

WHITHER THE NEW AGE?

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IN THE 1960S THE UNITED KINGDOM gave birth to a very American social movement.¹ It was metaphysical, immanent, world affirming and millenarian. It found its intellectual roots in nineteenth-century German idealism but more immediately drew inspiration from the eschatological hopes which had taken different forms in occult circles, especially in those groups which had formed all around the fringe of the more conservative and staid Theosophical Society.

We now know that by this time, while the number of people publicly identified by membership in one of the several visible occult and metaphysical groups was relatively small, public acceptance of some key occult ideas (reincarnation, astrology) and practices (meditation) had quietly mushroomed over the twentieth century. Literally millions of people had dropped away from the older churches and synagogues, but they left not for secular atheism, but because they perceived that the churches and synagogues had become too secular. Like many Evangelical Protestants, they complained that more traditional religious organizations were bogged down in various administrative concerns and non-religious matters and had failed to nurture the spiritual life of members. In part, they located the problem in something they called 'organized religion', and they sought an alternative spirituality, but one which would not take them out of the world. The New Age Movement was an ideal answer.

The long view – whence the New Age?

Because of the way we have told our religious history, centred as it is upon the story of the emergence to dominance of Christianity and the coming to the fore of the great national churches, we generally neglected and discounted the continued attempts to express dissent from that dominant perspective as little more than occasional outbreaks of heresy and apostasy. However, by the middle of the eighteenth century, as powerful forces of dissent massed against the traditional order, they could no longer be ignored. In the salons and cafés of pre-Revolutionary France, one could perceive the emergence of a working alliance between secularists (from atheists to deists), political revolutionaries, and occultists (Rosicrucians, Freemasons), an alliance later vividly portrayed in the picture of the United States' first president in his Masonic garb and the placing of occult symbols on the new country's national seal.²

While leaving the older churches in place, post-Revolutionary governments in France and America immediately opened new space for most every form of religious dissent, though the subsequent religious history of the two countries moved in quite different directions. England, escaping the violent revolution, slowly (and at every step over the objections of the powers that be) allowed more and more room for dissenters. Even with the very different paths they have followed, the United States, the United Kingdom, France and most of the other western European countries arrived at the same place. In each, a vital powerful, influential Christian community remains, that community no longer controls the culture in the ways it did when backed by state power, and religious dissenters in a bewildering variety of forms have risked coming out into the open. The communities of dissent no longer just request space to exist quietly on the cultural fringe, but now demand a place on the culture's board of directors.

As a focus of dissent, eighteenth-century occultism gave way to a variety of spiritual movements which took every conceivable organizational form. Possibly the largest of these movements was Freemasonry. While organized as a fraternity, Masonry effectively spread a new gnostic spirituality. Its visible alliance with revolutionary parties in Italy earned it the wrath of the Roman Catholic Church, but elsewhere it was able to develop apolitically, and, since it was not a 'church', and did not openly 'compete' with 'Christianity', it could grow and spread to every city and town. With few exceptions (Roman Catholics and the more conservative Evangelical Protestants), it was rarely seen as a spiritual competitor of orthodox Christian thought and many church members and leaders joined. In America, where only twenty to thirty per cent of the public were church members through the nineteenth century, Freemasonry functions as a spiritual home to many not affiliated with a church.³

Through the nineteenth century, in the freer post-Revolutionary cultures, numerous movements above and beyond Freemasonry gave expression to the alternative spirituality – Swedenborgianism, magnetism, Spiritualism. Other than Swedenborgianism, these movements were not originally 'church-forming' and each swept across the United States, Great Britain and continental Europe. Each, through its lectures and literature and the ensuing public controversy over its ideas, was influential far beyond its core membership (which remained relatively small). To say they were not church-forming is not to suggest that they lacked organization. Quite to the contrary: they were highly organized with groups modelled upon contemporary non-metaphysical clubs and

associations. They found their great prophet in the person of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

During the last decades of the nineteenth century, orthodox Christianity, which had experienced spectacular growth through the century (at least in North America), was shaken by the initial phase of what would later be called Modernism. The need to respond positively to new scientific findings (especially geology and biology), problems of immigration and urbanization, and biblical criticism, underlay the most significant Christian theological revolution since the Reformation. Modernists were challenging traditional Christian assumptions at every turn and once they gave ground on primary Christian affirmations of the Trinity and divinity of Christ, their end results were often difficult to separate from that of the metaphysicians.⁴

Once the key ideas of the Trinity and the deity of Christ were compromised, other ideas were soon to follow. A lower Christology undercut ecclesiology and ideas about church membership as a necessary element in salvation. For example, Modernist theology saw church membership as desirable, but certainly not an ultimate issue of salvation. Hence, in the end, it was optional.

Modernism emerged contemporaneously with a marked increase in the presence of occult metaphysical ideas within the culture and metaphysical leaders saw themselves as responding to many of the same intellectual concerns as Modernist church leaders. For example, Christian Science and New Thought, building their programme around a 'practical' Christian application of Emerson's ideas, appeared in the 1870s and 1880s respectively. Most surprising to their critics, both movements experienced immediate popular response and built national organizations in their first decade. A small group of Emerson's children in New England, associated together in Boston's Metaphysical Club, nurtured the first of a lineage of best-selling metaphysical authors – Ralph Waldo Trine and Henry Wood. In their first generation, at least, Christian Science and New Thought claimed for themselves a position within the Christian community, and were greatly offended and surprised when the churches failed to offer them any recognition.⁵

But, for our purposes, and from the perspective of the New Age, the most important of these movements to emerge in the late nineteenth century was Theosophy. While New Thought and Christian Science were peculiarly American movements and their spectacular success in the United States was not repeated elsewhere, the Theosophical Society, founded in 1875, became a worldwide movement during the career of its founders (the last of whom died in 1906). Not only could theosophical

lodges be found in countries from India and Australia to Russia and Great Britain, but it would spawn numerous similar groups, a number of which would eclipse it in membership.⁶

Alternative spirituality in the twentieth century

By the beginning of the twentieth century the various voices of an alternative spirituality had settled into several competing camps, each with its own self-assigned task. In the 1890s Spiritualism adopted a 'church' model and mediums founded centres to serve the individuals who found their way to its door. During their first generation, the Spiritualist churches differentiated themselves into a set of 'denominations' including several African-American groups initially composed of people pushed out of the white-dominated groups. British and European Spiritualists created similar groupings.

New Thought backed away from the feminist social agenda which had characterized its first generation, and retreated into its 'practical' programme of assisting individuals in self-healing and discovering a place in the new corporate society. Like Spiritualism, New Thought differentiated itself into a number of denominations – the Unity, Religious Science, Divine Science, etc. Membershipwise, they remained quite small, but otherwise their influence was tremendous. Unity, for example, functioned for many years primarily as a literature ministry, printing inexpensive tracts, pamphlets, magazines and books that circulated far beyond the bounds of the Unity study groups. Picked up by commercial publishers, the writings of leading metaphysical spokespersons such as Emmet Fox, William Walker Atkinson, Walter Lanyon, and Stella Terrill Mann quietly reached millions who never asked about the organizational ties of the person whose book they were reading.

Under the leadership of two dynamic women, Annie Besant and Katherine Tingley, Theosophy entered the twentieth century as a growing movement. The independent American Theosophical Society under Tingley found its focus in the community at Point Loma, at San Diego, California. Here Tingley attempted to model the good society, a quite successful experiment during her lifetime. Unfortunately, without her dynamic appeal, it soon folded and that branch of the society began a steady decade by decade decline. Meanwhile the international Theosophical Society under the leadership of Annie Besant began to experience a period of growth, the most spectacular phase of which was focused upon a messianic millennialism. Convinced of the cosmic role of young Jiddu Krishnamurti, in the 1920s Besant toured the world announcing the coming of a World Saviour through this unassuming

young man. Never had the Society experienced such growth. A new age was dawning.

The Theosophical Society's millennialism became the focus of debate within the movement. Other branches, especially the Tingley branch, rejected it. At least one movement, the Aquarian Foundation, was established to embody a competing messianism.⁷ Occult magician Aleister Crowley announced that a new aeon had already begun in 1904 and Crowley accepted the task of working for the dominance of his 'thelemic' teachings. This first wave of millennialism fell in a series of scandals beginning with Krishnamurti's resignation in 1929. But the seed had been sown and the hope of a new age, so much a part of Christian thinking, had now found a home in the occult metaphysical world. So important had it become, that even after its near banishment in the Krishnamurti disappointment, it was never far from conscious thought and always waiting a return.

One prominent mid-century theosophist, Alice Bailey, pumped new vitality into the movement's millennial hopes. She suggested that theosophical founder Blavatsky ascribed special significance to the last quarter of each century as a time pregnant with newness. Besant erred, claimed Bailey, because she anticipated the new age which would not arrive until late in the twentieth century. It was Theosophy's task, as Bailey was writing, to prepare people for the coming new age.⁸

By the 1960s in England, the forces had been marshalled for the launching of a new movement. Spiritualism was firmly entrenched as an established dissenting movement. Theosophy, including the Alice Bailey wing, was strong, though its presence was obscured by its division into a multitude of small organizations, many only loosely aware of their roots in the parent Theosophical Society. Astrology had made a significant comeback from a state of almost non-existence in the mid-nineteenth century. Since the end of World War II, new religious teachers had relocated from the mystic East. In the wake of interest in consciousness-altering drugs, psychologists turned their attention to the study of the religious means of changing consciousness and in the process provided new credentials for alternative approaches to the spiritual life. Times were ripe for a new religious movement that could integrate these longstanding trends.

The New Age

As originally proposed, the New Age Movement came to centre on several fairly simple ideas. Dominating the movement was a form of *millenarianism*. As the century drew to a close, Planet Earth would be the

recipient of new waves of spiritual energy. These energies were generally pictured in astrological terms and people often first heard of the New Age as the 'Aquarian Age'. The changes in the configuration of the heavens signalled, if not caused, the release of the new energies.

The first visible result of the incoming energies was the awakening of a few people to their presence. The awakening made them spiritually aware in a traditional sense, but also gave them new insights and abilities. For example, among the people who gathered in a small community at Findhorn, near Inverness, Scotland, were those who became attuned to the nature spirits and by utilizing the co-operation of the spirits they produced some spectacular results in the relatively barren ground.⁹

The spirits provide the means of personalizing contact with the spiritual world. Ultimate reality is not found in a personal deity, but an impersonal power, usually described as spiritual law or principle. That principle does not transcend the world, but is *immanent* in life and nature; it orders the world and determines the structure of our environment. Co-operation with or attunement to spiritual law brings happiness; disobeying spiritual law or fighting spiritual reality is ultimately futile and the source of all human problems.

Regular contact with spirit entities provided guidance for the slowly growing community of New Age believers and transformed those individuals involved. As other people were brought into the early believer's orbit, they too were transformed. The energies were spreading. Drawing upon familiar images from theosophical literature, those original New Agers began to speak about 'spiritual light', and of their gatherings as points of lights. An early goal of the movement was to locate the various groups of people affected by the first wave of incoming energy and sensitive to the spiritual world, and to link these groups into a worldwide network of light. Thus linked, the groups would be able to saturate the world with focused spiritual energy. People would be transformed, but more importantly, the world itself would be transformed. Not only would new transformed individuals appear, but a New Age would arrive.¹⁰

The message of the New Age swept through the West. Among the physically attuned, it had much the same effect that the contemporaneous charismatic movement had among conservative Christians. As the charismatic movement first emerged among small groups here and there, and networking began to take place through new parachurch organizations like the Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International, so came the New Age. First articulated in small groups like the

Wrekin Trust in Great Britain, the New Age radiated outward to the continent and across the Atlantic to North America. Already in place were numerous independent theosophical groups who quickly saw their role in the emerging network of light. By the end of the 1960s, an international movement was in place and travelling evangelists like Anthony Brooke, soon to be joined by David Spangler and a host of others, circled the globe to announce to any that would listen that the New Age was about to arrive, and to link individuals who responded into autonomous centres, new points of light.

No one expected the overwhelming response or planned what happened next as the movemental dynamics took over. Just as the early charismatic groups worked and prayed for a global revival, most who were there in the beginning were amazed when it happened far beyond their wildest dreams. In like measure, the early points of light were swamped by the response to the New Age message, and somewhat taken aback by the uncontrolled diversification the movement manifested.

Looking backwards, we can now see how the New Age Movement spread so quickly as its ideas and ideals were adopted by the many metaphysical and spiritualist churches and numerous occult groups which, having assumed a low profile, existed heretofore somewhat invisibly on the religious landscape. Many of these simply altered their programmes in response to the vivifying movement, and new adherents led in the formation of many new groups. The Movement also picked up a dynamic from previous Christian revivalistic movements by contrasting its new life over against the dead routine of the older churches which had killed the 'Spirit' by over-attention to form and organization. The New Age Movement contrasted itself with 'organized religion'. It saw itself as not 'organized', nor was it 'religion': it was a free-flowing spiritual movement. Thus New Agers rarely founded 'churches' or 'temples' or similar religious-sounding centres. Instead, New Agers founded numerous spiritual groups which gradually took on all the functions and provided all the services of older churches. Rejecting hierarchical models, New Agers adapted as their organizational model the Baptist/Free Church movement. Baptists, are, for example, built around autonomous congregations affiliated together in loose associations and networked with hundreds of independent missionary agencies, publishing houses, and special cause groups which present the very same bewildering anti-organizational ethos as the New Age Movement.

As with the Free Church movement, above and beyond the local groups, what little power there is in the New Age Movement is held primarily by publishers and networkers. An international structure of

bookstores, distributors and New Age book and magazine publishers form a mega-network that co-ordinates the distribution of materials across Europe and North America and increasingly other parts of the world. Individual leaders are almost entirely dependent upon this publishing structure to reach the public with their message. By their willingness to publish and promote an individual, they can provide them with a large audience or consign them to oblivion. A second set of New Age leaders stands at the nexus of networks of groups. These leaders (frequently also an integral part of the publishing mega-network), organize the large New Age conventions and facilitate the movement of lecturers, speakers and workshop leaders, nationally and internationally.

Much of the success of the New Age Movement in the 1980s can be attributed to its establishment of a broad *world-affirming* programme for action. More traditional occult organizations had tended to renounce worldly action as ultimately irrelevant and had programmed a rather narrow emphasis upon individual occult training. Responding to the needs of the world, the vision of global transformation was immediately particularized in an agenda focused upon several social problems. International relations, health, and the environment topped the New Age social programme. Some early adherents to the emerging New Age Movement had also been active in the older peace movement. New Agers added the agenda of the peace movement to their programme. Locked out of formal diplomacy, they were able to articulate ways in which otherwise ordinary citizens could contribute to the cause of peace through contacts with people in countries with whom their own governments had less than cordial relationships. New Agers believed that, given the influx of spiritual energy, their limited efforts would be multiplied immensely and directly contribute to global change.

Also, at the same time that the New Age Movement was emerging, another movement was developing from the convergence of interests of some physicians who had an occult background with colleagues who were frustrated with traditional medicine's seeming inability to deal with certain longstanding problems (cancer, chronic pain syndrome, etc.). Early meetings of some like-minded physicians in the 1960s led to the creation of the holistic health movement, which in turn found a hearty compatibility with the New Age Movement. The two soon intertwined and became somewhat inseparable. New Agers saw in holistic health a similar cultural critique to that which metaphysical religion had offered to the churches. In return, holistic health practitioners found New Agers a ready clientele upon whom to practise their brand of medicine.

Also, quite early New Agers made common cause with the older environmental movement and as the environmental movement grew New Agers had a public issue with which to identify. This identification was especially easy after the publication of what became known as the 'Gaia hypothesis', the idea that the earth is itself best understood as a single living organism. Closely related to the environmental cause has been animal rights.

Within the New Age Movement, the language of peace, healing and environmental restoration merged with New Age language of spiritual transformation, and the images of one issue borrowed as metaphors by the other. People began to speak of healing the earth, and transforming the way in which governments relate. With this mingling of broadly applicable concerns, coupled with the adoption of the New Age perspective by a measurable number of the public, the New Age Movement could be said to have matured. Occultists and metaphysicians no longer offered just a programme of occult training and a home for cultural dissent, but presented a complete alternative life-style.

The downfall of the New Age

Just as the New Age alternative matured and as individual aspects of its programme found some acceptance beyond its rather vague boundaries, the movement itself underwent both a massive attack from the outside and an internal critique which has led to its virtual demise. Outside critics levelled their attack at the movement's naïveté. Critics did not offer a substantive argument against the movement so much as hold it up to ridicule. The two parts of the movement which seemed most vulnerable were the practice of channelling and the widespread use of crystals. Mediumship, the claimed ability of certain individuals to contact the world of disembodied entities, experienced a significant rebirth under its transformed name, channelling. The term had originated in the realm of flying saucers to describe the telepathic manner of the communication with earthlings by space beings. While the practice was dismissed by some, more effective criticism centred upon the more successful channels who had become wealthy through the practice. Crystals presented a more substantive problem. Many outrageous claims were made concerning the supposed 'scientific' properties of the crystals to store and transmit energy. In the end, those who promoted the use of crystals were forced away from any scientific claims and had to defend the use of crystals entirely on less attractive spiritual grounds. However, by that time the damage of the controversy to the New Age Movement had been done.

While critics were ridiculing the New Age, its theoretical leaders were questioning its adequacy. New Age theoreticians like David Spangler attacked the most central of New Age commitments, the notion of an imminent global cultural transformation.¹¹

The youthful voices of the 1970s lost their faith that a new age could actually arise in their lifetime, even with all the combined efforts. This loss of faith in the possibilities of cultural transformation coupled with a response to the stinging criticisms of the more shallow aspects of the movement, led many of the leaders one by one to pronounce its obituary. By the early 1990s one could see a noticeable decline in the number of people who would identify themselves as New Agers.

Whither the New Age?

While the New Age Movement has passed its peak and entered a period of decline, it would be a mistake to think of it as having gone away or as simply destined to the dustbins of history. Many critics misunderstood the New Age as a superficial cultural fad, somewhat like hula hoops, which people use for the moment and then replace with something else equally ephemeral. Such were the critics who reduced the New Age to simply channelling and crystals.

However, at the heart of the movement was a clear and mature religious vision, which had the depth of the centuries-old Western metaphysical tradition, to some extent informed by the new Eastern wisdom traditions which have been steadily growing in the West over the last few decades. Thus, while the label 'New Age' passed into oblivion, the substance of belief and practice remained. The old New Age Movement had undergone a re-organization assumed under a variety of new names, names which many would argue actually better describe the community of transformed, spiritually-awakened, compassionate, earth-loving people the movement was structured to be. In Los Angeles, for example, the largest old New Age gathering takes place under the name 'whole life'.

Even though the name has largely disappeared, and the hope of a coming cultural transformation has markedly declined, all of the old trappings of the old New Age Movement remain. The publishers and bookstores are still in business; the number of 'New Age' magazines remains stable; the networks continue to promote a steady diet of lectures and worships. The larger cities still have annual conventions of believers. And a fourth to a third of the public still report their adherence to the more popular 'New Age' ideas and practices.

As the New Age has lost its vision of a cultural change, it has settled down as one aspect of the community of religious dissenters (which

includes Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims and occultists of all stripes) in the West. As a result of the Movement, metaphysical and occult religions have developed a new vocabulary and a new respectability. With their holistic alternative vision of life, New Agers have entered the public arena. Given the secular context of the political realm, it is to be expected that individuals committed to different aspects of the 'New Age' programme will find themselves in the places of power ready to change at least their little part of the world, if unable to move the entire culture.

NOTES

¹ This essay attempts to synthesize some twenty years observation of the New Age Movement and draws in part from insights found in two previously published texts on the Movement: J. Gordon Melton, Jerome Clark, and Aidan A. Kelly, *The New Age encyclopedia* (Detroit MI: Gale Research, 1990) and James R. Lewis and J. Gordon Melton (eds), *Perspective on the New Age* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1992).

² Cf James H. Billington, *Fire in the minds of men* (New York: Basic Books, 1980).

³ The gnostic worldview which permeates Freemasonry is very clearly presented in the popular textbook, *Morals and dogma of the ancient and accepted Scottish rite of Freemasonry* (Charleston SC: L. Jenkins, 1916).

⁴ On Modernism as a theological movement see William R. Hutchinson, *The Modernist impulse in American Protestantism* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1976).

⁵ On New Thought and related movements see Charles S. Braden, *Spirits on rebellion* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1963).

⁶ On Theosophy see Bruce F. Campbell, *A history of the Theosophical movement* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1980).

⁷ The best of the several books on the Aquarian Foundation is John Ollphant's *Brother Twelve: the incredible story of Canada's false prophet* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991).

⁸ Alice Bailey's crucial 'New Age' ideas are found in *The reappearance of the Christ* (New York: Lucis Publishing Company, 1948) and *Discipleship in the New Age* (New York: Lucis Publishing Company, 1944).

⁹ On the early years of Findhorn see Paul Hawken, *The magic of Findhorn* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1975).

¹⁰ Among sources describing the early process of networking and naming the first people to link is Ralph F. Raymond (Brother Francis), *The universal link concept* (Los Angeles: Universal Link Heart Center, 1968).

¹¹ In 1988 Spangler attempted to redefine the New Age through a series of articles which appeared in a spectrum of New Age periodicals. Among these articles which effectively demythologized New Age perspectives was 'Defining the New Age', which appeared in *New Realities* (May/June 1988).