
The New Age Movement

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Introduction

The New Age phenomenon is not a movement in the organised sense of that word. There is no formal creed, no central organisation and no way of taking out membership. To say it is an umbrella term would be an understatement; it is a catch-all title to subsume a diverse variety of ideas and philosophies, psychological, medical and religious viewpoints that all tend to the same direction. In this sense it can be seen as a movement.

Although seen by some as a conspiracy it would be a mistake to view it as such. There is no master strategy or secret plan. As we shall see, that is contrary to a New Age outlook. Even though a best-selling book on this subject by Marilyn Ferguson is called *THE AQUARIAN CONSPIRACY*, she wants to use the word in its literal sense - a breathing together. You do not *join* the New Age but rather come into contact with it. It has no visible unity but sees many people and groups working towards the same end.

In fact the syncretism, eclecticism and pluralism of the New Age can lead us to see its influence as more than it actually is; Green issues are very much in harmony with New Age thinking - but a green person is not necessarily a New-Ager. An example even closer to home is that of homeopathic medicine - that can be an expression of New Age ideology, or it can be approached in entirely other ways. We must beware of tarring everything with the same brush.

Three identifiable elements have come together to make up the New Age movement. **Firstly**, in the 1960s and '70s of Flower Power and Hippie fame, there was a rejection of the materialism of Western Society. Exploration of altered states of consciousness via drugs and Eastern meditation techniques became popular. However, that counter-culture in itself had no lasting future and people heading for San Francisco today do not bother with flowers for their hair.

Nevertheless, whilst the student drop-out is now well over thirtysomething, his initial sprint for freedom has been undergirded by a **second element**: the assimilation of a great body of ideas and practices tracing their origins back to the ancient civilisations of India and Egypt. Nurtured by the Gnostics, the alchemists and the Qabalists, in the sixteenth century Jacob Boehme popularised these ideas as did Emmanuel Swedenborg in the seventeenth century. William Blake in the eighteenth century continued to express ideas essentially in harmony with New Age approaches. By the nineteenth century these materials were all becoming generally available. Firstly through the Spiritualist movement from 1848 and much more significantly with the Theosophical Society founded in 1875, Eastern ideas on spirituality became more widely accepted in the West.

The third element of the New Age movement is the claiming of various scientific hypotheses as providing support for viewing reality in this kind of way. Rather than seeing the world as a giant mechanism, Einstein's theory of Relativity-forced widespread reappraisal. The latest theories in quantum physics have been exploited to argue that the basic element of reality is not, after all, matter, but energy which can manifest itself in various ways. Perhaps the most popular idea hijacked by the New Age movement is Professor James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis. In 1969 he suggested that the lithosphere (the solid part of the planet), the biosphere and the atmosphere form a single integrated system. In fact, the earth should be seen as a single living entity.

One further point to make by way of introduction is that just as the New Age can be expressed in manifold ways, so it can demand and accept many levels of commitment. Someone can be utterly immersed in it or simply *dabble*. **Basic tenets of the movement are the inviolability of an individual's will, and the freedom to choose one's own spiritual path.**

A New Age

Some years ago a West End musical called *Hair* caused a furore over its stage nudity; what may have escaped the notice of Christians at the time was its theme song - *This is the Dawning of the Age of Aquarius*. The concept underlying this is an astrological one - that just as there are monthly cycles for individuals, so there are ages, lasting around 2100 years, affecting the earth. Each age has its distinctive, and we are now entering fully into the Age of Aquarius, which will bring in a new order of harmony, understanding and peace.

Claims that humanity is on the verge of a new world order are not new, but what makes the Aquarian claim different from, notably, the Marxist claim of inevitable progress towards utopia is the place identified for revolution. Revolution indeed must occur, but not by the capturing of the institutions of society. Revolution must first occur within you and me. Thus whilst the New Age cosmology embraces the whole universe, the starting place for action is within ME. The future course of humanity begins inside the individual human being.

A New Consciousness

To be a New-Ager it is not enough then simply to assent to a set of ideas. To do anything really to assist the ushering in of this time of harmony, we must first be brought into harmony with reality as it really is. This requires a new consciousness, and this is critical to the whole emergence of a new world order.

According to Marilyn Ferguson, what is needed is a paradigm-shift in our understanding of self, society and the world. A paradigm shift is a radical change in outlook that comes about because too many facts emerge that cannot be explained in terms of the old paradigm. She cites the change from thinking of the world as flat to thinking of it as spherical or the change from Newtonian physics to Einstein's model as examples of scientific paradigm shifts. Our failing at the moment is that we try to solve old problems in the old ways. Instead we should be trying to solve these problems at an entirely different level. In the present

context, **change must come about not by political programmes but by inner transformation to a higher state of consciousness.**

As the number of individuals with altered consciousness grows, so eventually a critical point will be reached when the whole of humanity will be suffused with these ideas and the Age of Aquarius will have fully dawned. The intellectual support for such a concept is found in a scientific hypothesis called *Morphic Resonance* which postulates that knowledge is passed on from generation to generation in a given species.

All this presupposes that we naturally have a low state of consciousness, and this is exactly what is mooted. Generally we function at only a fraction of the capacity our minds are capable of. The daily routine and the materialistic outlook of society mean that sometimes we are barely awake. If we are to experience our full potential, we must become more attuned to the right way of seeing things.

The achievement of this changed consciousness goes under various names; *enlightenment*, *kensho* or *samadhi*. The means of getting there is known in New Age terminology as *transformation*. Much of the clutter of meditation, therapy and navel-contemplation of the New Age relates to the various means of passing through this process to emerge as an enlightened one.

Reincarnation and Karma

That reincarnation is in some way related to the New Age is well known; how exactly it fits in is important to grasp. It is not possible to say that we only live once. Rather, we are in a process of existence that manifests itself in a great series of incarnations on this planet. Death is not the end, but the passageway back to a debriefing area, where the lessons learnt can be assessed and the next incarnation planned in relation to what still has to be experienced. In an interview for *The Times Saturday Review* Shirley MacLaine said "Sometimes the biggest internal laughs I have felt have been at funerals, having lost someone really dear to me. It's a release of tension, an outlet from tragedy." As souls passing, sometimes painfully, through a long process of evolution, each earthly incarnation must lead us on. The climax of this is the joining of the individual with the total, so that the culmination of finding oneself is actually the losing of oneself in the All - which is the One.

When we begin as infant souls we have little choice about where or whom we incarnate as. In each life we generate *karma*, both good and bad. *Karma* is explained as the spiritual law of cause and effect, or "that which we sow we shall reap". However both sowing and reaping occur on the earth in incarnations. In this way successive incarnations have to deal with the current state of our karma account. As we mature and progress, however, we can, in conference with the spiritual helpers we encounter between lifetimes, plan which incarnations will be most helpful to us or to those with whom we are linked. Lorna St Aubyn teaches that there are three stages to dealing with karma in any given incarnation; the retributive, where we must face and resolve issues set up by our karma in past incarnations: the redemptive, where we move on from putting right on our own

account to putting right in a servant-mentality for others and other situations: and lastly the transcendent when the backlog of personal issues is fully dealt with and we can concentrate on service of others.

Therefore, as she sets it out, the teaching on karma and reincarnation ought to dissuade us from living in utter self-indulgence because you will have to pay for that sooner or later. Every lifetime that you fail to face and resolve these things means that the situation will recur subsequently and continually until put right.

St Aubyn goes on to mention the existence of *group karma*, whereby we are related to a soul group and somehow progress together, and further postulates the existence of *national karma* in these disturbing terms;

As a general principle, there would seem to be certain countries and races that have agreed to be used in order to expiate specific issues or to accomplish certain tasks. Poland could be seen as illustrating this very clearly. For several centuries she has been used as the lightning conductor of Eastern Europe, helping to contain through her own suffering the potential for wider conflagrations. Such excesses of persecution and occupation, imprisonment and exile as have been borne by the Poles can only make a modicum of sense if seen as a corporate act of redemption. That they were one of the countries most affected by the Chernobyl disaster seems to confirm this pattern.¹

The New Age Human Being

If each human being has vast potential that is never really tapped, and if a change of consciousness can bring us into the realisation of that potential, man must be a different being from the one described in the Bible. This is very much the case.

In New Age thinking, man is not a being created in the image of a distinct personal Creator-God. Rather he is an expression and manifestation of the all. Thus he is both a part of the planet and, inasmuch as there is anything divine at all, he is also part of the divine.

Therefore Marilyn Ferguson can speak of

Human-kind embedded in nature ... we are *not* victims, not pawns, not limited by conditions or conditioning. Heirs to evolutionary riches, we are capable of imagination, invention, and experiences we have only glimpsed. Human nature is neither good nor bad but open to continuous transformation and transcendence.²

In the same vein Lorne St Aubyn can believe of people that

Once they re-connect with the idea that they are an integral part of the planet rather than a casual visitor to it, they will no longer stand by and watch in silence the dreadful destruction being perpetrated on a home they loved for so long. Deeply involved in its destiny, they will begin to fulfil their roles as droplets of the Divine.³

Human beings then have no existence distinct from the universe, but are partial expressions of it. Chinese thought defined the whole universe as dependent on the interaction of *yin* and *yang*, the complementary principles. Behind this duality

is a singularity - a universal energy known as *Ch'i* and almost identical to the Hindu concept of *prana*. The way to both enlightenment and wellness, is being rightly aligned with this energy in its dual expression.

The series of STAR WARS films had the hero, Luke Skywalker attuning himself to the *force* so that he might become a Jedi knight. His father had once been a great warrior too, but had given way to the dark side of the force - not a completely different power, but its negative aspect. New Age living involves being rightly attuned to the energy of the universe - in Star Wars parlance, *may the force be with you*.

The way we can tap into this universal energy source is via the seven *chakras*, or energy centres in the human body. Each one of these has a special function, and good health is only possible when these are all in good working order, both in themselves and in relation to all the others. They are called chakras, meaning wheels, because when viewed by a clairvoyant this is how they appear. Such people can assess the state of the whole body's energy balance and locate problem areas. The first chakra is at the base of the spine and this *root* chakra gives us our drive, lack or even excess of it. The seventh chakra at the crown of the head, is the means of contacting our higher self and those spiritual beings willing to help us. According to Lorna St Aubyn, in paintings of Jesus this chakra is depicted as a halo.

Help People Can Seek

All these reincarnations, working out of karma and balancing and tapping in to fundamental energies is a tricky business. New Age writers acknowledge that the uninitiated can easily come unstuck; what people need is help. One way is by attuning ourselves with the Earth's own chakra points. This is the thinking behind sites of special spiritual interest such as Glastonbury. Stone circles can also be at the focus of the earth's energies. There are said to be connections between them called *ley lines* and, supposedly, medieval man instinctively knew where to site his holy places to draw maximum benefit from them.

The benefit goes the other way too. By spending time at such places we can bring man increasingly into harmony with the earth and heal some of the disruption in the earth's own energy centres that centuries of man's abuse have created.

The other main way of help on the spiritual path is through guidance. The passing Piscean age brought learning as pupils receiving from a master; in the Aquarian age people will "learn to find within themselves that still small voice which can grow increasingly authoritative if we have learned to listen with humility, through a channel unencumbered with our own wishes and fears."⁴

So says Lorna St Aubyn. Even more dangerously she continues;

Our greatest initial difficulty in establishing contact with something beyond our everyday self will probably lie in trusting a process with which our conscious minds will feel uneasy We are not taught ...to listen to dreams

and intuitions Rational thought has, of course, a vital role to play, but it must not become so powerful that it excludes from our lives the whole rich world of the unconscious.⁵

It is through the assistance of discarnate souls that we can receive guidance and help in living life. However these are neither omniscient nor necessarily benevolent and great care is urged in discriminating. Assistance should be sought from people who are well versed in these areas so that dangers can be avoided. One, two or three of these spirit guides can then be resorted to, depending on the particular situation and their own expertise. One way in which help from entities in the spiritual realm is said to be received is by *channelling*. Whereas mediumship supposedly contacts the spirits of the departed, channelling relates to these discarnate beings. Apparently the actress Sharon Gless, made famous in the TV series "Cagney and Lacey", when receiving a television award for her role, acknowledged the aid of a spirit-guide called Lazaris who is channelled through one Jack Pursel. Seth is another spirit-entity who apparently channelled through Jane Roberts. This woman spent much of her life from 1963 until 1984, when she died, channelling and publishing this material. Seth is one of the best known and most widely published of these guides; **the basic message of the books is that we each create our own reality through our beliefs and desires.**

The word *occult* is frequently used in New Age writings, but whereas we would hear such a word with fear, those involved consider it simply as the means of entry into the hidden wisdom of the ages. Magic and witchcraft or *wicca* form a part of this, as do shamanism and divination. Each of these elements attempts in one way or another to link with the reality behind appearances and the energy available in the universe so that we may make better progress in living in this incarnation. Changing of situations and guidance for the future, analysis of problems and healing from diseases all come under this form of help.

New Age Christianity

There is a distinctive reinterpretation of Christian doctrine in New Age thinking so that **key words and ideas that define truth are emptied of their Biblical content and filled with something other.** Walter Martin's book 'THE NEW AGE CULT' identifies in the words of New Age teachers eight perversions of Scripture doctrines.⁶

- 1 God: In a sense there is no such thing as God, God does not exist. And in another sense, there is nothing else but God - only God exists All is God. And because all is God, there is no God.
- 2 The Trinity: Eternal thought is one; in essence it is two - Intelligence and force; and when they breathe, a child is born; this child is Love. And thus the Triune God stands forth, whom men call Father-Mother-Child.
- 3 Jesus Christ: What is the Christ? Within all life there exists a quality, an energy, which has as its basic characteristic irresistible growth, irresistible and inevitable expression of divinity. It is a quality which says that whatever form I am enclosed in, I will not be held prisoner of that form, but I will transform it

into a greater form. I will use all life, all experiences as stepping stones to greater revelations of divinity. The Christ is the basic evolutionary force within creation.

4 The Atonement: The crucifixion is nothing more than an extreme example. Its value, like that of any teaching device, lies solely in the kind of learning it facilitate.

5 Salvation: How simple is salvation! All it says is what was never true (ie sin and its punishment) is not true now, and never will be. The impossible has not occurred, and can have no effects. That is all.

6 Eternity and Judgement: God never made a heaven for man; he never made hell; we are creators and we make our own. The Last Judgement might be called a process of right evaluation. It simply means that everyone will finally come to understand what is worthy and what is not. After this, the ability to choose can be directed rationally.

7 Demonic Powers: It is important to see that Lucifer, as I am using this term, describes an angel, a being, a great and mighty planetary consciousness. It does not describe that popular thought-form of Satan who seeks to lead man down a path of sin and wrong doing. That is a human creation, and yet it is a creation that has some validity but represents the collective thought-form of all those negative energies which man has built up and created.

8 The Second Coming: In a very real sense Findhorn represents the Second Coming. Any individual, any centre, who so embodies the new that it becomes a magnetic source to draw the new out of the rest of the world, embodies the Second Coming.

It is clear that historic, Scriptural Christianity is utterly at variance with New Age views of spiritual reality. In fact the New Age writers argue that so-called mainstream Christianity is not representative of the real thing and that this was lost with the demise of the Gnostics. Indeed, much of New Age spirituality would be amenable to that kind of heresy.

The New Age Mentality

Hand the man on the Clapham omnibus a New Age book and the chances are he won't have a clue what is being said. Our late 20th century secular and materialistic viewpoint is a long way from the New Age mentality. It seems unlikely that vast numbers of people in this country are likely to be won over rapidly to such a belief at present.

However, whilst the New Age itself may have some way to go, we should be aware of the factors that are going into creating a climate that will eventually be conducive to New Age beliefs. When famous people appear on TV chat shows and mention these things, a seed is planted. When you realise that a significant number of people voted for the Green Party at the last Euro elections it shows that people are becoming conscious of the environment. Even mineral water is sold on the basis of creating a good balance between mind, body and spirit!

The book SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL by E F Schumacher has proved very popular;

literature recently has been enormous - what STAR WARS had as its underlying rationale was brought out more explicitly by THE DARK CRYSTAL screened in the UK over the Christmas period. As Marilyn Ferguson points out, "A generation in love with Tolkien's fantasy (THE LORD OF THE RINGS) are ready for magic in themselves and in their young children."⁷ Stimulated by such role playing games as *Dungeons and Dragons*, many enter an imaginary world which can, if taken to extremes, act as a pathway to New Age experiences. The Ladybird reading scheme PUDDLE LANE introduces young children to wizards and magicians at a young age - and they are benevolent too.

The latest computer game produced by one company is called *SimEarth*, explicitly founded on the Gaia concept mentioned before. The company, Maxis, previously had a colossal success with a game based on city planning concepts; it was called *SimCity*. This was purely secular, but now many who enjoyed creating a city will want to progress to a planet and will do so in New Age terms. The casual use of the term New Age in the media all helps to raise the profile.

None of these things is New Age in itself, but the cumulative effect of all this will be eventually to create a society in which the man on the Clapham omnibus will consider New Age to be the obvious answer.

Appraisal

In its broadest influence **the New Age could represent a vastly more potent threat to Christianity than modern cults** such as Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons. The New Age should not only be seen as a false belief system that could deceive some and confuse many. Unlike secular humanism that invites us to advance to a post-Christian society, the New Age invites us to return home; to go back almost literally to our roots. It is nothing short of an invitation to advance to a *pre-Christian* society.

The historian Francis Oakley analysed the impact Christianity made on Medieval thinking about society. Pre-Christian thinking was thoroughly monistic.

The sharp distinction that modern Westerners are accustomed to make between nature and supernature, between nature, society, and man, between animate and inanimate, were almost wholly lacking. Nature was alive; it was "full of gods"; it expressed, both in its benign cyclical rhythms and in its intimidating and catastrophic upheavals, the movements and indwelling of the divine If we ourselves find that pattern to be well-nigh incomprehensible today we would do well to remember that we do so precisely because our very idea of what it is to be divine has been radically shaped by centuries of Judeo-Christian thinking with its obdurate insistence on the unity, omnipotence, and transcendence of God, centuries during which the meanings ascribed to such words as *god, divine, religious*, and so on have, by primitive or archaic standards, been narrowed down to a degree bordering on the eccentric.⁸

What Oakley was applying specifically to politics, Dr R Hooykaas applied in RELIGION AND THE RISE OF MODERN SCIENCE. He wrote

There is a radical contrast between the deification of nature in pagan religion and in a rationalized form, in Greek philosophy, and the deification of nature in the Bible. By contrast with the nature-worship of its neighbours, the religion of Israel was a unique phenomenon. The God of Israel, by his word, brings forth all things out of nothingness The New Testament proclaims again the message that there is no eternal cycle of nature or cycle of history ... The Bible knows nothing of "Nature" but knows only "creatures", who are absolutely dependent on the will of God. Consequently, the natural world is admired as God's work and as evidence of its creator, but it is never adored ... in total contradiction to pagan religion, nature is not a deity to be feared and worshipped, but a work of God to be admired, studied and managed. When we compare pagan and biblical religions, we find a fundamental contrast between the ideas concerning God and man which have emerged. In the Bible God and nature are no longer opposed to man, but God and man together confront nature. The denial that God coincides with nature implies the denial that nature is godlike.⁹

This he concludes was the belief that made modern science possible. Oakley's point was that it was only the Christian faith that divested the political ruler of divinity. All this and much more would be lost to the advance of the New Age. All this was granted us by the pure preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Whether the New Age becomes a major religious viewpoint in our day or just another stubborn deception depends largely on whether our society loses its fundamentally Biblical outlook on the world, or whether God will graciously preserve it from the blindness into which it seems so ready to plunge.

References

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- 3 St Aubyn, op cit p 17
- 4 *ibid* p 41
- 5 *ibid* p 41
- 6 Walter Martin, *THE NEW AGE CULT*, Bethany, Minneapolis, 1989, pp 25-32
- 7 Ferguson, op cit p 353
- 8 Francis Oakley, *THE CRUCIAL CENTURIES*, Terra Nova Editions, 1979, pp 108 & 111
- 9 R Hooykaas, *RELIGION AND THE RISE OF MODERN SCIENCE*, Scottish Academic Press, 1972, pp 7-9

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