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

Part 3

Chapter 10.

The Extent of Belief in Astrology

Chapter Summary

This chapter discusses the assumption that belief in astrology is growing. It considers the historical background which posits an apparent decline of astrology in the seventeenth-century a revival in the nineteenth-century, and a move towards universal acceptance in the twentieth-century. It then reviews attempts to quantify belief in astrology. Results from previous surveys are summarised in appendices 2 and 3,

Introduction

It is widely assumed by astrologers that astrology is increasing in popularity. Writing of the situation in 1980, Dane Rudhyar (1980: 67; see also Arroyo 1975: xv) claimed that 'astrology is becoming widely accepted'. For many astrologers the growth of belief in astrology is a symptom of the decline of traditional religion, which itself, it is argued, accompanies the transition to the Aquarian Age (Rudhyar 1975b: 23; see also Hone 1970: 272; Levine 1997: 4; Grasse 12000: 20; Caton 2002: 20; McDevitt 2002: 1, 16; Nobel 2003:1, 28-9). Stearn considered that astrology had experienced a 'meteoric rise' and 'spectacular comeback' following centuries in which it had been associated with the Dark Ages, and put a date on the beginning of this process: the Uranus-Pluto conjunction in 1966. Rose (1982: 25) also picks the 1960s, but associates astrology's fortunes with the growth of the New Age movement. West and Toonder (1973: 109), on the other hand, identified a sharp increase of interest in astrology 'after the First World War', with a further turning point after the Second World War (1973: 119). Mayo (1981: 9; see also Oken 1974: 3) noted the increase in astrology since the 1960s and picked 1977 (1979: foreword) as the key year. Hand (2003: 109) also identifies the

1970s as critical while Greene and Sasportas (1987: xi) identify 1983 as a year which saw a sharply increased interest. There are also widespread predictions amongst astrologers that astrology is about to experience a major breakthrough (Toonder and West 1973: 273; Sullivan and Sasportas 1992: 106), often citing Jung's forecast in this respect (Moore 1960: 33; Mayo 1979 front matter).

Amongst external commentators on astrology, Underwood's statements (1972: 1, 34) that 'there is probably a greater interest in the subject than there has been for centuries' and that its study 'has never been more widespread and popular than it is today', are typical but clearly exaggerated, if the present is compared to the Renaissance, imperial Rome or eighth-century BCE Assyria.

Amongst scholars of the New Age, the tone is set by Melton, Clarke and Kelly (1991: 277), who regard the 'growth of interest in astrology' as 'the most widespread indication of the modern renewal of interest in all manner of things occult'. The argument that belief in astrology is growing is shared by astrology's sceptical critics. Indeed, the assumption that astrology's popularity is increasing has been a major factor in the development of the organised sceptic movement (Bok, Jerome and Kurtz 1975: 4).

However, the assumption that interest in astrology has recently undergone a major increase is not confined to the 1970s to 1990s. It was remarked on by the astronomer Bart Bok in 1941 (1941: 233) and the astrologers Marsom (1939: 20), quoting an unnamed American astronomer, and Charles Carter (1939: 2) in 1939. Yet, as long ago as 1911 Alan Leo (1911: 265) identified a 'revolution in astrologic thought' since 1891, using very much the same evidence, the increasing publication of astrological periodicals, as did Bok in 1941 (see also Howe 1967: 67).

Astrology was no stranger to the media in the 1890s and 1900s. When Alan Leo was attacked in *The Daily News* on 27 August 1890 under the headline ' Cheap Astrology' , his collaborator Frederick Lacey regarded it as good publicity in spite of the adverse content (Lacey 1919: 36). Conversely, an absence of comment on astrology might indicate its general social acceptance. When Annie Besant' s address on the laying of the foundation stone of the new Theosophical Society headquarters in London was not reported in the press, Alan Leo, who had chosen the moment astrologically, remarked that ' The very silence of the newspapers shows that; for they do not mention it. A few years ago, they would have made a headline of it' (Leo 1911: 8.10.403).

Two major problems may therefore be identified in the argument that the popularity of, or belief in, astrology is increasing. First is that the assumption that this is the case appears to have been taken for granted throughout the twentieth-century, mainly on the basis of recent impressions. Secondly, it depends on the concept of a previous decline.

The 'Decline' of Astrology

Tester (1987: 243) represented the typical historical view when he concluded his history of astrology with the assumption that it died out at the end of the seventeenth-century. However Curry (1989: 95-152) argued that the situation was more complicated and depended on the distinction between three varieties of astrology. The first, the astrology of philosophers and academicians, he defined as high. The second, ' middling' , form of astrology was based on the casting of horoscopes, usually as a commercial enterprise for individual clients. The third, ' low' astrology, was expressed primarily through the production and sale of mass-market almanacs. Curry demonstrated that it was only ' high' astrology which died out in the mid to late seventeenth century, while ' middling' survived in isolated examples and ' low' continued to thrive. The collapse of ' high' astrology' and, to an extent, ‘middling' , was associated, as Geneva (1995: 281) has pointed out, with the dismantling of the neo-Platonic universe. Such philosophical

changes, though, had no relevance for popular culture. Thus Capp (1979: 238-269) and Perkins (1996) have demonstrated the continuation of a consistent popular astrological tradition throughout the eighteenth-century and up to the latter part of the nineteenth-century, represented mainly by the almanacs, whose content was based around astrtological forecasts for the coming year. *Old Moore's Almanac*, the largest selling publication of its kind, sold 362,449 copies in 1801 (Perkins, Appendix I), a figure which dwindled to 50,000 in 1895 and 16,000 in the 1920s. This decline was more than offset by the launch of a cheaper version, *Old Moore's Penny Almanak*, which had been founded in 1842 and of which over a million were printed in 1898 (Capp 1979: 268-9). *Raphael's Almanac* and *Zadkiel's Almanac*, which contained more detailed general astrological forecasts than *Old Moore's* sold around 300,000 in 1898 (Capp 1979: 269), the latter a six-fold increase on sales in 1851 (Godwin 1994: 177) and more than the figure of 90,000 quoted in 1929 (Robson 1929: 3). As a comparison the fourth best-selling book of 1993 was *1994 Horoscopes*, selling 480,000 copies in the UK (Bruce 1995: 106), while Capp (1979: 269) noted a print-run of *Old Moore's Almanac* of 1.75 million in 1975. While these figures are variable, they do not indicate an increase in readership, given the increase in population in the nineteenth-century from just over 18 million in 1801 to over 45 million in 1901.[1]

Capp (1979: 191) also noted the survival of lunar lore in nineteenth-century British agriculture. It is also possible to discern continuity in north America in the eighteenth-century (Butler 1979) and the nineteenth, particular amongst apocalyptic groups, including the Mormons (Brooke 1994; Quinn 1998). In addition, there is evidence for continuity outside the English-speaking world. Devlin (1987: 1-9, 92-99), for example, argued that, in France, popular astrology flourished throughout the nineteenth-century as a form of ' popular religion' .

The proposition that astrology has enjoyed a substantial revival in the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries is therefore dependent on the notion that it died out in the seventeenth century. If the notion of decline must be qualified, as Curry indicates, then so must the nature of the revival. While Curry's 'high' astrology was scarcely to be found in post-seventeenth-century Britain with the exception of a few thinkers such as Jung (in the twentieth-century) whose astrological writings were all translated into English from the 1950s onwards (Main 1999), 'middling' astrology has enjoyed a measurable revival since the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-centuries. The evidence for this is to be found in the successful publication of magazines and books devoted to the casting and interpretation of horoscopes in the early nineteenth-century (Curry 1992), and the organisation of sustained societies and schools of astrology since the early twentieth-century (Campion 1988). However, most journalistic interest in astrology's contemporary popularity is concerned with 'low' astrology in its modern form of newspaper and magazine columns which, it may be argued, fill the place once occupied by almanacs. In Britain, the USA and much of the western world, horoscope columns are carried by most of the popular press and women's magazines. According to Gallup (1979: 185), 'Attesting to the popularity of astrology in the United States today is the fact that astrology columns are carried by 1,200 of the nation's 1,750 daily newspapers'. The journalist and religious commentator Anne Atkins stated in 1999 that, in her opinion, the horoscope column is the most popular piece in any newspaper, with the agony aunt coming a close second (Atkins 1999). A more recent development is the spread of astrology to the internet, a medium which can expand the print formula of the standard twelve paragraph horoscope column to the supply of downloadable computerised readings based on the customer's exact birth data. Jonathan Cainer, *The Daily Mirror* astrologer, reported that his web site www.Cainer.com, receives 100,000 'unique' visits per day; each page the visitor then looks at constitutes a 'hit' so, if each visitor looks at between three and six pages, the site receives between 300,000 and 600,000 hits per day which, in 2001, made it Britain's fourth most popular web site

(Cainer 2001). Rick Levine (2001) of the Seattle based website www.Star-IQ.com, reported in 2001 that the site received 300,000 ' page views' per month and, on the basis that 10% of visitors accounted for 70% of those page views, he estimated a figure of 80,000 visitors per month. As an insider in the internet astrology business Levine also estimated that the Astrology.com website sent around 2.5 million standard horoscope columns to customers each day. However, such figures may be unreliable indicators of public interest. A casual browser may find themselves on Astrology.com' s mail list, while 50,000 page hits on www.findastrologer.com was reduced to 900 actual visits when web host statistics were replaced by more accurate figures computed by a web counter (*APA Newsletter* 2001, issue 29).

Cainer also reported that when he worked on *Today* newspaper in the late 1980s, when the first horoscope phone lines, running pre-recorded tapes, were launched, the weekly call figures were 25,000 out of a circulation of half-a-million, representing 5% of the circulation. By 1999 he was working for *The Daily Mail* where his lines were receiving around 17,000 a week, less than 1% of the circulation of two-and-a-half-million, bringing in a gross income of approximately a million pounds per annum. While the headline figure of a million pound turnover can make for dramatic headlines, the actual percentage of readers calling was very small.

Sean Lovatt described the situation he found when he was engaged in producing computerised horoscopes for *The Daily Express*. In around 1991 the newspaper offered readers a computerised horoscope which could be obtained by sending in a cut-out coupon. About 5200 were sold at £9.99 each, earning a gross income of £520,000 but representing a response of only 0.5% of the total circulation of over a million. He recalled that,

> When the Express didn' t put a coupon that was cutable out in the paper, just an advert saying please send these details off to this PO Box number, the response was much,

> much smaller. By the time that we had been doing it for a few years, this is for birth charts, for character analysis that I am talking about. By the time we had been doing it for a few years, it seemed to me that the pool of Express readers who were interested in this had dried up somewhat and we were getting about 2,200 to 2,500 each time they did a reader's special offer, which they did twice a year. Some of those people, I recognised from my database were past purchasers of the reports who were buying them for other people. Their children, friends, husbands, family and others were new people. So it seemed that there was only a percentage of Express readers who were prepared to part with their pounds to get an astrological printed report and once they had got that, they didn't necessarily want another one. We then introduced another product which was a 12 monthly forecast. That did better. People seemed to be more interested in their future than their character. Of course, the fact that the two are indivisible is another matter. We did better with that and more reorders and there would be people who would over a period of five to six years, every year order their 12 monthly forecast (Lovatt interview 2001)

There is then, a demand for astrology. However, the percentage who take the active step to purchase a birth chart interpretation is, when compared to those who read their horoscope in the newspaper, very small and heavily dependent on the nature of the commercial promotion.

Numbers of Astrologers.

The most accurate measurement of the current extent of Curry's 'middling astrology' may be the number of professional astrologers in the country. There is, though, no census of the number of professional astrologers. The Christian evangelical Anderson (1988: 9) estimated that there are 60,000 'fortune-tellers, clairvoyants and astrologers' in France, while Melton, Clarke and Kelly (1991: 277) estimated that there were '10,000 professional astrologers in the United States serving more than 20 million clients'. However, there is no indication of how they arrived at this figure. It is, though, double the figure of 5,000 astrologers catering for 10 million customers given by Louis MacNeice in 1964,[2] suggesting that it may be a simple extrapolation from MacNeice's estimate.

Many reported figures, even in the academic literature, are based on vague assertions. For example, Dean and Kelly (2003: 175, 182-3) report that 1 in 10,000 of either the 'general population' (2003: 182) or of 'western countries' as a whole (2003: 175) are

practitioners or students of astrology, a figure, which applied to the UK, means that there are 5,000 such people. However, Dean and Kelly's source is Dean, Mather and Kelly (1996: 60), which contains no further information. Their estimate is based on an unsourced 'reconciliation of association memberships, conference sales and software sales' (1996: 60).

In the UK, the Astrological Association (AA) had 1302 members in October 2003 (Czerny 2003) while the Astrological Lodge of London (ALL) had 205 in March 2003 (Blake 2003). The largest astrological gathering in the UK, the annual AA conference, usually attracts between 250 and 300 delegates, while the 2002/3 edition of the *Guide to Worldwide Astrology* (2002/3 111-7) lists seventy-three local astrology groups in the UK. This figure may be reduced to around sixty-five if various schools and national societies are ignored. A flourishing group, such as the Suffolk Astrological Society, which has been meeting continuously since 1981, has around '20-30 paid up members' and holds twenty-two meetings per year which may attract 'between 8 and 12 members/non-members' or 'around 18 on a good evening' (Gray 2003). We may extrapolate from this figure to estimate that between 650 and 1300 individuals attend meetings of local astrology groups in the UK.

By comparison, in the USA, the National Council for Geocosmic Research (NCGR) had 2225 members in November 2003, of whom 115 were outside the USA (Fei 2003). Its nearest rival, the International Society for Astrological Research (ISAR) had 984 members, of whom 830 are in the USA and 154 international (Boggia 2003). The ISAR conference in Anaheim in October 2003 attracted around 600 delegates while the ISAR education conference in Minnesota in November 2003 was attended by almost 200 delegates.

The largest private school of astrology in the UK, The Faculty of Astrological Studies, has 474 students working for the basic qualification, the certificate, and 163 studying for the Diploma, a total of 637 which is boosted to 809 when students at occasional seminars and the annual summer school are added (Martin 2003). Of the 637 active students, 578 are based in the UK and 165 attend classes in London. The Mayo School, which split from the Faculty in the early 1970s and teaches only correspondence courses has 289 diploma students, around 70-100 certificate students. Around 60% of the total is UK based.

The London School of Astrology (LSA), a smaller college founded in London in the late 1990s by former Faculty tutor and council member, Sue Tompkins, has 28 diploma students, together with ' Perhaps another 10 who are studying/revising etc and intend taking exams at some point' , and 33 Certificate students. In addition, an average of 25 attend one-off workshops in London, with a minimum of 14, a maximum of 80 and a total of 150 different individuals in a year. The Centre for Psychological Astrology, meanwhile, has 26 diploma students, a number which is deliberately restricted as the teaching is intensive. The smallest and newest British astrological society, the British Association of Vedic Astrology (BAVA), which was founded in 1998, has 6 ' advanced' students and 18 ' beginners' . An average of 20-25 attend one-off workshops, usually in London, a total of 250 different individuals in a year, with 70 of those accounted for by the annual conference (Brennan 2003).

The above figures suggest that about 1000 individuals are currently taking astrology classes in the UK, a figure which may, perhaps, be doubled if the other small schools of astrology are taken into account, as well as the unregistered number of informal classes up and down the country which may be taken in community halls or private homes. A reasonable estimate is therefore a thousand individuals working for an astrology qualification and an unknown number, up to a thousand, taking classes informally.

Previous Studies

The existing research into levels of belief in astrology is mainly based on large-scale surveys and hence suffers from the problems identified by Bennett (1987: 26): this is that respondents are asked to make simple yes/no judgments about matters on which they may have no clear view, and may also be influenced by a reluctance to admit to belief in ' superstition' . In addition, the types of questions asked vary from survey to survey. Some pose direct questions about belief, others about readership of horoscope columns (Miller 1992) and still others inquire into respondents' opinions on matters such as connections between birth signs and character (Paulik and Buse 1984). The results are then used to infer levels of belief.

The figures given for public interest in astrology vary widely. Crowe (1990: 181) quoted numbers, based on Gallup Polls, indicating that 55% of American teenagers aged 13 to 18, ' believe that astrology works' . In the UK Spencer (2000: 104) cited an unsourced article in the *Guardian* newspaper which apparently reported that 45% of young people ' gave credence' to astrology, while the same paper in the same year quoted sceptical psychologist Richard Wiseman' s ' own research' indicating that 60% of the population regularly read their own horoscopes (Chaudhuri 2000). Such vague figures extend to the sceptical literature. For example, astronomer George Abell recorded that, ' according to my polls and my colleagues' , about a third of the people in the United States and Western Europe believe in astrology. And at least 90 percent are "open-minded", meaning they do not dismiss astrology as outmoded or nonsense' (Abell 1981: 72).

However, in the academic literature the most quoted sources for statistics on belief in astrology are the Gallup Polls, which have been asking related questions on the subject since 1962. The questions asked are a mixture of direct, overtly concerning belief and indirect, seeking information about attitudes from which belief may then be inferred (see chapter 11). The direct question, 'Do you believe in Horoscopes?' resulted in positive figures amongst British adults of 14% in 1975 (Gallup 1976a: 2.1417) and 20% in 1978 (Gallup 1980: 329). Also in 1975 the question 'Do you believe in astrology or not?' found positive responses amongst 22% of American adults (Gallup 1978: 573). The equivalent figure for American adults was 29% in 1978 (Gallup 1979: 184). In 1995 and 1996 the question was extended as follows: 'do you believe in astrology, or that the positions of the stars and planets can affect people's lives?' Positive responses of 23% were obtained in the first year and 25% in the second (Gallup 1996: 10; Gallup 1997: 205).

These figures form the basis of most considerations of the extent of belief in astrology in the academic literature. For example, Stark and Bainbridge (1985: 228-30) rely on Gallup's 1975 (1978) figures while Gill (1999: 701; see also Gill, Hadaway and Marler 1998: 513) relies heavily on Gallup polls from the 1970s to 90s for his figures of 'belief' in astrology amongst British adults of 23% in the 1970s and 26% in the 1980s and 1990s, though the former figure is 9% higher than that given by Gallup for 1975 and 3% higher than Gallup's figure for 1978. The American National Science Foundation (2002) used Gallup's 1996 figure (1997) in its discussion of the extent of 'pseudoscience'. The figures cited by Roof (1993: 72), that 26% of 'boomers', that is American adults born after 1940, believe in astrology, or Hunt (2003: 173), that between 15% and 25% of American adults believe in astrology, are derived from Gallup statistics. Elsewhere Gallup figures are quoted but appear to be exaggerated. For example, the Astrology Now web site (2002) reported that 'a recent Gallup poll found that over 50% of Americans believe in Astrology'. Meanwhile, Christian evangelicals

such as Chandler (1989: 21) and Harris (1999: 23) rely on Gallup statistics to indicate that belief in astrology is rising and is a threat both to Christian belief and society.

Nevertheless, such figures do find their way into the secondary literature and can form the basis on which policy is made by concerned institutions. Thus, Gill (1999: 51, 80, 126, 128, 135) interpreted Gallup poll results in the light of what he sees as the essential rivalry between ' traditional' and ' non traditional' belief and the decline in mainstream church attendance. His survey achieved widespread publicity and was trumpeted in the press under headlines such as ' Christianity "in crisis" as pews empty' (Pett1999). We should suspect though, that his figures are unreliable: his percentage of disbelievers, derived from Gallup, is over double the figure obtained by Paulik and Buse (1984) and Bauer and Durant (1997).

Most of the questions from which statistics about belief in astrology are deduced are framed on the basis of assumptions about the nature of astrology, or astrological claims which may themselves be suspect. Different sets of figures may be drawn from questions which vary widely. It is likely that the nature of the question and the context in which it is asked are likely to have an effect on the level of the answer. For example, Gallup' s 1975 question, ' Do you Believe in Horoscopes? may test for attitudes to the accuracy of horoscope columns but not for astrology as a whole. Similarly the statistics cited by Bruce (2002: 81), based on ' Opinion Research Business (2000)' , that 16% ' have tried or experienced' astrology, and which form a crucial part of his argument that New Age culture as a whole is in decline, are highly dubious. In a study of students' belief in paranormal phenomena, Gaynard (1992: 179) found that experience of a phenomenon is not necessary for belief. In addition, if it is considered that anyone who has ever encountered astrology has ' experienced' it then the figure is more likely to be close to the 76% who, in 1975 (Gallup 1978: 1.572) knew their sun signs. Hunt (2003: 17) bases his figures on similarly vague assumptions. His use of statistics which claim that 18%

of non-church-going teenagers have been 'involved' in astrology, as opposed to 10% of church-goers, gives no indication of the nature of that involvement, any more than Bruce gives of the nature of experience.

Readership of horoscope columns

One limit on the readership of horoscope columns is the circulation of the titles which carry them. In the UK in October 2003, the total circulation of daily national newspapers carrying horoscopes was just under 10 million and, of Sunday papers, just over 10 million.[3] Beyond this figure there are a number of imponderables. For example, while it may be calculated that four people read each newspaper sold, most people will not read every section. In addition, some papers, such as the *News of the World*, give their astrologer a very high profile whereas in others, such as the *Independent on Sunday*, the horoscope is an insignificant feature.

Indirect questions posed by Gallup include those on the readership of horoscope columns. In 1975 15% of French adults claimed to read a horoscope column 'regularly' (Gallup 1976b: 1.309) and in the same year 23% of American adults gave a positive answer (Gallup 1978: 1.572). However, as Stark and Bainbridge (1985: 230) noted, the same poll indicated that 17% of those who claimed not to believe in astrology also read a horoscope column regularly. Their conclusion was that what they call 'actual belief' in astrology is held by members of a 'client cult' in which the members, or 'clients', have faith in the astrologer's ability to provide real results. The readership of horoscope columns is indicative of no more than membership of an 'audience cult', in which the reader, or 'cult member', is seeking no more than entertainment.

Research conducted by the French Public Opinion Institute in 1963 found that 58% of the population knew their birth signs, 53% 'regularly read their horoscopes in the press', 38% 'have at one time or another wished to have a personal horoscope made, 37%

believe ' that there is a relationship between the character of persons and the sign under which they were born' and 23% believe that predictions come true (Gauquelin 1982: 37-8). Such nuanced research, posing a variety of questions, enables the examination of attitudes to astrology as more than a matter of simple belief or disbelief. It is also clear that the definition of astrology itself plays a role: more people ' believe' , if belief is defined as the existence of connections between character and birth sign than if it is necessary for its predictions to come true. However, there is still the matter of the discrepancy between the number of people who regularly read their horoscopes and those who admit to belief in the relationship between character and birth sign; an excess of 16% of the former over the latter in the French figures.

Later surveys added to the picture, though not consistently. In Germany Paulik and Buse (1984) asked a series of questions about astrology, from which they then deduced that 38% of their sample were ' strong believers' , 32% were ' believers' and 30% non believers. In the UK John Bauer and Martin Durant (1997) inferred levels of belief from the frequency with which their subjects read newspaper and magazine horoscopes and obtained the following figures:

' Serious believers' (read horoscopes often or fairly often and take them seriously or fairly seriously) 5%.

' Non serious believers' (read horoscopes often but take them not very seriously) 18%.

' Non serious believers' (read horoscopes fairly often but take them not very seriously) 21%.

' Non serious believers' (read horoscopes not very often and take them not very seriously) 29%

' Non-believers' (do not read horoscopes) 27%.

Bauer and Durant's attempt to convert attitudes to horoscope columns into belief in astrology led to sharply differing conclusions to those obtained by Paulik and Buse. Although figures for non-believers in both studies (27% and 30%) roughly coincide, Bauer and Durant's 'serious believers' number 5%, while Paulik and Buse's 'strong believers' are almost eight times as numerous at 38%. It is evidencethat both methodology and terminology may make a great deal of difference to the eventual reporting on the conclusions of such surveys.

The linear concept of strength of belief on a single scale suggested by both Paulik and Buse, and Bauer and Durant, is unlikely to take account of countless individual variations, let alone the possibility that a daily reader of sun-sign columns, rated as a weak believer, might be considered far more devout than a professional astrologer for whom their work may be primarily a money-making activity. Meanwhile, readership of horoscope columns is not necessarily an indicator of belief in astrology. Sherriff remarked that most people, including her, read horoscope columns 'for a laugh' (2001: 7), while Plug concluded that while more women read horoscope columns than men, there is no difference between the sexes when it comes to belief in astrology (Plug 1975: 174).

However, the psychologist Crowe (1990: 181) disputed claims that horoscope columns are read 'for entertainment value only' and concluded that 'the evidence suggests otherwise'. An alternative explanation for the discrepancy between relatively high figures for readership of columns and relatively low figures for belief in astrology is therefore that a proportion of those who read columns react negatively to the word belief.

Shelley von Strunckel, astrologer for *The Sunday Times* and the London *Evening Standard*, is likewise sceptical that the word belief has any value when applied to the readership of horoscope columns:

> when people are asked if they believe in astrology, we are really discussing two questions. How they hold the art/science of astrology is one thing but what they get out of a column may be quite another and it may be that it is their only moment of stillness in the day or week. Now if that column is written by someone who has some degree of spiritual content in their own life, then what they are going to get is not just something to read but it is going to take them to some place within themselves that they don't have the skill to visit on their own. Patrick[4] had that as well. He was an altar boy as a kid…So when we are talking about what goes on in reading a column, we are talking about the astrological skill and the astrological structure but we are also talking about the content. And the reason I bring this up, particularly in context of what you are writing is that it is important to discuss what we consider to be belief today because when people say ' Do you believe in astrology?' I would propose that people don't actually know what the term belief means (von Strunckel interview 2002).

Denial of Belief

The figures on horoscope readership show a wide range of variation. In 1977 Dean and Mather summarised previous surveys in the UK, Germany, France and the USA. They estimated that 70% of the adult population read horoscopes, while only 20% ' believe that there is something in it' (Dean and Mather 1977: 79, 83). To take these figures at face value,50% of the adult population read horoscopes while believing that there is nothing in them. The question, then, is why so many people should do something that is apparently so meaningless. A simple explanation is that the figures are distorted by the problems noted by the psychologist Gustav Jahoda. When he considered the problems arising from direct questions concerning belief he observed that adherents of ' superstitious beliefs' in England ' are apt to be somewhat shamefaced about superstition and liable to deny holding any such beliefs when faced with a strange interviewer' (Jahoda 1969: 25-6). If they are influenced by critiques of beliefs such as Park' s (above), they may well answer in the negative even when their position is ambivalent. The consequence, as Gillian Bennett noted, is that questionnaires which seek simple

yes/no answers to questions of belief are liable to elicit misleading responses. She reports that respondents

> very often like to phrase their answers with a little face-saving ambiguity. In these circumstances, if they are pushed to say whether "I think there may be something in it" means "definitely yes" or "definitely no", they will probably say "no", even though that is far from their real opinion' (Bennett 1987: 27).

Simple questions about religious affiliation are likely to produce misleading answers. A simple example was given by Hadaway, Elifson and Petersen, who report on studies in which institutionalised youths felt it was clearly in their interests to claim to be religious, ' leading to the "finding" that delinquent boys were much more likely to be church members than non-delinquent boys' (1984: 109). Thus Bennett observed that, by moving away from a strict requirement for yes/no answers, interviewees are allowed to express shades of opinion.

Adorno *et al* discussed a subject who, in both interview and questionnaire responses, had been shown to be highly ' authoritarian' and hence, in their terms, likely to be highly superstitious. He agreed with the statement ' some day it will be shown that astrology can explain a lot of things' , is an indication of ' authoritarian' tendencies, yet his overall score on superstition was very low. Adorno suggests that the subject had therefore given misleading answers because he had ' a general need to appear hard-headed and realistic and unlikely to be ' taken in' (Adorno *et al* 1950: 185, 205). Wuthnow (1976: 226), meanwhile, concluded that, if a respondent gave contradictory answers, he or she had either misunderstood the question or made a mistake. The alternative explanation, for which the rationale is Festinger' s (1968) ' cognitive dissonance' , is the recognition that it is perfectly natural to hold mutually contradictory opinions.

If a large number of astrologers are aware of the argument that a belief is automatically false, and even potentially dangerous, we may assume that they are likely to take this

into account when questions of belief arise. For example, if the question, ' do you believe in God?' is regarded as hostile, it can be interpreted as assuming ignorance on the part of the person being questioned and will not elicit an accurate response (Quigley 2001). We can therefore expect defensiveness amongst subjects when the question ' do you believe…?' is asked by a questioner who is perceived to be critical.

It is possible, therefore, that respondents are afraid to answer ' yes' to questions which they fear might expose them to ridicule. The fact that individuals may be embarrassed to admit to an interest in astrology in public situations was noted by Laurel Sanford who, at the time, was a student on the BA programme in Astrology and the Liberal Arts at Kepler College in Seattle. Sanford,

> who works as a ' personal coach,' says, "If I' m talking to an individual client and say, ' Well, how about if I read your chart?' they' ll say, ' You can do that.' But if they' re in a group with other co-workers, no way' (Fefer 2001a).

The astrologer and psychotherapist Mavis Klein took the issue further and suggested that strong protestations of disbelief might actually indicate strong belief. In an echo of the divide between Curry' s ' low' astrology on the one hand, and a combined ' middling' and ' high' on the other, she suggested that

> There are two groups of people who believe in astrology. There' s the ' Daily Mail, Daily Mirror people' mass of the population who say 'yes, I believe in it, it works for me' , but couldn' t possibly justify it. Then there' s the cognoscenti. But the mass of educated middle-class people react with pure fear, fear of its presumed fatalism. I lecture to lots of middle class, educated people and I get this hysterical, foot-stamping reaction. It' s complete bullshit. But this fear actually indicates belief (Klein 2002b)

Klein' s point is that publicly declared attitudes to astrology, at least in Britain, are partly conditioned by class-determined attitudes. As Rice found, whilst less-educated, lower income people are more likely to believe in traditional paranormal phenomena, ' the only classic paranormal phenomenon that they subscribe to more than better educated people is astrology (Rice 2003: 100). Klein' s point, though, is that better educated

people may not be opposed to astrology because they have necessarily thought about the issues, but because it challenges attitudes which come with their education as part of a package. As Wallis and Bruce argued,

> No-one will adequately explain social action who does not understand how individuals interpret their world. But no-one will understand how individuals interpret their world who is not aware of the social and historical context within which they do it (Wallis and Bruce 1983: 109).

The attempt to quantify belief as if it is a static state of mind which may be graded on a two dimensional scale is therefore highly problematic. Wuthnow, for example, noted that social experimentation may be of limited duration, down to the weekend festival, such as Woodstock (Wuthnow 1976: 209). Glock and Stark (1966: 25) argued that there is a difference between holding a belief and attaching importance to that belief. Bruce (1995: 105-6) correctly points out that there is a distinction between those for whom astrology ' is no more than reading a book and entertaining an idea, while for others ' it is a change of world view and direction comparable to conversion to more traditional religions' . Thus Wuthnow (1978: 44-60) distinguished belief as indicated by level of interest in astrology from that defined by level of commitment.

Chapter Summary

It is has been argued that the model of astrology which posits decline of astrology in the seventeenth-century followed by a revival in the nineteenth applied only to what Curry called ' high' and ' middling' astrology and not to the popular astrology of almanacs and, in the twentieth-century, sun-sign guides. It has also been shown that the figures for belief in astrology are highly variable, ranging from less than 20% to over 70%. The larger context is an absence of data. For example, Wuthnow (1976: 9. 172) argued that, in the absence of similar questionnaires asking the same question over long periods, it is possible to assess neither trends nor the rate of change in belief. With reference to the specific question of whether belief in astrology is increasing, Gill (1999: 80-1)

suggested that, after comparing data from the 1970s to 1990s to that gathered by Gorer[5] in 1950, the natural fluctuations in the figures do not suggest a pronounced trend. In spite of anecdotal evidence it cannot, therefore, be shown that belief in astrology is increasing. In terms of Curry's 'middling' astrology, the evidence from membership of astrological societies and number of students on courses, is that numbers are tiny.

The argument, introduced in chapter 1, over whether the contemporary belief in astrology is anachronistic, and that it therefore represents some of difficult-to-explain cultural anomaly, may therefore be answered in part by the conclusion that Curry's 'low' astrology is fundamentally a normal part of popular culture.

Notes

1. Figures for Great Britain and Ireland supplied by *Whitakers Almanak* from www.gendocs.demon.co.uk/pop. 29 November 2003.

2. Cited in Gauquelin 1982: 36.

3. Figures from http://abc.co.uk, 12 December 2003. See also http://udel.edu/~semmel/Circulation.htm, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/pressoffice/graphics/research/nrsjul02jun03.pdf 29 November 2003.

4. Patrick Walker, former astrologer to *The Mail on Sunday* and *Evening Standard*.

5. Gorer, Geoffrey, *Exploring English Character*, London: Cresset Press 1955.