

Astrology and New Age: Minority Religion with Mainstream Appeal

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Abstract

The contemporary New Age movement is largely - though not completely - a modern manifestation of theosophy and astrology. While the study of the stars has a persistent albeit esoteric presence throughout the history of western metaphysical thought, Theosophy itself comes closest to being a renaissance of the ancient heresy of Gnosticism. Both subjects have of course been condemned by canonical Christianity and, more recently, by a prevailing scientific/reductionistic form of modern science. Through its gnostic heritage, New Age should by rights be a minority religion in a traditionally Christian host society. However, eschewing for the most part sectarian sociological forms, New Age and popular interest in horoscopes and astrological forecasts have entered and essentially are the contemporary spiritual supermarket. Using the Stark and Bainbridge terminology, its 'audience' and 'clients' are simply and mostly mainstream consumers. How and why does astrologically based gnosticism create mainstream/market appeal? Does secularization play here a role, and what does the emergence of New Age popularity tell us about shifts and changes within current western society?

Apart from its continuation of New Thought heritage that stresses the power of the mind (*A Course in Miracles*, est, N.L.P., Unity, etc.), the New Age movement is equally a development of Spiritualism's offspring of Theosophy. From Spiritualism, New Age inherits its belief that we can communicate with the dead, but like Theosophy, there is less interest in mediating or communicating with the spirits of deceased family members and loved ones and more in receiving guidance from evolved spiritual masters or mahatmas, extraterrestrial beings or space-brethren, and extra-dimensional discarnates. With its devaluation of the material world of nature for a transcendental realm of *gnosis* or spiritual wisdom, Theosophy considers nature as a foil that must be penetrated and bypassed if the aspirant is to achieve an understanding of true reality. By-and-large, New Age follows in this same understanding of nature as an illusion, as something unreal, and as something that simply masks the true reality of the spirit.

The chief metaphor of New Age is the astrological concept of the Age of Aquarius based on astronomy's 'precession of the equinoxes' principle and one that argues that we have left or are leaving or shortly will leave the Age of Pisces that has flourished from around the time of Christ. As British historian Nicholas Campion has discovered, there are countless different understandings of when the Age of Aquarius begins – understandings that range over several centuries if not more. To be fair, however, the Aquarian Age for New Age is less a literal expectation and more a metaphor for what is to be a collective shift in consciousness. The form of this shift is another matter, and whether it is the product of the worldwide web of electronic communication systems and the global exchange of information, or whether it is a product of humanitarian and ecological activism, whether the cumulative effect of many individuals attaining enlightenment, or whether the result of spiritual grace in the form of supernatural intervention, the important notion behind the concept itself is that it symbolizes a 'golden age' of individual, social and global integrity.

In the 1960s, at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, the Jewish-German expatriot Fritz Perls introduced his Group Gestalt Therapy with its stress on the value of immediate, authentic experience within a framework that takes the mind/body as a holistic organism rather than a Cartesian dichotomy. Perls, along with such seminal thinkers as Wilhelm Reich, Otto Rank, Kurt Lewin, and Carl Rogers and such complementary practices as Abraham Maslow's Self-Actualisation and Roberto Assagioli's Psychosynthesis, launched the field of humanistic psychology from which the Growth and Human Potential movements took their birth. Beginning in California and quickly spreading beyond, Human Potential intertwined with the American psychedelic heritage and spawned numerous self-help/psycho-physical therapeutic practices. As these became increasingly integrated with the 'cultic milieu', the New Age as a self-conscious spiritual movement began to evolve. In a sense, New Age represents the spiritualization of the Human Potential movement.

Because of its gnostic and theosophical affinities, New Age has received much condemnation from the more traditionally religious social mainstream of the west. Such

criticism is especially forthcoming from the conservative and fundamentalist wings of Christianity. For instance, inasmuch as New Age accepts Jesus Christ, he is endorsed less as a redeemer or savior from sin and more as a way-shower par excellence. From this perspective alone, New Age represents the same sort of heretical position as was condemned by the ecclesiastical councils of the early Church. Moreover, Christianity as an exclusivist theology – one offering the *only* way to salvation – has a natural difficulty with the essential inclusivist and pluralist orientation of the unstructured, amorphous and conglomerate New Age movement. An illustrative attitude from this direction toward New Age is that expressed by critic Lee Penn, prolific contributor to the *New Catholic Review* who sees a dangerous non-cannonical New Age inspiration behind the United Religions Initiative and much of the reformist platform of ECUSA.

But from a different direction, New Age comes under attack by the scientific/philosophic community apart from any vehemence stemming from Jewish and Christian quarters. Typically, a more ‘atheist’ mindset describes New Age as little more than touchy-feely, airy-fairy, intellectually vapid, eclectically woolly, cheaply false, spiritually kitsch, and a mumbo jumbo mash that is pastel-colored and lavender-scented. Across the board, its central purpose is frequently understood by the non-sympathetic as little more than an effort to make money from those reputedly foolish enough to purchase the many gimmicks and psycho-physical therapies that are marketed under the widely embracing label of New Age. New Age is condemned for its narcissism and spiritual appropriation alike.

But from the scientific community alone, New Age is ridiculed on much the same basis as religion itself is rejected as immature fantasy – manifesting an unwillingness of adherents to ‘grow up’. Taking a reductionistic attitude toward religion in general, New Age is understood as either one more opiate to appease the masses now seen primarily as consumers rather than workers (the neo-Marxist attitude) or an entrenched and obstinate human desire to recreate the early symbiotic world of child-and-mother (the neo-Freudian perspective). Consequently, New Age must navigate between two equally negative antagonists – the rationalists, on the one hand, and the religious

conservatives, on the other. That it has continued to do so and establish itself as a viable presence in increasingly enlarged sections of western bookshops apparently flies against the outlook it faces between its two formidable opponents. The question becomes one of asking how is this possible? Is the mainstream appeal of this 'minority' spirituality a product of the movement itself, namely, its cleverness, its marketing skills, its organization, or is it a product instead of inherent weaknesses in its mainstream adversaries?

While New Age derives from specific cultural or sub-cultural trends (theosophy, spiritualism, humanistic and later transpersonal psychologies), it is nevertheless a disparate conglomerate of different movements and/or religions. Sociologically, it remains difficult to grasp. It is neither a traditional church, identifiable sect, mainstream denomination or a single unorthodox cult. There is no institutional mechanism for determining membership or countenancing expulsion, no one who can speak for the movement as a whole, no list of creeds, and no registrar of membership. It is instead a loose series of networks, often cellular and replicate, with a constantly shifting rostrum of spokespeople, therapists and teachers. In short, its fluid organization or even non-organization makes it more of a consumer phenomenon than anything that could be understood as traditionally religious. There is no unified or coordinated overall strategy that is or can be articulated for the movement as a whole as a means for consciously insuring mainstream success – including the sale of its many, many different products.

In fact, the absence of any hierarchical or integrating structure throughout the movement as a whole would appear to indicate that the mainstream appeal has more to do with mainstream changes themselves than with any coordinated acumen on the part of New Age as a self-conscious movement itself. A clue to part of the answer is perhaps to be found in New Agers' frequent proclamation that they are spiritual rather than religious. This would seem to indicate that New Age springs from atavistic human impulses for religiously sanctioned values, meanings and answers to fundamental questions – answers that established religious institutions are increasingly failing to supply for the satisfaction of public demand. In other words, the human desire for

spiritual seeking is a more or less cultural constant, but institutional religion no longer is the framework within which this quest is undertaken in our rapidly changing social and economic world.

The non-institutional nature and marketing choice of New Age appears to be its underlying appeal. The New Age represents *a* if not *the* spiritual consumer supermarket that is steadily superseding the appeal of traditional religion in the west. In the context of social transformations, New Age has become emblematic of the affirmation and celebration of spiritual choice. This in turn leads to severe accusations of cultural appropriation – especially from identity-endangered peoples, but New Age insists that the multi-cultural register is now public domain and accessible to everyone.

This appeal of New Age also appears to be a challenge to – if not violation of – the prevailing rational utilitarianism of the scientific and technological bases of western capitalistic infrastructure. While the positing of cultural change in modern versus postmodern terms may have reached and already passed its peak, the west still seems to be living in a perceived aftermath to an efficiency paradigm's bankruptcy. The empirical, calculated and overly rational means of production, while producing the consumer goods, fall short in themselves for dealing with human needs and demands for the intuitive, emotional and spiritual. In face of the impersonal bureaucracy and over-institutionalization of the contemporary west, New Age represents a de-institutionalized spirituality that caters to the personal. To the degree that this is true, it also explains the phenomenal growth in fundamentalist and evangelical forms of mainstream religion that have capitalized on the desire for emotional experience and have centered on this want rather than institutional organization. Both New Age and the Pentecostal wing of Christianity cater to similar needs, but whereas the latter can foster this response within a traditionally understood format and religious understanding, New Age answers to a rising interest in the bizarre, the strange, the new and different – like, for example, the witnessing of Uri Geller's spoon-bending. Both are part of the spiritual consumer market that in itself has no fixed boundaries but directs its marketing skills and appeals to as wide an audience it can – one that includes the more marginal 'cultic milieu' seeker but

also the more mainstream consumer who through uncertainty, confusion, boredom or even legitimate curiosity peruses spiritual options along side the necessary goods and frivolities of life.

One example of a 'New Age product' among many, many others is astrology. Astrology, however, is particularly important in that it provides the underlying framework and rationale for the New Age itself. The Age of Aquarius is an astrological concept. That being said, astrology is far from a new or recent interest. If alchemy is the parent of chemistry, astrology is the parent of astronomy – a study that goes back to at least the beginnings of history. It has been an inevitable part of humanity's desire to know its place in the universe and understand macrocosmic/microcosmic connections. Overtime, and despite their being superseded by more sophisticated and predictable systems of explanation, the symbols and terms of astrology have entered into and become part of the cultural register. In the surfeit of choice that has come to characterize the contemporary west, the familiar and methodological are becoming supplemented and sometimes replaced by the exotic and superstitious. Many are turning to forgotten and discarded spiritual vernaculars in an attempt that might be interpreted as stemming from a desire for more colorful and mystically laden symbols and notions. Astrology is at the forefront of this popular interest – combining as it does the familiar with the obscure.

Newspaper horoscope columns began to appear in the late 1930s. Since that time, they have become a regular feature in the daily tabloids and the weeklies. For instance, in Britain, Russell Grant describes 'Your Stars' for the *Evening Post*, while Peter Watson maintains a slightly more detailed star-sign listing for the *Daily Mail*. Both papers list a dial-in service for each of the twelve signs. These and more form part of a well-established astrological vernacular culture. The diffusion of this interest finds a presence among more select audiences as well. An example of this last would be the London produced journal *Boyz* that describes itself as "For gay adults only." The weekly maintains a 'Starman' page presenting brief star-sign analyses along with a 'top tip' and a 'passion rating' that are all tailored to the established nuance of its readership. In its June 16th 2001 issue, for example, for Aquarius the magazine stated, "You're worried that this

good feeling is an artificial high. It's only artificial if you think it is, it exists now, and it's up to you if you want it to stay. Look at yourself in the mirror, and say, 'I'm a complete and utter shag'." For Leo's, the 'top tip' was "Take fruit to eat instead of paying a million pounds for popcorn," and, out of a possibility of five stars for 'passion rating', only Taurus received one star; Aries, Gemini, Leo, and Capricorn, two; with Cancer, Sagittarius and Aquarius being assessed with all five. Strictly for comparison, Grant states for Aquarius, "Your own particular personal pursuits or choices may seem peculiar to serious-minded onlookers, but they're the very essence of your being." For the same sign, Watson says, "People are right when they tell you you're wasting a lot of energy and talent. It may be time to admit you would love to be more original in how you deal with important areas of your life, but you haven't up to now, been given the encouragement you'd like. That is probably more an excuse than a reason not to take a chance and show that when push comes to shove, you can be every bit as ingenious as the next person. The planets are urging you to have a go. Now."

Whether we judge such columns to be serious or not, whether they are intended to be humorous, whether they simply offer guiding principles and advice that some readers can incorporate into their lives, and whether any of these 'Star' pages are based on actual astrological considerations, the fact remains that the daily horoscope has become an accepted part of vernacular culture. Everyone reads one of these columns at some point, and some people actually rely on them and use them. While most people may not take them seriously, they are nevertheless an accepted part of popular discourse. But inasmuch as this is true, the daily and weekly horoscope page is the tip of the iceberg of astrological esotericism.

Of course, at the much deeper levels we encounter 'serious astrology' in the sense of the pursuit of a codified system of horoscope casting and interpretation – a process that is subject to standard empirical testing, confirmation or disconfirmation. But in the context of understanding marginal religions with mainstream appeal, it is not the validity of astrology that is here the issue but rather the role that astrology play in demotic and cultural discourse. This in turn has led to the increasing popularization of Human

Potential and New Age practices if not of the New Age movement as a whole. The New Age speaks in its own language, it has an identifiable vocabulary, and a large part of its dialogue and New Age-speak are grounded in the terminology and concepts of astrology.

The astrological bias of New Age is, of course, only a constituent part of its growing mainstream appeal. If the movement as a whole conforms largely to the Stark and Bainbridge construct of the 'cult movement', its more prolific and ephemeral manifestations occur as their 'audience and client cults'. The audience and clients who attend a New Age lecture or consult an astrologer for advice are largely mainstream consumers. Doubtlessly, in this mainstream and market appeal of what we can understand essentially as an astrologically-based form of gnosticism, secularization plays a role – especially in Larry Shiner's senses of secularization as (1) the decline of influence of institutional religion, (2) the shift from 'other-worldly' to 'this-worldly' orientations, (3) the privatization of religion, (4) Robertson's 'surrogate religiosity', and (5) the more openly rational society resulting from industrialization and urbanization that can "accept alternative sets of beliefs without anxiety" (Hill, 1973:228-250; quote 248). If the second seems ironic as that gnosticism is fundamentally an 'other-worldly' spirituality, New Age has not clearly articulated its position, and the other-worldly and this-worldly emphases remain ambiguous. But to the degree that astrology caters to both positions, it becomes an ideal vehicle for an ambivalent spirituality such as New Age and the conflicting other-worldly/this-worldly desires inherent in the contemporary mainstream consumer.

It is perhaps only in the sense of secularization as representing the process by which the world is "gradually deprived of its sacral character," that astrology and New Age do not fit the expected scenario of western humanity's rejection of magical images (Hill, 1973:245). But as Hill (247) points out, "Interest in astrology seems to be an area of considerable importance even in the most technologically advanced areas of Western society." The final suggestion is that astrology and New Age are attempts to 'keep the world sacred', and this may be the bottom-line explanation for the current mainstream appeal of traditionally minority religion.

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