

Prophecy, Cosmology and the New Age Movement
The Extent and Nature of Contemporary Belief in Astrology

Chapter 1

Introduction

Astrology in the Contemporary world

Astrology occupies a prominent place in contemporary British popular culture. It is considered to be a New Age belief or practice (York 1995), paranormal (Rice 2003: 100) or an 'alternative religion' (Hunt 2003: 171-3), is seen as a potential contributor to the decline of the mainstream churches in Britain (Gill 1999) and is considered worthy of comment by the cosmologist Stephen Hawking (2001: 103). Richard Dawkins, Professor of the Public Understanding Of Science at Oxford University, believes that astrologers should be prosecuted for fraud (1998: 121), while the British television regulatory code prohibits the broadcast of 'horoscopes' except as 'entertainment' or as the subject of 'legitimate inquiry', and forbids it at times when children are likely to be watching television (ITC 2003: 1.10). Yet all women's magazines in the UK carry horoscope columns and, in December and January, both they and the 'tabloid' newspapers publish heavily promoted supplements of forecasts for the coming year. Moreover, press stories on astrology generally create the impression that it is a multimillion pound industry. For example, in August 2003 Robert Matthews (2003: 9) wrote in *The Sunday Telegraph* that,

astrology has grown to be a huge worldwide business...It seems that no sector of society is immune to its attraction. A recent survey found that a third of science students subscribed to some aspects of astrology, while some supposedly hard-headed businessmen now support a thriving market in "financial astrology"...Astrology supplements have been known to increase newspaper circulation figures and papers are prepared to pay huge sums to the most popular stargazers...[who] can earn £600,000 or more a year. A single profitable web site can be worth as much as £50 million.

Although all such quoted figures are given without reliable sources, they tend to be repeated as journalists base subsequent reports on each others' work (see for example Hale 2003). There is, in fact, little in the way of reliable information on astrology's

place in contemporary British culture. This study is a preliminary attempt to rectify this situation.

Background

This study arose in part from my personal experience over the past twenty-five years that much of the public discourse on astrology is dominated by the assumption that astrology is overwhelmingly a matter of belief. Interest in astrology is interpreted as 'belief' and students and practitioners of it are characterised as 'believers'. In the 1990s, when both the Astrological Association of Great Britain and the British organisation, the Association of Professional Astrologers, routinely referred historical and sociological questions from journalists to me, I was frequently asked both about the extent of belief in astrology and for explanations for this belief. The question of my own belief or disbelief in the subject was also often an issue for interviewers and still is, given that I am generally perceived to be a defender of, or advocate for, astrology, a role which I resist. For example, on 18 August 2003 I took part in a number of radio interviews which were part of a wide-ranging media response to the publication of an article in *The Sunday Telegraph* on 17 August (Matthews 2003), reporting on a paper (Dean and Kelly 2003) which purported to show that astrology's claims were false. Although I was introduced on both programmes as an academic, on the London station, Talk Radio, I was asked 'Are you a believer?' and, on the Irish station RTE, I was asked 'Do you believe in it?'. Of the many dozens of radio and television interviews in which I have been involved over the previous decade, I can not remember a single hostile critic of astrology being asked whether they disbelieve. My perception of such questions concerning personal belief is therefore that they are designed to expose bias, the assumption being that the 'believer' can not be trusted to give reliable statements about astrology's nature, role and function. The 'disbeliever', meanwhile, is presumed to be impartial and objective. As David Hufford wrote of religious belief in general, rather than of astrology in particular, 'we know that scholars just aren't supposed to believe

things like that', adding, 'but we have never been taught exactly why' (Hufford 1995: 71).

In response to such media inquiries, I began to investigate the problem for myself. It became clear that the nature of personal belief and the extent of public belief are more complex questions than the journalistic request for precise figures and simple 'yes/no' answers would suggest. This was brought home to me in the mid-1990s when I participated in a discussion on astrology on the British television station, Central Television. In response to questions from the presenter, ninety-nine members of the hundred-strong audience admitted to reading horoscope columns, but only one was prepared to admit to belief in astrology. Clearly, whilst some reports use readership of horoscope columns as an indicator of belief, the vast majority of people who would be so classified resist categorisation as believers, especially in a forum as public as a television studio. The word 'belief' itself would seem to be loaded with additional meaning. It seems apparent, as well, that there is a gulf between practice, in this case the readership of horoscope columns, and belief, the willingness to subscribe to a worldview in which such columns may be taken seriously.

My study will be largely confined to the astrology of the English-speaking world. This is for the simple reason that the general failure of the citizens of the USA and UK to speak languages other than English extends to the world of astrology, with the result that British and American astrologers read each others' work, but that developments from Europe tend only to have an impact in the English-speaking world when they are championed by single individuals (Harvey 1973: 1). For example, while German astrologers in the 1920s and 30s were devising ever more complex forms of interpreting horoscopes via the so-called 'Hamburg School' (Rudolph 1973), British astrologers 'were hardly aware of what was afoot in Leipzig, Munich, Düsseldorf, Hamburg and other centres of Teutonic astrological endeavour' (Howe 1967: 66). The situation is

unchanged. Since it began holding national conferences in 1968 the Astrological Association of Great Britain has held only one conference, in 1992, at which translation facilities were provided, and European speakers are rare; in 2003 only two speakers were from mainland Europe, as opposed to four from the USA, fourteen from the UK and one from Australia; a total of nineteen from the English-speaking world.

The Structure of this Study

The title of this thesis is 'Prophecy, Cosmology and the New Age Movement: the extent and nature of contemporary belief in astrology'. The prophecy examined is that which forecasts the coming of the often synonymous periods of the Age of Aquarius and the New Age. The cosmology under examination is that application of astronomy to the measurement and prediction of historical periods, particularly the nineteenth and twentieth-century theosophical revival of a neo-Platonic, teleological cosmos whose character is primarily understood spiritually. The New Age is then examined chiefly as an ideological rather than, say, a sociological, phenomenon. The specific examination of contemporary belief in astrology is then intended to illuminate wider contemporary issues concerning the supposed relationship between 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' beliefs within the context of debates on the place of religion in the modern world, particularly Britain. An underlying theme throughout the thesis is a consideration of the role of millenarian thought in the modern west, especially in relation to the popularity and function of astrology.

I have four major concerns in this study.

Firstly whether astrology is a New Age discipline and, if so, what is its relationship with millenarianism?

Secondly whether, if astrology is a New Age discipline, it should be seen as a rival to mainstream Christianity.

Thirdly, if it is a rival to Christianity, whether quantification of belief in astrology may indicate the extent of that rivalry.

Fourthly, whether astrology's continued existence represents the anomalous survival of a pre-modern superstition in the modern world. Is it, as Adorno (1994: 36) claimed, 'basically discordant with today's universal state of enlightenment'?

The thesis is divided into three parts.

Part 1 will consider astrology's potential New Age identity against the background of western millenarianism, the development of the idea of the astrological ages and the question of belief in the Age of Aquarius, together with a consideration of contemporary debates on the nature and origins of the New Age movement itself.

Part 2 will examine two significant developments in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century western astrology which arose out of astrology's engagement with theosophical millenarianism in the 1890s and 1900s. The first such development was the conscious creation of an esoteric astrology, an astrology of the soul, in the 1890s-1900s. By the 1930s this new form of astrology was being integrated with depth psychology, particularly Jungian psychology, to create a psychological astrology, an astrology whose prime focus of attention was the personality rather than - as had been in the case in the nineteenth-century - the environment, life circumstances and the prediction of events. The second development was a sharply increased emphasis on the sun as the principle focus of horoscopic interpretation. By the 1930s this led to the development of the language of the twelve birth signs as a new and potent form of vernacular astrology.

It is this form of astrology on which most contemporary estimates of 'belief' in astrology are based.

Part 3 will contain two sections. The first will summarise the previous literature on the extent of, and reasons for, belief in astrology. The second will report on my own data; this includes interviews with astrologers, questionnaires distributed at astrology conferences, and questionnaires distributed to public groups and designed to reflect on previous research on public attitudes to astrology. My research is therefore divided between the quantitative and qualitative (Bryman 2001) or what Runkel (1990: 1) called 'the method of relative frequencies' and 'the method of specimens'. My purpose is to examine whether previous estimates of 'belief' in astrology are reliable.

Previous Studies

Although astrology is, as has been noted, a subject of considerable journalistic interest, there has been little academic concern with its contemporary cultural nature and function. The English-language literature on the New Age movement includes only one paper devoted to astrology (Feher 1992), while there are a handful of sociological studies which attempt to describe and quantify belief in astrology (Wuthnow 1978; Paulik and Buse 1984; Bauer and Durant 1997). Most critiques of astrology tend to concentrate on the veracity of astrology's claims and assume an *a priori* hostile position in which astrology represents either scientific ignorance (Culver and Ianna 1988; Martens and Trachet 1998) or religious error (Anderson 1988; Morey 1981), with just a few examples of general surveys by sympathetic writers (Parker 1970; Spencer 2000). There is therefore still no wide-ranging work which examines astrology's cultural locus which may be classed as academic or rigorous. As Yinger said of religious studies in 1969, 'we are still at the "natural history" level of research, trying to describe all the wonderful beasts of the jungle' (Yinger 1969: 98). Thirty-four years later this is still the case with the investigation of astrology's place in the modern world.

Methodology

My interest is with astrology's cultural status, rather than with the truth of its claims. As Gaynard observed in a study of young people's belief in the paranormal, 'it is probably of equal interest to ask, for example, why more people *believe* that they have experienced precognition than OBE¹ as it is to question why more people *have* experienced precognition than OBE' (Gaynard 1992: 179). My approach has been influenced by the phenomenological principles first set out in 1913 by Edmund Husserl, who argued that it was essential that all inquiries into any area of human endeavour touching on consciousness paid due respect to the 'I' (Husserl 1972: 7), the individual's subjective experience, rather than attempt to explain it away or reduce it to quantitative measurement. Husserl argued that the task of the phenomenologist was not to judge the phenomena under investigation but rather the "'description" [of]...the realm of essential structures of transcendental subjectivity immediately transparent to the mind'. In other words, the phenomenon - in this case, belief in astrology - may be understood on its own terms rather, say, than as a variety of some other category, such as a form of religion or science.

In view of my focus on the question of whether astrology is a New Age movement, and hence on its relationship with Christianity, I have been influenced by the extension of Husserl's phenomenological approach into the new discipline of the study of religions, and in particular by Ninian Smart. It was Smart who largely defined the discipline's approach as one of 'methodological neutralism' or 'agnosticism' (Smart 1973b: 94, 108), as opposed to the personal religious commitment which, he argued, had once assumed to be a prerequisite of the study of theology (Smart 1973a: 12; 1973b: 4). The phenomenological approach is a useful one in this study precisely because it enables me, as an insider within the field of astrology, to recognise that position and its

attendant value judgements, while pursuing the goal of as neutral as possible an understanding of the contemporary extent and nature of belief in astrology.

The phenomenological approach may be simply defined as one 'in which differing belief systems are examined as perceived in their own terms, rather than by adopting a reductionist stance' (Caird and Law 1982: 153). Thus, my investigation of the question of belief in astrology is descriptive and analytical rather than judgemental, my immediate precedents in this respect being three principal academic works on the New Age; those by York (1995), Heelas (1996) and Hanegraaff (1996).

The study of astrology's cultural identity within such a framework does not in itself suggest that astrology need be necessarily considered either a New Age discipline or a religion, for, as Ninian Smart argued, 'the study of religion is itself strategic to some of the human sciences; it also passes into the study of "non-religious ideologies" without affecting their status' (Smart 1973a: 11). In other words, the phenomenological approach developed in the study of religions may be applied to other disciplines. In addition, any consideration of whether astrology is a religion does not, as Smart continued, have any bearing upon the truth of its claims. Later in this study I have dealt at length with literature produced by hostile critics of astrology, both evangelical Christians and scientific sceptics, much of which focuses on the supposed falsity of astrology claims. In addition, I have attempted to deal with them in as neutral a way as possible by reporting their arguments without judgement.

It is also important from a phenomenological perspective to allow astrologers to speak for themselves and relate their own experience. This is a goal which I have tried to achieve through surveying the literature with an open mind, reporting on claims and assertions without personal judgment, and through semi-structured interviews. On the grounds that such people may have specialized knowledge and experience in the field, I

have therefore conducted the bulk of my fieldwork amongst those active in astrology, particularly attendees at astrology conferences. To use Ninian Smart's adaptation of Husserl's phrase, I am concerned with the astrologer's 'I-picture' (Smart 1973a: 24), the definitions astrologers use for themselves, as opposed to those which may be allocated to them by academics or external critics. As Husserl himself noted (1965: 90-1), the phenomenological study of consciousness is emphatically not the same as the psychological study of consciousness, for the researcher is seeking to observe and describe, not explain in terms of preordained categories. My fieldwork amongst the wider public, meanwhile, is more limited and is intended to cast light on existing research in order to suggest possible models for future research.

In addition, Husserl argued, the phenomenological process should begin with the investigator's reflection on their own 'I' (Husserl 1972: 7), the set of assumptions and biases which they bring to the investigation or in this case, as Smart would say, my own 'I-picture'. At the heart of this process is reflexivity, the ability to reflect on one's own motives and biases which is necessary if one is to avoid the possibility that these will unduly shape one's conclusions. Moreover, as Smart (1973a: 11) argued, reflexivity implies the existence of a dialectical relationship between the student of religion and the object of study, with the beliefs of both the student and the individuals studied liable to change. The existence of such a relationship necessarily challenges what Charlotte Davies has defined as social science's 'implicit assumption that we are investigating something "outside ourselves"', an aspiration which she doubts is possible even in 'hard' sciences such as astronomy and physics, which still, like the arts and humanities, require the researcher to evaluate evidence and reach conclusions which can never be entirely separated from questions of personal conditioning or bias (Davies 1999: 3). Reflexivity, which Davies defines as 'a turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference' is, in her opinion, vital to intelligent research, but nevertheless carries potential pitfalls: it may lead to a 'form of self-absorption...in which boundaries

between subject and object disappear [and] the one becomes the other, a process that effectively denies the possibility of social research' (Davies 1999: 4-5). However, following Hufford's distinction between the 'scholarly' and 'personal' voice (Hufford 1995: 57), I have attempted to emphasise the former, observing Davies' opinion that, if the danger of 'self-absorption' is fully acknowledged, then 'genuine reflexive ethnographic research...can be undertaken from a realist perspective' (Davies 1999: 6). Reflexivity, Davies continues, is not a single phenomenon but assumes various forms, affecting the research process at every stage.

While pursuing a scholarly voice, though, I am aware of Kenneth Pike's distinction, first formulated in 1954 (Pike 1971: 5-7; Headland 1990: 15), between the two distinct modes of being, emic and etic. These are derived from the words phonemic, meaning a sound, and phonetic, the word or symbol used to represent that sound (McCutcheon 1999: 15). Pike himself defined an 'emic unit' as a 'physical or mental item treated by insiders as relevant to their system of behaviour' (Pike 1990: 28), as opposed to 'etic' units which are externally imposed or conditioned. Although there is no standard agreement over the two terms' precise definition (Harris 1990), roughly translated 'emic' means insider and 'etic' outsider (Pike 1971: 17; Harris 1990: 51; McCutcheon 1999: 17). However, it would be false to imagine the existence of a simple insider-outsider polarity, in which emic and etic function as mutually exclusive categories, for any individual may be a member of different emic subsystems, while any person in an emic situation is also bound simultaneously to be part of a real, etic, external world that is not, as the extreme reflexive position would hold, merely a personal projection (Pike 1990: 32, 34-5; see also Harris 1990: 48-9). It is important, in order to balance Hufford's personal and scholarly voices, to be able to take both etic and emic positions, a point made convincingly by James Lett (Lett 1990: 135-6). It may therefore be argued that individuals may adopt emic or etic stances at different times and in distinct situations, particularly in relation to a diverse discipline such as astrology. As Hill

wrote of the Church of England, if one defines an insider as a 'member' who shares the group's definitions of its dogma then further questions are suggested: is the member lay or clergy, what is the level of commitment and what is their personal understanding of the official dogma? (Hill 1979: 11). These variables may ultimately render generalisation extremely difficult, if not meaningless. What is important, though, is that, fulfilling Evans-Pritchard's (1967: 61, 79) first condition for the anthropologist, I speak the 'native's' language; I understand the ways in which astrologers communicate. The paradox Smart noted in relation to phenomenological studies is of importance here: they must be value-free in the sense that the phenomenon is not subject to *a priori* judgements and the researcher's own subjective experience must be 'bracketed out', yet such an approach may actually evoke a 'value-rich' appreciation of the meaning of the religion being observed (Smart 1973b: 21).

There is, therefore, the question of the value which I, as an insider, may or may not attach to astrology. As Michael Hill wrote in his discussion of approaches to the sociology of religion, 'the more crystallised are the value-systems in the social phenomenon being studied...the more self-conscious becomes the problem of value in the observer' (Hill 1979: 6-7). Hill argued that one does not need to be a member of a group in order to understand it, and was critical of those 'insider' studies, such as those within Christian groups, which adopted the methodologies of social science but regarded the group's doctrine as a given. Yet, as Stark noted, 'the most important factor in creating a truly scientific study of religion' in the late twentieth-century was the entry into the field of 'persons of faith' (Stark: 1999: 54). I realise that, as an emic within astrology as a whole, if not within particular sub-groups, to an etic observer, I may well be characterised as a 'person of faith'. However, my study does not concern the veracity of astrological claims and only touches on the verdicts which have been made on those claims, both for and against, to the extent that they shape the literature on belief. Like

Hanegraaff (1996: 8 n.26) I am investigating emic statements, but with a view to investigating to what extent they correspond with existing etic judgements.

Following Ninian Smart (1973a: 1), it is appropriate to set out certain autobiographical details. I have studied astrology since 1971. Between 1975 and 1984 I earned a proportion of my income by casting horoscopes for clients, from 1980-4 I taught the subject in adult education in London and since 1986 I have been paid to write popular books and features on astrology. I have served on the committees of a number of astrological societies, including a term (1994-9) as President of the Astrological Association of Great Britain. In terms of astrology as a whole, then, I am very much an 'insider' with an 'emic' perspective, and have been so in an institutional sense; that is, in terms of active involvement in societies and teaching, since 1978. However, although I tend to be treated as an insider within any group of astrologers, I may still feel like an outsider in terms of my inner 'emic' identity. I am not in accord with astrologers who read past lives in the birth chart, argue that classical modes of interpretation are superior to modern ones, marry astrology with counselling or routinely examine the horoscopes of their friends and colleagues. In addition, my identity is strongly shaped by involvement in other groups in which astrology may be regarded, from an etic perspective, as either a fringe activity or false and possibly offensive. For example, I have good friends who are materialist, atheists and sceptics, and close family members who are 'born-again' Christians. I myself grew up in a strong Church of England background and have experienced Christianity in different forms. For me, the emic-etic, insider-outsider relationship is therefore not a polarity but a constantly shifting set of ideas and experiences which may vary with time and location. This complexity actually accords with Pike's own view: one can be an etic observer within an emic system, but no two etics will ever interpret the same emic phenomenon in exactly the same way (Pike 1971: 44-48).

However, such is the diversity of opinion within astrology that it may be argued that, if the differences between astrologers en masse are greater than the similarities, the very notion of 'astrology' as a single entity may be, as Steven Sutcliffe has said of the New Age movement (Sutcliffe 2003: 16), no more than an 'etic' formulation useful for outsiders and even for insiders, but with little relevance to the real situation.

While it may not be necessary to take such an extreme position, it is nevertheless the case that, within astrology there are different emic groups who may believe they have little in common with each other. The fundamental disagreement between Lee Lehman, who works from a primarily medieval perspective, and Glenn Perry, whose astrology is heavily based in theosophy and psychotherapy is a case in point (Lehman 2003, Perry 2003b). Thus, while in astrology I may be an insider, there are many groups within astrology in which I feel like an outsider. My own position has always, therefore, been to be supportive of some claims within astrology but critical of others.

My position in this process is simultaneously that of insider and outsider. Clifford Geertz's model may, in this respect, be a useful one. Observing the ontological difficulties that arise from the methodological formulation of polarities such as emic-etic, insider-outsider, and subjective-objective, he cites the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut's differentiation between 'experience-near' and 'experience-distant' concepts, which may be linked by a graduated scale (Geertz 1999: 51). From Geertz's perspective, insiderness and outsidership then become questions of degree which may vary with time, place and mood. And we may all place ourselves on a scale between extreme positions. My relationship with the attitudes and concepts I am studying may therefore be summarised as 'experience-near'.

My perspective on astrology as a single entity is simultaneously emic and etic. Ultimately, in a world in which no perspective exists in isolation from any other, or

from the world around it, any individual is likely to adopt a perspective which may be considered emic and etic at one and the same time. All astrologers, in other words, are at once members both of emic groups and of a society which adopts etic views of what astrology is, does or claims. Their attitudes and behaviour are likely to be complex and contradictory. To look for simple unifying characteristics which can explain 'belief' in astrology may therefore be a project with little chance of success. As far as Smart's (1973a: 11) claim that there is a dialectical relationship in the study of religions between the student and the object of study, my own critique of certain astrological claims is already well known. I have already been critically engaged with the subject matter of this thesis. As an example, I am known to be critical both of the argument that the Age of Aquarius is imminent (Campion 1990) and of what I consider to be poor standards of argument and scholarship in astrology in general (Phillipson 2000: 116).

My personal attitude to astrology is generally pragmatic and based on its usefulness. I regard the psychological models of 'natal' astrology, the practice of casting birth-charts for individuals, as more personally meaningful than any other contemporary equivalent. I have found the application of 'horary' astrology, a divinatory use of astrology to answer precisely timed questions, analogous in its use to the I Ching or tarot, to be remarkable and, within the context of modern cosmology, inexplicable. My long-term interest, though, is in the study of 'mundane' (from the Latin *mundus*, world) astrology, the examination of solar and planetary cycles in relation to historical change.

Recent precedents for the participation of the researcher in the group - participant observation (Bryman 2001:2) - have been provided by Tanya Luhmann and Susan Greenwood, who followed similar paths through their direct involvement in groups whose primary focus was ritual magic (Luhmann 1989: 62-5; Greenwood 2000: 50-1). Both, though, entered the groups they studied as outsiders (even though Greenwood may be considered an 'insider' within the magical world as a whole) and then were

obliged to cope with the issues they faced as a result of the fluid boundaries between their identities as insiders and outsiders. There are a number of important distinctions between their work and mine. The worlds of magic and witchcraft, which they investigated, are based around action; the groups tend to be closed to outsiders and therefore require a much greater degree of personal commitment than does astrology (Pearson 1998: 51-54). While astrology can be invoked in the service of magical ritual (Farrar and Farrar 1984: 88-91), in the form of the calculation and interpretation of horoscopes it is an essentially solitary and intellectual enterprise, the principle shared activity being the consultation between astrologer and client, and the only collective activity being attendance at public meetings or classes which are open to strangers. In a public sense, then the boundaries between insider and outsider status in astrology are porous and difficult to define. Also, whereas Lurhmann and Greenwood focused on activity, my concern is with the etics and emics of thought rather than of action, a distinction made by Lett (1990: 135), that is, with the manner in which astrology is defined externally and with the discourses astrologers use to describe themselves.

Astrology may itself be defined as a practice, though primarily an individual one, if the casting and interpretation of horoscopes is taken as the primary locus of activity. However, the emphasis in this thesis is not on such practice, but on perceptions of astrology, both emic and etic.

An Anthropology of Astrology?

The respectable examination of astrology as a topic within the history of ideas was established by Lynn Thorndike in the early-twentieth century (1905). His major work (1923-1958) concluded with the seventeenth-century; hence subsequent histories of astrology, such as Tester (1987: 240, 243) assumed that astrology completely died out by 1700. Capp (1979: 238-269) showed, though, that while astrology was dropped from

educated society, its popular existence in the form of almanacs continued undisturbed throughout the eighteenth-century. Howe (1967) and Curry (1992) then demonstrated astrology's survival and revival in the nineteenth-century, leaving only the twentieth-century substantially ignored. Yet the study of astrology's contemporary cultural locus may shed light on the condition of modern society as a whole. As Grace Davie (1994: 68) argued, 'by looking at the way that society reacts to new religious movements and the controversy they generate, we can discover more about that society itself', while Bryan Wilson (1979: 3) pointed out that 'Religious change is...cultural change'. It is not necessary to argue that astrology is a religion in order to make the point that an understanding of the cultural milieu within which it thrives may shed light on contemporary society as a whole. Caird and Law (1982: 152), meanwhile noted that there was in the 1980s a substantial lack of empirical social psychological research into counter-cultural religious beliefs. While there has now been substantial work in some areas, astrology has been generally untouched. While this study cannot tackle the psychological, it does aim to lay the ground for social research.

In their introduction to *Astronomies and Cultures* (1993: 12), Clive Ruggles and Nicholas Saunders cite approvingly Tristan Platt's 1991 suggestion that we are in need of an 'anthropology of astronomy'. Platt's words are somewhat more radical than this quote would suggest. He wrote that,

an historical anthropology of astronomy must emphasise the interaction between different cultural perspectives on history and time, rather than subsuming them within what is still a predominantly North Atlantic "World" perspective. Hence the need to deconstruct the universalising discourse of modern professional astronomy itself (still with an inbuilt tendency to appeal to a historicist account of its own past) if we are to arrive at an approach to the subject at once sociological and ethnoscientific, which recognises the recreation of different cultural histories as a more significant and viable prospect than an absolute (and inevitably ethnocentric) Universal History (Platt 1991: S83).

If there is one folk or ethnoastronomy which is still awaiting proper study then it is contemporary astrology. Astrology has become an integral part of contemporary

popular culture via newspaper and magazine horoscopes. Through its continual borrowing from astronomy, for example in its appropriation of newly discovered solar system bodies, and its use of astronomical terminology, it is a genuine modern ethnoastronomy. Indeed, it may be the most visible expression of astronomy in culture. Whereas once anthropology was explicitly concerned with the study of 'primitive' peoples (Evans-Pritchard 1967: 77), Greenwood's 'anthropology' of contemporary witchcraft has been influential in challenging the dogma that anthropology is about 'them' rather than 'us'. This study is therefore a step towards an anthropology dealing with a different aspect of modern society: the notion that our lives and destinies are linked in some way with the zodiac.

Although this study may be classed as anthropological in the sense that it is a study of people, or sociological in the sense that it is a study of society, my primary concern is with the transmission of ideas. Also, in general, I have followed Philip Runkel's view that too great a concern with methodological dogma can sacrifice meaning to what he calls 'manner'. He argued that,

When social scientists think about generalizing, they do not use an arcane logic more potent than the logic used by the rest of us. The logic and procedure of science come simply from the efforts of ordinary people trying their best to be careful when they think about what they observe and then they tell others about it (Runkel 1990: 5).

My methodology is also influenced by my previous training as a historian. In particular I am concerned with origins, in this case of the New Age movement and of contemporary astrology as a language of birth signs, personality and psychological potential. While the foundation of my study is historical, this leads directly into an analysis of the contemporary situation, principally from a qualitative standpoint. My use of quantitative data therefore remains indicative of possible areas for future research and is designed mainly to test whether previous and, often, widely reported figures on 'belief' in astrology are accurate. I am primarily concerned with the 'emics' of

contemporary astrology, the nature of the narrative that astrologers weave about their role in society and their place in the cosmos. Following Bryman's summary of the discussion on the relationship between qualitative and quantitative research (2001: 4-5), the one focusing on subjective experience, the other on the attempt to establish objective measures of such experience, I do not see these contrasting approaches as mutually antagonistic but, when used together, supportive.

I am also concerned with four frequently stated 'etic' views on astrology: namely that it is a New Age discipline, that it is incompatible with, or a rival to, mainstream Christianity, that its existence is somehow incompatible with modernity in general, and that its popularity is both huge and steadily increasing. I approach these questions primarily through astrology's emics, its literature and the stated opinions of its students and practitioners. Following Ann Geneva (1995: xiv), who argued that 'it is first necessary to locate astrology within its own universe of discourse before historians can attempt to compare it with other explanatory systems', I am concerned to investigate astrology's contemporary 'universe of discourse'.

Definitions of Astrology

Astrology is occasionally categorised as a religion by its practitioners, sometimes as an art or science. Its critics though, invariably describe it in religious terms. In this study I am primarily concerned not with whether astrology actually conforms to any accepted definition of religion, but with whether it is perceived as a religion, and with the consequences of that perception. In part this is due to the difficulty of defining religion. As Stewart Guthrie wrote, 'scholars agree that no convincing general theory of religion exists' (Guthrie 1996: 412). The problem is compounded by a lack of any agreed definition of astrology. As Dean and Loptson wrote,

Dictionaries, encyclopaedias and astrology text books have defined astrology variously as a science, a supposed science, an art, a divinatory art, an art/science, a

language, a philosophy, and as a system for self-understanding (Dean and Loptson 1996: 33, 41 n 1; see also Dean and Mather 1977: 3).

However, astrology's critics tend to assume that it conforms to a definition of religion which posits supernatural agencies as causal factors within human society. In this sense such critics draw on both E.B. Tylor's definition of religion as belief in 'spiritual beings' and J.G. Frazer's as the 'propitiation and conciliation of powers believed to be superior to man' (Arnal 2000: 23). Although neither definition entirely covers the diversity of expression encountered in contemporary astrology, its critics tend to focus on its occult or supernatural aspects. Religious critics tend to see such supernatural agencies as essentially real, while scientific critics see them as inherently false. Both, though, agree that belief in them is, or can be, dangerous.

Most etic definitions of astrology include it in the general sphere of the religious. Representing sceptical scientists, the astronomers Roger Culver and Philip Ianna conclude unambiguously that astrology is 'a firmly entrenched belief system', (1988: xii). The psychologists Jahoda (1969: 25) and Plug (1975) categorise astrology as a 'superstition',² while Richard Crowe points out that 'virtually all scientists regard astrology as unfounded superstition' (Crowe 1990: 164). Gill, Hadaway and Marler (1998: 512-3) include it under the catch-all category 'occult' but also as a 'non-traditional religion'. The physicist Robert Park goes further, taking an overtly hostile position and describing it as one of 'the darkest superstitions that beset our species' (2000: 201), language that is not far removed from that of its religious opponents. Within the sociology of religion, Stark and Bainbridge refer to it as 'deviant supernaturalism' (1985: 431). In part such terminology may be fuelled by moral outrage. The astronomers Bok and Mayall quoted the attack on astrology from the 'Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues', which argued that 'faith in astrology...is harmful because it encourages an unwholesome flight from the persistent problems of real life', adding that 'when moral habits are weakened by depression or

war, bewilderment increases, self-reliance is lessened and belief in the occult increases' (Bok and Mayall 1941: 244). Returning to the theme in 1975 Bok, by that time emeritus professor of astronomy at the University of Arizona, argued that it was 'morally inexcusable' for the American Astronomical Society not to have taken a firmer stand against astrology. Stark and Bainbridge, meanwhile, define astrology as a species of magic (1987: 105) in that it makes utilitarian but unverifiable claims. Saliba (1995: 23), writing from a Christian background, argues that astrology is 'occult' and, in that it is also a New Age belief, is to be categorised as a 'new religious movement' (see also Wilson and Cresswell 1999; Barker and Warburg 2001).

Astrology is generally classified as 'paranormal' in the sense that it transcends 'the explanatory power of mainstream science' (Gray 1991: 7; see also Abell and Singer 1981; Hines 1988: 19) and is widely included in measures of paranormal belief (Plug 1975, Williams *et al* 1989; Goode 2000). Following unnamed 'American scholars', Rice (2003: 95) distinguishes two types of paranormal belief, 'traditional' and 'classical'. On the one hand there are the traditional, the 'religious' beliefs central to traditional Christian doctrine, such as heaven and hell, the devil and creationism. On the other hand there are 'classic' beliefs, commonly associated with the supernatural or occult, such as belief in ESP, reincarnation, psychic healing, UFOs - and astrology. In the sense that such classic supernatural beliefs are distinct from religious ones, they may conform to Plug's definition of a superstition, that it is a 'superstitious' belief which does not form part of the mainstream religion (Plug 1975: 169). However, although the classification of astrology as paranormal may be appropriate if it is accepted that its claims transcend scientific explanation, it may be misleading if it is then assumed that it shares the same internal nature and social status as other beliefs classified as paranormal. For example Greeley's discussion of the paranormal (1975) focuses on communication with the dead and peak mystical experiences. Thus, when Haraldsson (1985) includes astrological consultations as 'psychic or psi-related experiences', along

with sightings of ghosts and visits to mediums, the validity of his discussion, beyond the simple reporting of quantitative results, may be open to question. The lack of a clear definition, as noted by Dean and Kelly, is evident in such work and may, as Zinnbauer *et al.* (1997: 550) note in their discussion of the lack of an accepted definition of spirituality, impair communication amongst researchers. Ultimately, it may be necessary for those studying astrology's place in culture to follow the lead of those studying Buddhism, and 'recognize the diversity of belief and practice within their own traditions' (Herbrechtsmeier 1993: 16).

The differences between various definitions are more than just a matter of language and tend to suggest a reliance on different philosophical models. Dictionary definitions tend to emphasise celestial causality, as does the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1952) which describes astrology as 'the art of judging of reputed influence of stars upon human affairs'. To astrologers a more familiar definition would be that found in Margaret Hone's *The Modern Text Book of Astrology* (1973: 16) which emphasised not planetary causation but the 'interpretation of the correlation of planetary action in human experience'. According to another prominent astrologer, Robert Hand (1989: 316), astrology is a 'taxonomy of life' while to Kelly Hunter (1999: 1) it is 'an intuitive science, the full power of... [which] lies in transforming consciousness through imagery'. As Dennis Elwell realised (1986: 143), 'Astrology means different things to different people, and is big enough to accommodate many complementary, and even contradictory, opinions'. There may, in fact, be no one such single thing as astrology but rather different astrologies. These might appear to be magical, religious or scientific, can be applied to understanding the past, the management of the present or the prediction of the future, and may be used for personal spiritual development or forecasting fluctuations in the stock market. For current purposes the working definition of astrology will be 'the practice of relating the heavenly bodies to lives and events on earth, and the tradition that has thus been generated' (Curry 1999: 55). It must be

recognised from the outset, though, that there may be a profound difference of both attitude and practice between an astrologer who may be analysing commodity prices for a bank or forecasting the outcome of soccer games, and one who is counselling clients or concerned with their own spiritual development.

Within Curry's definition then, it is necessary to consider a distinction between two forms of astrology which was first identified by Cicero (1929) in the first-century BCE. Cicero identified an astrology derived from the observation of natural phenomena from one based on 'art', that is, the technical procedures of divination. In the medieval context, then, natural astrology assumed the existence of general celestial influences which may be the basis of statements of broad significance for human affairs or world events. The astrology of art, or judicial astrology, generally required the casting of horoscopes, placing a high reliance on the astrologer's ability to judge, or interpret the complex patterns in the chart.

It is clear that these are not watertight, mutually exclusive categories, and the theory and attributions of natural astrology were integral to judicial astrology. On the other hand, it was possible to accept the principles of natural astrology and be utterly opposed to judicial astrology.

A modern natural astrology might therefore include other phenomena which are not usually considered astrological, including the sun-spot cycle, circadian (daily) rhythms and lunar cycles. The notion of the solar system as a giant clock in which the planets are the hands which indicate different time periods on earth may also be included with natural astrology, even though no celestial influences may be necessary for such a model.

Modern Critiques of Astrology

Astrology has two principal sets of opponents: evangelical, fundamentalist or conservative Christians represented by such groups as the Reach Out Trust, and the positivist, secular humanists represented chiefly by the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP). The latter organisation stands at the heart of modern organised scepticism and regards its mission as to eradicate all forms of the paranormal and occult, including astrology (Kurtz 2001; Hansen 2001: 148-161). Fundamental to CSICOP's perspective is the notion that astrology's survival in the modern world is historically problematic, even inexplicable. This is not a view unique to them. As Michael Hill wrote, interest in astrology seemed to be considerable 'even in the most technologically advanced areas of western society' (1979: 247) while the astronomers Snow and Brownsberger (1997: 7) wrote that 'even today' some people have faith in astrology. Glick and Snyder (1986: 20) noted that 'belief in astrology...remains as prevalent today as ever, despite the lack of scientific evidence for such beliefs'. A typical view was expressed by John Silber, President of Boston University. He argued that,

Astrology is in fact a bizarre survival from pre-scientific times. Its theories were worked out when people believed the earth was the center of the universe and that seven planets revolved around it: the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. Although this view of the universe has been proven false, astrology continues with hardly a wobble (Silber 2001).

The manifesto 'Objections to Astrology', drafted by Bart Bok, Lawrence Jerome and Paul Kurtz and published in *The Humanist* in 1975, and which led to the foundation of CSICOP, pulled together '186 leading scientists' to sign a document calling for a campaign against astrology, an initiative which was to result in the foundation of CSICOP. The manifesto included an element of surprise that astrology should have survived: 'One would imagine, in this day of widespread enlightenment and education, that it would be unnecessary to debunk beliefs based on magic and superstition', while astrology's survival, it was claimed, 'can only contribute to the growth of irrationalism and obscurantism' (Bok, Jerome and Kurtz 1975: 4). The manifesto's combative

language and dualistic imagery of a society facing a struggle between reason and irrationality pervades the language of organised scepticism. For example, sociologist Erich Goode (2002: 27) regards paranormal belief, including interest in astrology, overtly as a 'threat'.

The 'Objections to Astrology' represented a conscious attempt to resist the increasing pluralism of the post counter-cultural western world, and possessed a tone of alarm similar to that found in attacks on astrology by evangelical Christians (see for example Anderson 1988: 9-11). At its worst, it is often argued, astrology's survival presents a real threat to the health of society. Michael Gauquelin (1982: 35),³ who was himself sympathetic, quoted psychologist Hans Bender's damning indictment:

It is striking that more than three hundred years of experimental sciences have not succeeded in providing an antidote to astrological beliefs. Astrology is a social reality. Its forms vary from the crudest superstitions to thoughtful attempts at connecting the astrologer's magic vision of the world with modern psychological knowledge...Therefore astrology poses a problem of social and psychological health.

In its milder form scepticism retreats from the argument that astrology is a danger to civilisation and regards it as merely ridiculous. The astronomer, George Abell, one of the most prominent sceptics, mused that astrology seems 'incredible' and an 'absurdity' (Abell 1981: 73, 94) and, following the general sceptical argument, a note of incredulity was sounded by the sceptic Lucy Sherriff (2001: 7), who wrote,

Nearly all woman's magazines publications carry horoscopes. Most of us really do only read them for a laugh, and let's face it, the horoscope debunking has been so thorough that the people who actually take it seriously are few and far between. So, why are they still there?

The journalist Robert Matthews sounded similarly bemused when he wrote that astrology's popularity has been maintained 'despite the scepticism of scientists' (2003: 9). The unspoken assumption is that sceptical scientists somehow speak for the modern

world as a whole. This is, perhaps, a natural product of belief in the law of progress, an application of evolutionary theory to the human intellect that assumes humanity has evolved from a state of superstition to one of reason in the historic period, over the last four millennia, and that rational, materialist, secular humanism is the highest state of intellectual development reached by humanity. This point of view was criticised by Baillie (1950) and Bowler (1989). According to J.B. Bury, by the 1870s the 'idea of Progress' had become 'a general article of faith' (Bury 1932: 346) and, as Sklair (1970: 65) demonstrated, was regarded as synonymous with evolution. He added that,

When Mr. Frederic Harrison delivered in 1889 at Manchester an eloquent discourse on the "New Era", in which the dominant note is "the faith in human progress in lieu of celestial rewards of the separate soul", his general argument could appeal to immensely wider circles than the Positivists whom he was specially addressing (Bury 1932: 346).

To argue that the positivist-evolutionary view of history can be demonstrated aside from the value judgments of the historians who write that history is, as Butterfield showed, unsustainable (Butterfield 1965: 105 - 6). Progress mythology holds that, because secular humanism is the highest state of human consciousness yet reached, all other world views must, by definition, be anachronistic. They represent survivals of earlier forms of thought which have survived by accident and are involved in a struggle with science which is envisaged as a titanic battle of light against dark. Carl Sagan's (1995) image of science as 'a candle in the dark' is widely quoted (see for example, Goode 2002: 24) yet, while contemplating the apparent rise of belief in the paranormal, Sagan adopted the language of medieval Christianity and wrote that 'the demons begin to stir' (1995: 27).

The belief that western culture can conform to a single set of intellectual values may itself be a vain one. As Bilgrave and Deluty argued, in their discussion of psychologists' religious beliefs, 'the current Weltanschauung in the west is a curious amalgam, consisting of religious, humanistic, scientific, and romantic elements' (1998: 329) and

secular humanism, from this point of view, has no special claim to pre-eminence in the modern world. Romanticism, which has every much a claim as secular humanism to modernity, stresses 'subjective, immediate experience, the cultivation of affect and intuition, and the creation of personal meaning through authentic choice' (Bilgrave and Deluty 1998: 329). Romanticism's vigour throughout the nineteenth-century, into the origins of the contemporary New Age movement, has been well-documented by Joscelyn Godwin (1994). The question of whether astrology is anachronistic, therefore, may be a biproduct of Whig historiography, the term devised by Herbert Butterfield (1965) to describe what he regarded as the mistaken theory that the history of the last five hundred years represents the triumph of reason, including science, over unreason, including astrology.

Modernism and Post-modernism

Looking at the context within which astrology thrives, Hess considers the New Age movement as a whole to be post-modern (1993: 36), although he offers no explanation for this. Paul Heelas, meanwhile considers the New Age movement in its counter-cultural aspects, and hence astrology, which he includes as New Age (1996: 23, 34), as an aspect of 'modernity in crisis' (1996: 138). However, he neither defines modernity nor explains why the New Age might not in fact be an aspect of modernism. Robert Bellah, however, did point to the crisis in modernity and the consequent shift in spirituality, which he identified as arising, in the USA at least, from 'the massive erosion of the legitimacy of American institutions - business, government, education, the churches, the family' (Bellah 1976: 333). Hexham and Poewe point out that the distinctions are not clear-cut and argue that the counter-culture of the 1960s contained elements of both modernism and post-modernism (1997: 149-151), while Patrick Curry has discussed astrology as a post-modern discipline (1994). Elsewhere some developments within astrology, such as the recovery of former traditions, are identified as post-modern (Campion 1994: 3) while others – such as the argument that astrology is

a science that can be proved, or the New Age proposition that its widespread acceptance will change the world for the better - are clearly aspects of modernism (see for example Hand 1990: 15). The problem, of course is one of definition, for there is no universally accepted meaning of the terms modern and post-modern. Williams (1989: 33) notes that aspects of culture defined as modern, such as avant-garde art, are taken to be representative of 'modernity' as a whole while being quite clearly not representative of the entire modern world, while Jameson (1991: 55) asks whether it is even possible to say that the post-modern exists. If modernism is characterised by the self-confident creation of the future and, if modernists think 'compulsively about the New...(try) to watch its coming into being and look for 'new worlds' (Jameson 1991: ix), then the development of psychological astrology, the most influential development within modern professional astrology, may be an indicator of a modernist trend within twentieth-century astrology (Hand 1990: 15). If, though, modernity is defined as 'the social condition of living in an urban, fast-changing, progressivist world governed by instrumental reason' (Jencks 1996: 8) and postmodernism 'is what you have when the modernization process is complete' (Jameson 1991: ix), one could argue from a variety of different positions. The sociologists of science John Bauer and Martin Durant discussed the matter, agreeing with Heelas' view that astrology is encouraged by the crisis of modernity. They consider that astrology,

may be regarded sociologically, as one among a number of potential compensatory activities that may be attractive to individuals who are struggling to come to terms with the uncertainties of life in late modernity...Belief in astrology is rather a matter of the moral fabric of modern society than of scientific literacy. It seems that in Britain, as in Germany or France, belief in astrology is prevalent among particular social groups; groups which, as we have indicated, may be experiencing difficulty in accommodating their religious feelings to life in an uncertain post-industrial culture. Paradoxical as it may seem, therefore, we conclude that popular belief in astrology may be part and parcel of late modernity itself (Bauer and Durant 1997: 69).

The purpose of this thesis is to consider whether astrology's continued existence in the modern world is an anomaly, a legacy of the past which has survived in spite of the

Enlightenment and scientific revolution, or whether it may be considered a natural part of the modern world.

Notes

1. 'Out of the body experience'.
2. The usual definition of superstition is an 'irrational or unfounded belief' (Plug 1975: 169), although, following Yahoda, Plug notes that this is problematic in view of the assumption it makes concerning the veracity of the belief .
3. Citing Schmidtchen, G. 'Soziologisches über die Astrologie, Ergebnisse einer repräsentativ-Befragung', *Z.f., Parapsychologie u. Grenzgebiete der Psychologie*, 1957, 1.47.