

Introduction to the New Age Movement

The New Age movement is very difficult to define. It is a broad social movement that encompasses a wide variety of philosophies, beliefs, and practices. Although the New Age Movement is very clearly a "movement" in the sense of a shift in spiritual or philosophical perspective experienced by large numbers of people, it is not a "movement" in terms of an organized, coherent group. Unlike the strong emphasis on community within branches of the Neo-pagan movement, the majority of New Agers relate to the broader New Age movement as individuals. In fact, individualism is a key component of the New Age worldview, as we will see. Not all individuals who participate in "New Age" practices or who espouse New Age beliefs, furthermore, identify themselves with the New Age label. Religious studies scholar James R. Lewis has suggested that more and more "New Agers" are rejecting the New Age label, perhaps because of the negative connotations associated with it in popular perceptions and media coverage. The New Age movement generally has become associated in popular perceptions with some of its more flamboyant elements, such as channelling or crystal healing, and the underlying spiritual motivations of those involved with New Age beliefs and practices have often been ignored. Despite this turning away from the New Age label, however, there does not appear to be any turning away from New Age ideas. The New Age movement, by any name, continues to be a major component of contemporary alternative spirituality.

Historical Influences and Precursors

The historical factors influencing the development of the contemporary New Age movement are as varied and diverse as the contemporary movement itself. Sociologist and religious studies scholar J. Gordon Melton has identified eight major historical precursors to the contemporary New Age movement, plus a multitude of other significant contributing factors and

individuals that have effected the movement to greater or lesser degree. The eight historical precursors identified by Melton are: Swedenborgianism; Mesmerism; Transcendentalism; Spiritualism; Christian Science/New Thought; Theosophy; Parapsychology; and Eastern Thought.ⁱ Although all eight of these precursors identified by Melton can be said to have had a major impact on the contemporary New Age movement, we are going to focus primarily on the impact of Spiritualism, Christian Science, Theosophy, and Parapsychology. It is these movements that contributed to the primary stress within the New Age movement on speaking to spirits (channelling), healing, reincarnation, religious syncretism, and scientific wholism.

Spiritualism

Spiritualism is a religious movement based on communication with the spirits of the dead which originated in New York State in 1848. It spread very rapidly throughout the United States, Canada and Europe. For a few short years, its adherents numbered well over one million people in the United States alone. Membership peaked during the eighteen-fifties, and despite periodic revivals has not achieved these levels in North America since that time. Today there are considerably fewer Spiritualists than at the height of the movement, but there are still approximately 180,000 registered members of Spiritualist churches throughout the United States. Interestingly, while nineteenth and early twentieth century Spiritualism has had a strong impact on the development of the New Age movement, the New Age movement itself is now influencing contemporary Spiritualism. The boundaries between the two movements in the contemporary context are consequently not always clear.

Spiritualism originated in upper New York State in 1848. Although the defining characteristic of the Spiritualist religious movement - communication with the spirits of the dead - has been known in many religious traditions throughout human history, it was the experience of

such communication between two young girls in New York that sparked the religious movement known as Spiritualism. The origins of the modern Spiritualist movement are therefore found in what came to be called the Hydesville Rappings, named after the town of Hydesville, New York where the strange occurrences happened.

According to the signed testimonies of a man named John Fox, his wife Louise Fox, and their daughters Kate and Margaret Fox, a few months after they moved into a small cottage they began to hear a series of loud, unexplained knocking noises. They reluctantly concluded that their new home was haunted, and the adults were very frightened. Their daughters, however, were not particularly scared. On the evening of March 31 1848, the youngest Fox daughter, Kate (age 12) decided to try to talk to this ghost. She dared the ghost to imitate the sounds she made (she apparently called out to the ghost, "Mr Splitfoot, do as I do!"). The spirit copied the number of knocking sounds Kate made, and she and her sister quickly taught the ghost a simple alphabet code so it could communicate with them (one knock for "a", two for "b", etc. Using this method, the "ghost" claimed to be that of a murdered travelling salesman named Charles Rosna, who had been killed by the previous tenant and buried in the basement. The Fox family attempted to verify this claim, and found a "peddler's box" buried there, but had to stop digging when they hit the water table, and the basement became flooded. According to Spiritualist author Arthur Conan Doyle, however, when the cottage was moved in 1904, excavators did find a body at the site.

News of the ability of the Fox sisters to communicate with spirits - an ability known as mediumship - spread rapidly. Along with an older sister named Leah, the sisters were encouraged to demonstrate their mediumship abilities publicly. Others soon began communicated with spirits also. By the year 1850, there were a reported one hundred practising

mediums in New York, fifty to sixty "private circles" for the development of mediumistic ability, and an additional fifty practising mediums in Philadelphia. In addition to these newly developed mediums, thousands of others became ardent believers in the possibility of spirit communication. These mediums learned new ways of communicating with spirits. According to historian R. Laurence Moore, in 1850 New York,

most of the spirits were rappers, but already some had learned to do other things.

Aside from making rapped replies to questions, spirits could rely on automatic writing, slate writing, and control of the medium's voice to get their message through".ⁱⁱ

As mediumistic phenomena became more elaborate, full possession trance became the norm for Spiritualist mediums. Some of these mediums began producing "materializations" of spirit matter (called ectoplasm) from their own bodies. These mediums were practising what became known as physical mediumship. Nineteenth century examples of physical mediumship included apports, automatic writing, drawing, etc., chemical phenomena (luminous lights; spirit photography); electrical phenomena; fire immunity; levitation; magnetic phenomena; materialization; psycho-physiological phenomena (shrinking or elongation of the body; stigmata, trance; ectoplasm production); and telekinesis.

Other mediums were practising what became known as mental mediumship. These mediums, known as trance mediums, were those who spoke "inspired sermons" on topics chosen by their audiences while under the influence of a controlling spirit. Trance mediums largely avoided physical materializations and the more blatant displays of mediumship favoured by test mediums. The kinds of phenomena exhibited by trance mediums included clairvoyance, clairaudience, healing, possession, premonition, psychometry, telepathy, and glossolalia.

One of the most famous mental or trance mediums of the nineteenth century, and one of the most influential, was a medical medium and philosopher named Andrew Jackson Davis. Andrew Jackson Davis became a medium while acting as a test subject for a local mesmerist, as early as 1845, three years prior to the Fox sisters' demonstrations of mediumship in upstate New York. Under the influence of mesmerism, Andrew Jackson Davis began to diagnose the illnesses of individuals through what he interpreted as divine revelation. Mesmerism was the practice, based on the teachings of a man named Anton Mesmer, of inducing trance by a process that later became known as hypnotism. Davis was apparently an ideal test subject, for he entered trance easily. Based upon his mesmeric experiences, Davis began to develop a philosophy which would later become strongly influential in the growing Spiritualist movement. He called his philosophy the Harmonial Philosophy, for it taught that physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health were dependent upon one another. For Jackson, mediumship was the way to show that spirit, and health, were connected to the physical and mental lives of those still living. Many other mediums picked up Davis' emphasis on healing and the ideal of harmonial philosophy. It is Davis' work that underlies most of the philosophical principles of Spiritualism.

Based upon Davis' work, and other spirit-inspired sources, Nineteenth century Spiritualists developed a list of principles that summarized their religious faith. This list, first codified by Spiritualist historian Emma Hardinge Brittan, has been modified several times. One contemporary version, that of the National Spiritualist Association of Churches (N.S.A.C), reads:

1. We believe in Infinite Intelligence.
2. We believe that the phenomena of Nature, both physical and spiritual, are the expression of Infinite Intelligence.
3. We affirm that a correct understanding of such expression and living in accordance therewith, constitute true religion.

4. We affirm that the existence and personal identity of the individual continue after the change called death.
5. We affirm that communication with the so-called dead is a fact, scientifically proven by the phenomena of Spiritualism.
6. We believe that the highest morality is contained in the Golden Rule: "Whatsoever ye would that others should do unto you do ye also unto them."
7. We affirm the moral responsibility of the individual, and that he makes his own happiness or unhappiness as he obeys or disobeys Nature's physical and Spiritual laws.
8. We affirm that the doorway to reformation is never closed against any human soul here or hereafter.
9. We affirm that the precepts of Prophecy and Healing contained in the Bible are Divine attributes proven through Mediumship.ⁱⁱⁱ

Almost every one of the above principles has been picked up and elaborated upon in the New Age context. As the above "Statement of Principles" indicates, the religion of Spiritualism stresses an optimistic doctrine of personal experience and spiritual progress. This view of religion is very different from the mainstream Christian view of both nineteenth and contemporary twentieth century Christianity, but has been extremely influential in terms of its impact on the contemporary New Age movement. The concept of a loving personal God as found in Christianity is replaced by an impersonal emphasis on "Infinite Intelligence" and "Natural Law," for example, and emphasis maintained by New Agers, for this emphasis allows a wide range of personal conceptions of "Godhood" to be expressed by individuals interested in the New Age movement. The doctrine of original sin has been rejected in favour of an affirmation of the essential goodness of mankind, another concept picked up by the New Age movement; and the Christian concepts of Hell and eternal damnation are replaced with a belief in universal opportunities for spiritual progress, for the 'doorway to reformation' is never closed. Also

rejected is the Christian doctrine of salvation: Spiritualism teaches the individual's own responsibility for personal happiness and spiritual progress. This emphasis has also been picked up within the New Age context, where each individual's spiritual wellbeing, while aided by wiser spiritual souls, is nonetheless the primary responsibility of each individual person. Nobody else, not even God, can save you if you won't save yourself by dedicating yourself to a spiritual path.

In addition to these points, however, the principles of Spiritualism put a primary stress on mediumship, or the experience of personal communication with the spirits of the dead, and on healing as one aspect of mediumship. According to Spiritualist belief, communication with the dead is a "fact," "scientifically" proved through the phenomena of Spiritualism. It is primarily this strong emphasis on personal communication with the spirits of the dead that sets Spiritualism apart from the Christian environment in which it arose. The emphasis on healing as a spiritual manifestation of communication with the spirit world is also central. Both this emphasis on speaking to spirits, and on spiritual healing, have also been encompassed within the contemporary New Age movement.

Christian Science

Like the Spiritualist religious movement, the religion of Christian Science has also had a major impact on the New Age movement. Whereas the major impact of Spiritualism has been first its stress on spirit communication, second its emphasis on spiritual evolution, and then only third its stress on spiritual healing, it is the healing emphasis within Christian Science that has been its primary influence on the New Age movement. Christian Science was founded by a woman named Mary Baker Eddy. She was born in 1821 into a Calvinist (Protestant) family in New England. Mary Baker was always prone to illness from the time of childhood, and in particular suffered from convulsive fits and hysteria. As a result, she was concerned with issues

of healing and health through most of her life, and it was this concern for health that ultimately led to the founding of the Christian Science movement.

Mary Baker Eddy did not live a particularly happy or healthy life. Her first husband died after only a year of marriage, and her son was born shortly after his death. She was so ill with grief and the birth that she gave her son to her parents to raise. She continued to be ill intermittently for years, and consequently sought healing through a variety of alternative healing systems. Mesmerism, or hypnotism, brought her some relief from her illnesses in the 1860's, although it could not provide a total cure, but when the hypnotist she worked with died in 1866, Mary Baker Eddy was left once again seriously ill. In 1866, she suffered a serious fall, and possibly a concussion. She lay in bed semi-conscious for three days, and in one of her lucid moments, asked for a bible to read. She turned to one of the healing miracle stories in the New Testament, and had what we can probably call an enlightenment experience. She had a sudden realization of truth, after which she got out of bed, and was miraculously recovered. The bible passage she forever associated with this experience is Jesus' claim "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Light."

The "truth" that Mary Baker Eddy realized in 1866 was the truth of the **unreality of matter** . Mrs Eddy described this truth as the realization that the reality of spirit is the only reality: physical things are not real, and it is an error to assume that the world of matter is anything but a faulty perception of the truth of spiritual reality. This aspect of Mary Baker Eddy's revelation may have been influenced by the writings of Emmanuel Swedenborg. Swedenborg was an eighteenth century scientist and mystic who had proposed the idea of the law of correspondences. According to Swedenborg, everything physical is simply a reflection of a greater spiritual reality. Anything which occurs on a physical level therefore corresponds to

something greater occurring on a spiritual level. Mary Baker Eddy's realization goes even farther than this, however, for the truth that she realized while reading the Bible after her accident was that Spirit, or Soul, is the only true reality that exists. Our minds and our souls are our true nature: our bodies, and the material world around us, are just the outer shell of true reality. Mrs Eddy never exactly denied that matter existed, but she came pretty close to doing so.

In 1871, Mary Baker Eddy founded her church, called the Church of Christ, Scientist, on the premise that our material bodies were symptoms of error in our mortal minds. True human nature was purely spiritual. This means that ill health is also just a result of human error. True health comes from realizing the true spiritual nature of mankind, and with realizing the true spiritual nature of God's love. In 1875, Mary Baker Eddy published her book Science and Health with a Key to the Scriptures in which she outlined the teachings of her new religion. In this book, she argues that Eternal Mind, or God, is the source of all existence. The five senses that report sensations of physical matter to us are simply reporting the mistaken beliefs of the mortal mind. Disease is equally a mistaken belief. Science is the true wisdom of Eternal Mind, as taught by Jesus, that the mind has the power to transcend the illusions of sin, illness, and death. It was for this reason that she named her religion and philosophy Christian Science.

Based upon these teachings, the main issue for which Christian Science became famous was the issue of spiritual healing. Mary Baker Eddy argued that sickness was an illusion, an error, that came from improper perceptions of truth and improper relationships to God. When you lost sight of God's truth, you fell into confusion, and this confusion can be exhibited in the body as sickness. Such confusion and error are signs of sin. Mary Baker Eddy's system of healing, therefore, is a purely spiritual one, designed to "heal" sin, and encourage the patient to focus their thoughts solely on the truth of spiritual life, and thereby reestablish health by

banishing illusion and error. It is this emphasis on the close relationship between physical illness, and spiritual state, that has been picked up and elaborated within the context of the New Age movement. Healing, whether it be the healing of the self, or the healing of the world, is a major concern within the context of the New Age movement. Although very few New Agers use the language of "Christian Science" to articulate their convictions (in fact, the language of "sin" or "error" is avoided entirely in the New Age context), the idea that sickness is a physical manifestation of a spiritual problem, and that spiritual remedies can help alleviate physical symptoms, is widespread among contemporary New Agers.

Theosophy

While Spiritualism contributed to the New Age stress on spirit communication and spiritual evolution, and while Christian Science contributed to the New Age stress on spiritual healing and spiritual/physical correspondences, Theosophy is primarily responsible for contributing to the New Age stress on religious syncretism and its adoption of the concept of "elevated masters" as spiritual teachers. Theosophy is both a philosophy and a religious movement, and as a religious movement it was founded by a woman named Helen Petrovna Blavatsky in 1875. Blavatsky had been active in Spiritualism and the occult since her childhood in Russia. When she moved to the United States, she continued her interest in Spiritualism, and it was this interest that lead her to found the Theosophical Society. Theosophy, however, while similar to Spiritualism, also differs on a number of points. Blavatsky was much more interested in eastern religions than any of the American Spiritualists, and she moved to India in 1879 and set up the headquarters for the Theosophical Society there.

According to Blavatsky, it was not the everyday spirits of the dead who spoke to her, but highly evolved souls, or "masters," who wished to pass on their wisdom to those still on earth.

These souls, or mahatmas, were like the Buddhist saint-like figures who chose to not enter Nirvana until all the souls on earth had been taught how to do so also. The wisdom of these masters was not available to everyone, however, for not everyone was yet spiritually evolved enough to master it. Another concept Blavatsky borrowed from eastern religions was therefore reincarnation, for rebirth over many lifetimes was necessary in order to master the wisdom of these highly evolved souls. Mahatmas were those souls who had finished their own spiritual evolution, and were now trying to help everyone else on earth evolve spiritually.

Blavatsky understood herself to be one of those people chosen by the masters to channel their wisdom to people on earth. According to the wisdom of these masters, the entire universe is simply a varied manifestation of the life of God. Each human being is a spark of the Divine, a miniature version or reflection of the whole, whose physical existence helps transform a latent or potential divinity into an active, full participation in God. Because we all start as part of God, to become physical we must pass down through multiple layers of existence, and add multiple "bodies" at each of these layers, until we come to the earth/physical layer. These layers are: Divine; Monadic; Atomic; Buddhic; Upper Mental; Lower Mental; Astral (Emotional); and Physical. At the Upper Mental level the spark attains a "causal" body; at the Lower Mental level it attains a "mental" body; at the astral level it attains an "astral" body, and at the physical level it attains a physical body. As we master the lessons needed to attain wisdom, we draw upon the resources of all of these levels, and thereby ultimately lead to our reunion with the Divine source of all. In mastering these lessons, and learning to recognize and utilize our astral, mental, and causal bodies, we can learn to do remarkable things - telepathy, teleportation, materializations, etc. Blavatsky, as a messenger for the Mahatmas, was capable of these things.

According to Blavatsky, her role as a messenger of the Mahatmas or Masters heralded the coming of a New Age, in which the spiritual wisdom of east and west would merge. In order to facilitate the coming of the New Age, the Theosophical Society adopted three objectives:

1. To form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or colour.
2. To encourage the study of comparative religion, philosophy, and science.
3. To investigate the unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in man.^{iv}

In terms of the New Age movement, it is both the content of Theosophical teachings and these three basic goals or principles that have had a major impact. The idea of a New Age which draws upon the spiritual traditions of all the worlds religions is one of the defining characteristics of the New Age movement. The idea that the universe is really just a manifestation of God, and that we too are part of this manifestation, is also mainstream in the New Age context. And the idea of enlightened spiritual masters, who can pass on their wisdom through human channels, has also been extremely influential. And finally, the third goal or principle, that of investigating the unexplained laws of nature and powers of man, has also been adopted, especially through the work of parapsychology.

Parapsychology

Parapsychology is the study of the paranormal - those powers and unexplained phenomena that many claim to have experienced and yet which lay outside the bounds of mainstream psychology or science. The history of parapsychology begins with an organization called the Society for Psychical Research in England. The SPR was very closely connected to Spiritualism and Theosophy, for the phenomenon studied by these early investigators were almost entirely connected to mediumship. This research was referred to as psychical research. It was not until 1927, however, when a man named William McDougall set up a psychology

department at Duke University, that parapsychology really developed. McDougall encouraged psychical research within his psychology department, although not all of his fellow professors were happy with him doing so. In 1929, he admitted two new students to his program who wanted to study psychical science exclusively. These students were J.B (Joseph Banks) Rhine and his wife Louisa Rhine. It was the Rhines who put psychical science on the track to scientific semi-respectability.

J.B. Rhine and Louisa Rhine were both originally biologists. Joseph Rhine had been born in 1895; his wife Louisa in 1891. They were married in 1920, after both had earned their degrees in biology. In 1926, they had met a man named Walter Prince, who was a Spiritualist medium. He was apparently a very successful medium, for he managed to convince both of the Rhines that there really was something happening around him that natural science could not explain. They both decided to shift their field of study from natural biology to psychical science. Once they reached Duke university, they set about trying to set up tests that would reveal the nature of whatever seemingly supernatural phenomena was actually taking place. It was through their training in the natural sciences that they insisted on rigid experimental structures for their tests. Both of the Rhines were interested in ghosts and life after death, but they thought that no matter how much evidence you accumulated, you would never be able to show, without question, that there was no other explanation for the phenomena such as visitations, etc. The Rhines wanted to study something they could conclusively prove. So with the support of McDougall, they changed the name of psychical science to parapsychology, and set about standardizing the field so that clear, scientific evidence could be accumulated.

In addition to changing the name of the whole research discipline, the Rhines introduced three major innovations into the study of parapsychology. First, they standardized or classified

the field of study into two distinct categories, which they called Extrasensory perception (ESP), which included three types - telepathy, clairvoyance, and precognition; and Psychokinesis (PK), which was the ability to move objects solely through the power of the mind. Next, they introduced standardized testing equipment (mainly a deck of cards called Zener cards, which had five cards each of five different symbols - cross, star, circle, square, and waves); and automatic dice throwers for PK experiments so as to reduce the chance of cheating. And third, they introduced the idea that anybody could be tested - you didn't have to go out and track down a spiritualist medium or psychic any more. This second innovation was based on J.B. Rhine's assumption that if psychic phenomena existed at all, they should exist in a reasonable sampling of any population group. So the Rhines set up their standardized tests, put some quality controls in place to prevent fraud, and started testing University Students at Duke University by the thousands. And started getting results, too.

In 1934, J.B. Rhine published a book called Extra-Sensory Perception, in which he described his "scientific" research into ESP and published his findings. His standardization of research methods and the statistical evidence in his book succeeded in getting a separate department set up at Duke University solely to study Parapsychology. Since it was his work on ESP that led to getting the Parapsychology department set up, that is what the Rhine's concentrated mainly on for the next several years. The test for ESP is relatively simple. A deck of Zener cards would be shuffled randomly, and then one person, called an "agent", would turn the cards over one by one, while a second person, the test subject, called the "percipient" would record their guesses of what they thought the card to be. Usually, the 'agent' and the 'percipient' would be separated by a divider; sometimes they would be in different rooms; other times, just facing in different directions. The percipient was not supposed to be able to see the agent, as a

safeguard against fraud. When the actual cards were compared to the guesses, Rhine found that the results were significantly above chance expectations.

In their studies of Psychokinesis, which the Rhines began serious work on it in 1934, once the Parapsychology department was established. Their research into PK was mainly centred around attempts by student test subjects to effect the fall of dice as they were thrown, first by hand, then by wooden cups, and finally by a mechanical device which made the toss completely random. Percipients would try to effect the fall of the dice according to a number that was randomly given to them by a controlling agent. The agent would call out "double -six", the dice would be tossed, and the percipient would try to make the dice fall as double sixes. Again, the Rhines claimed to get results significantly above chance expectations.

In the nineteen forties, J.B. Rhine adopted a new term to cover both ESP and PK. This new term was "Psi phenomenon". He was forced to abandon his clear cut distinctions between ESP and PK, because the test results could not always be explained with reference to just one or another. For example, if a percipient gets 10 out of 12 cards right while guessing, is that because of telepathy (he read the agents mind); clairvoyance (he just picked the answer out of thin air); precognition (he looked ahead to when the cards would be revealed, and wrote down what he saw); or psychokinesis (he caused the cards to fall into the order they did when they were shuffled)? Even if the tests showed something was happening, it was very hard to explain just what exactly that something was. So in modern parapsychology today, researchers talk about psi phenomenon, and then use ESP and PK as types of one, unified mysterious "force" at work.

This idea of a single unified spiritual force at work is very influential in the New Age context. Parapsychology has influenced the New Age through its ability to lend a scientific aura of legitimacy to this fundamentally spiritual conviction of a unified spiritual force that underlies

all parapsychological phenomena. There is a surprisingly strong emphasis within the New Age Movement on scientific legitimacy for spiritual experiences. Most New Agers have some experience with telepathy, precognition, PK, or some other parapsychological phenomenon, and believe that these experiences are genuinely "true" in an empirically testable sense. Furthermore, most New Agers share a world view in which wholism is a component - all aspects of reality, scientific and spiritual, are united into a whole, and must therefore be compatible. Parapsychology, therefore, in seeking to give scientific credence to parapsychological phenomenon, also gives scientific credence to spirituality, and spiritual credibility to science.

Worldview

Although it is certainly true that the New Age movement is difficult to define, and that it encompasses a wide variety of diverse beliefs and practices, it is nonetheless also true that common worldview underlies much of the New Age Movement. Although aspects of this worldview are interpreted or articulated differently by individual New Agers, this core of common assumptions about reality are what unite the New Age movement into an identifiable movement at all. Although there is no overarching organizational structure, therefore, within the New Age movement there is an overarching conceptual structure. Keeping in mind that generalizations can ever only be that - generalizations, inapplicable to all participants in the New Age movement - the following characteristics contribute to the particularly "New Age" way of looking at the world.

The first identifiable characteristic of the New Age worldview is that it is monistic. New Agers understand the universe, in all its diversity, to be one, cosmic whole. Everything that exists is united with every other thing that exists, and the seeming diversity of objects in the universe is just a diversity on a material or physical or historical level: underneath everything lies

a cosmic "all-is-oneness." One new ager in fact suggests that the "New Age bottom line is "All is One."^v

The ways in which New Agers conceive of this monistic universe can differ, however. According to sociologist Paul Heelas, some New Agers conceive of this idea of all-is-one in "vertical" ways: they see this physical world, and our physical nature, as one "lower" manifestation of the universe in its entirety, which is seen to encompass many levels and many types of existence. New Agers who conceive of the universe in this way frequently suggest that as we become more spiritually evolved, we will leave behind the physical aspects of existence in favour of "higher" spiritual existences and awarenesses. This evolution might occur spiritually, following the death of the body, or spiritually within a single lifetime.

Other New Agers conceive of the monistic universe more in terms of "horizontal" links than vertical ones. This view stresses the interconnectedness of all things, and all life, without suggesting that one might be evolutionarily superior to another, or that one is "more real" than another. From this view, the physical world we live in, and the interconnectedness of all life within it, is a manifestation of the monistic view that values the physical while recognizing the spiritual within it, rather than "above" it. For some New Agers, both of these views are held simultaneously.

The monistic view of contemporary New Agers carries a few implications for understanding specific New Age teachings. First, the spiritual unity of the universe is conceived in terms of a spiritual energy which unites all things. This energy, similar to the psi phenomenon explored by parapsychologists, is the underlying substance of the universe. In the New Age context, however, this cosmic energy is more than simply the mechanism whereby ESP and PK phenomena occur. It is the very substance of the universe. This energy is consequently

conceptualized as the "God Force," "Cosmic Consciousness," or "Cosmic Love," for the universe is understood to be God, and God is understood to be Love, and Love is understood to be Energy, of which we as human beings are physical expressions.

The second implication of the New Age monistic worldview is the assumption that there is no such thing as coincidence. As within the contemporary worldview of Wiccans, all acts are considered meaningful within the New Age context. New Agers talk about synchronicity - the meaningful relationship between seemingly isolated events that occur within the same time span - as an expression of this conviction that nothing is coincidental. Given the underlying spiritual unity of all things, and given the interconnectedness of all things as united by the spiritual energy of the universe, it follows that all events, and all people, are somehow connected to one another also. Synchronicity is therefore a governing principle of events. Furthermore, the universe in its entirety is understood to be conscious and purposeful. The universe is self aware, and has a reason for existence, of which we are a part. Events in our lives are therefore structured so as to tell us what path we should follow. The underlying spiritual nature of the universe/God speaks to us in signs, symbols, dreams, and seeming "coincidences." One should therefore pay attention to the signs one is given, so that each person can live in accord with the spiritual nature of the universe and with their own spiritual goal.

Third, given the underlying unity of the universe, and the spiritual energy which unites all things including human beings, it follows that glimpses of this reality have been grasped by individuals throughout history. Each of the world's religions, therefore, contains elements of this cosmic truth. According to sociologist Paul Heelas, "the notion that 'all religions are the expression of this same inner reality' means that adherents can find the same... wisdom in apparently different traditions, thereby sidestepping points of disagreement between, say,

Christianity and Buddhism."^{vi} As a result, the religious traditions of the world become a resource for New Agers to borrow or synthesize from. The Hindu mystic, the Christian saint, and the Native American Shaman all have insights into this Cosmic Divine energy of which the universe is made.

In addition to being monistic, the worldview of contemporary New Agers is also wholistic. According to religious studies scholar Ted Peters, "the cardinal principle of wholism is that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts."^{vii} The ultimate whole is of course the universe itself, made up of, but greater than, all of the individual elements of which we, as human beings, are a part. In this sense, wholism is comparable with the monistic view of the universe held by New Agers. Wholism, however, is also the recognition that the universe is made up of many smaller wholes or "whole systems." This idea has been borrowed from the field of biology, in which holism is understood as the complex web of interrelated wholes that make up the world, and the universe. A plant is more than its constituent parts of stem, sap, chlorophyll, roots, etc., and just as an animal is more than the sum of its blood, bones, fur, etc. The whole plant, or animal, is then part of a larger whole - an ecosystem - and an even larger whole - the global environment, and ultimately an even larger whole - the universe itself. Changes which effect one whole system consequently effect each of the larger systems of which the smaller whole is simply a part.

The concept of wholism is applied within the New Age movement to almost every aspect of life and thought. In addition to the concept of monism, the primary expression of this wholism is seen in the recognition that the earth itself is a whole. Human beings are part of the earth, not separate or set apart from it. The recognition of the earth as a whole system is referred to as the Gaia hypothesis, where Gaia is Mother Earth, and Mother Earth is seen to be alive.

This is more than a recognition of a divine spirit who is symbolized by the earth, it is a recognition that the earth itself, and every animal, plant, rock, lake, or breeze that goes into making up the earth, is one whole living entity, an entity that is more than the sum of her constituent parts. This perception of Mother Earth results in a reverence for the earth as a spiritual as well as a physical thing, and in the adoption of an environmental activism stance that works to prevent and reverse pollution and the extinction of species. If animals and trees and lakes and breezes are part of the living body of the Mother, then saving those parts from harm is necessary for the health of the Mother. And the health of the Mother is necessary to our own well-being. Recognizing our links to other species, and to the earth as a whole, is therefore a primary spiritual goal of the New Age movement.

Just as the earth itself is a whole system of which we are a part, so too is human society a whole system. Anything which effects sufficient numbers of individual members of society, therefore, is also presumed to effect society as a whole. This concept of social wholism and the potential impact of parts (individuals) on the whole has become known in New Age contexts as the hundredth monkey concept. This term has been borrowed from the work of paranormal investigator Lyall Watson, who wrote about a strange occurrence apparently observed by primatologists studying macaques living on islands off the coast of Japan. These researchers observed that one particular female macaque began, as the result of an individualist quirk, to wash the potatoes that constituted a large part of the macaque diet in streams or the ocean before eating them. She then taught this trick to her mother and other members of the group, and even more members of the group learned to do the same. This new pattern of learned behaviour apparently interested the primatologists, but didn't surprise them until something inexplicable happened. Suddenly, overnight, macaques on other islands and on the mainland were also

washing potatoes before eating them - without ever having come into contact with the first influenced group. According to Watson,

This is what seems to have happened. In the autumn of that year, an unspecified number of monkeys on Koshima [island] were washing sweet potatoes in the sea... Let us say, for argument's sake, that the number was ninety-nine and that at eleven o'clock on a Tuesday morning, one further convert was added to the fold in the usual way. But the addition of the hundredth monkey apparently carried the number across some sort of threshold, pushing it through a kind of critical mass, because by that evening almost everyone was doing it. Not only that, but the habit seems to have jumped natural barriers and to have appeared spontaneously, like glycerine crystals in sealed laboratory jars, in colonies on other islands and on the mainland in a troop at Takasakiyama.^{viii}

The concept of the hundredth monkey has been picked up by New Agers and applied to human beings. If all monkeys can suddenly learn a new behaviour once a "critical mass" of them have learned it, then perhaps all human beings can learn a new, spiritual way of being once a certain number of us have transformed our own way of living and seeing the world. No matter how diverse the religions, philosophies, and cultures of the world, therefore, once a certain number of people have become genuinely spiritual in their outlook, all these diversities will be overcome, and the entire population of the world will attain a spiritual outlook. The search for spiritual enlightenment for one's self, therefore, is also the search for spiritual enlightenment for our species, and for the world and universe itself.

If human society is one complex whole in which the actions of individuals can effect the larger group, it follows that each branch of human knowledge is also a part of a larger, integrated

whole. The wholistic aspect of contemporary New Age worldview has therefore been drawn upon to criticize the compartmentalization of knowledge. New Agers are critical of what they see as the reductionistic methods of knowledge production practised in the contemporary world. In a reductionistic model, according to New Age thinker and physicist Fritjof Capra, it is assumed that "all aspects of complex phenomena can be understood by reducing them to their constituent parts."^{ix} In a wholistic model, on the other hand, the world is "no longer seen as a machine, made up of a multitude of objects, but... as one indivisible whole."^x It follows that such seemingly diverse fields as physics, biology, psychology, philosophy, and theology all have something relevant to say about this complex, indivisible whole. It further follows that these fields of knowledge, previously isolated from one another, are parts of a larger, unified field of knowledge that can reveal the underlying unity of all existence. No matter how diverse these fields of knowledge currently appear, therefore, they are all, if properly understood and applied, in search of the same cosmic truth about the nature of the universe.

Yet another implication of the wholistic aspect of the contemporary New Age worldview is the perception that, like the world itself, each individual is made up of diverse parts that are nonetheless united in a coherent, unified whole. New Agers stress the fundamental unity of the body, the mind, and spirit. Although New Agers speak of "spiritual" concerns and "physical" concerns, they stress that true awareness transcends these distinctions. Health is the effect of a well-balanced person, and balance is attained only by treating all aspects of the individual. For this reason, the primary emphasis within the New Age movement on healing centres on the ideal of wholistic health care. The physical, emotional, mental, social, environmental and spiritual aspects of a person's life must be addressed before healing can take place. Furthermore, preventative rather than interventionist medicine is seen as the best medicine. Ignoring any of

the "parts" that go into making up the whole human being can lead to the fragmentation of the person, and this in turn leads to dis-ease and illness. The best way to treat a person is therefore to prevent fragmentation in the first place, so that illness doesn't follow, or to encourage reintegration of the person into a healthy whole, so that illness will then be alleviated. Recognizing the wholistic nature of our selves, and of our integration with the large natural whole of the world, and the universe itself, therefore lies at the core of the New Age emphasis on healing.

In addition to its monistic and a wholistic emphasis, the worldview of the contemporary New Age movement is also individualistic. The individual is one "whole" within the larger whole that is the universe itself. As such, she represents a microcosm (universe in miniature), and in working towards an individualistic spiritual transformation, she thereby helps transform the world. The goal of individual transformation is therefore central within the New Age context. In fact, religious studies scholar J. Gordon Melton suggests that "the central vision of the New Age is one of radical mystical transformation on an individual level."^{xi} This radical mystical transformation, whether phrased in terms of self-fulfilment, self-actualization, realization of God-consciousness, or attaining enlightenment, can be reached by following a wide variety of spiritual paths. Any spiritual path that can awaken the individual self to its creative and spiritual potential, and to its fundamental oneness with the universe itself, is thereby 'legitimate' within the New Age context. Similarly, any technique such as biofeedback, meditation, hypnosis, vision quests, prayer, etc. that can help one get in touch with one's self is accepted. Paths which stress the sinful, fallen, helpless, or inviolate/separate nature of man, however, are rejected or excluded from the New Age spiritual repertoire.

Awakening to one's own creative and spiritual potential can take many forms. Generally, it means developing an intuitive approach to knowledge and experience, or what New Agers call a "whole brain" approach. This in turn can lead to the development of psychic gifts such as telepathy, empathy, healing powers, visionary powers, and the power to speak to spirits on other levels of existence. It is a truism within the New Age context that in our everyday lives we use only ten percent of our minds. Once each individual learns to tap into the other ninety percent of his or her mind, untold powers become available.

Awakening to one's own individual spiritual nature also involves recognizing that each individual creates his or her own reality. Because all things are understood to parts of a unified whole, and because all things are in essence spiritual energy, it follows that the actualized expression of that energy that we experience around us results from our own shaping of those energy forces. From the perspective of the New Age, there is no one, true "reality" out there somewhere, beyond the simple assertion that all things are one, and that this oneness is God, and Love. Everything else, positive or negative, is the result of one's own expectations. If you experience illness, it is because you have shaped your life, and your body, that way. If you experience health, or success, or happiness, that too is because you have directed the universal and personal energies to accomplish those goals. For some new agers, this idea that each person shapes their own reality is placed in the context of reincarnation beliefs: that each person chooses the life they will lead while in the spirit realm, and then lives the chosen life to learn needed spiritual lessons. For others, this idea that reality is shaped by each individual person is understood in terms of the sheer mental and spiritual power of the individual in this lifetime. Focusing your energies on a goal, consciously or unconsciously, positively or negatively, will bring that goal to fruition. In the words of one New Age thinker, individuals who have

awakened to their own spiritual natures and their own spiritual potentials become "artists and scientists of [their] own lives."^{xii}

Another term for individual spiritual transformation is individual spiritual evolution, and an evolutionary focus is the next important aspect of contemporary New Age worldview. Evolution is one of the most important concepts and metaphors within the New Age movement today. According to religious studies scholar Ted Peters, within the New Age context the term "evolution" may refer to either a "psychological change within an individual's lifetime [or] to revolutionary transformation in human consciousness that could occur within a single generation."^{xiii} This evolution or transformation of consciousness is the next stage in human evolution itself. Having attained a critical mass of individuals who have evolved spiritually as individuals, the whole of society will evolve with them. This evolution of consciousness will entail the development of a planetary consciousness, in which the unity of all will be acknowledged and utilized, and the fragmented and self-destructive ways of the past will be overcome. For some New Agers, once this planetary consciousness has been attained, the need for our physical existence will be over, and we will evolve to a higher spiritual state independent of physical bodies. For others, it means simply that we recognize the spiritual value in both physical and spiritual dimensions of reality. In all cases, the evolution of consciousness on the individual and social levels are what leads to the coming of the New Age.

The belief that a new age of spiritual enlightenment is nearly upon us is the fifth aspect of contemporary New Age worldview. This millennial focus is what gives the New Age movement its name. The coming New Age, sometimes called the Age of Aquarius, will be a time when the underlying unity of all the world's religious teachings are recognized, when the underlying spiritual unity of all life is recognized, and when spiritual or divine nature of all existence is

recognized and affirmed. The evolving planetary consciousness of people will lead to a sense of affiliation to all life that transcends that of limited allegiance to family, race, or nation.

Harmonic Convergence

Although conceptions of when this New Age shall occur differ widely within the context of the New Age movement, one popular date given is that of 2012 C.E. This date, according to New Ager Jose Arguelles, coincides with the end of a 5200 year Mayan calendar cycle which began in 3113 B.C.E. According to Arguelles, the coming of the New Age in 2012 was preceded by a "peak period" in human and global energies called the Harmonic convergence, which took place August 16-17 1987. On these dates, according to Arguelles, the Aztec calendar came to an end, and the planets in the solar system aligned within 123 degrees of one another for the first time in 23,412 years. As a result, it marked a turning point towards a New Age in which each individual's consciousness would attain a unity of four levels of mind: the limbic or autonomic nervous system functions, the emotional-conceptual functions, the rational-purposeful functions, and the spiritual functions which are in tune with the evolutionary consciousness of the planet. Arguelles called for 144,000 enlightened spiritual teachers to gather at the world's "power spots" (everywhere from Mt. Shasta in California to the Pyramids in Egypt) to meditate and visualize the coming of the New Age, and to help heal the earth and earth's citizens in anticipation of a new era of spiritual enlightenment and ecological awareness. According to sociologist Gordon Melton, more than the requested 144,000 people participated in the Harmonic Convergence effort. Although the 2012 date suggested by Arguelles as the date for the coming of the New Age is by no means adopted by all New Agers, the conviction that this New Age is coming, or quite possibly that it is already here, is central to the New Age worldview.

The Celestine Prophecy

The book by James Redfield titled The Celestine Prophecy, published in 1993, is an excellent example of a New Age novel. In it, the worldview of contemporary New Agers is clearly articulated. The novel tells the story of one man's quest for the "insights" contained within a manuscript discovered in the jungles of Peru. This manuscript, written thousands of years ago, tells the story of the spiritual evolution of human kind, and provides readers with the necessary insights to awaken this spiritual growth within themselves. As each insight is grasped, it triggers in the reader a greater awareness of the spiritual nature of mankind, and triggers also a desire to search for the next spiritual insight. The powers that be, however, in this case represented by a reactionary Catholic Church and a militaristic Government, have been attempting to suppress knowledge of the manuscript so that the status quo can be maintained. Despite the destruction of the original manuscript and the murder of those who would spread its message, however, the powers that be are destined to fail. The word is out, spread by word of mouth, and the spiritual transformation of the world thereby only delayed rather than prevented by those who would see it fail.

The Nine Insights

The Celestine Prophecy suggests that there are nine spiritual insights that must be grasped so that the spiritual transformation of human beings and the world can be attained.

These nine insights are :

1. A Critical Mass. The first insight is the recognition of the synchronicity of events. The seeming coincidences that we all experience in our lives are not coincidences at all, but are instead messages to us about the nature of our spiritual paths. Paying attention to these coincidences will reveal to us the paths we should take to attain spiritual growth. The more spiritually advanced you become, the more aware of these meaningful events you will become.

As enough people realize that the synchronicity of events is meaningful, the way will be opened for the transformation of consciousness not just of individuals, but of the species as a whole. Such a "critical mass" has now been, or soon will be, attained, and mankind is ready for the next spiritual insight.

2. The Longer Now. The second insight is the recognition of the transformative and evolutionary pattern of history. To understand the materialistic, mechanistic, atheistic world we live in today, and to understand why such a world seems so empty and meaningless, one must understand that the late twentieth century world is merely the culmination of a task we set for ourselves hundreds of years ago. Having turned to the study of nature in an attempt to find out about God and God's plan for us, we forgot along the way that the answers we were looking for would be a long time coming. Now they have started to appear, however, and that is why more and more people find the secular, scientific, materialistic world unsatisfactory.

3. A Matter of Energy. The third insight is the recognition that the whole world, and each individual, is really made up of energy. This lesson, which contemporary physics teaches us, is also a spiritual lesson, for this energy is more than physical energy, it is spiritual energy. Recognizing the true energy nature of all things allows us to transcend the materialistic trap of thinking that matter, rather than spirit, is our primary form. The physical is simply a concrete manifestation of energy, and all individual physical things are just manifestations of the larger energy pattern of the universe.

4. The Struggle for Power. The fourth insight is the recognition that each of us needs energy to support ourselves, and that in our unenlightened states we feed off the energy of others to meet this need. Trying to get energy from others by having them make us the centre of their attention, however, is stealing energy, and represents a false solution to our need for energy. We

need to find an energy source which does not drain others, and which can keep us sustained indefinitely. This is the energy of God, not mankind.

5. The Message of the Mystics. The fifth insight, therefore, is that God is Energy, that this energy is love. The fifth insight is the recognition that the world's mystics, those people who have experienced unity with God, have tapped into a religious truth: that God is a well-spring of energy and love that can sustain us indefinitely, and that lives inside ourselves. All the world's religions have recognized this fundamental truth: they have simply articulated it according to the specific teachings of each tradition. The truth, however, remains the same.

6. Clearing the Past. The sixth insight is the recognition that each person has a spiritual goal in life, and that this goal can be discovered once negative behaviour patterns learned in childhood are overcome. In times of stress we revert to these patterns of behaviour, and it is only as we become more spiritually aware that we can recognize, overcome, and transcend these patterns to find our true purpose in life. These patterns, called "control dramas," take one of four kinds: the 'poor me' pattern, the 'aloof' pattern, the 'inquisitor' pattern, and the 'intimidator' pattern. The 'poor me' pattern is one where you try to make others feel guilty so they will pay more attention to you. The 'aloof' pattern is one where you act mysterious and aloof, so that people will try to get you to open up and thereby will focus their attention on you. The 'inquisitor' pattern is one where you find fault in others, and force them to pay attention to you by putting themselves down. And the 'intimidator' pattern is one where you intimidate or frighten others into paying attention to you. Not only are these control dramas learned from your family, however, so too is your spiritual goal. The spiritual goal of every person is to synthesize and transcend the behaviours and philosophies of our parents. Surpassing our parents, spiritually, is the way in which human spiritual evolution takes place.

7. Engaging the Flow. The seventh insight is the recognition that having attained knowledge of our spiritual path, we must maintain that recognition and be open to the signs, dreams, coincidences, etc. that point towards the next steps we should take to maintain our progress. These signs will increase as we become more open to them.

8. The Interpersonal Ethic. The eighth insight is the recognition that many of these signs or coincidences will come from the wisdom of other individuals. It is only in meeting with others, and sharing their insights, that we can attain our own. Similarly, it is only in sharing our own insights that others can take the next steps on their own paths. Communication is therefore a central spiritual task, but communication at the right time and place. Talking too much, and preventing others from having their say, is a spiritual failure. Failing to speak, when you have something to say, is also a spiritual failure. Everyone on earth is here for a reason, and each of us must communicate with others for these purposes to be fulfilled.

9. The Emerging Culture. The ninth insight is the recognition that as enough people grasp the previous eight, society will shift into a new mode of evolutionary being. Material wants will be taken care of by mechanical means, and we will be free to focus on spiritual concerns. As this spiritual focus continues, we will evolve beyond the need for the physical at all, and attain an evolutionary level in which we become beings of pure energy. This will unite us with other beings of pure energy, including the souls of those who have died in the body, and attained a purely spiritual existence. The emerging culture represents the dawn of a New Age.

As is evident from the above "insights," The Celestine Prophecy is clearly a "New Age" text. The Insights reflect every aspect of the New Age worldview. The popularity of this book - a New York Times bestseller - is perhaps the biggest indicator of the widespread popularity of the New Age movement itself.

Endnotes

- i Melton, J. Gordon, Jerome Clark and Aidan A. Kelly. New Age Almanac. Detroit,MI: Visible Ink Press, 1991, pp. 4-8.
- ii Moore, R. Laurence. In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture. New York: Oxford Press,1977, p. 15.
- iii N.S.A.C. 1991:36. Many Spiritualist churches have adopted lists of principles written in more readily accessible language. An alternate version reads: 1. The fatherhood of God; 2. The brotherhood of man; 3. The immortality of the soul and its personal characteristics; 4. Communion between departed human spirits and mortals; 5. Personal responsibility; 6. Compensation and retribution for all good and evil deeds done on earth; 7. A path of eternal progress, open to every soul.
- iv Melton, J. Gordon. Encyclopedic Handbook of Cults in America. Revised and Updated Edition. New York/London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1992, pp. 129-130.
- v This is the claim of R. Chandler (Understanding the New Age. Milton Keynes: Word UK, 1989, p. 27), as quoted in Paul Greer. "The Aquarian Confusion: Conflicting Theologies of the New Age." Journal of Contemporary Religion 10(2) 1995:151-166, p. 161.
- vi Heelas, Paul. "The New Age in Cultural Context: the Premodern, the Modern and the Postmodern." Religion 23(1993):103-116, p. 105.
- vii Peters, Ted. The Cosmic Self: A Penetrating Look at Today's New Age Movements. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991, p. 58.
- viii Quoted in Melton, Clark & Kelly, The New Age Almanac p. 411. Melton cites Ken Keyes' 1982 work "The Hundredth Monkey" as the primary New Age adaptation of this story. A movie produced by Elda Hartley called "The Hundredth Monkey" also served to popularize the story and concept.
- ix Fritjof Capra, quoted in Kyle, Richard. The New Age Movement in Contemporary American Culture. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995, p. 88.
- x Capra, quoted in Kyle 1995, p. 88.
- xi Melton, J. Gordon. Encyclopedic Handbook of Cults in America. Revised and Updated Edition. New York and London: Garland Publishing, inc., 1992, p. 172.
- xii Marilyn Ferguson, quoted in Kyle 1995, p. 82.
- xiii Peters 1991, p. 75.