

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

Part 3

Chapter 8

Reasons for Belief in Astrology

Chapter Description

Belief in astrology is a matter of concern both for evangelical Christians and sceptics, who tend to see it as a threat to society. This chapter discusses the nature of belief and then surveys the literature on belief in astrology, primarily that emerging from positivist perspectives, especially from sceptics and psychologists, and attempts to define the various reasons proposed as explanations for belief in astrology. Lastly it considers debates within the sociology of religion, such as secularisation theory, which may place astrology within a broader cultural context, and considers whether definitions of astrology as a belief or superstition are viable.

Introduction

Astrology is widely treated as a matter of 'belief' (Hunt 2003: 173) or faith (Bok and Mayall 1941: 244) rather than, say, knowledge. Yet there is currently no detailed consideration of the function of belief in astrology in the sociological literature. There are, though certain general assumptions. Hill (1973: 247), for example, suggests that 'astrology provides an 'alternative source of self-definition' among groups of individuals who are searching for such 'definition', but it is not clear why those individuals should have found this function in astrology. Elsewhere claims are made but little independent argument offered. Hexham and Poewe offer no independent reasons for belief in astrology, preferring to cite Eliade, though without a reference, as the source for their claim that belief in astrology arises out of belief in karma and reincarnation, and vice versa (Hexham and Poewe 1997: 104).

The greatest concern with astrology is found in literature written by Christian evangelicals and scientific sceptics. While the Christian evangelical literature on belief in astrology includes the argument that astrology's claims are true, but originate in the satanic realm (see for example Harris 1999; 2000), the major part of the debate on belief in astrology is therefore based on the sceptical premise that science has disproved it. Crowe's comment (1990: 163), that 'there is currently no scientific or statistical evidence for...[astrology's] validity' is typical and is echoed throughout the sceptical literature (see for example Glick and Snyder 1986: 20). The sceptical literature repeatedly promotes the view that all research results into astrology are negative (see for example, Abell 1981: 89; Dawkins 1998: 122; Blackmore 1999: 184; Dean and Kelly 2003: 175). Such information is also cited in the literature on the sociology of religion. For example, Hexham and Poewe (1997: 104), citing sceptical sources (McGervey 1977; Bastedo 1978), write that 'astrology has been thoroughly discredited by scientific testing' and conclude that it is therefore magical and irrational. The need to explain belief in astrology, therefore, arises directly out of the view that its claims are so patently false that those who take it seriously are suffering from psychological weakness or disorder (see for example Dean, Kelly and Mather 1996b: 86).

Definitions of Belief

Belief is a highly problematic issue for astrologers. For example, when the question 'do you believe in astrology?' was put to astrologer Jane Ridder-Patrick when she was addressing a meeting of students in the astronomy department at Glasgow University on 1 March 1990, she replied simply,

no, I don't believe in astrology. I know from more ~~than~~ ten years of almost daily hands-on experience that astrology is a valid and useful tool for understanding our world and our relationship with it (Ridder-Patrick 2000b).

She later added that,

belief for me is a leap of faith which is not based on concrete personal experience. When working with any tool or system, including astrology, I need some kind of

PROOF that makes sense to me. It doesn' t have [to] be formal scientific proof which is so often, in any case a complete non-sense for looking at astrology. However, I would add that I have the working hypothesis that astrology can be used to examine, quite literally, anything under the Sun. When venturing into new territory, as I am at the moment, I keep an open mind, constantly testing if a proposition is ' true' or not either literally or symbolically & rejecting whatever doesn' t pass the stringency test. If I have any belief in relation to astrology it is that life is meaningful and purposeful, and that astrology has a part to play in illuminating this meaning and purpose (Ridder-Patrick 2000c).

Thus Ridder-Patrick' s understanding of belief is that it is inherently false. She concedes belief only in astrology' s function, not its existence, and considers that its validity is based in empirical observation.

Strictly speaking, the definition of belief is neutral, meaning ' trust or confidence' in the object of belief and, in the examples given in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the objects of belief can be either religious, intuitive, a matter of opinion or an accepted fact. Thus it is possible to believe both in the Virgin birth and the existence of gravity, without the fact that both may be defined as beliefs, implying that one is more true than the other. In this sense a belief does not have to be true but neither is it necessarily false: it is the perception of the believer which counts. Edwards (1957: 10) defines belief as a ' psychological concept' and adds that,

By a person' s beliefs about a psychological object we shall mean all those statements relating to the object that he agrees with or accepts. By a person' s disbeliefs about a psychological object we mean all of those statements about the object that he disagrees with or rejects.

In the strict definition of the word one can believe in science, or that a particular phenomenon is scientific, including astrology, as did Colin Wilson when he headlined an article in the *Daily Mail*, ' Why I now believe astrology IS a science' (Wilson 2001). In Wilson' s strictly grammatical use of the term, belief doesnot carry religious connotations. In popular discourse scientists are also regularly described as believers. For example, on the same day, *The Independent* reported that ' scientists...believe that

they have found the gene' responsible for a 'sweet tooth' (Connor 2001a), and that 'some scientists believe [that evolution] has come to a standstill' (Connor 2001b).

Theological discussions of 'belief' tend to concentrate on its relationship with faith for which, according to Clark (1898: 827), it is a synonym (Hastings 1910: I.827). Yet, having noted the two words' shared meaning as 'loyalty', or 'to hold dear', Cantwell Smith (1998: 104. 116-7) argues that, due to shifting usage, 'belief' has lost its spiritual connotations to the extent that 'belief in God' no longer carries the same power as 'faith in God'. Yet the attempt to distinguish words which have fundamentally the same meaning leads to confusion. O' Hear (1982: 2) distinguished faith as 'an all encompassing set of attitudes to human life and the world' from mere 'scientific', 'historical' or 'psychological' beliefs. Yet, he argued that 'for believers faith is overwhelmingly a matter of living and of acting', as if faith is a natural attribute of believers.

In common usage the word can be used neutrally or pejoratively at one and the same time: in the literature on paranormal phenomena the term 'believe' is applied to both sympathetic and sceptical opinions of paranormal phenomena (see for example Sheldrake 2001: 58; see also Marks and Colwell 2001). Some beliefs, in this usage, can be false but others, if they are verified by observation, true. This was essentially the point made by Frank Jevons (1896). However, Jevons undermined the clarity of the distinction by arguing that observation itself is a function of consciousness, and itself may be external or internal (1896: 402-3). Thus, the belief that certain acids corrode certain metals may be verified externally but the belief that revenge is sweet may only be judged internally. Beliefs, then, are inferences which may be judged true or false according to reason.

In popular discourse amongst sceptics, belief is automatically regarded as false, in contrast to science, which is the source of truth (Glick and Snyder 1986: 22; Krippner and Winkler 1996). For example, discussing the granting of a PhD to Elizabeth Teissier, President Mitterand's astrologer, by the Sorbonne, Magnus Linklater commented in *The Times* that the core problem of the incident was that,

In short, the woman really *believes* in astrology. And there is the rub. If you seriously believe that the stars rule our lives, you have abandoned the most basic tenet of science which is knowledge obtained by observation and experiment (Linklater 2001).

In much of the sceptical scientific literature, a 'belief' is automatically defined as false unless, in rare cases, proved otherwise. Myers (1990: 102, 109-111, 114), in his summary of the psychological reasons for belief, generally treats beliefs as false but regards them as dangerous only when 'belief perseverance' (the tendency for individuals to retain beliefs when they have been disproved) occurs and leads to 'self-defeating behaviour'. Later, though, he concedes that a false belief may be countered by a true one, suggesting uncertainty over the word's precise use.

More recently the cognitive psychologist Stephen Pinker (1997: 25) defined beliefs as 'information, incarnated as configurations of symbols'. Symbols, in his view, are 'physical states of bits of matter' which correspond to beliefs and are triggered 'by things in the world'; when two of these bits of matter 'bump' into each other, he argues, the symbols to which they correspond combine to form a new belief. The assumption, that a belief is a distinct cognitive state arising from physiological processes was combined with a summary of the sceptical arguments on the nature of belief by Robert Park (2000: 35), Professor of Physics at the University of Maryland. He argued that brains are 'belief engines'. According to Park's line of reasoning, belief has physiological causes and occurs when the believer mistakenly infers a causal connection in two unconnected events. Park argues that, when 'the chemical messengers

of emotion cause the thalamus to bypass the sensory cortex and route the information directly to the amygdala', a belief then becomes a 'personal superstition' (Park 2000: 36). Park acknowledges belief's positive function in encouraging survival strategies and social cohesion but, he argues, carried to extremes, it can become destructive – as in the mass suicides at Jonestown and Heaven's Gate (for which see Hall 2000). However, 'If this sounds hopelessly gloomy', he wrote, 'be patient, we are coming to the good news: we are not condemned to suffer the tyranny of the belief engine. The primitive machinery of the belief engine is still in place but evolution didn't stop there. It provided us with an antidote, namely science' (Park 2000: 37).

The notion of belief as an opposite to truth was applied to astrology by Dean and Mather (1977: 3, 15), who argued that, because belief and truth are incompatible then, in relation to astrology, the former may offer meaning but must be tested against the evidence and ultimately replaced by the latter in the form of science, which offers genuine explanations. According to this argument, while astrology may be subjectively pleasing and while this does not make it true, such subjective satisfaction is nevertheless the basis of belief in it (Dean 1992; Dean and Loftson 1995/6: 40; see also Dean, Mather and Kelly 1996b: 66; Kelly 1997: 1063; 1998: 544). Astrology is therefore essentially a 'delusional system' (Dean 1998/9: 49).

Reasons for Belief in Astrology

Kanitscheider (1991: 259-260) proposes that a major reason for belief in astrology is publicity through the media, an argument which may explain how belief spreads but not why it spreads. Similarly Dean (1998/9: 26-28, 47-51; see also Dean, Kelly and Mather 1996b: 86-88) proposes four reasons for belief, all based on personal experience and resulting from 'reading sun signs', 'reading astrology books', 'visiting an astrologer' and 'being an astrologer', his argument being that 'astrology seems to work, so we become believers'. According to Kelly, although its claims are false, 'many people appear to be

attracted to astrology because it seems simple and speaks to their lives' (Kelly 1998: 542). Dean and Mather agree, suggesting that 'The great popularity of astrology is due largely to its symbolic and non-scientific nature, for this makes it instantly helpful in understanding, ie (sic) in areas of belief' (Dean and Mather 1977: 3). Regarding Dean and Mather's third reason above, 'visiting an astrologer', Wunder (2002) argued that this was a marginal consideration when compared to personal study of astrology.

Astrology as Primitive Error

The arguments which seek to explain religion as a form of 'primitive error' were summarised by Thrower (1999: 99-125). By association, then, astrology is also condemned as primitive error. The evolutionary position was summarised comprehensively by Jevons, who argued that progressively, over the millennia, as humanity evolved, it used its reason to correct false beliefs and identify true ones so that religion, even though fundamentally false, became progressively less so (Jevons 1896: 402-3). The philosophical framework for this hypothesis is inherited from the evolutionist theories of religion as developed by anti-Christian positivists, notably Edward Tylor in 1873, James Frazer in 1890 (1971)¹, Emile Durkheim in the 1910s (1912) and Bronislaw Malinowski in the 1920s (1925), building on the work begun by the eighteenth-century radicals summarised in chapter 2. Broadly speaking, the evolutionist perspective holds that religion originates as 'primitive' totemism, animism or magic, in which natural forces are animated or anthropomorphised, evolves through polytheism into monotheism and finally, in line with the law of progress, atheist materialism (Evans-Pritchard 1967: 31-3; Hill 1973: 19-43). Thus, if it can be argued that magic is a primitive form of religion, and that religion itself results from primitive error, then astrology can be deemed false purely by defining it as magic. For example, Jerome argued that 'astrology is false because it is magic' and that, consequently, 'to bow to the magical "dictates of the stars" is to abandon free will and rationality' (Jerome 1975: 10, 16). Statements such as those of the sceptic, George Abell, for whom belief in

astrology is necessarily 'incredible and absurd' (Abell 1981: 73, 94) and therefore be understood in their historical context as a manifestation of the positivist proposition that all religious belief is patently false.

The idea that there are such mutually exclusive categories as magic, religion and science, and that the last follows the first two in an evolutionary process, has been critiqued in general terms by Stanley Tambiah (1990) in relation to the sixteenth to eighteenth-centuries, by Charles Webster (1982) and Frances Yates (1983, 1986) and, in respect of the twentieth century, by Yinger (1970: 77). Additionally, Stark (1999: 47) argued that the evolutionist point of view, based in what he regarded as the erroneous notion of the 'primitive mind', was 'incorrect, extremely misleading, and often simply fabricated', and had been discredited once anthropologists began to conduct rigorous fieldwork rather than rely on theory.

Insecurity and Fear

Inextricably tied to the notion that astrology represents the survival of magical, primitive religion is the theory that it originates as a means of providing security to people who are naturally insecure, fearful and unable to deal with their environment or responsibilities without a crutch: an argument made extensively in relation to the origins of astrology in the ancient near-east (Jacobsen 1946: 126-7; see also Kramer 1963: 123).² The assumption that insecurity produces, in stages, fear, low-self-esteem, 'persuasability' and, ultimately, belief in astrology, has entered the psychological literature as a rationale for contemporary belief in astrology (see for example Glick and Snyder 1986: 50; Janis 1954, 1955; Adorno 1991: 3). Bok, for example, cited a statement put out by the 'Society for Psychological Study of Social Issues', which posited personal inadequacy, claiming that,

The principal reason why people turn to astrology and to kindred superstitions is that they lack in their own lives the resources necessary to solve serious personal

problems confronting them. Feeling blocked and bewildered they yield to the pleasant suggestion that a golden key is at hand - a simple solution - an ever present help in time of trouble (Bok and Mayall 1941: 244; see also Bok, Jerome and Kurtz 1975: 18).

However the 'insecurity' rationale for the development of ancient astrology has been challenged by Koch-Westonholtz (1995: 17-18) on the grounds that, firstly, it represents the inappropriate projection of modern concerns on to an ancient society and, secondly, that the omen literature indicates a society which was very certain of its beliefs. Similarly Gollob and Dittes (1965) have questioned the supposed relationship between low self-esteem and belief and, in studies of the wider culture, Stark (1999: 56) has argued that far from religion appealing to the inadequate and insecure, religious people enjoy better than average mental and physical health (Stark 1999: 56). Roof (1993) showed that those attracted to New Age beliefs tend to be more educated than the average.

Marginality

Linked to the fear and insecurity hypothesis is 'deprivation theory', which maintains that paranormal beliefs 'provide people with the means to cope with the psychological and physical strains and disadvantaged social and economic status', and predicts that 'socially marginal people will be more likely to believe in classic [paranormal] phenomena' (Rice 2003: 95, 104; see also Wuthnow 1978: 45; Glock and Stark 1966, Geertz 1966; Stark and Bainbridge 1980). This may be defined as classic, or 'type 1' marginality. However, Wuthnow interchanges this definition with a second, characterised by adventurousness combined with what he called 'cognitive sophistication', an ability to think independently and a higher level of education (Wuthnow 1976: 173). This may be defined as type 2 marginality. New religious movements, a category in which Wuthnow includes astrology, may therefore appeal to those people, typical representatives of the 1960s counter-culture, whose marginality is defined by their having lived in communes, used drugs, participated in radical politics

or having a liberal background (Wuthnow 1976: 184). When such experimentation takes place, Wuthnow argues, the normative order, that is, adherence to traditional religious belief breaks down (Wuthnow 1976: 196). Thus cultural pluralism, as characterised by the counter-culture, is a factor in encouraging new ideas, such as astrology (Wuthnow 1976: 217). Wuthnow's findings, though, were mixed. He found evidence both that astrology appeals primarily to type 1 marginality (1978: 49, 53-4) and type 2 (1978: 57); in other words, that astrology appeals to both the poor and dispossessed on the one hand and young, educated whites on the other.

Gullibility

A major etic explanation for belief in astrology, one which is found especially in the sceptical literature (Sherriff 2001: 7; see also Dean and Mather 1977: 7, 15), is gullibility: a willingness by certain people to believe whatever they are told. Belief in astrology then arises from a series of 'reasoning errors' (see Phillipson 2000: 136; Dean, Kelly and Mather 1996b 89-90; Glick and Snyder (1982: 50) of which one is self-attribution, the natural tendency to agree with what one is told about one's self (Mosher 1965: 400; Babbage and Ronan 1998: 418). However, gullibility is itself only a plausible explanation if astrology is patently false, while self-attribution may equally explain belief in psychology or science (Alcock 1981: 61; see also Forer 1949: 118; Snyder and Larson 1972: 388; Snyder, Larson and Bloom 1976: 263-4). It is then unclear why such arguments should apply particularly to astrology.

Psychology

The argument that belief in astrology has psychological causes is, though, supported elsewhere in the psychological literature. Rice (2003: 105), for example, has argued that 'innate and learned personality characteristics', may play a greater role in belief in astrology than do social factors. Plug (1975: 172-4) found that belief in astrology may be correlated with emotionality, as measured in the Eysenck Personality Inventory

(Eysenck and Wilson 1976), suggestibility and persuasability, while Belter and Brinkmann (1981: 427-432), found a higher probability that believers in 'magical...supernatural powers' (such as 'luck, chance, fate, superstition and astrology' (1981: 427) would be more likely to locate control in their lives in external forces. However, as most publicly accepted definitions of astrology posit the existence of external forces, this is not surprising.

Pathology

The theory that belief in astrology is pathological was developed in the pioneering work of the Freudian Marxist Theodor Adorno (1903-1969). Adorno identified a personality type which he termed 'authoritarian', distinguished by excessive conformism, bullying and submission to higher authority, of which two varieties were provided by astrology and fascism (Adorno *et al.* 1982). Belief in astrology then becomes a warning sign of possible fascist tendencies. It was in this context that the sceptical astronomer George Abell (1981: 94) cited Voltaire's aphorism that 'Men will cease to commit atrocities only when they cease to believe absurdities, and that the 'use of astrology' is considered an indication of neurotic or psychotic behaviour (Welsh 2000).³ The existence of the authoritarian personality, though, was challenged by Steiner (1954; see also Steiner and Johnson 1967; Stark 1999: 56).

Ignorance of or hostility to science

The notion of belief in astrology as inherently false, as opposed to science which, *a priori*, represents truth, is linked to the argument that such belief results from ignorance of science. One aspect of this ignorance is public confusion between astronomy and astrology with the latter, according to this hypothesis, benefiting in the public mind from the credibility of the former (Bok and Mayall 1941: 233; Snow and Brownsberger 1997: 7). At its most extreme, the sceptical argument continues, public perceptions are not so much a matter of ignorance as of outright hostility to science

(Kanitscheider 1991: 259). The assumption that scientific knowledge correlates inversely with belief in the paranormal and astrology is the basis of Tobacyk and Milford's (1983) influential scale of paranormal belief.

However, the supposed negative correlation between belief in science and either the paranormal in general or astrology in particular, was challenged or reversed by Wuthnow (1976: 164-8, 173, 181; 1978: 50, 56), Williams, Taylor and Hintze (1987: 356-8) Roof (1993), Broch (2000), Goode (2002: 27) and Rice (2003: 101). Haraldsson (1975: 150-1), meanwhile, showed that the position is complex and that different samples of data produce variable results. As Steve Bruce pointed out (1995: 55) in relation to the decline of mainstream Christianity, there is no reason to suggest that 'modern people, the beneficiaries of science and technology, are incapable of believing in the supernatural'.

Secularisation and the decline of traditional religion

There is today a widespread belief that religion in the western world is in a state of long-term decline (Wuthnow 1976: 41). It is also a matter of record, as Stark and Bainbridge report (1985: 430), that much of the literature on the recent history of religion in the west assumes a decline in religiosity in western countries. Wuthnow (1976: vii) wrote that 'for some years, a gradual, largely imperceptible, yet overwhelmingly profound cultural shift has been taking place in American society', which has 'wrought changes in our basic conceptions of ourselves and in the meanings we ascribe to our worlds'. This process, known as secularisation, has been defined by Stark and Bainbridge (1987: 429) as 'the erosion of belief in the supernatural a loss of faith in the existence of otherworldly forces'. On a wider level it should be noted, there are also public concerns over the apparent decline of membership in, or respect for, other traditional centres of authority in the UK, such as political parties (*Guardian* 22 April 2000) and faith in the police (Burrell 2001).

Although the roots of secularisation may be traced back to the nineteenth-century (Chadwick 1985), to seventeenth-century Puritanism, following Max Weber's arguments (1958) or to earlier stages in the history of western rationalism, including Greek philosophy (Hill 1979: 19-46; Wilson 1979: 11), it is widely assumed that the counter-culture of the 1960s accelerated the process (Wuthnow 1976: 1, 6, 12; see also Caird and Law 1982). Advocates of the theory, those who believe that the process is desirable, take the teleological view that such an intellectual development is the counterpart of biological evolution and argue, in the words of Peter Berger, that 'modernization necessarily leads to a decline of religion, both in society and in the minds of individuals' (Berger 1999: 2). For example, Bryan Wilson (1979: 11), a leading advocate of the theory, described what he perceived as a long-term trend 'in the nature of human consciousness, towards what might be called a "matter-of-fact" orientation to the world'.

Hill differentiated six varieties of meaning of the term:

1. The decline of religion in terms of the meaning and prestige of its symbols and its practice, although not necessarily its institutions, an argument particularly associated with Bryan Wilson (1966).
2. The shift of attention within religious groups themselves from 'otherworldly' to 'this-worldly' concerns (Shiner 1967; Berger 1969).
3. The disengagement of religion from the rest of society's political and social structures as religious choice becomes a private matter. This process, known as 'privatisation' and proposed by Wilson (1969, 1979), is particularly associated with the increase of religious pluralism since the 1960s (Wuthnow 1976: vii, 1, 2, 6, 207-208). As Rice

wrote, ' beginning with the counterculture movement of the late 1960s, people have increasingly rejected traditional religions in favor of more personalised belief structures (Rice 2003: 105). According to Orenstein this trend ' emphasises personal choice, is ambivalent about religious authority, focuses in experimental practice and personal growth, and mixes together spiritual stimuli from different traditions' (Orenstein 2002: 309; see also Caird and Law 1982: 152; Zinnbauer *et al.* 1997: 51). Thus, Stark and Bainbridge (1987: 316) write of religion becoming a ' cultural speciality' .

4. The transposition of beliefs and activities that once possessed a divine point of reference to an entirely secular context. An example would be the overarching claims of such modern ideologies as communism, humanism, Marxism, nationalism and scientism (Hill 1979: 243).

5. The gradual loss of the world's sacred character, that is the disenchantment of the world strongly associated with the theories of Max Weber (1958). Hill (1979: 247) suggests that astrology's popularity in the 1960s and 70s may have represented an attempt to re-enchant the world.

6. The shift from a sacred to a secular point of reference in society as a whole, rather than just in the more limited sphere of religious beliefs and practices (Becker 1950).

Criticism of Secularisation Theory

In spite of its popular appeal however, secularisation theory is far from universally accepted. A particularly blunt refutation was offered in 1972 by Andrew Greeley (1974: 45), who argued that the theory that society is moving inexorably towards secularism is itself less a matter of empirical observation than of religious faith, one shared by both secularists and churchmen. A huge amount depends, though, on how the data is collected and interpreted. Glock (1962: 100) noted that, of three recent studies of

religion in the United States, one showed that a revival was occurring, the second that there was a continuation of a long-term increase, and the third that secularisation was increasing. The issue depends largely on the extent to which Christianity is taken as the normative definition of religion. As Smart (1973a: 10, 34-5; see also Clayton and Gladden 1974) pointed out, there was a tendency in the 1950s and 1960s to assume that Christianity was normative and that other forms of belief might therefore be mistakenly assumed to be less religious. An increase in non-Christian beliefs is therefore automatically interpreted as a decline in religion. In this respect Herbrechtsmeier (1993: 6) also notes the tendency of western scholars to adopt definitions which suit their ideologies.

However, as Hill points out, the issue is far from clear-cut and depends not only on one's preferred definition of religion but, given that the argument assumes the existence of long-term trends, it also depends on the period taken into consideration (Hill 1979: 228-250; see also Yinger 1969: 88-89; Herbrechtsmeier 1993: 6 Gill, Hadaway and Marler 1998: 514). That is, decline in religious belief might be apparent from one starting point but not from another. The historical argument is a critical one, as part of the secularisation debate depends on the inappropriate comparison of past with present world views. For example, Steve Bruce, noting that in 1976 36% of British adults claimed to have had supernatural experiences, in which he includes 'horoscopes', acknowledged that this is a large figure. Yet he stated that it is small compared to the Middle Ages and hence that the secularisation thesis is maintained (Bruce 1995: 55). However, the phenomena which are now defined as supernatural by virtue of their inexplicability within the framework of natural law, were perfectly capable of naturalistic explanation within a medieval Aristotelian framework, as Thorndike has documented in considerable detail (Thorndike 1923-58). The general absence of a historical perspective, it should be noted, is a weakness in many sociological texts. For example, Hexham and Poewe (1987: 105), in their potted history of astrology, designed

to demonstrate its marginal significance, spoke of its revival in the sixteenth-century following its decline in the third-fourth centuries. This was some four-hundred years after the real date, the twelfth-century (Tester 1987).

Wuthnow' s argument illustrates the extent to which the secularisation thesis is based on arbitrary definitions which take Christianity as representative of religion. Having noted that, between 1971 and 1973, the proportion of respondents in the bay area of San Francisco who knew nothing about Transcendental Meditation and Zen Buddhism dropped from 33% to 3% and 9% respectively, he then defines such practices as ' nonreligion' in order to maintain the thesis that the drop in church attendance indicates a corresponding decline in religiosity (Wuthnow 1976: 37-39). He identified stages in this process in which American adults moved progressively from conservative religion to liberal religion to no religious affiliation, but it is clear that religion is defined as theism, that is traditional Christianity (Wuthnow 1976:, 83-6). The significance of Wuthnow' s argument for New Age culture is that its existence may therefore be seen as a consequence of secularisation and a symptom of privatisation. However, in that the New Age *sensu stricto* gives a high significance to supernatural forces, Bruce (2002: 75-105) has argued that, precisely because such superstition must also be seen as a phase in the secularisation process, its own demise is also inevitable.

Three models can now be identified for the impact of modernity on religion.

1. Modernity is characterised by increasing secularisation and a corresponding growth of scepticism about religion which is therefore in decline, perhaps inevitably, as in the six variants discussed above.

2. Modernity has had little effect on religious belief, which persists relatively undiminished, obscured by the decline in official church attendance. This argument was

proposed influentially by Greeley (1972), Yinger (1969: 90), who coined the phrase 'hidden' religion, and Luckmann (1990), who devised the term 'invisible religion', to describe the religiosity of those who retain traditional beliefs but no longer attend a regular church service. Stark and Bainbridge relate this theory to their view that secularisation not only is not new but is a continuous and natural process within 'religious economies' in which the tendency of religious institutions to become more worldly is both continuous and is automatically countered by tendencies to revival, producing 'sects', and innovation, which results in the development of 'cults' (Stark and Bainbridge 1985: 429-431). The very concept of the decline of the church, the triumph of science and the shift towards a 'religionless' future is therefore, in their view, contradicted by the historical evidence.

3. As an extension of point 2, modernity is characterised by increasing fragmentation of established religious forms and greater pluralism, an argument which is, perhaps, most congenial to the inclusion of new religious movements and new age beliefs within the framework of the contemporary religious world. Davie (1994: 93-116) has coined the phrase 'believing without belonging', a direct reference to Hornsby-Smith's (1991: 4) consideration of the joint questions of 'beliefs and belonging' in relation to modern English Catholics, in order to describe those individuals for whom religious experience is no longer found in one of the mainstream churches. She adds that 'the sacred does not disappear - indeed in many ways it is becoming more rather than less prevalent in contemporary [British] society' (Davie 1994: 43). In Europe as a whole, she reports, the increase of 'other faith categories' represents a growth area in religiosity since 1945, rather than the decline predicted by secularisation theory (Davie 1994: 27).

Callum Brown also considers Steve Bruce's insistence that belief in the supernatural, and hence faith in God, has been in decline since the 1960s. He points out that the real shift might be in terms of the shift in the focus of ethical concern towards such matters as environmentalism and nuclear war (about which the Bible had little to say), and also

the revolution in social attitudes affecting such matters as marriage, which made the church seem conservative and out of touch (Brown 2001: 190). That is, levels of religiosity may have little to do with church attendance, a supposition which supports Adorno's finding that people are quite capable of distinguishing between religion and the church (Adorno 1950: 731; see also Batson and Ventris 1982: 142). The crucial issue is whether the church is perceived as being able to satisfy that religiosity.

The above three arguments are not water tight compartments. Davie, for example, emphasises the persistence of traditional belief within the contemporary framework of institutional fragmentation, while Wilson's 'privation' thesis is particularly applicable to the diversity found within the general category of New Age, as demonstrated by Roof (1993: 194-200), though by the simple expedient of abandoning Wilson's narrow definition of religion. As Hall (2000: 4) states, 'students of religion now acknowledge what casual observation attests: contrary to the expectations of twentieth-century social theorists...the rise of modern society has failed to bring the thorough-going secularisation that would undermine widespread religious belief. Instead, as in times past, people who need spiritual and social support continue to turn to religion in huge numbers'.

Astrology as Abnormal or Normal

The central theme, then, of most of the literature on belief in astrology is that it is a phenomenon in urgent need of explanation. However, a counter-argument is to be found within the literature on the sociology and phenomenology of religion. Greeley, for example, (1975: 7) launched a substantial critique of Adorno and argued that the definition of the paranormal as abnormal is unsustainable. Instead, he claimed that 'the paranormal is normal' and that people who have paranormal experiences are not only 'not kooks...deviants...social misfits', but may actually 'be more emotionally healthy than those who do not have such experiences'. Stark (1999: 56; see also Best and

Kellner 1991: 3, 37), meanwhile, argued that Adorno and his colleagues were authoritarian modernists who themselves were concerned with the control of information and ideas to suit their own purposes. For their part Caird and Law (1982: 151-2) noted that the tendency to regard adherence to non-conventional religions, in which they included theosophy and spiritualism, as a form of social deviance, arises from a flawed model of western religion in which a stable society is said to be currently meeting a unique challenge from new ideological sources which it is obliged to resist. Yinger (1970: 78) observed that 'the social use of deviation to reconfirm and re-establish boundaries, a theme so powerfully developed by Durkheim, is, I suspect, a prime source of magical beliefs and practices amongst contemporary people', a category in which he included science. As Ninian Smart said of the psychology of religion, there is a sense that the purpose is to explain away the phenomena under consideration, rather than investigate or understand it (Smart 1973a: 37; see also Hill: 1973: 13-14). Thus the labelling of astrology as deviant may be no more than a device to confirm what Glock and Stark (1966: 10-11) called the 'humanistic value orientation'; in other words what Herbrechtsmeier (1993: 15) termed the 'imperial' attitudes of modern science, that is the use of 'methodological scienticism' (Stenmark 2001: 32), the application of inappropriate scientific methodologies to questions which they cannot answer. The proposition that belief in astrology needs to be explained is itself the product of what Dean *et al.* described as systematic errors of human judgement (Dean, Kelly and Mather 1996b: 89-90). As a result, Stark continued, 'it is now impossible to do credible work in the social scientific study of religion based on the assumption that religiousness is a sign of stupidity, neurosis, poverty, ignorance, false consciousness, or that it represents a flight from modernity' (1999: 567). Religion, for Stark, is a category which includes astrology.

The etic literature on belief in astrology is deeply embedded in the prejudice against it noted by the astronomers Culver and Ianna (1988:xii) and the psychologists Eysenck

and Nias (1984: 7-11; see also Curry 1987:1-4; Halbronn 1987:213-5). One possible explanation is provided by Stark (1999: 57), who observed that there is a widespread bias, at least in the literature on the sociology of religion, towards antagonism to groups which are small, committed and which include vivid images of the supernatural. Consequently, he argues, groups which come 'closer to disbelief' are judged 'better' than those which do not (Stark 1999: 57). Wuthnow (1976: 69; see also 127), meanwhile, noted that what he called the positivist 'meaningsystem' dismisses as false or irrelevant all phenomena that are not deemed consistent with its philosophy. Such judgements, as Michael Hill wrote with particular reference to sociologists, are 'extra-sociological' (Hill 1973: 9), or beyond the scope of the discipline within which the researcher is working. Following Hill, then similar judgements made by scientists against astrology may be designated 'extra-scientific'.

From a phenomenological standpoint, the nature of belief is difficult to understand if it is assumed, *a priori*, to be false. As David Hufford has argued, the investigation of belief traditions has itself been distorted by the *a priori* assumption that those beliefs are false, even when researchers make obligatory declarations of their own neutrality. As he summarises the situation, the essentially misguided question that such researchers ask is ' 'Why and how do some people manage to believe things which are so patently false?...[and] the interpretations that follow often obtain most or all of their explanatory force from the assumption that the beliefs under study are objectively incorrect' (Hufford 1987: 19). Further, Hufford argued that attempts to debunk supernatural beliefs, or to subject them to rational explanations, may be equally based on statements of faith and that, therefore, 'traditions of disbelief should be recognised as such and no more accepted uncritically than are traditions of belief' (1987: 25, 27). Similarly Herbrechtsmeier (1993: 10) argued that the 'sacred-profane dichotomy' is an inadequate basis for the definition of religion since it is vague and far too reductionistic'.

Rational Choice

An alternative model for belief in astrology, then, is not that it represents a superstitious flight from reason, a failure of either scientific knowledge or Christian faith, but a perfectly logical means of viewing the world. As Batson and Ventris (1982: 141) pointed out in relation to religious commitment, it may be 'carefully thought out and taken seriously as a major goal in life'. Further, Rodney Stark's findings that the adherents of the groups he regards as 'cults'⁴ including astrology, decide on their affiliations on the basis of a clear assessment of the benefits, implicitly demolishes the supposedly well-defined boundary between the rational and the irrational, arguing that religious affiliation is frequently explained by what he called 'rational choice theory'. 'Humans', Stark and Bainbridge argued (1985: 5), seek what they perceive to be rewards and try to avoid what they perceive to be costs'. Further, they argued, 'human beings make rational choices because their desire for certainty is less likely to be met from irrational choices whose outcome will most likely be unpredictable, and prefer rational gods because they are likely to offer them a greater certainty of reward than capricious, irrational ones' (Stark and Bainbridge 1987: 113-4).

Astrologers Responses to Scepticism

The sceptical, positivist point of view, that belief is essentially false, is well known to astrologers. Dean's point of view, supported by some sceptical colleagues, was also given prominent space in a volume of interviews with contemporary astrologers, produced by an astrological publisher and targeted specifically at the astrological market (Phillipson 2000: 124-166). Astrologers who are members of astrological societies for a number of years will become aware of such sceptical arguments, particularly when applied to astrology by sceptical scientists, because they are summarised in the specialist literature, as by Bowles (2001) in the newsletter of the US based Association for Astrological Networking (AFAN).

Secondly, the sceptical proposition, that belief in astrology requires explanation because scientific evidence does not exist, is contradicted by the existence of positive research results. Notable, in this respect is the so-called ' Mars Effect'⁵ which has been refuted by sceptics but nevertheless remains a part of the pro-astrology literature (Ertel and Irving 1996). These and other positive results may be challenged and undermined, but that does not remove them from the literature, and astrologers respond to sceptical critiques by referring to positive scientific results (see for example Lind 1962: 17-21, Mather 1975/6: 28-30; Downing 2003). The argument, then, that belief in astrology exists in the complete absence of positive scientific data cannot be sustained.

Thirdly, astrologers are aware of the critiques of contemporary science by Feyerabend (1978a, 1978b) and Midgely (1992), and of scientism, the view that ' science alone can and will eventually solve all, or almost all, of our problems' (Stenmark 2001: 15), as well as of the view that science has ' acquired the trappings of a primitive religion' (Raju 2003: 79). This is not an unusual position. Wuthnow, for example, defines ' social science' , the idea that human life is shaped primarily by the material environment, as a twentieth-century ' meaning system' or ' belief system' (1976 4, 112). Such literature is available to astrologers and is quoted by them (see for example, Addey 1976/5: 33). The consequence is a lack of respect amongst astrologers for scientific sceptical critiques of astrology. For example, Spencer (2000: 245) considered that ' for astrology' s many followers, the approval of physics ultimately doesn' t matter'.

A typical example of the interaction of astrologers and sceptics occurred in August 2003, following the publication of a paper in *The Journal of Consciousness Studies* by Dean and Kelly (Dean and Kelly 2003). This then formed the basis of a half-page report in *The Sunday Telegraph* headed ' Astrologers fail to predict proof they are wrong' (Matthews 2003). The story was syndicated around the world and became the basis for

further press reports and countless numbers of radio discussions (Piechowski 2003b; Turner 2003). Astrologers have developed networks which are highly efficient at countering anti-astrology stories in the media (see Dean 2003). In the UK, *Daily Mirror* astrologer Jonathan Cainer' s own high-profile response (Cainer 2003: 39) took about five times as much space as the *Mirror's* own report on Dean and Kelly' s paper (White 2003). It was republished by the Astrological Association in its bi-monthly *Council News*, following an introduction from President, Roy Gillett (Gillett 2003). The Astrological Association itself coordinated around a dozen of the radio responses by astrologers which were complemented by the generally sympathetic attitude adopted to astrology by the tabloid press. For example, like *The Daily Mirror*, *The Daily Express* reported the Dean and Kelly paper (Hale 2003) but gave more space to Amanda Platell' s response. Platell is a well-known journalist and former press-secretary to conservative prime minister John Major. The reader, then, is left to decide what to believe, Dean and Kelly' s statistics or Platell' s personal testimony. Platell concluded,

Ultimately, astrologers are like romances - there are good ones and bad ones. But the duds should never deter you from a shot at happiness, whatever the latest research says (Platell 2003: 25).

Similar responses were made through astrological networks in the USA, mainly were either rhetorical scathing attacks on Dean and CSICOP (Perry (2003a, Westin 2003, Piechoski 2003a, 2003b, Muise 2003), or scientific critiques of his arguments (Urban-Lurain (2003a, 2003b; Ertel 2003a).

Astrologers and Belief in Astrology

The question, then of how astrologers respond to the word ' belief' and their ~~pon~~se to the question ' do you believe in astrology?' is therefore an important one. The evidence suggests that the word is widely held to have negative connotations. Neil Spencer (2000: 14) described ' belief' as a ' troublesome word' , while when Margarete H addressed the problem in 1951 (1973: 15), she advised students to sidestep the question

of belief by stating, rather, that they observe ' that certain traits of character and certain types of events appear to correlate with certain planetary relationships' .

According to Kate Czerny, administrator of the Astrological Association of Great Britain, the definition of astrology as a matter of belief is media led (Czerny 2000). Thus a journalist (who was sympathetic to astrology), on interviewing an astrology teacher who justified her use of astrology in terms of experience, reinterpreted her statement as an indication of belief, writing that

There' s no doubt that the faculty at Kepler are, to one degree or another, astrology believers. Dr. Lehman claims to have had success in predicting the outcome of sports games and beating the house in Vegas (Fefer 2001b).

The Astrological Association' s President, Roy Gillett, confirmed that journalists insist on asking about the level of belief in astrology in spite of protestations that it is not a matter of belief: ' You get this question all the time. You tell them it' s not like that and then the words "we don' t know how many people believe in it" (Gillett 2000). The question arises, then, as to whether the word ' belief' is so corrupted by the perjorative associations projected on to it by scepticism, that its use in any debate becomes the automatic cause of misunderstandings. Thus Davie (1994: 43), realising that the word now carries a host of prejudicial assumptions, but also recognising that there is currently no suitable alternative, refers to ' what I have called "belief" (as a convenient shorthand)' .

Chapter Summary

A survey of the public debate on belief in astrology indicates that it emerges primarily from the positivist assumption that astrology, *a priori*, must be false precisely because it conflicts with the positivist world view. As Stephen Hawking (2002: 103) wrote, explaining scientists' lack of belief in astrology, ' The real reason most scientists don believe in astrology is not scientific evidence or the lack of it but because it is not

consistent with other theories that have been tested by experiment' . The argument is therefore fundamentally one of epistemology, and of competition between different approaches to knowledge. Further, amongst scientific sceptics, the term ' belief' is automatically used to indicate propositions which are false. Thus, the argument continues, the presumed problem of astrology' s existence in the modern world can be explained if, first, belief in it can be explained. All such explanations, emerging from the automatic assumption that astrology is false, therefore, assume psychological disorder or weakness, or social deviancy, as explanations. However, the challenge to secularisation theory, questioning the evolutionist view of religion, opens the way to another possibility: that astrology may exist as part of the process of privatisation, the increasing pluralism of religiosity which is a feature of modernity, and that individual affiliation to it may be a consequence of rational choice rather than superstition. The consequence, though, of the debate on the nature of belief in the sceptical, psychological and sociological literature, and the frequent assumption that beliefs are automatically false, may have made astrologers reluctant to admit to belief in astrology.

Notes

1. *The Golden Bough* was published in a two-volume edition in 1890, expanded into three volumes in 1900 and to twelve in 1911-15. The abridged version appeared in 1922.

2. See also Shlain 1998: 22, Pannekoek 1961: 19 this 123; Campbell 1979: 103-4; Van der Waerden 1974: 2.89; Cumont 1960: 11; Perry 1997: 111, Starkey 2000: 264.

3. Citing the ' Piedmont Psychiatric Clinic' s Symptom Checklist' .

4. For discussion of the theories on the formation and nature of cults see Hill 1979: 47-97; Bromley and Hadden 1993; Saliba 1995; Dawson 1998: 13-40.

5. The French statistician Michel Gauquelin (1928-1991) demonstrated, amongst a series of results, that Mars tends to be either rising or culminating at the birth of sports champions (1988). For a comprehensive review of Gauquelin' s work see Ertel and Irving (1996).