DEFINING THE NEW AGE

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"Always start by defining your terms," students are often told. Dictionary definitions are seldom attention-grabbing, and the meaning of one's key terms may already be obvious to the reader. Indeed, any reader who purchases a volume about New Age must plainly have a working knowledge of what the term means—so why bother to define it?

There are a number of important reasons to start with definitions. First, as Socrates, whose life's work consisted largely of attempts to formulate definitions of key concepts, ably demonstrated, there is a world of difference between knowing what a concept means and being able to articulate a definition. Second, there is a difference between a dictionary definition and the defining characteristics that emerge through scholarly discussion: key concepts in a field of knowledge are usually more complex and subtle than can be summarised in a few dictionary phrases. Third, attempting a definition—in this case of 'New Age'—enables us to bring out the various salient features of the movement, and to help ensure that key aspects are not neglected. Fourth, there are important comparisons and contrasts to be made between New Age, alternative spirituality, New Religious Movements (NRMs) and New Social Movements (NSMs), and hence an attempt to define one's subject matter is a useful exercise in conceptual mapping, enabling us to draw conclusions about what belongs to the field of New Age studies and what lies outside. Finally, discussing definitions is important where a term's meaning is contested: as will become apparent, the expression 'New Age' admits of different meanings, and indeed some writers have suggested that the concept is not a useful one, since it lacks any clear meaning whatsoever.

At an intuitive level, many readers would claim to recognise the 'New Age' when they see it. It manifests itself in shops that specialise in Tarot cards, crystals, incense, alternative remedies and books on ley lines, the paranormal, astrology, and eastern and esoteric spirituality. It appears in the form of magazines such as *Kindred Spirit, Caduceus* and *Resurgence*, and in local directories providing advertisements and addresses for the services of Reiki healers, yoga teachers and various

psychic consultants. It has its centres, either in practitioners' owned or hired premises, or in renowned towns such as Glastonbury or Totnes. There are also characteristic events, such as Mind-Body-Spirit festivals and psychic fairs.

How can one find a definition of 'New Age' that will serve to bring so many different features together? One major difficulty in defining 'New Age' is that different writers draw different boundaries. Paul Heelas, for example, includes a significant number of what he calls the 'self religions': groups like Landmark Forum (also known simply as The Forum, formerly *est* or Erhard Seminar Training) and Programmes Limited (formerly Exegesis). Some writers trace the New Age back to William Blake (1757–1827); others see it as originating in the 'hippie' counter-culture in the USA in the 1960s, while the scholar of the New Age, Wouter Hanegraaff, places it later still, regarding it as beginning in the second half of the 1970s. Some authors claim that, if there ever was a New Age Movement, it is now finished, while others aver that it is still with us.

A further problem relates to the supposed constituents of the New Age. If it supposedly includes homoeopathy, eastern religions, ley lines, deep ecology, angels, channelling, Tarot cards, astrology and Neuro-Linguistic Programming, what do such interests have in common? If there is no common essence, do they at least have a relationship? If they have common or related features, what is the point in conjuring up a term to refer to them collectively?

The Scope and Diversity of the New Age

Although the Theosophical Society is not normally considered to be part of the New Age Movement, its eclectic ideas have significantly contributed to the development of the New Age phenomenon. In particular, Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), Alice Bailey (1880–1949), Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986), and Dion Fortune (1890–1946), all of whose writings still feature significantly on the Mind-Body-Spirit shelves of bookshops, were at one time Theosophists, although all except Fortune abandoned the Theosophical Society.

Bailey's ideas relate on the one hand to Theosophy's founder-leader Helena P. Blavatsky's 'Ascended Masters'—advanced spiritual beings who are now free from the cycle of reincarnation and who continue to guide humans on Earth from their celestial abodes. In particular, Bailey

claimed contact with a spiritual guide by the name of Djwahl Khul, whom she claimed to be the ultimate author of many of her writings. On the other hand, Bailey was influenced by Christianity, although she developed her own idiosyncratic interpretation in the two-volume *Discipleship in the New Age* (1944, 1955), and *The Reappearance of the Christ* (1948). The first bears obvious noteworthiness for Bailey's use of the expression 'New Age'; the second develops ideas of a spiritual evolution towards a new world religion in which the teachings of Buddha and Christ would be fused. Christ would return some time towards the end of the twentieth century, enabling the Ascended Masters to draw closer to humanity, thereby ushering in a new era of heightened spiritual awareness.

Krishnamurti, Steiner and Fortune demonstrate in different ways the diverse interests of the subsequent New Age Movement. Having rejected the Theosophical Society's endeavours to present him as new world teacher Maitreya and avatar, Krishnamurti claimed to be bound by no tradition, and preached a message of non-violence, teaching that peace was not achievable by socio-political means, but only by a transformation of the self, cultivating the virtues of goodness, love and compassion. Krishnamurti saw the importance of education in self-development, and established numerous schools in India, Britain and the United States. Steiner, even more than Krishnamurti, is associated with education, and the Steiner school emphasises a holistic approach to education, stressing the importance of the development of the spiritual and physical aspects of the individual, as well as his or her intellect. The Anthroposophical Society, founded by Steiner, promoted a form of 'Christian occultism' (as Steiner himself called it), whereby individuals were encouraged to rediscover the divine powers, which they had lost. Jesus Christ, Steiner taught, showed humanity the way in which this can be accomplished.

Dion Fortune's ideas were less Christian-centred than Steiner's: for her Jesus Christ was only one of a number of Ascended Masters of whom she claimed to have visions. An esotericist, Fortune combined occultism and magic with Tarot, Kabbalah and neo-Paganism. Particularly significant is her association with the town of Glastonbury, which she visited regularly, and where she contemplated the Celtic underworld that allegedly lived beneath the Glastonbury Tor. Her *Avalon of the Heart* (1934), re-issued as *Dion Fortune's Glastonbury*, remains in print.

More recently, the New Age became associated with the 1960s 'hippie' movement, which began in the USA and percolated into Canada and

Britain. The hippies were the youth counter-culture, coming initially from US college campuses, and rejecting 'The Establishment'. Set against the background of US involvement in Vietnam, a favourite hippie slogan was 'Make love, not war,' and the twin values of 'love' and 'peace' were declared in preference to the materialism and perceived authoritarianism of the West's dominant culture. They attracted publicity for their unconventional dress, which was in keeping with their 'psychedelic revolution', involving bright colours and 'flower power' designs. Men grew long beards and women typically wore long dresses. Their interests included drug-taking—particularly cannabis and LSD—rock music, eastern philosophy and religion. Their lifestyle was typically either communal or nomadic. Significantly, the hippies' interests extended to the environment, and their celebration of Earth Day in 1970 received media publicity. The hippie movement was short-lived, however: although a few neo-hippie groups remain, the movement virtually disappeared in the early 1970s. The younger generation of the 1970s and later seemed more interested in a conventional lifestyle, forging careers and seeking material prosperity.

Some mention should be made of the 'New Age' travellers, if only to highlight the fact that they have really little bearing on the 'New Age' movement discussed here. The New Age travellers took their rise from free music festivals in the 1970s, for example the Windsor Park Free Festival, and other festivals at Glastonbury and Stonehenge. They journeyed between one festival and another, using vans, buses, caravans and lorries, and pitching improvised tents in which to spend the night. Their activities attracted considerable opposition from local communities, and there were many arrests. Their interests, however, were predominantly musical rather than spiritual.

Much more influential in the development of the New Age Movement was the Findhorn community. Established in 1962 by Peter and Eileen Caddy on the banks of the Moray Firth, the community began as a horticultural experiment. When the poor soil and climate nevertheless succeeded in producing remarkable crops (some cabbages weighed as much as 40 pounds), this success was attributed to supernatural beings, known as 'devas'. Particularly important in the development of New Age philosophy were Sir George Trevelyan (1906–1996) and David Spangler, both of whom had leading roles in shaping Findhorn.

Trevelyan's interests were varied. He founded the Wrekin Trust in 1971, but is almost equally significant for his role in establishing the

Teilhard de Chardin Society, the Soil Association, and the Essene Society. He preferred the term 'Aquarian Age' to 'New Age', a preference that was reflected in the title of his book *A Vision of the Aquarian Age* (1977). The Wrekin Trust was a centre for 'spiritual education', and Trevelyan's vision was, as he put it, 'a vision of wholeness' entailing 'the essential unity of all life'.

When David Spangler later joined the Findhorn community in 1970, the programme of seminars commenced, spanning a range of topics including yoga, personal development, creative writing and healing, among many others. Spangler's own philosophy was essentially Christian, although he tended to reject institutional religion. In common with Christianity, Spangler proclaimed an eschatological hope, but he expected a transformation in the physical world, when there would be a new evolutionary stage in the life of the universe, with renewed self-discovery and personal development. In contrast with Alice Bailey's Christian-derived New Age philosophy, Spangler believed that this New Age would not arrive inevitably, but required human awareness and effort to bring about.

An important landmark in New Age philosophy was the publication of Marilyn Ferguson's *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (1982). This book was important for a variety of reasons. First, it is unmistakably utopian: Ferguson argued for a 'paradigm shift' which she believed was about to take place in the human mind and brain, in human spirituality, and with a new emergent culture. Ferguson perceived a need for a transition in spirituality from its past emphasis on tradition, authority, faith and ritual, to a new spirituality that relied on direct knowledge, experience, 'adventure' and human wholeness, a spirituality which would emphasise meditation, healing and recognition of one's inner divine nature. Not only would such changes take place in the individual, but they would be accompanied by social and political transformation.

Ferguson's importance lies not only in her utopian agenda but in her analysis of how she perceives the operation of this movement. Like Trevelyan, she prefers the term 'Age of Aquarius' to 'New Age', but the concept is much the same. The word 'conspiracy' in the title is significant, because for her it connotes 'breathing together'—the original meaning of the term. The ideas of the Aquarian Age are not to be found in any single organisation or ideology, but are to be found in various sources that breathe together symbiotically. For Ferguson, the New Age is not another religion or a new single movement, but a

Segmented Polycentric Integrated Network (SPIN), or more accurately, a SPIN of SPINs. The ideas come together at various junctures: in books, in magazines, in special interest groups, and at various events and festivals.

Objections to the Term 'New Age'

The preceding outline of the history of term 'New Age' highlights the range of interests that the movement espouses. Yet it is precisely this diversity that has caused some critics to take the view that these interests are too diverse to be encapsulated profitably by a single concept. I propose to consider a number of objections that have been made to the use of the term 'New Age' in order to determine whether or not it should have currency.

'The New Age is a Hotchpotch of Disparate Ideas'

The first line of criticism is that the term 'New Age' covers too great a variety of concepts to be of use. Critics such as Peter Lemesurier, Lowell Streiker and Rosalind Hackett variously describe it as "an extraordinary mish-mash of ideas… having little connection with each other", a "hodgepodge", and "very eclectic, drawing on the (often contradictory) ideas and teachings of a host of (alternative) Western traditions… as well as of teachers from Eastern religious traditions" (Lemesurier 1990; Streiker 1990:46; Hackett 1992:216; cited in Heelas 1996:2). It is as if a beachcomber devised a collective noun to designate, say, all the objects that he or she had found in the course of a day: one might come up with a noun, but unless there is purpose to the grouping of such objects, or unless they bear some common set of features or at least a family resemblance, the use of any such term seems pointless. As Steven Sutcliffe argues, 'New Age' is a construct—that is to say, a term created by outsiders to bring together artificially a number of disparate ideas that may not be linked by their exponents. It is therefore a term that "lacks predictable content… and fixed referents" (Sutcliffe 2002:29). Thus, Heelas wishes to include Human Potential organisations such as Landmark Forum (formerly *est*—Erhard Seminar Training) and Exegesis; Wouter Hanegraaff (1996) notes that Transcendental Meditation, The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) and the Osho organisation have at times appropriated the label 'New Age', as has the UFO-religion The Aetherius Society.

'New Age Cannot be Defined as Alternative Spirituality'

A further line of attack on definitions of New Age comes from Jeremy Carrette and Richard King in their book, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (2005). Carrette and King's polemical attack is predominantly a critique of New Age practices, and this aspect of their book falls outside the scope of this chapter. For the purposes of the present discussion, I shall consider their critique of the notion of 'spirituality', for, if they are right in claiming that such a concept is too nebulous to be of value, it follows that the incorporation of 'spiritual' as a descriptor of New Age is inappropriate.

Carrette and King complain, quoting Mick Brown, the author of *The Spiritual Tourist* (1998), that 'spirituality' is "a kind of buzz-word of the age". Echoing Dorothy Rowe (2001), they contend that it is "a Humpty Dumpty word" (Carrette & King 2005:32), a concept without any clear unambiguous fixed meaning. Following Walter Principe, the authors trace the history of the term 'spiritual', identifying four key stages of its development. First, there is "early biblical" usage, entailing making sense of life morally, and disciplining one's carnal nature; second, early Christian Hellenism used the term 'spirit' as being diametrically opposed to 'matter' in a metaphysical dualism; third, there is a use in ecclesiastical parlance, which distinguished between 'matters temporal' and 'matters spiritual'—terms which defined ownership and jurisdiction; finally, following the Protestant Reformation, there arose a tendency to equate the 'spiritual' with the inner life of the soul in contrast with the authority of the Church: the doctrine of the 'priesthood of all believers' entailed the possibility of finding the divine within oneself, rather than communicated through intermediaries such as priests, saints or the Church.

Carrette and King perceive the present-day use of the term 'spirituality' and its accompanying 'privatisation of religion' as emerging from the Romantic movement. Theologians like Friedrich Schleiermacher laid emphasis on 'feeling' as the key characteristic of religion: an inner awareness, rather than blind faith in ecclesiastical authority. The authors see the inner quest for the divine as subsequently manifesting itself in the exploration of oriental religions, and subsequently taken over by capitalism, by selling of books, tapes and spiritual paraphernalia, as well as the use by capitalist organisations of spiritual techniques for managerial training—for example the use of the *I Ching* in decision making, or meditative practices for stress relief.

'New Age is Neither an Emic Nor an Etic Category'

A third line of objection is Steven Sutcliffe's contention that 'New Age' functions neither as an emic nor an etic piece of terminology. Etically, it is a construct, but emically it is not readily found as a self-description by those who are within the movement. Sutcliffe notes, for example, that in the bibliography of Wouter Hanegraaff's important and detailed book on the New Age Movement, only six out of several hundred titles actually use the phrase 'New Age'.

Sutcliffe does concede that there are some instances of emic use of the term, for example by Alice Bailey, George Trevelyan and David Spangler, the 1960s 'New Age travellers', and in the celebrated musical *Hair*, which affirmed the 'dawning of the Age of Aquarius'. However, as Sutcliffe points out, the important emic uses of the term 'New Age' lie well in the past, and do not typically reflect what is currently to be found in so-called 'New Age' circles. The New Age no longer consists of some neo-Christian expectation based on William Blake or Alice Bailey. Even Spangler, who was closely associated with the origins of the Findhorn community, and wrote *Revelation: The Birth of a New Age* (1971), came to recant on the notion that some new paradise was around the corner. Sutcliffe concludes that emic uses of the term 'New Age' are "optional, episodic and declining" (Sutcliffe 2003:197). The use of the term itself has declined, and indeed—as he insists—"there is and has been no New Age Movement" (Sutcliffe 2003:208).

'The New Age has Disappeared'

A further line of attack is the suggestion that the 'New Age' phenomenon itself has disappeared. As has been shown, the movement took its rise in the US counterculture of the 1960s, when hippiedom, 'flower power', freedom from authority and utopian expectations were all the rage. Today, the shelves in bookstores that promote the ideas associated with New Age are labelled 'Mind-Body-Spirit', and the latter term is used for the various festivals that are currently held in British cities and elsewhere. The hippies are *passé*, and so is their ideology. They were politically left-wing, rejecting the capitalist system and becoming society's 'drop-outs' in the belief that by so doing they could bring about a new social utopia. Few hippies are still around, and the New Age, far from being in opposition to a capitalist system, has become a multi-million dollar industry, to the extent that critics such as Jeremy Carrette and Richard King (2005) have criticised it for its support of

capitalist ideology. The 'radical common sense' advocated in Marilyn Ferguson's *Aquarius Now* (2005) is more of a recipe for personal material prosperity than for any spiritual journey.

New Agers no longer seem to expect a dawning Age of Aquarius, which will accompany the planetary transition from Pisces—the age of Christianity—to Aquarius—the New Age. Even David Spangler retracted his utopian claims, stating that the New Age was "an idea, not… an event" (Spangler; cited in Sutcliffe 2004:114), and that its importance lay not in the destination, but in the journey (Kemp 2003:3).

A Defence of 'New Age'

I shall now consider some possible rejoinders to the criticisms stated above. It should be observed that, because of his sustained attack on the concept 'New Age', Sutcliffe endeavours to avoid directly using the term, always placing it in quotation marks, in order to indicate his disapproval of the term as a coherent designator. However, although the substitution of "'New Age'" for "New Age" serves to indicate the problematical nature of the term, Sutcliffe nonetheless appears to use the expression 'New Age' with no obvious difference from those writers on the topic who employ it without any quotation marks, and Sutcliffe appears to have no difficulty in identifying the subject-matter that is typically associated with the term 'New Age'. This being the case, why not simply drop the quotation marks, and continue to talk about New Age instead of 'New Age'? The only possible reason for doing so would be that the removal of the quotation marks would serve to contradict the author's thesis that 'New Age' is an unintelligible concept. Yet his ability to use the expression 'New Age' (with quotations) implicitly acknowledges that the concept is perfectly capable of being understood. If this is indeed the case, then we ought to be able to move towards some kind of definition.

Certainly the concept 'New Age' is a theoretical construct. However, the term's nature as a construct does not necessarily undermine its usefulness or employability. Scholars continue to write about Hinduism, for example, usually in the full knowledge that the term is a western etic piece of vocabulary imposed by nineteenth-century westerners to cover a number of vastly different spiritual practices focused on different forms of deity. While it is useful to remember that the term is a construct, it

has become so embedded in western thinking that it would be difficult to change it, and there is a clear advantage in having a term that draws together a set of religious worldviews that bear family resemblances to each other, and which serves to differentiate a cluster of religious ideas and practices from Buddhism, Sikhism and Islam.

I turn now to the issue of spirituality. Are Carrette and King right in regarding this concept as being too vague to be used in the context of New Age and Mind-Body-Spirit? The fact that a concept is nebulous does not necessarily entail that it is useless, and indeed Carrette and King grossly exaggerate the fluidity that pertains to the notion of spirituality. They cannot seriously believe that it is a Humpty Dumpty concept meaning literally anything at all: this is simply false, and to point out that its meaning has developed over the centuries is an observation that could be made about many words that are in current usage. They may well be right in claiming that the concept is in need of much further analysis, but that in itself is no reason to discard it as being devoid of meaning.

Clearly, it is not realistic within the scope of this chapter to propose a concept of spirituality that can be guaranteed to withstand academic scrutiny, but it is possible to make some remarks about the term that will serve to show that it at least contains some substantial content. Most importantly, those who use the term 'spirituality' imply that there is something (or maybe Someone) that exists beyond the empirical realm—whether it is God, Brahman, buddhas and bodhisattvas, or some kinds of spiritual beings such as Ascended Masters or devas. Additionally, spirituality requires more than simple belief in the existence of such beings: in some sense they are capable of being experienced, and interact with human beings, whether by being 'channelled', or through the practitioner's personal experience. Spirituality typically expresses itself in ritual, and the New Age is renowned for its multiplicity of ritual acts, whether these are prayers, meditations, spell-castings, or Tarot readings. Finally, spirituality is about finding meaning in one's life: receiving guidance for life, obtaining answers to questions about why we are here, what the purpose of life is, and what may happen after we die. All these proposed components of spirituality no doubt need further discussion and clarification, but they constitute an important part of what the spiritual life entails, and it is simply false to suggest that the term 'spirituality' can genuinely mean whatever one wants it to mean, or—less sweepingly—that it is devoid of clear meaning.

Having said this, one must be wary, however, of simply using the

expression 'alternative spirituality' or, worse still, 'alternative religion' as a synonym for, let alone a definition of 'New Age'. The word 'alternative' raises the question, 'Alternative to what?' If it were to be suggested that 'alternative spirituality' is to be understood as spiritual ideas and practices that constitute alternatives to traditional mainstream Christianity, then such a term would have to encompass other major world faiths such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism. While it is certainly the case that books and paraphernalia relating to certain forms of Buddhism, Hinduism and Sufism frequently occupy shelf space in the Mind-Body-Spirit section of many book stores, neither those who have been brought up in these traditions nor western converts to them can be regarded as 'New Agers'. By contrast, the New Ager is better characterised by an eclecticism that commits him or her to no one specific expression of spirituality; religions typically offer firm answers to spiritual questions, whereas the New Ager is often described as a 'seeker' who perhaps derives more spiritual nourishment from the search itself than from what, if anything, he or she actually finds.

I shall now turn to the 'emic/etic' line of objection. It is surely evident that the term 'New Age' has been used both 'emically' and 'etically'. Emically, significant numbers of spiritual seekers have adopted the designation 'New Age' as a self-description. Thus, in a Canadian census in 1991, some 1200 people accepted the label 'New Age'; in a similar census in New Zealand, 1212 citizens adopted the label. (531 described themselves as 'Other New Age religions not classified elsewhere', and a further 681 accepted the designation 'Spiritualism and New Age not further defined', where 'Spiritualism' was given as a separate category).[1] Two authors cite a survey carried out in Maryland, which claims that 6 per cent of Maryland's population identifies with New Age ideas[2] (Naisbitt and Aburdene 1990:280). These may constitute a sizeable proportion of each country's population, but these are self-descriptions by individuals.

Etically, the term is applied by various external commentators on the New Age, including Christian evangelical critics and by academics.

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[1] Data taken from New Zealand national censuses, based on self-identification, down to denominational level. Total 1996 population: 3,616,633. Listed in table as "Other New Age religions not classified elsewhere." From VisionNet Census 1999; original source: Statistics New Zealand; cited at www.adherents.com.

[2] See also www.adherents.com.

Examples include Wouter Hanegraaff and Michael York, and university courses incorporating the term 'New Age' are run in various British and US institutions.

The above points effectively rebut the idea that the New Age is passé. New Age shops continue to survive—that is to say, specialist retail outlets that market literature and artefacts relating to the themes that I have identified above as pertaining to the New Age. Their proliferation is such that Carrette and King can refer to the phenomenon as an "explosion" and a "cultural addiction" (2005:1). Major bookstores may have renamed their shelves 'Mind-Body-Spirit', but the subject-matter is the same.

However, the fact that the New Age has changed in the past few decades remains an unconvincing argument for denying it an identity. Many movements change over time: one only has to consider Britain's major political parties as cases in point. The New Age emphasis on spiritual quest positively lends itself to change and innovation. Equally, the absence of a unified or agreed worldview need not deter us from regarding the New Age as a coherent concept. Many organisations and movements thrive on debate and disagreement. A university is an obvious example, where debate and competing hypotheses are the very essence of academic life. Movements such as the feminist movement, although less institutionalised, admit of competing opinions: thus there are feminists who advocate positive discrimination rather than strictly equal opportunities; there are 'separatists' who believe in setting up exclusively female environments for women to build confidence, while other feminists hold that women should be able to relate to men on equal terms; there are 'unadorned' feminists, while others believe that women may legitimately maintain a feminine identity with traditionally female attire and cosmetics. Yet the presence of all these divergent positions within feminism does not entail that 'feminism' is not a movement or a useful concept. If it is argued that 'New Age' differs from feminism in that the latter is a single unified movement, this is not the case. Different feminists have different interests, spanning women's suffrage, women in the workplace, women in education, anarcho-feminism, separatist lesbian feminism, eco-feminism and 'difference feminism'. (The last of these celebrates the gender differences between male and female.)

The New Age as a SPIN

Of course, the New Age Movement is a much wider complex than the feminist movement—which can be construed as forming merely a part of 'New Age' thought—which is why writers like Ferguson have employed the notion of SPIN as a characterisation. Although it has been argued that the New Age Movement lacks a unified worldview, ideology and organisation, I believe that, not withstanding criticisms of such notions, the various concepts of cultic milieu, SPIN and web, proposed respectively by Colin Campbell, Marilyn Ferguson and Dominic Corrywright, offer an instructive means of understanding the New Age phenomenon. Campbell defines his notion of the "cultic milieu" as the "sum of unorthodox and deviant belief systems". These are espoused by a "cultural underground", and the overlapping structures of these ideas find outlets in magazines, books and meetings among others.

Campbell was writing in 1972, considerably before the New Age became a topic of academic interest. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that his idea of a "sum of unorthodox and deviant beliefs systems" is proposed somewhat uncritically, and is somewhat of an overstatement. If we were to take "sum" to mean 'totality' of unorthodox beliefs and practices, this would include belief in the Earth's flatness (there still exists an International Flat Earth Society), Holocaust denial, or sadomasochism. Campbell, however, qualifies the cultic milieu's parameters by stating that they emphasise first-hand spiritual experience (sometimes popularly labelled "the mystical"), a rejection of established religion, an absence of dogma, which encourages seeker-ship, and a preparedness to combine such ideas with the non-religious. The notion of "belief systems" in this context also needs critical examination: in most cases, Campbell's "cultural underground" does not offer grand systems, but—more often than not—artefacts (such as crystals), services (healing, meditation), ideas ('Jesus lived in India'), or technologies.

Marilyn Ferguson takes the notion of the cultural milieu rather further in the concept of a SPIN of SPINs. The Segmented Polycentric Integrated Network (SPIN) is a concept devised by Luther P. Gerlach and Virginia H. Hine (1970). The SPIN's 'segmentation' lies in the fact that there are different areas of interest within the New Age: Ferguson specifically discusses the areas of religion, medicine and health care, and education. The Findhorn community, influenced by Trevelyan's multifaceted interests, has promoted a similar range of topics, spanning ecology, horticulture, spirituality and education. These areas of

interest each have their own organisational segments: for Trevelyan these included the Soil Association, the Essene Society and the de Chardin Society, among others. It is possible, of course, simply to pursue in isolation one or two of the interests commonly associated with the New Age: parents may simply send a child to a Steiner school, or a spiritual seeker might find solace in a Buddhist meditation group. Such people, according to the SPIN definition, are not New Agers, since they do not make use of the polycentric network: they are simply supporters of alternative education and a minority religion respectively.

These single organisations in themselves do not merit the description 'New Age', since they lack the feature of integration. As we have seen, Trevelyan emphasised the notions of 'wholeness' and 'unity of life'—ideas that are typically associated with the New Age, and which very much lend themselves to the kind of integrated networking that goes on within it. Thus 'spiritual education' is not something that can be isolated from specific religious writers and spiritual groups such as de Chardin or the Essenes. Both these forms of spirituality have implications for humanity, how to care for our planet, and the future of humankind upon it. This in turn links with ecology and organisations like Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, and the Soil Association.

As Corrywright (2004) points out, there are various 'network hubs', 'nodes' or 'gateways' that help to integrate and promote such ideas. He cites the journal *Resurgence*, and points to organisations such as Schumacher College and the Findhorn Foundation. Other 'links' can be topographical, for example the town of Glastonbury. Part of Corrywright's 'web' also involves organisations that may lack the diversity of New Age beliefs and practices, but which promote one particular type of spiritual that may be of interest to New Age seekers. He cites Sharpham House as an example: this is a Buddhist community situated near Totnes, which provides lectures, courses, meditation sessions and retreats, but does not limit its programme to committed Buddhists.

Sutcliffe, however, emphatically rejects any such attempt to encapsulate the movement, pointing out first, that the New Age's early stages did not consist of such any such network, and that Gerlach and Hine's examples were Pentecostalism and Black Power, both of which are "clearly-demarcated social movements" (Sutcliffe 2003:199). Sutcliffe's argument here is less than convincing, however: the fact that New Age did not begin as an integrated network does not entail that it has not become one now, and if Gerlach and Hine chose clearly-defined social

movements as examples of SPINs, it does not follow that more complex and seemingly nebulous movements cannot be thus defined.

Towards a Definition of New Age

We are now in a position to move towards a possible definition of New Age. In endeavouring to understand the phenomenon, it is important to distinguish the New Age from several phenomena that it plainly is not.

The New Age is certainly not a religion. Paul Heelas writes: "Some see the New Age Movement as a New Religious Movement (NRM). It is not. Neither is it a collection of NRMs" (Heelas, 1996:9). Somewhat paradoxically, Heelas is inclined to talk about "New Age movements" as if they are clusters of individual spiritual and self-improvement groups. Thus, he identifies (a) an "*est* family", (b) groups offering specialised trainings but do not belong to this family, and (c) trainings "which do not appear to have such strong connections with particular New Age movements" (Heelas 1996:63). The first category includes some of Scientology's enterprises; the second embraces Rajneesh (now Osho), the Emissaries of Divine Light, and Transcendental Meditation; while the third relates to business organisations that have been inspired by ideas associated with New Age. This classification is somewhat puzzling, since The Forum (formerly *est*), Rajneesh/Osho, and Scientology tend to be self-contained, avoiding links with New Age networks.

The tendency to regard the New Age Movement as an NRM or a cluster of NRMs no doubt stems from the brief history of the academic study of both areas. The term 'NRM' remains somewhat unsatisfactory, and is still imprecisely defined, encompassing a range of disparate spiritual groups of different vintages and backgrounds, and academic study has largely gone along with the Anti-Cult Movement's concepts of 'cult' and 'New Age'. Thus *FAIR News* states,

> The umbrella term "New Age" covers a vast range of groups some of which seem to have little to do with the actual ushering in of the New Age of Aquarius. Many have ecological traits, others deal with alternative medicine, and most of them belong to the "fringe" rather than to the category of destructive cults. (*FAIR News* 1989:8)

As I have argued, New Agers' interests travel wider than any single religion, and indeed the New Ager is typically characterised by a rejection of the notion that any single religion can claim monopoly

of answers to spiritual questions. This is especially true of two types of religion. The first is Paganism and its associated phenomenon of 'goddess spirituality'. Mind-Body-Spirit stores may stock their quota of books on the present-day revival of these traditions, but those who espouse Paganism frequently take exception to being labelled as 'New Agers'. Although it assumes a variety of forms, individual Pagans follow the practices that pertain to their chosen tradition, in contrast with the variety of spiritual practices that are taken up by New Agers, such as crystal therapy, Tarot, *I Ching*, and the many others.

Secondly, and importantly, much of the New Age Movement tends to reject Christianity, at least in its traditional institutionalised forms. A cursory glance at the Mind-Body-Spirit bookshelves will confirm an interest in Buddhism, Hinduism, philosophical Taoism, western Sufism and neo-Paganism, but not in the Bible or the traditional Christian classics. No doubt this is partly due to the Judaeo-Christian notion that their God is a "jealous God" (Exodus 20:5) who demands total allegiance, and for whom any New Agey quest is unnecessary and reprehensible. Having said this, it is noteworthy that one important feature of New Age interest lies in the alternative 'gospels' and their commentators. Christianity's canonical gospels may not be of great interest to New Agers, but books like Levi H. Dowling's *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ* (1985) and Holger Kersten's *Jesus Lived in India* (1986) have been best-sellers. At the time of writing, the present author was interested to note that several Glastonbury booksellers were promoting various new titles on Mary Magdalene, no doubt prompted by Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code* (2003).

It is not difficult to see why these alternative lives of Jesus Christ should be popular in New Age circles. Some of them, such as Dowling's *Aquarian Gospel* and Helen Schucman's *A Course in Miracles* (Anonymous 1985), are supposedly channelled. They purport to provide esoteric knowledge, yielding new information about Jesus that the Christian Church either does not know, or—if writers like Dan Brown are to be taken seriously—wilfully withholds. The notion that Jesus might have had a female disciple in Mary Magdalene lends obvious support the New Age celebration of the feminine, and simultaneously questions the presumed celibacy attributed to Jesus by the Church. Thus these alternative lives of Jesus assume an anti-establishment anti-authoritarianism. In addition, the suggestion that Jesus may have had exchanges with Hindu and Buddhist sages underlines the eclectic nature of the New Age, placing these various religions in a syncretistic blend.

Reciprocally, mainstream Christianity has typically rejected the ideas of the New Age Movement. Norman L. Geissler, writing from a Protestant evangelical standpoint, asserts that the New Age is "the most dangerous enemy of Christianity in the world today" (Geissler 1984; cited in Berry 1988:3). Part of the concern about the New Age no doubt lies in its nebulous nature: since it is never totally clear where the boundaries of New Age lie, some Christians fear that New Age ideas and paraphernalia can invade their faith by stealth. The author recently attended a counter-cult meeting at which some attendees voiced disquiet about a woman who was wearing a skirt bearing a 'sun' design. Was the pattern simply decorative, or was it a New Age symbol? Concern has been expressed about the well-known 'Trinity knot', often regarded as a traditional Christian symbol, and which appears on the front of the New King James Version of the Bible. Constance Cumbey notes that it is used on the cover of Marilyn Ferguson's *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (1982), and contends that it is gnostic rather than Christian. A Christian author on the Internet points out that it features on Dorothy Morrison's *The Craft: A Witch's Book of Shadows*, as well as on Aleister Crowley's 'Hierophant' Tarot card. The design can also be construed as three interlocking sixes, as in the 'number of the Beast'.

More soberly, the official Christian critiques of New Age philosophy tend to be negative. Responses from mainstream churches in recent times have come from the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of England, the Methodist Church and the Church of Scotland, among others. While acknowledging commendable features such as the care of the Earth, they find a number of problems with the New Age. These include its panentheist tendencies and its location of divinity within the self, thus precluding notions of alterity, divine grace and sin. The preoccupation with eastern religions, pre-Christian spirituality and extra-biblical documents, it is claimed, runs counter to Christian revelation and to its identification of Christ with the historical Jesus to whom the canonical gospels testify. The New Age's relativism and interest in Esotericism also attract criticism.

Having said this, it is worth noting that there exist some Christians who view the New Age more positively, maintaining that it is possible to learn from and engage in dialogue with it. Examples include New Age Catholics, the Christaquarians, and Christians Awakening to a New Awareness (CANA), all of which seek to attract Christians who are either finding it difficult to belong to traditional institutional Christianity, or who believe that New Age spirituality can enhance

one's understanding of the Christian faith. Individual authors who have sought to explore the New Age within a Christian framework include Daren Kemp, Adrian B. Smith, Don MacGregor, and of course Matthew Fox, whose *Creation Spirituality* (1991) has become a religious classic. Some individual Christian churches have sought to build bridges with the New Age: one notable example is St James, Piccadilly, in London, where prominent New Age speakers are regularly invited, and spiritual practices such as circle dancing, Zen meditation and labyrinth walking are encouraged.

In my *Exploring New Religions* (1999), I attempt to identify a number of salient features which can be associated with the New Age, and which serve to define it. There is an optimistic view of the self, even to the extent of identified the self with a 'God within', allied to which there is a belief in the desirability of self-improvement or 'empowerment', which manifests itself in a variety of ways. One such manifestation is the emphasis on health and healing—physical, mental and spiritual—which expresses itself in alternative medicine, as well as spiritual practices such as various types of meditation. Belief in the self's potential also incorporates the development of personal skills such as positive thinking, assertiveness and methods of wish-fulfillment. There is a questioning of traditional authority, particularly the long-established authority of the male-dominated Christian Church. The questioning of traditional religion results in an eclectic approach to a variety of forms of religious expression, ranging from eastern spirituality to neo-Paganism and shamanism, as well as an uptake of practices such as divination, mediumship and witchcraft, of which the Church has characteristically disapproved. In place of obedience to authority, there is a heightened emphasis on activities associated with the 'right hand side of the brain': intuition, creativity, imagination, compassion, healing, the celebration of the feminine, and so on.

While it must be acknowledged that the so-called 'New Age Movement' is not a single movement, but more of a counter-cultural *Zeitgeist* or, in Gerlach and Hine's terminology, a SPIN, I have argued that the term possesses both emic and etic currency, and that New Age (or its cognate Mind-Body-Spirit) is still alive and active. The New Age will no doubt continue to change, and even, in time, die out. Academic study of the New Age Movement will no doubt change too. As has been the case with New Religious Movements, academic research has become increasingly specialised, and the same may happen with the New Age

Movement. However, to study it in its various components would run the risk of ignoring the ways in which its elements interconnect and overlooking the holism that it so constantly emphasises.

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