethnography, genealogy and empirical structure. In other words, the precise location in time and space of 'New Age' remains remarkably unclear despite the assumption that 'New Age' is now a secure etic term.¹⁶ Is it 'a religion of revelation' (Hanegraaff 1996: 27), a 'genuine movement' (Melton 1988: 35) or an embodiment of 'self-spirituality' (Heelas 1996: 18)? Or is Steyn (1994: 6) correct to claim that 'it is not an organisation which people can join and it has no creed that everyone should confess'?

The fact is, no one is sure.

'New Age': tangled emics

The special potency of 'New Age' lies in its range of possible interpretations and associations. These include a modernist 'new world order', a resacralised cosmos and – not least – an era of human empowerment and fulfilment in a post-scarcity society. In short, the phrase 'New Age' evokes large-scale cultural change, reflecting exciting yet also risky developments in the modern world: technological revolution and the boom in travel and cultural tourism, certainly, but also the disruptions of the industrial revolution and, more darkly, the globalisation of war and the money economy. These multiple meanings ensure that ideological ambiguity inheres in any particular invocation of 'New Age'. The eschatological question of whether the 'New Age' is to be 'secular' or 'religious', (human) made or (divinely) revealed, is left unresolved.

There is scattered usage of 'New Age' from the mid-Victorian era onwards, but here I want to focus on a twentieth-century genealogy, when the emblem

is used with increasingly stylised connotations and the social contexts of its use can be cross-referenced. In Wellesley Tudor Pole's *Private Dowding*, for example, a Spiritualist exegesis of the sufferings of the First World War, a Christ-like figure called 'The Messenger' tells the author that 'a spiritual remedy is becoming available [that] will veritably prove the elixir of the new age and will be within reach of all mankind' (Pole 1917: 95). The appeal to things 'spiritual' and egalitarian are perennial ingredients of dissident religiosity. But a Christian element also enters in: harbinger of this 'new age' is 'the Christ spirit' which 'will dwell among men with healing in its wings'. Pole later surfaces in 'New Age' circles in England in the 1960s, as we see in Chapter 4. Meanwhile, in South Africa, Johanna Brandt, wife of a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church, received a series of revelations from a 'Messenger'. First published in Dutch in 1918, *Die Millenium: ein voorspelling* [The Millennium: a Prophetic Forecast] announced that 'an altogether new epoch' was imminent and that 'the first great miracles of the new age of mystic revelation' were about to be revealed in South Africa (Steyn 2001).

The relationship of 'The Christ' to this imminent new era, which had preoccupied Wellesley Tudor Pole in England and Johanna Brandt in South Africa, was taken up in earnest in the US in the 1930s by Alice Bailey, a former Anglican and Theosophist who eventually published a vast corpus of books outlining her system of 'eschatological Theosophy' (Ellwood 1995: 321). Culminating in the two-volume *Discipleship in the New Age* (1944, 1955), *The Return of the Christ* (1948), and *Education in the New Age* (1954), Bailey's epic texts prophesied an esoteric 'New Age' to be inaugurated by Christ's return. But although Bailey's 'New Age' was persuasive, it was never entirely hegemonic: the deregulated, lay praxis of what would soon be termed 'postmodernity' put paid to that. Others who toyed with the emblem could put their own spin on it to suit the moment. For example, among groups providing spiritual alternatives in the aftermath of the Second World War was 'World Union', which offered study courses in 'New Age Citizenship' and 'New Age Health' from a London address.¹⁷ An indefatigable English pamphleteer, Basil Stewart, added a twelve-page booklet entitled *The Aquarian Age: What it Connotes and the Phenomena that Will Usher it In* (Stewart 1942) and the more substantial *Spiritual Truth: the Pure and Universal Religion of the New Era of the Aquarian Age* (Stewart [n.d.]) to his roster of self-published tracts on a range of issues from Spiritualism to anti-Catholicism. And as we already know, in New Zealand in 1956 the Heralds of the New Age began to publish booklets of messages channelled from spirit guides, 'space brothers' and deceased religious leaders, while pockets of a 'New Age subculture' emerged (Spangler 1984: 26) in the US.

In 1967 two modest English publications championed the 'New Age' emblem. They merit a few comments, since the late 1960s is a key period for mapping the hermeneutic shift in New Age.¹⁸ *Revelation for the New Age* (Brooke 1967) and *A Faith for the New Age* (Vaughan 1967) were both published by Regency Press, an outlet associated with Spiritualist and

Psychic publications. Indeed, the author of the former was a member of both the Society for Psychical Research and the Churches' Fellowship for Psychical and Spiritual Studies, while several well-known Spiritualist sources are included in the extracts of writing in *A Faith for the New Age*. This is essentially a plea for a more broadly 'supernaturalistic' (ibid.: 200) and millennialistic Christianity, based on what the author calls 'widespread expectation' of an 'immanent Manifestation or Second Coming' (ibid.: xliii) that will 'open up vast new continents of mind and soul for mankind to explore in a truly New Renaissance and a truly New Reformation in a truly New Age'. Similar influences shape the collage of views and experiences in *Revelation for the New Age*, a collection of talks given by the author in the early 1960s to small groups in the US and UK. Brooke's material adds some exotic seasonings to Vaughan's neo-Christian manifesto, including Indian mysticism, psychic surgery, UFOs, and the *lingua franca* of Esperanto. These and other elements are considered to be 'signs' foreshadowing 'a dramatic breakthrough of spiritual values which will sweep us all into a worldwide co-operative community', which Brooke calls 'the world administration of the new age' (ibid.: 7).

But ambiguity haunts the form this revelation will take. Will Christ return as the bearded Palestinian famous from European church statuary, as the cover picture of *Revelation for the New Age* suggests? Or in the guise of a contemporary charismatic figure – perhaps the emerging Korean guru, Sun Myung Moon (Brooke was among the first to publicise Moon's Unificationist theology in the West), or Sri Aurobindo? Or perhaps the revelation will be more diffuse – a matter of 'a new realisation dawning in the hearts of men?' (ibid.: 8).

It is clear that in these early statements on 'New Age', authored between the 1930s and late 1960s, there was real discussion and debate, and even a degree of consensus, on the timing and nature of this new order. The meaning of the emblem at this time was evidently in part negotiated within a community of users. In other words, 'New Age' carried literal status, in sharp contrast to the proliferation of referents, and their increasing metaphorisation, that characterises 'New Age' discourse from the 1970s onwards. I explore this point in detail in Chapter 5, but it is worth emphasising here that in the 1960s a variety of small projects explicitly identified themselves with a dawning 'New Age', presented as a public revelation of spiritual power on the point of engulfing the whole planet. In the US an information network called, simply, 'New Age Teachings', issued a monthly bulletin of 'channelled' messages to subscribers in some thirty countries around the globe (Melton *et al.* 1990: 326). In north-east Scotland, a small community beside the coastal village of Findhorn described itself as 'pioneering a new way for the New Age'.¹⁹ An American activist, David Spangler, lived at Findhorn in the early 1970s and wrote a book there called *Revelation: The Birth of a New Age* (Spangler 1977 [1971]).

In contrast, there are also references in several directories of alternative spirituality documenting an emergent 'umbrella' function. A self-styled 'New Age Group' in Blackpool, England, for example, was holding regular meetings

to discuss ‘colour, numerology, practical mysticism, esoteric astrology, unity and yoga’, while ‘The New Age Research Fellowship’ in Epsom concentrated on ‘absent and contact healing, rescue work, meditation, [and] discussion on occult matters’ (Strachan 1970: 120–1) and the Middle Piccadilly Farm at Sherbourne, Dorset, listed itself as a ‘small New Age community’ specialising in ‘self-exploration workshops’ (Khalsa 1981: 50). What exactly is ‘New Age’ about all these latter associations? Since they do not explain their grounds for adopting a ‘New Age’ identity we can only surmise that the term was ‘in the air’ and seemed a potent and accessible slogan to organise and perhaps market diverse wares and practices. The so-called ‘New Age Travellers’ who emerged in the 1980s were different again. A picaresque hybrid of punk and ‘free festival’ hippies in the English countryside (Lowe and Shaw 1993, Hetherington 2000), the ‘travellers’ were for a time entirely identified with ‘New Age’ in popular discourse in the UK and counted as the most common category mistake made by friends and colleagues when I first told them of my research in the mid-1990s. Confusions stemming from the co-existence of at least two broad currents of popular hermeneutic – one apocalyptic and eschatological, the other expressive and humanistic – reminds us of the point of embarking on a genealogical investigation in the first place, since the a prioristic assumption of a ‘New Age Movement’ obliterates nuanced emic differences by default.

Enough has been said here to indicate that some specific historical currents of alternative spirituality that fall short of a ‘movement’ in any useful sense have nurtured ‘New Age’ discourse. A recent revival of the term ‘Aquarian’ as a rival emblem must also be mentioned for the sake of completeness. It derives from astrological calculations on the earth’s movement from Pisces into Aquarius, the new sphere of celestial influence (Kelly 1990). Astrology had been popularised in the 1920s – for example, *The Message of Aquaria* (Curtiss and Curtiss 1921) and *The Riddle of the Aquarian Age* (Bennet 1925) – and in the 1930s it entered British daily newspapers. In the contemporary period the ‘Aquarian’ motif can be traced to the late 1960s: the musical *Hair* had the chorus line ‘this is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius’, and the famous Woodstock music festival was billed as an ‘Aquarian Exposition’ (Makower 1989: 106). The trope also drives texts like *A Vision of the Aquarian Age* (Trevelyan 1977) and *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (Ferguson 1982). Sometimes the expressions ‘New Age’ and ‘Age of Aquarius’ are interchangeable: a recent book by David Spangler is called *Pilgrim in Aquarius* (Spangler 1996). But ‘Aquarian’ has also been an alternative tag for Pagan practitioners seeking to celebrate the dawn of a new cycle of spirituality while distancing themselves from the stark modernism, and perceived mercantilism,²⁰ of ‘New Age’. Thus Marian Green, editor of *Quest* magazine in England, is said to be typical of some British Pagans in the early 1990s in that she ‘entertains the New Age idiom as a compatible frame of reference’ (York 1995: 151). And in the US, Adler (1981: 402) reproduces a 1973 ‘Aquarian Manifesto’ celebrating ‘Aquarians Together’, denoting ‘Witches, Warlocks, and Wizards, Psychics, Priests and Parapsychologists; Mystics, Mediums, and

Magicians; Astrologers, Diviners and Occultists'. In the light of this and other evidence of blurred boundaries, recent Pagan claims of sharp differentiation from 'New Age' must be treated as strategy rather than history.²¹

Deconstructing 'New Age'

The term 'New Age', like the earlier terms 'hippie' and 'yuppie', is partly an accurate designation and partly a mass media stereotype, a symbolic canopy beneath which a very wide variety of phenomena are thrown. There is *something* going on, everyone agrees, but what?

(Simmons 1990: 203–4)

The search for descent . . . shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself.

(Foucault 1977: 147)

In short, I argue in this book that 'New Age' was originally an apocalyptic emblem and is now a tag or codeword for a 'spiritual' idiom. In both cases 'New Age' lacks predictable content and fixed referents: it is always interpreted vernacularly, although the literalist tendencies of the earlier period allow far less hermeneutical latitude than do the polysemic fragmentations of post-1970s spirituality. In order fully to deconstruct 'New Age' and refocus academic attention, I need to show how 'New Age' is intimately linked to wider spiritual experimentation. To this end I exhume in the first part of the book, entitled 'Emblem', some key early episodes in 'New Age' discourse. The ideology of an imminent 'New' or 'Aquarian' age that became available in the 1930s has as a primary source the post-Theosophical writings of Alice Bailey, but it also reflects complex popular cultural dynamics in the period and a growing constituency of seekers hungry for new spiritual syncretisms. After the Second World War the nuclear age and the 'space race' added urgency to this discourse; one sketch of the régime at the Findhorn community in 1968, before the incursions of the counterculture, characterises this 'early' New Age discourse as

a spiritual cargo cult, waiting for something to happen. From the skies, through world events, or from within, they were waiting for that signal, that sign, the ineffable essence of a new 'reality' that would tell them that the old was passing away and the New Age was beginning.

(Hawken 1990: 180–1)

In the second part of the book, entitled 'Idiom', I build a contrastive profile of 'late' New Age. Following a hermeneutical shift in the early 1970s, and under pressure from new developments in alternative religion – including the vigorous evangelising of NRMs (Clarke 1987), the 'do your own thing' ethos of the counterculture (Neville 1970) and the diffusion of 'personal growth' and

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human potential pursuits in popular culture (Heelas 2000, Puttick 2000) – ‘New Age’ became an increasingly multivalent signifier. By the 1980s and 1990s ‘New Age’ had metamorphosed into a label for a sensual and somatic idiom of contemporary popular religion containing a little bit of just about everything. This shift from sharply-focused, apocalyptic emblem to diffuse humanistic idiom is the axis around which the book turns.