

EGOISM, THE 'CULT OF MAN' AND THE NEW AGE MOVEMENT

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Time, events, or the unaided individual action of the mind will sometimes undermine or destroy an opinion without any outward sign of change...No conspiracy has been formed to make war on it, but its followers one by one noiselessly secede. As its opponents remain mute or only interchange their thoughts by stealth, they are themselves unaware for a long period that a great revolution has actually been effected.

This quote from Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* is heralded by Marilyn Ferguson in her book *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (1980) as the expression of the shibboleth and social consequence of a new, loosely organized "spiritual revolution." This "silent conspiracy" of religious values and beliefs would soon be termed the "New Age Movement" by all those except, ironically, its practitioners. Certainly, very few bodies of beliefs, no matter how amorphous, have been as thoroughly mislabeled or misunderstood as being a truly conspiratorial social movement. For example, Burrows writes:

The New Age Movement's collusion may not be tightly organized, sharply focused, or bent on apocalyptic totalitarianism...Its premises are not readily apparent and thus not easily critiqued." It is the New Age Movement's unobtrusiveness, its ability to conceal and not to offend, that has consolidated its grip and assured its spread. Without formal organization, it is difficult to net. Not bound by any tradition, it freely spins its, mystical web in endless variations. (in Frost 1992 15)

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NEW AGE

The "New Age Movement" is not, in any sociological sense, a social movement.¹ For example, Smelser (1963) stipulated that a social movement requires both leadership and some form of regular communication. No one has yet claimed leadership status in the New Age, and this is not surprising, given the highly individualized nature of beliefs (Sebald 1984 109).² This lack of leadership also clearly distinguishes the New Age from "alternative religions" or cults, which center on

charismatic or even paternalistic patterns (Mitchell 1974). In contrast to the private beliefs and practices of those belonging to the New Age, Jacobs (1989 5) has further argued that widespread membership in alternative religions represents "...the desire to experience both the ideal family and the fathering of a protective and loving male authority figure." As opposed to more formally based alternative religions, the New Age is also characterized by an amorphous body of regular, sustainable, and even fully identifiable communication. The lack of leadership, absence of prescribed public ritual, and routinized patterns of communication have led several observers to conclude that efforts to capture the full range of meanings imputed to the New Age Movement is futile. For example, Jones has remarked that

...whereas the New Age originally connoted [the] metaphysical and occult, the category has broadened to the point that it has become a 'catchall'. (1989 32)

Even the expression "New Age" is largely misleading. As Carlson and Motsenbocker (1989 39) have noted: "To locate the New Age phenomena within a cultural character is one task; to identify it with particular time referents is another." Several authors, for example, Geisler (1987), Melton (1988) as well as Carlson and Motsenbocker (1989) have asserted that New Age beliefs were prefigured in the writings of eighteenth-century Swedenborgism. This view posited the existence of an invisible spiritual world, in which "[e]verything in the visible material world corresponded to the spiritual world, though as a lesser reality" (Melton, in Basil 1988 37). Even more closely aligned with contemporary New Age beliefs are the nineteenth-century writings of Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, founder of the Theosophical Society. For example, in her book *The Secret Doctrine* (first published in 1888), Madame Blavatsky outlined the basic principles of the Theosophy movement:

(1) An Omnipresent, Eternal, Boundless and Immutable Principle, on which all specula-

tion is impossible, since it transcends the power of human conception...(2) The Eternity of the Universe *in toto* as a boundless plane...(3) The fundamental identity of all Souls with the Universal Over-soul, the latter being itself an aspect of the Unknown Root; and the obligatory pilgrimage for every soul.

Those who are familiar with contemporary beliefs or writings of the New Age would find that these ideas are not unfamiliar. With its movement into America, the Theosophical Society divided into three groups (Ellwood 1973). The most important of these was headed by Alice Bailey, who founded the Arcane School in New York, with its Full Moon meditation groups. In the writings of American Theosophy, it is possible to detect increasing strains of scientism and eschatological beliefs consistent with those of current New Age beliefs. Bailey was the first explicitly to mention the advent of a "new age" in her book *Discipleship in the New Age* (1944), and it was Bailey's channeling of an entity who prophesied the imminent coming of a great spirit (called Maitrya), who in turn was destined to issue in a new world order.

However, the number of adherents to the various branches of the Theosophical Society has not grown appreciably since the end of the Second World War (Ellwood 1973). Since that time, the beliefs espoused by these groups have become more diffuse. Many of those who hold these beliefs are not likely to claim allegiance to or even have knowledge of these early spiritual associations. It was not until the upheaval of the 1960's that religious beliefs, tinged with scientism and popular culture, again found a significant audience (Hess 1993). Many of these now belong to a category often referred to in sociology as New Religious Movement, or more commonly as NRM's (Chalfant, Beckley & Palmer 1994; Roberts 1995; Johnston 2001; McGuire 2002). The 'New Age' is, by contrast, less capable of definition because its boundaries are less like those of traditional religions. "There is," as Barker (1989 189) succinctly remarks of the new age, "no central organization."

This further expansion of beliefs and adherents, however, has not resulted in a unified organization or leadership. From a sociological perspective, the diffuse nature of the New Age has led to difficulties in capturing

the entirety of beliefs under a single conceptual category, in the manner of Troeltsch's sect-denomination typology. Additionally, there are problems in classifying New Age beliefs as essentially a 'formal' or 'informal' religion. Contrary to the definition of informal religion, many of the adherents to New Age beliefs see these beliefs (such as alternative medicine or reincarnation) as central to their worldview and that they are not tangential or transitory convictions. The direction of influence, in fact, appears to be reversed. Instead of New Age beliefs becoming formalized as a new religion, several of these beliefs are increasingly being adopted by practitioners of various formal religions, particularly among those holding more liberal theological beliefs (Donahue 1993). More Americans, in fact, are discovering increasing compatibility between more traditional and New Age beliefs. Wuthnow (1998), quoting an August 5, 1990 Gallup poll, found that 15 percent of those polled described themselves as holding New Age beliefs, and another 12 percent expressed interest in learning more about New Age beliefs.

Thus, these same beliefs do not often find expression in formal settings with accompanying hierarchies and patterned rituals. As a result, there have been several attempts to find an adequate means to categorize these beliefs. Grootius (1986), for example, has argued that there are several basic beliefs held by adherents to the New Age Movement: that 'all' is 'one,' and this 'one' is God; all religions are thus essentially one; a change in consciousness is not only possible but necessary to apprehend this oneness; and that the cosmos is steadily evolving toward this consciousness. Associated with these abstract beliefs, there are a number of concrete convictions, including reincarnation, beings existing beyond the known world, practices involving meditation or other consciousness-changing techniques, and holistic health practices. Olds (1989 62-69) has identified central New Age beliefs as: self-authenticating revelation; the immanence of God; emphasis of the metaphysical teachings of Eastern religions; a unification of 'masculine' logic and 'feminine' sensitivity, and a reliance on the evolution of scientific knowledge as a means of revealing the new world order. The New Age body of knowledge may extend from highly technical writings, such as Capra's two works *The Turning Point*

(1982) and *The Tao of Physics* (2000; first published in 1975), and Goswami's *The Self-Aware Universe* (1995) to popularized quasi-scientific technologies such as astrology and crystal healing. Melton (1990) has stressed the importance of individual and social transformation within New Age beliefs, while Hargrove (1989 96) has asserted that the New Age Movement "...is concerned with personal renewal and identity formation, and hence has an appeal to persons suffering from psychic deprivation." Lewis and Melton (1992) have also noted the emphasis on transpersonal psychology. For example, Groothius has remarked that:

A wholly new school of psychology is struggling to emerge as the dominant path to human understanding. This new school is called 'transpersonal psychology' and is a logical extension of the humanistic school. Anthony Sutich in the first issue of the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* (Spring 1969) described transpersonal psychology (or 'fourth force psychology') as an emerging force interested in 'ultimate human expectancies' not incorporated into behaviorism (first force), classical psychoanalysis (second force), or humanistic psychology (third force). Among those capacities listed are unitive consciousness, peak experiences, mystical experience, self-actualization, oneness, cosmic awareness, and transcendental phenomena. (1986 79-80)

IS THE NEW AGE A RELIGION?

Much has been made of the 'New Age' being a "false religion," or even being more akin to "magic" (Roberts 1995). The 'New Age'—a misnomer to begin with, and clearly incapable of any easy classification—can be easily dismissed in this way. However, another possibility exists, and that is to consider members of the New Age as religious practitioners, and there is very good reason for proceeding in adopting this approach. Two broad categories of definitions of religion have been traditionally recognized—substantive and functional (Roberts 1995; McGuire 2002). Of these two categories, a substantive definition—both broader in scope and allowing for a more diffuse principle of organization—is capable of capturing the variety and nuances of the New Age. Thus, a functional definition modeled on Geertz's (1966) understanding of religion serves to

place practitioners of the New Age well within the boundaries of what is defined as religion.³

Geertz places the essence of religion at the level of meaning, and quotes Santayana's (1905) essay entitled "Reason in Religion" as capturing the essence of what a religion is:

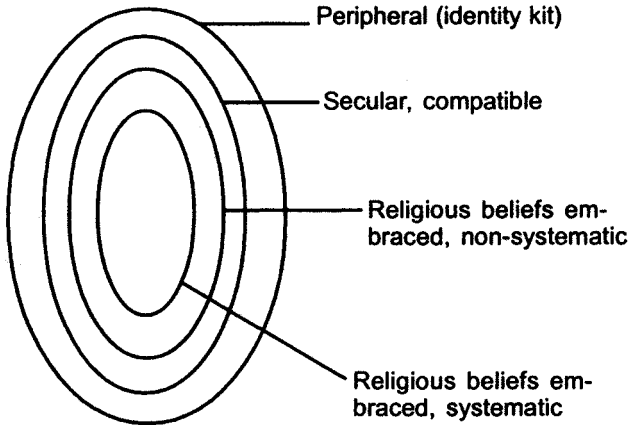
The vistas it opens and the mysteries it propounds are another world to live in; and another world to live in—whether we expect ever to pass wholly over into it or no—is what we mean by having a religion. (Geertz 1966 3)

Based on this understanding, Geertz develops a carefully constructed definition of religion that has four basic components:

A religion is (1) a system of symbols which acts (2) to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations...by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (Geertz 1966 4)

With every point in this definition, the New Age takes on an increasing reality as a religion. The symbols may be borrowed from other religions or come even from civil religion—Shakti Gawain's comments regarding political life in her book *Living in the Light* (1998) reflect this—but the wealth of symbolism is clearly present. These 'moods or motivations' are indeed long-lasting—certainly more so than in most cults, which are reflexively referred to by sociologists as *religious* cults. The 'general order of existence' can also be along a number of organizing principles that are clothed in an aura of factuality, and this increasingly included science, such as new scientific developments such as quantum physics (Hess 1993; Capra 2000). To those who subscribe to these beliefs, they are no less "real," one can safely assert, than beliefs held by those in more traditional religions—in fact, it appears that increasing numbers of persons still involved in traditional religions are holding beliefs and having spiritual experiences that are highly similar to those of New Age practitioners (Wuthnow 1998 123).

Figure 1: Levels of Commitment to New Age Beliefs



CHARACTERISTICS OF NEW AGE PRACTITIONERS

Describing the New Age, providing a historical background, and defining the New Age as a religion by utilizing Geertz's (1966) perspective helps to circumscribe the boundaries of the New Age. However, less attention has been given to the characteristics of those who adhere to these beliefs. Many analysts, as a result, have recognized the diffuse nature of New Age beliefs, while treating the believers as essentially unified in holding these beliefs. This problem stems partly from the sheer number and range of beliefs, and partly from the reluctance of many to identify themselves and members of the New Age. Lewis and Melton have noted that a result of this is that:

....[because] individuals, institutions, and periodicals who formerly referred to themselves as 'New Age' no longer identify themselves as such, studies built around a distinction between New Age and non-New Age...become more complex. In particular, one can no longer simply ask respondents in a straightforward manner whether they consider themselves part of the New Age. One must instead rely on more indirect types of questions—such as assent to beliefs in reincarnation, planetary consciousness, holistic healing methods, et cetera—to determine whether respondents belong to the movement. (1992 2)

While asking indirect questions such as these may also be problematic,⁴ it neverthe-

less points to the need for recognizing the differing kinds and levels of commitment of individuals to beliefs commonly included in the New Age. One way of conceptualizing this is to distinguish not only "New Age" members from "non-New Age" members, but to differentiate between those individuals who are peripheral to the New Age from those who have fashioned New Age beliefs into a personal cosmology, and for whom these beliefs constitute a central life interest. Figure 1 depicts this continuum. At the outermost, or peripheral position are those who are 'externally' committed to the New Age, often displaying their commitment in the form of "identity kits" (Goffman 1973). Ironically, although these are often the least committed members of the New Age, they are the most readily identifiable. It is possible that this is a central source of cynicism regarding the sincerity of those identified as "New Agers" by those in the larger society. At the second level are those who hold many of the New Age beliefs, but do not see these beliefs as essentially religious or spiritual. This "secular" level includes those who believe in aspects of the New Age such as environmentalism, planetary consciousness, and possibly karma and reincarnation, while not tying these beliefs in any significant way to a supernatural force, either personal or impersonal. Approaching the core level of commitment of the New Age are those adherents who view these beliefs as a central life interest, although not having formulated them into any systematic hierarchy. Thus, one might include beliefs associated with channeling

Figure 2: Central Beliefs of the New Age



or guidance, but not be able to articulate the relationship of these to karma and reincarnation. Finally, those at the core level have embraced the major beliefs of the New Age, and are able to express them in systematic form as a worldview that informs their actions in the world.

Moving from periphery to core, one is less likely to discover those who readily identify themselves as subscribing to the New Age movement, or to New Age beliefs, as Lewis and Melton (1992) have noted. While these beliefs are highly diffuse, it is possible to posit an ideal type that encompasses the central beliefs of the New Age, ordering them in Gutman-scale fashion, from least exclusive to most exclusive, as depicted in Figure 2. Each of these categories, of course, may hold a range of interpretive meanings. Ecology may consist of a straightforward responsibility to be environmentally aware, or it may involve a complex of beliefs about global harmonics and ley lines (Aubyn 1990). The Eastern beliefs of karma and reincarnation are closely connected, but can be linked in sophisticated ways to beliefs and practices related to healing and chakras (psychological techniques such as transpersonal psychology or physical methods such as crystal healing and reiki). The final three categories necessitate a sacred orientation toward an unseen world. Further, the belief in ascendance implies a final connection between one's self and a spiritual realm that might be referred to as God, the Universe, the Higher Self, I Am, or in a number of other ways (Gawain 1986). Those in the core of the New Age are not only likely to believe in ascendance, but it is also probable that they will be able to integrate the other beliefs into a well-articulated cosmology, often accompanied with sophisticated rituals and routines.

The rituals and routines associated with these beliefs, however, may not only be practiced in private (a characteristic of common

or unofficial religion), but may be highly *privatized*, in the sense that they are 'stylized' to conform to the individual needs of the practitioner. Thus, the New Age is essentially a private religion, although there are few or no proscriptive rules that prohibit public practice. Moreover, the New Age is privatized in the respect that each adherent to a central body of beliefs may nevertheless utilize highly unique practices. Even the most purely 'spiritual' belief, that of ascendance, may entail a relationship with either a personal or impersonal entity that is uniquely envisioned. There may be public ceremonies and speakers, but the central aspect of the New Age is its emergence as a privatized religion.

SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF A PRIVATIZED RELIGION

Thus, the "New Age Movement" is doubly misnamed. Adherents to New Age beliefs draw on a number of traditional religious, psychological, scientific and quasi-scientific beliefs and practices, but they do not incorporate these into a formally organized body of beliefs. However, the truly unique quality of the New Age is that each individual's interpretation of these practices serves to *isolate* the individual from others, rather than strengthening relations between individuals. This runs counter to Durkheim's assertion of a central function of religion, which is to increase the sense of belonging among individuals, and forms the basis of their attachment to their society:

...religion derives from a double source: firstly, the need to understand; and secondly, from sociability...[However], these factors should be inverted, & sociability should be made the determining cause of religious sentiment. (Durkheim 1965 [1912] 12)

However, the advent and growth of New Age beliefs as essentially a private religion

affirms a second Durkheimian thesis: that religion reflects the values and beliefs of the society which, in turn, forges the identities of individuals

...it is society which, fashioning us in its image, fills us with religious, political, and moral beliefs that control our actions. (Durkheim 1951 212)

Durkheim's central thesis, then, is that the religious beliefs of a society reflect the character of the society itself. Conversely, characteristics of a society could be discerned from an examination of its religious beliefs and practices. Traditional societal beliefs, rituals, and practices in Western societies are being replaced by a growing egoism resulting in what Durkheim termed the "cult of man," in which the need of the individual became predominant over the needs of the society. Durkheim's remarks often presage the work of Campbell, who commented in *The Power of Myth* that

...ritual has lost its force. The ritual that once conveyed an inner reality is now merely form. [This is] true in the rituals of society and the person rituals of marriage and religion. (1988 7)

The externalization of ritual and its transition to form devoid of significant content may result in a general sense of anomie. Thus, in the *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Durkheim remarked that:

If we find some difficulty today in imagining what the feasts and ceremonies of the future would consist in, it is because we are going through a stage of transition and moral mediocrity. The great events of the past which filled our fathers with enthusiasm do not excite the same ardour in us, either because they have come into common usage to such an extent that we are unconscious of them, or else because they no longer answer to our present aspirations; but as yet there is nothing to replace them. (Durkheim in Giddens 1972 610)

Durkheim further asserted that, as a social institution, formal, structured religion would decline in influence as the society gained in complexity:

...the power which [the force of religion]

exercises, becoming more general and abstract, leaves more place to the free play of human forces. The individual...becomes more a source of spontaneous activity. (Durkheim 1965 143-144)

In addition to this situation of "moral mediocrity," then, Durkheim envisioned an increasing distance of the individual from the religious normative constraints that in turn produced what he termed a "collective conscience." With the rise of egoism, or the individual's (perceived) self-reliance, Durkheim posited the further decline of the importance of the religious institution (if not religion itself).

In his masterful analysis of the question of egoism vis-a-vis normative constraints in Book II of *Suicide*, Durkheim further noted a central underlying consequence of egoism to be the isolation of the individual from the society, coupled with a "norm of free inquiry" that is unleashed by the weakening force of formal religion:

The more weakened the groups to which [the individual] belongs, the less he depends on them, the more he consequently depends only on himself and recognizes no other rules of conduct than what are founded on his private interests...in which the individual asserts itself to excess in the face of the social ego and at its expense... (Durkheim 1951 209)

For Durkheim, then, the decline of religion represented a danger to the solidarity of the society, as well as causing the individual to forfeit a sense of identity and purpose. The "salvation" of identity, as a result, could not be found either in society or within the established religions that were the reflections of the society. Durkheim found this condition to be "pathological" and referred to it as giving rise to misplaced religiosity, centering the sacred not in the social, but in the individual, in the "cult of man."

...society cannot disintegrate without the individual simultaneously detaching himself from social life, without his own goals becoming predominant over those of the community, in a word without his personality tending to surmount the collective personality. (Durkheim 1951 209)

Somewhat paradoxically, many of those who identify with New Age beliefs have taken these beliefs from the fully-developed cosmology of Eastern religions, in which the "collective personality" is a transcendental monad, universal force that finds expression in the concrete lives of individuals (Won 1989). This is an otherworldly orientation that serves to unite believers through collective, public ritual and through spiritual leaders, whether these are Brahmin priests, yogic gurus, or Buddhist Bodhisattvas. Members of the New Age, however, have largely eschewed both the otherworldly orientation of Eastern cosmology and rejected the importance of following any given religious leader, taking a more eclectic approach to the variety of teachings.

It is consistent with Durkheim's observations regarding the increase in egoism in the West, however, that this trend would find expression in privatized religious practices in which emphasis on individual personality supercedes a collective orientation. Indeed, as Beckford (1994) has noted, the sacred and the social realms have become increasingly divorced from each other, and what social solidarity that remains in postmodern societies now rests on technical-rational foundations. However, the moral component to this solidarity appears to be shifting from public ritual to private meanings in which the "iron cage" of Weber's (1958) brooding has now become something less dramatic: a "postmodern" age which is not so much "new" as indeterminate and without any final mooring.

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ENDNOTES

1. Melton (1988) believes the New Age Movement to be a genuine "movement," but defines this movement only in terms of the collective transformative vision of its practitioners, rather than identifying any organizational coherence or permanent leadership.
2. This individuation of beliefs is also a reason, at least in part, for the lack of empirical investigation of the New Age (Melton & Lewis 1992).
3. It may well be, as Roof (1999 88) asserts (quoting Harold Blum) that one significant aspect of the religious experience in America is "the perpetual shock of the individual discovering yet again what he or she always has known." This is also a point made by Tipton (1984) in his *Getting Saved from the 60's* (1984). If this is so, then Geertz's definition retains still greater relevance for defining the New Age, and place practitioners of the New Age even more in the traditional light of more established religions.
4. For example, 25% of all Americans now believe in reincarnation, according to a recent Gallup poll. However, this does not indicate a widespread increase in those holding to related New Age beliefs, such as a belief in karma. Nor does this increasing belief in reincarnation by itself indicate a growing interest in Eastern religions.