

ASTROLOGY'S PLACE IN HISTORICAL PERIODISATION: MODERN, PREMODERN OR POSTMODERN?

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ABSTRACT: External critics of astrology, as well as some internal commentators, have struggled to define astrology's relationship with the modern world. To Enlightenment philosophers and nineteenth-century anthropologists it was premodern, its strange survival in the modern world being an anachronism, posing a problem which could be explained using models of social marginality or psychological inadequacy. To contemporary sociologists it is usually postmodern. In these terms astrology is generally seen as a product either of social marginality or psychological inadequacy, and as a means of providing security for individuals who are unable to cope with the pressures of the modern world. For some who are sympathetic to astrology, though, the escape from modernity into postmodernity is viewed positively, liberating astrology from what are seen as the oppressive and distorting norms of modernity. This paper will suggest that all three positions are based on the notion of a single 'astrology' conforming to a single 'truth' about the nature of modernity, and will critique the 'insecurity' hypothesis. It will suggest that much twenty-first century astrology is modernist in nature and modern in its historical affiliation. Its existence in the modern world therefore ceases to be a problem to be explained. The notions of the modern and the postmodern are also examined and their value as universal descriptions questioned.

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There is a view, prevalent amongst sociologists who have looked at the matter, as well as some astrologers, that modern practice of, or belief in, astrology should be classified as 'postmodern'. For external critics of the discipline, this implies that astrology's survival in the modern west poses an existential problem. For example, in his analysis of the *Los Angeles Times* horoscope column, published in 1953, the Frankfurt School philosopher Theodor Adorno argued that 'astrology is 'basically discordant with today's universal state

of enlightenment'.¹ Adorno held to the view that astrology was fundamentally premodern, a dangerous relic of a superstitious past. In 2001, Alan Smithers, then Sydney Jones Professor of Education and Director of the Centre for Education and Employment Research at the University of Liverpool, in 2001 commented that 'The continuing hold of astrology on the human psyche is curious', adding the Marxist phrase that it constitutes a 'false consciousness'.² For John Bauer and Martin Durant, writing in 1997, such curious discordance could be understood in terms of the decline of modernity, drawing on the notion of the postmodern as what Jameson called 'the cultural logic of late capitalism'.³ Astrology, they wrote, is

one among a number of potential compensatory activities that may be attractive to individuals who are struggling to come to terms with the uncertainties of life in late modernity... belief in astrology is prevalent among particular social groups; groups which, as we have indicated, may be experiencing difficulty in accommodating their religious feelings to life in an uncertain post-industrial culture. Paradoxical as it may seem, therefore, we conclude that popular belief in astrology may be part and parcel of late modernity itself.⁴

Such a view is also found amongst sociologists of religion. For example, Paul Heelas considers that the New Age movement in its counter-cultural aspects, and hence astrology, which he includes as New Age, as an aspect of 'modernity in crisis'.⁵ However, he neither defines modernity nor explains why the New Age might not instead be an

¹ Theodor Adorno, *The Stars Down to Earth* (1953; repr. London: Routledge, 1994), p. 36.

² Alan Smithers, 'Astrology, like literature and music, can invest life with meaning', *The Independent* Wednesday 4 April 2001, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/alan-smithers-astrology-like-literature-and-music-is-capable-of-investing-life-with-meaning-753186.html>

³ Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London and New York, Verso, 1991).

⁴ John Bauer and Martin Durant, 'British Public Perceptions of Astrology: An Approach from the Sociology of Knowledge', *Culture and Cosmos* 1, no. 1 (1997): p. 69.

⁵ Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 23, 34, 138.

integral aspect of modernity, rather than a symptom of its historical crisis.

All such sociological opinions are, however, based on problematic assumptions. For example Adorno took the *Los Angeles Times* horoscope column as representative of astrology as a whole, ignoring the astrologers, their clients and readers, and the wide range of astrological literature available at the time. Smithers' assumption that there is a 'false' and hence a 'true' consciousness assumes a world of black-and-white truths which is difficult to sustain from a humanities or social-science perspective: what distinguishes a 'false' consciousness from a 'true' one? Bauer and Durant, meanwhile, offered no evidence for their insecurity hypothesis, which is taken unquestioningly from a prevailing view of the postmodern condition as resulting from a failure to deal with modernity. Neither does Heelas present any evidence in support of the proposition that astrology is New Age and, therefore, postmodern. We are presented, then, in sociological accounts of modern astrology's cultural context with a proposition—that astrology is postmodern—which is essentially evidence-free.

The central theme, then, of most of the literature, is that modern belief in astrology is a phenomenon in urgent need of explanation. However, a counter-argument to the Adorno-Smithers-Bauer-Durant view is to be found within the general literature on the sociology and phenomenology of religion. Andrew Greeley, for example, launched a substantial critique of Adorno and argued that the definition of the paranormal as abnormal is unsustainable.⁶ 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'.⁷ (Astrology is often classified as 'paranormal' in the sense that, as Gray put it, it transcends 'the explanatory power of mainstream science' and is widely included in measures of paranormal belief.⁸) Harvey Irwin has also

⁶ Andrew M. Greeley, *The Sociology of the Paranormal* (London: Sage Publications, 1975).

⁷ Greeley, *Sociology of the Paranormal*, p. 7.

⁸ W. D. Gray, *Thinking Critically about New Age Ideas* (California: Wadsworth, 1991), p. 7. See also C. Plug, 'An investigation of superstitious belief and behaviour', *Journal of Behavioural Science* 2, no. 3 (1975): pp. 169–78, as well as, Erich Goode, *Paranormal Beliefs*:

argued recently that paranormal ideas are widespread, frequently appeal to educated people and that attempts to label such notions as bizarre or marginal are misleading and unhelpful.⁹ Rodney Stark, meanwhile, has argued that Adorno and his colleagues were authoritarian modernists who themselves were concerned with the control of information and ideas in order to suit their own purposes.¹⁰ For their part Caird and Law 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.¹¹ Milton Yinger 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.¹² 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.¹³ The same criticism can be applied to much of the literature on the sociology of astrology.

THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF MODERNISM

The inquiry should begin with an examination of the historiography of modernism. The difficulties of defining modernism are recognised by some commentators, such as

A Sociological Interpretation (Illinois: Waveland Press, 2000).

⁹ Harvey J. Irwin, *The Psychology of Paranormal Belief: A Researcher's Handbook* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2009).

¹⁰ Rodney Stark, 'Atheism, Faith, and the Social Scientific Study of Religion', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* Vol. 14, no. 1 (1999): p. 56; see also Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (London: MacMillan, 1991), pp. 3, 37.

¹¹ Dale Caird and Henry G. Law, 'Non-Conventional Beliefs: Their Structure and Measurement', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* Vol. 21, no. 2 (1982): pp.152–63, here pp. 151–52.

¹² John Milton Yinger, *The Scientific Study of Religion* (New York: MacMillan, 1970), p. 78.

¹³ Ninian Smart, *The Phenomenon* (London: MacMillan 1973), p. 37; see also Michael Hill, *Sociology of Religion* (London: Heinemann, 1979), pp. 13–14.

Peter Childs, who argues that the term may be no more than a retrospective imposition on a series of disparate individuals and movements.¹⁴ Some of these problems are rooted in its presumed historical origins, and related arguments such as the proposition that the postmodern, including alternative spiritualities, is at fault for deviating from the Enlightenment inheritance. The challenge to the notion of a single Enlightenment narrative was made by R.G. Collingwood, who questioned the over-simplified view of eighteenth-century intellectual culture as characterised by brave scientists or cool, rational encyclopaedists.¹⁵ The image of the Enlightenment as a single phenomenon marked by a kind of positivist, rational secularism, which underpinned Adorno's critique of astrology, is, as Kusukawa and Maclean said of the Scientific Revolution, a 'somewhat dodgy concept'.¹⁶ The European Enlightenment had a diverse nature of its own, including as it did, Emmanuel Swedenborg and large numbers of esoteric freemasons.¹⁷ Joscelyn Godwin inferred, in the use of the term 'Theosophical Enlightenment', that the eighteenth-century advocates of 'alternative spiritualities' were outside the mainstream Enlightenment, so I turn to Dorinda Outram, who has argued that the paganism of the French Enlightenment, which is so important to the foundation of Aquarian and New Age ideas, is part of the Enlightenment, not separate to it.¹⁸ As Gillian Bennett argued, the notion that astrology's existence in the modern world is somehow incompatible with post-Enlightenment rationalism is based on a misunderstanding of popular belief.¹⁹ In the sense that New Age astrology is a peculiarly twentieth-century innovation then, following

¹⁴ Peter Childs, *Modernism* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 13.

¹⁵ R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics*, revised edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998),

¹⁶ Nicholas Jardine on S. Kusukawa and I. Maclean, eds., in 'Imagineering the Astronomical Revolution, Essay Review', *Journal for the History of Astronomy* 37, part 4, no. 129 (November 2006): p. 471.

¹⁷ Margaret C. Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

¹⁸ Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (New York: SUNY Press, 1994); Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 31–46.

¹⁹ Gillian Bennett, *Traditions of Belief: Women, Folklore and the Supernatural Today* (London: Penguin, 1987) pp. 24–25.

Hanegraaff's arguments on New Age culture's intellectual lineage, it may be seen in part as a product of Enlightenment secularisation.

The problem is partly one of definition, for there is no universally accepted meaning of the terms modern and postmodern. Modernism is often defined as characterised by science, materialism, technology, secularism, and a rejection of religion and spirituality. In Charles Jencks' words it is 'the social condition of living in an urban, fast-changing, progressivist world governed by instrumental reason'.²⁰ Jencks recognises three 'forces' of the modern movement: 'modernisation, the condition of modernity and cultural Modernism'.²¹ The problem is that these three may by no means be compatible. In any case, to Childs, 'Modernism' (along with 'Modern' and 'Modernity') is simply a word.²² To attach too much significance to a word, as if the thing described *is* the word is therefore fundamentally mistaken. There is a world of difference between saying that such-and-such a thing *may be described* as modern, and to say that it *is* modern. Thus Bauer and Durant's error is to assume that there really *is* a historical condition called late modernity, and that astrology really *does* have certain qualities which make it late modern in character.

Jean-Francois Lyotard, who did so much to define modernism, characterised it as marked by 'grand-narratives', the belief in universal truths, of which an influential example is provided by the Enlightenment narrative of the hero-scholar on a quest for truth.²³ For Raymond Williams, writing as a socialist, modernism in politics is characterised by the global domination of 'late-capitalism', with its emphasis on economic production at the cost of all other values.²⁴ For both Lyotard and Williams modernism becomes oppressive, restrictive and anti-democratic, emphasising the collective

²⁰ Charles Jencks, *What is Post-Modernism?* (1986; repr. London: Academy Editions, 1996), p. 8.

²¹ Charles Jencks, *The Post-modern Reader* (London: Academy Editions, 1992), p. 11.

²² Childs, *Modernism*, p. 12.

²³ Frederic Jameson, foreword to Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), p. xxiii.

²⁴ Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (London: Verso, 1989).

over the individual and expressed through the disenchanting consequences of technology.

However, the problem with such views is their ahistorical nature. They can only survive through the careful exclusion of two key qualities of the modernising project. The first is the development of liberal democracy with its emphasis on individual rights and choice. The second is modernism in one vital area the arts, the prime representative of Jencks' 'third force', cultural Modernism. We should turn again to Raymond Williams, who notes that aspects of culture defined as modern, such as avant-garde art, are taken to be representative of 'modernity' as a whole, while being quite clearly not representative of the entire modern world.²⁵

Modernism in the arts prioritised precisely those qualities which are supposedly denied by modernity's materialistic denial of individuality and imagination. Amongst leading artists there is no shortage of examples. We could take Wassily Kandinsky, the founder of abstract painting, a theosophist and mystic, who 'who disliked the values of progress and of science and longed for a regeneration of the world through a new art of pure "inwardness"'.²⁶ Then there is W. B. Yeats representing poetry. Both Kandinsky and Yeats were devout theosophists, driven by the need to manifest the spiritual truths required for the implementation of Blavatsky's new spiritual world.²⁷ Amongst modernist musicians, Gustav Holst was deeply influenced by the modernizing astrologer Alan Leo (from whose writings his 'Planets Suite' took its inspiration), while André Breton, the founder of surrealism was a practising astrologer.²⁸ Even if we were to argue that these four were not typical of modernist artists, which would be a difficult line to take, their very presence sabotages cosy notions of modernism as materialist and alternative spiritualities as postmodern. The term 'modern' then becomes not a defined set of modalities,

²⁵ Williams, *Politics of Modernism*, p. 33.

²⁶ E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, 15th ed., revised, (London: Phaidon Press, 1995), p. 370.

²⁷ Elizabeth Heine, 'W. B. Yeats: Poet and Astrologer', *Culture and Cosmos* 1, no. 2 (Winter/Autumn 1997): pp. 60–75.

²⁸ Raymond Head, 'Astrology, Modernism and Holst's "The Planets"', *Astrology Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (Winter 1994–95): pp. 40–54; Nicholas Campion, 'Surrealist Cosmology: André Breton and Astrology', *Culture and Cosmos* 6, no. 2 (Autumn/Winter 2002): pp. 45–56.

but a convenient description for use in certain circumstances, when postmodern might do equally as well. As Raymond Head wrote, in his study of the composer Gustav Holst, 'Modernism was not conceived as a style but a loose collection of ideas. It was a term which covered a range of movements and styles that largely rejected history and applied ornament, and which embraced abstraction'.²⁹ As the literary critic Chris Baldick wrote, 'Modernist writers tended to see themselves as an avant-garde disengaged from bourgeois values, and disturbed their readers by adopting complex and difficult new forms and styles. [They] replaced the logical exposition of thoughts with collages of fragmentary images and complex allusions...'.³⁰ This is aesthetic modernity, but modernity nonetheless. Yet, surely the fragmentation of the individual is a quality ascribed to postmodernity. As Best and Kellner wrote

Aesthetic modernity emerged in the new avant-garde modernist movements and bohemian subcultures, which rebelled against the alienating aspects of industrialization and rationalization, while seeking to transform culture and to find creative self-realization in art.³¹

Is there, then, any difference between modernity and postmodernity in art beyond the labels imposed by this critic or that in this or that context? Apparently not. After all the crisis in late modernity identified by Bauer and Durant as significant for astrology, is a feature of modernism, not late modernism in art for Cinzia Blum.³² The issue is not whether there is such a universal phenomena either as modernity or modernism, but that the confusion amongst even the most distinguished theorists is such that to then define such-and-such a contemporary belief or practice as modern, in contrast to others which are not modern, is highly problematic.

²⁹Victoria & Albert Museum, http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1331_modernism/the_exhibition.html (accessed 17 March 2010).

³⁰ Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

³¹ Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory*, p. 2.

³² Cinzia Blum, *The Other Modernism: F. T. Marinetti's Futurist Fiction of Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 3.

THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF POSTMODERNISM

The historiography of postmodernism is no less confused than that of modernism, even though it is supposedly one of the guiding philosophies of recent times. According to Thomas Docherty,

there is hardly a single field of intellectual endeavour which has not been touched by the *spectre* of 'the postmodern'. It leaves its traces in every cultural discipline from architecture to zoology, taking in on the way biology, forestry, geography, history, law literature and the arts in general, medicine, politics, philosophy, sexuality, and so on.³³

Yet, although the term is widely used, there is little more understanding of what it means than there is of modernism. Charles Jencks considered that postmodernism focuses on the individual rather than the collective: 'Above all', he argued, 'it is characterized by the attempt to place humanity and, in particular human reason, at the centre... [its] root meaning, to be beyond or after the modern, remains common to diverse usage.'³⁴ Part of the problem is that, for Jencks, postmodernism means the continuation and transcendence of modernism, rather than its end.³⁵ Under these circumstances almost any attempt to distinguish the modern from the postmodern is doomed. As an example, Jencks argues that postmodernism represents the end of a single world view. But when was there ever such a single world view?

The discussion of postmodernism is as confused as is that of modernism, partly because the former is often simply seen as an alternative to the latter. For example, Inglehart, repeating Jencks, argues that,

In post modernisation, the core project is to maximise the individual well being, which is increasingly dependent on subjective factors. Human behaviour shifts from being dominated by the economic imperatives of providing food, clothing and shelter towards the pursuit of quality of life.³⁶

³³ Thomas Docherty, *Postmodernism: A Reader* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p. 1.

³⁴ Jencks, *The Post-modern Reader*, p.10.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.11

³⁶ Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 75.

However, as noted above, such a view is only possible if political modernization—the development of liberal democracy and human rights—is excluded. Thus modernity is caricatured (falsely) as inimical to the interests of the individual and found wanting.

Such confusion was noted by Charles Jencks, who admitted that ‘Most people have heard of Post-Modernism and don’t have a clear idea of what it means. They can be forgiven this confusion because Post-Modernists don’t always know and, even when they think they do, often find themselves disagreeing’.³⁷ True, Jencks finds such confusion to be a legitimate consequence of Postmodernism’s essential nature: ‘One of the reasons it became potent’, he argued, ‘was its suggestive ambiguity, the way it specified the departure point, but left open the final destination’.³⁸ Docherty noted the problem—that if the word ‘postmodern’ is ambiguous, some confusion is inevitable: ‘The term itself hovers uncertainly in most current writings between—on the one hand—extremely complex and difficult philosophical senses, and—on the other hand—an extremely simplistic mediation as a nihilistic, cynical tendency in contemporary culture’.³⁹

However, the problem is not one of ambiguity, but of a lack of historical sense. Discussions of postmodernism as opposed to modernism take place in a historical vacuum, fictionalising the recent past as authoritarian and materialistic. For example, according to Best and Kellner, ‘the postmodern is associated with the pagan, with the absence of rules, criteria, and principles, and with the need for experimentation and producing new discourses and values’.⁴⁰ But this, of course, is precisely what characterises modernity, not postmodernity, in the arts. According to Blum, ‘Futurism’, described as the ‘earliest incarnation of the modernist avant-garde’, was ‘characterised by striking ambivalences and contradictions’.⁴¹

The Postmodern-Modern dichotomy also collapses when we consider cosmology. Postmodernism supposedly takes a perspectivist viewpoint in contrast with the universalism of

³⁷ Charles Jencks, *Post-Modernism: The New Classicism in Art and Architecture* (London: Academy Editions, 1987), p. 7.

³⁸ Jencks, *The Post-modern Reader*, p. 10.

³⁹ Docherty, *Postmodernism*, p. 1.

⁴⁰ Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory*, p. 164.

⁴¹ Blum, *The Other Modernism*, p. 1.

modernism, in which the universe is the same from wherever one views it. But if such perspectivism is located in Einsteinian relativity, are we genuinely supposed to argue that Einstein was a postmodernist? And astrologers, who believe in universal laws are not exactly postmodernists.

Worse, for the notion of postmodernism, Eleanor Heartney pointed out that its existence can only be understood in relation to modernism and that its presumed characteristics (incredulity towards metanarratives, a crisis of cultural authority and the shift from production to reproduction) are evidence of an identity crisis so severe that 'its most ardent advocates seem unable to come to any consensus about what, exactly it is'; it feels, she continued, 'like Narcissus' reflection in the water, which disintegrates the moment one reaches out to grasp it'.⁴²

To sum up, then we have two problems with the definition of astrology as postmodern. First we have the awkward problem of avowedly modernising astrologers. Are they really suffering from a 'false consciousness'. As phenomenologists should we not take their self-description seriously? The only way to incorporate them into the postmodern world is to argue that the modernising project is actually postmodern, at which point all attempt to distinguish the two finally dissolve. Second, postmodern theory is essentially ahistorical and makes confident statements about the present which are almost devoid of knowledge about the past, to which it is compared. Johannes Wolfart recognised that all the various versions of postmodernism (of which there are as many as there are observers) are united by the belief that history is passing through a transitional phase.⁴³ Postmodern is really a form of postmillennialism, a species of historical mythology that is predicated on a peaceful transition to a new world, and it makes no more sense to ask whether New Age is postmodern than to consider whether postmodernism is New Age,

Zigmunt Bauman recognised the problem of defining postmodernism as a historical phase when he claimed that the term means different things to different people and

⁴² Eleanor Heartney, *Postmodernism* (London: Tate Publishing, 2001), pp. 6–7.

⁴³ Johannes C. Wolfart, 'Postmodernism', in *Guide to the Study of Religions*, ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (London: Cassell, 2000), p. 381.

'perhaps more than anything else [it is] a *state of mind*'.⁴⁴ Bauman lets us out of the modern/postmodern trap. The release from modernism-postmodernism as successive historical periods does not, though, remove the trap posed by the concept of two discrete modes of thought.

However even the notion of postmodernism is subverted by postmodernists. Lyotard argues that the postmodern 'is undoubtedly a part of the modern...a work can only become modern if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in its nascent state'.⁴⁵ So Mary Klages can then argue that 'Postmodernism ...doesn't lament the idea of fragmentation, provisionality, or incoherence, but rather celebrates that. The world is meaningless? Let's not pretend that art can make meaning then, let's just play with nonsense'.⁴⁶

ASTROLOGY AS DEVIANT

The question arises then, as to whether astrology's survival in the modern world is anachronistic. This question may be addressed by challenging the positivist argument that 'belief' as a whole, and hence belief in astrology, is itself anachronistic. The argument is fundamentally an epistemological one and concerns the issue of who has the right to pronounce on matters of truth; the positivist view that only modern science can make such declarations was shown to be deeply flawed.

Thus the labelling of astrology as deviant may be no more than a device to confirm what Glock and Stark called the 'humanistic value-orientation'; in other words what Herbrechtsmeier termed the 'imperial' attitudes of modern science.⁴⁷ It is also an application of what Stenmark termed 'methodological scienticism', the mistaken application of

⁴⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. vii.

⁴⁵ Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, p. 79.

⁴⁶ Mary Klages, Colorado University, <http://www.colorado.edu/English/courses/ENGL2012Klages/pomo.html> (accessed April 2010).

⁴⁷ Charles Y. Glock and Rodney Stark, *Religion and Society in Tension* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965), pp. 10–11; William Herbrechtsmeier, 'Buddhism and the Definition of Religion: One More Time', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 32, no. 1 (1993): p. 15.

inappropriate scientific methodologies to questions which they cannot answer.⁴⁸ The proposition that belief in astrology needs to be explained as if its modern existence is anachronistic is itself the product of what Dean *et al.*, ironically referring to astrologers, described as systematic errors of human judgment.⁴⁹ 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'.⁵⁰

The argument that belief in astrology is out of step with modernity is based on questionable *a priori* assumptions, chiefly that astrology is necessarily false, and therefore incompatible with the value modernity supposedly places on scientific truth, and appeals to individuals whose insecurity renders them unable to deal with the pressures of modernity.

REASONS FOR BELIEF IN ASTROLOGY: IS ASTROLOGY FALSE?

The argument that astrology is postmodern because it is necessarily false, requires that explanations be established for why people believe in it, in contradiction of all the evidence. A number of different hypotheses are proposed. For example, the cosmologist Stephen Hawking took a functional view, seeing the desire for control as crucial: 'The Human race has always wanted to control the future', he wrote, 'or at least to predict what will happen. That is why astrology is so popular'.⁵¹ The philosopher Bernulf Kanitscheider advanced what we may call the 'gullibility hypothesis', blaming publicity through the media, an argument which may explain how belief spreads but not why it spreads.⁵² Geoffrey Dean and his collaborators, including Ivan Kelly, an edu-

⁴⁸ Mikael Stenmark, *Scientism: Science, Ethics and Religion* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), pp. 2–3.

⁴⁹ Geoffrey Dean, Ivan Kelly and Arthur Mather, 'Astrology' in *The Encyclopaedia of the Paranormal*, Amherst, ed. Gordon Stein (New York: Prometheus Books, 1996), pp. 89–90.

⁵⁰ Stark, 'Atheism, Faith, and the Social Scientific Study of Religion', pp. 56–57.

⁵¹ Stephen Hawking, *The Universe in a Nutshell* (London: Bantam Press, 2001), p. 103.

⁵² Bernulf Kanitscheider, 'A Philosopher looks at Astrology', *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* 16, no. 3 (1991): pp. 259–60.

cational psychologist at the University of Saskatchewan, proposed four reasons for belief in astrology, all assuming gullibility: 'reading sun signs', 'reading astrology books', 'visiting an astrologer' and 'being an astrologer', their argument being that 'astrology seems to work, so we become believers'.⁵³ Dean emphasises the personal experience that comes from an experience of astrology 'working', whether through reading horoscope columns, and either visiting, or working as, an astrologer. This much is acknowledged by sceptics. For example, Robert Basil conceded that there is an experiential basis for many New Age beliefs; the distinction, though, is between experience and explanation, and the former does not constitute version of the latter.⁵⁴ 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'.⁵⁵ Astrology, in other words, has an immediate and effective way of communicating personal meaning. 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, i.e. [sic] in areas of belief'.⁵⁶ This line of argument takes us close to the notion of astrology as meaning-making. In this regard we can find an analogy in the novel. In response to the rhetorical question, 'Why Write Novels?', Derek Johns wrote 'the reasons we write fiction... [is that] we are story-telling creatures who must shape our experience and share it with others'.⁵⁷

The real debate here, though, is not between an astrology that is scientifically, objectively verifiable in the modern sense (requiring statistically replicable data) on the one hand or, on the other, one that is scientifically false and, depending on one's perspective, either a useful way of constructing

⁵³ Geoffrey Dean, 'Discourse for Key Topic 4: Astrology and Human Judgement', *Correlation* 17, no. 2 (Northern Winter 1998/9): pp. 26–28, 47–51; see also Dean, Kelly and Mather, *Astrology*, pp. 86–88.

⁵⁴ Robert Basil, 'New Age Thinking' in *The Encyclopaedia of the Paranormal*, ed. Gordon Stein (New York: Prometheus Books, 1996), p. 458.

⁵⁵ I. W. Kelly, 'Why Astrology Doesn't Work', *Psychological Reports* 82 (1998): p. 542.

⁵⁶ Geoffrey Dean and Arthur Mather, *Recent Advances in Natal Astrology* (Subiaco, Australia: Analogic, 1977), p. 3.

⁵⁷ Derek Johns, 'Why Write Novels?', *The Author* (Autumn 2008): p. 95

meaning or a superstition to be eradicated. It concerns the competing views relating to the personal evaluation of evidence. That is, for an individual who experiences astrology as true, the problem of belief, as framed by the sociologists, disappears, for the belief is not in something which is known to be untrue. Most of the scientific and sceptical literature on astrology is published in small-circulation academic journals and largely unknown outside a tiny circle of interested scholars. It therefore has no impact on general public perceptions of astrology. However, debates on significant arguments concerning certain scientific tests of astrology are widely known amongst students and professionals of astrology, but such people also know that sceptical claims and negative results are contested.⁵⁸ Therefore, neither general lay interest in astrology, nor deeper engagement in the practice, involve belief in something which is known to be scientifically untrue. The need to explain belief in the phenomenon is therefore based on mistaken assumptions.

REASONS FOR BELIEF IN ASTROLOGY: PREHISTORIC ERROR

The arguments that astrology is inherently false are rooted in the notion of religion as 'primitive error', which were well summarised by James Thrower.⁵⁹ This argument also circulates in critical media comments on astrology.⁶⁰ The 'primitive error' hypothesis adopts a scheme of periodisation in which it is assumed that astrology belongs to a primitive, prehistoric, phase of human intellectual evolution, and that its survival in the modern world therefore represents a disjunction between those individuals who believe in it and the state of intellectual evolution appropriate to modernity. This is why Smithers could refer to astrology as 'false consciousness'.

The evolutionary position in religion was summarised comprehensively by Jevons, who argued that progressively, over the millennia, as humanity evolved, it used its reason to

⁵⁸ Nicholas Campion, *A History of Western Astrology*, Vol. 2, *The Medieval and Modern Worlds*, (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 265–75.

⁵⁹ James Thrower, *Religion: The Classical Theories* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp. 99–125.

⁶⁰ Magnus Linklater, 'An academic dispute that is out of this world', *The Times*, 30 August 2001, p. 12.

correct false beliefs and identify true ones so that religion, even though fundamentally false, became progressively less so.⁶¹ 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, Emile Durkheim in the 1910s and Bronislaw Malinowski in the 1920s. 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.⁶²

Tylor set the tone for cultural-evolutionist discussions of astrology in strident tones, following his discussion of magic. Forgetting that notions of 'truth' are beyond the remit of the anthropologist, he wrote of astrology,

Looking at the details here selected as fair examples of symbolic magic, we may well ask the question, is there in this whole monstrous farrago no truth or value whatsoever? It appears that there is practically none, and that the world has been enthralled for ages by a blind belief in processes wholly irrelevant to their supposed results, and which might as well have been taken the opposite way.⁶³

Tylor's rhetoric ('monstrous farrago...enthralled...by a blind belief'), though, is hardly scholarly. These are words which spring from a deep and profound anger, rage almost, at a perceived affront to the whole of civilisation which has survived from a primitive stage of human development. Somehow astrology's survival represented a grand paradox, as if, somewhere in central London men were still living in caves, killing each other with flint axes. Astrology, in this sense was barbaric. This notion that astrology is an affront to civilised values occurs in the research of such scientists as Miller, who concluded that astrology should be resisted because it is un-American in that its fatalism is inimical to

⁶¹ Frank Jevons, *Introduction to the History of Religions* (London: Methuen, 1896), pp. 402–3.

⁶² E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Social Anthropology* (London: Cohen and West, 1967), pp. 31–33; Hill, *Sociology of Religion*, pp. 19–43.

⁶³ Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1873), p. 133.

democracy.⁶⁴ Such views underpin the anger which drives sceptical hostility to astrology.

Yet the notion of early humans as necessarily intellectually primitive has been thoroughly dismantled by a succession of anthropologists, notably by Evans-Pritchard. The error, as Victor Turner has pointed out, was not only to assume that an absence of Christianity indicated primitive status but that the presence of simple technology is evidence for simple minds.⁶⁵ The cultural-evolutionary model is, quite simply, not credible. It fails the first test of any sound hypothesis—it lacks evidence. Yet it remains the preferred model of anti-astrology sceptics.

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, Lawrence Jerome, one of the driving forces behind the 1975 'Objections to Astrology' 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'.⁶⁶ Statements such as those of the sceptic, George Abell, for whom belief in astrology is necessarily 'incredible and absurd' can therefore be understood in their historical context as a manifestation of the positivist proposition that all religious belief is patently false.⁶⁷

However, although the idea that there are such mutually exclusive categories as magic, religion and science, is still popular amongst most sceptics, as well as many scientists and academic theologians, it is generally regarded as untenable amongst historians of ideas. The notion that science both follows magic and religion as part of an inevitable evolutionary process, and is separated from them as an entirely distinct mode of perception has been critiqued in

⁶⁴ Jon D. Miller, 'The Public Acceptance of Astrology and other Pseudo-science in the United States', paper presented to the 1992 annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, 9 February 1992.

⁶⁵ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New Brunswick and London: Aldine Transaction, 2008), p. 3.

⁶⁶ Lawrence Jerome, 'Astrology: Magic or Science?', *The Humanist* 35, pt. 5 (Sept/Oct 1975): pp. 10, 16.

⁶⁷ George O. Abell, 'Astrology' in *Science and the Paranormal: Probing the Existence of the Supernatural*, ed. George O. Abell and Barry Singer (London: Junction Books, 1981), pp. 70-94.

general terms by Stanley Tambiah, in relation to the sixteenth to eighteenth-centuries by Charles Webster and Frances Yates and, in respect of the twentieth century, by Milton Yinger.⁶⁸ Rodney Stark, writing as a sociologist, 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.⁶⁹ Let me make it clear that, to blur the distinctions between magic, religion, and science is not to deny that science may follow distinct evidential procedures which themselves may bring major and beneficial advances in knowledge, but that the boundaries in their historical development overlap. The key to the relationship between the three is magic. Contrary to the views of such anthropologists as Durkheim, who attempted to distinguish religion and magic, religion contains many magical elements in the form of attempts to manipulate the visible world by engaging with the invisible.⁷⁰ Meanwhile, as Charles Webster so persuasively demonstrated, modern science emerged in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries not as a clean and decisive reaction against magic but as a smooth progression, as notions of experimental method and the evaluation of evidence developed. The terms 'science', 'magic', and 'religion', are therefore constructs which mean different things to different people in different contexts.

REASONS FOR BELIEF IN ASTROLOGY: THE INSECURITY HYPOTHESIS

Inextricably tied to the notion that astrology represents the survival of magical, primitive religion is the theory that it

⁶⁸ Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion and the Scope of Rationality* (1984; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Charles Webster, *From Paracelsus to Newton: Magic and the Making of Modern Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Frances Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (1979; repr. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983); Frances Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (1972; repr. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986); Yinger, *The Scientific Study of Religion*, p. 77.

⁶⁹ Stark, 'Atheism, Faith, and the Social Scientific Study of Religion', p. 47.

⁷⁰ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (1912; repr. New York: The Free Press, 1995).

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, but now questioned.⁷¹ The assumption that insecurity produces, in stages, fear, low-self-esteem, 'persuasability' (i.e., gullibility) and, ultimately, belief in astrology, has entered the psychological literature as a rationale for contemporary belief in astrology.⁷² The astronomer Bart Bok, for example, cited a statement put out by the Society for Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI), 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.⁷³

The problem with such assertions is that they are taken as a given. Neither Bok nor the SPSSI had any evidence: they were taking a faith position.⁷⁴ Simply, there had been no studies and hence no evidence to support their proposition, and the political imperative of condemning astrology took priority over the normal evidential requirements of science. In that Bok's position was evidence-free, it was a paradoxical manifestation of 'anti-science' within the scientific community. The problem was identified by Carl Sagan in 1975: when invited to sign that year's manifesto, 'Objections to

⁷¹ Campion, *A History of Western Astrology*, vol. 2, p. 44.

⁷² See for example Peter Glick and Mark Snyder, 'Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: the Psychology of Belief in Astrology', *The Humanist* 46, pt. 3 (May-June 1986): p. 50; I. L. Janis, 'Personality correlates of susceptibility to persuasion', *Journal of Personality* 22 (1954); I. L. Janis, 'Anxiety Indices related to susceptibility to persuasion', *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 51 (1955); Adorno, *Stars Down to Earth*, p. 3.

⁷³ Bart J. Bok, and Margaret W. Mayall, 'Scientists Look at Astrology', *The Scientific Monthly* 52 (1941): p. 244; see also Bart J. Bok, Lawrence E. Jerome, and Paul Kurtz, 'Objections to Astrology: A Statement by 186 Leading Scientists', *The Humanist* 35, no. 5 (September/October 1975): p. 18.

⁷⁴ Nicholas Campion, 'Do Astrologers Have to Believe in Astrology?', *The Sceptic* 15, no. 2 (Summer 2002): pp. 20–22.

Astrology', he refused on the grounds that none of the signatories had any knowledge of astrology, that the experimental data was absent and that the whole exercise represented an authoritarian and fundamentally dishonest attempt to impose one group's set of values in another.⁷⁵ Sagan had no time for astrology, which he dismissed as a 'pseudoscience', yet he regarded the position of the organised sceptics as untenable, on the grounds that to speak as scientists was incompatible with an absence of evidence.⁷⁶

In spite of its wide currency, the 'insecurity' rationale for the development of ancient astrology should not be taken for granted. It has been notably challenged by Ulla Koch-Westonholtz on the grounds that, firstly, it represents the inappropriate projection of modern concerns on to an ancient society and, secondly, that the Babylonian omen literature (from which western astrology is descended) indicates a society which was very certain of its beliefs.⁷⁷ Similarly the social-psychologists Harry Gollob and James Dittes questioned the supposed relationship between low self-esteem and belief, arguing that there is no evidence that one leads to the other.⁷⁸ Rodney Stark then showed that, far from religion appealing to the inadequate and insecure, religious people enjoy better than average mental and physical health.⁷⁹ And, following Stark, Wade Roof showed that those attracted to New Age beliefs tend to be more educated than the average. Under these circumstances, it becomes difficult to sustain the insecurity argument, and the main arguments for the sociological view of astrology as postmodern collapse.

⁷⁵ Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark* (New York: Random House, 1997), p. 285.

⁷⁶ Carl Sagan, *Cosmos: the Story of Cosmic Evolution, Science and Civilisation* (London: Warner Books, 1994), p. 66.

⁷⁷ Ulla Koch-Westonholz, *Mesopotamian Astrology* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 1995), pp. 17–18.

⁷⁸ Harry F. Gollob and James E. Dittes, 'Effects of Manipulated Self-Esteem on Persuasability Depending on Threat and Complexity of Communication', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 2, no. 2 (1965): pp. 195–201.

⁷⁹ Stark, 'Atheism, Faith, and the Social Scientific Study of Religion', p. 56.

ASTROLOGERS AND POSTMODERNISM

Patrick Curry published one of the first academic discussions of the topic in 1994, in a paper addressed to historians of astrology. He was addressing a very real issue in the historiography of astrology (one also pertinent to sociological treatments of the subject): the imposition of a historical narrative in which astrology is an anachronistic survival from the past. His contribution was extremely valuable. Curry identified astrology as inherently pluralist and relativist, both characteristics of postmodernism, while its enemies in the western world, whether Christian or scientific, were monist and universalist, both characteristics of modernism. For the last two thousand years, he argued, astrologers have adopted the language of their persecutors, of absolute truth and scientific laws. In these terms astrology is, and has always been, fundamentally postmodernist not in terms of its historical time-frame, but its assumptions, while many of its practitioners have adopted the language which became associated with modernism—'its love affair with all-encompassing grand-narratives' and worship of Progress'; he adds, 'The point about postmodernism, therefore, is not that it has replaced modernism but that the fundamental premises of modernism have been transformed, by a subtle but powerful sea-change, into assumptions. The keynote of post-modernism is not a new consensus but a lack of consensus'.⁸⁰

Some astrologers have turned the sceptics' argument around and agree that astrology finds a natural ally in postmodernism. One is Geoffrey Cornelius, who delivered the following lecture titled 'Astrology: the Post-Modern Shape Shifter', via an on-line conference in November 2010:

Despite the valiant efforts of astrologers over the past century, modern astrology has not found a place in contemporary culture. We have still not caught up with the impact of the scientific Enlightenment. Aping science is futile, and attempts to return to our roots, Hellenistic, Arabic, Indian, are sentimental distractions until we face the core dilemma of modern practice: the loss of rationale with the sweeping away of the ancient Cosmos. We examine the argument for a divinatory interpretation of practical astrology

⁸⁰ Patrick Curry, 'Astrology: From Pagan to Postmodern?', *The Astrological Journal* 36, no. 1 (Jan./Feb. 1994): p. 74.

as the shift our discipline requires to release its potential and open an intelligent conversation with post-modernity.⁸¹

Cornelius sees postmodernity as offering a safe haven for astrologers bereft of their pre-Copernican cosmology, not because it encourages the revival of antique astrological techniques, but because it permits a reading of astrology as divination. By removing astrology from modernity, he challenges modern science's right to comment on it. He does not deny that there have been modernising astrologers, but argues that they have failed.

Commentators on other areas of 'alternative' (a difficult word) thought, also see liberation in postmodernism. Stephen Flowers, writing on magic, argues that,

Furthermore the post-modernist is free of the constraints of modern progressivism: To the modern if it's not new, if its not the latest thing, then it is 'retrograde' or 'reactionary' and hence unacceptable. Post modernists are free to synthesise elements from all phases of human history—in any shape or form that suits their purpose'.⁸²

Some modernising astrologers take a similar line to Cornelius. For example, Glenn Perry, who is deeply influenced by the modernizing astrologer Dane Rudhyar (see below), considers that

What is most interesting about these developments is that, implicit in the new, organismic paradigm of postmodern science are the very principles upon which astrology is based... The possibility of a creative synthesis of modern and premodern truths may lead to an integration of psychology and astrology in a new, postmodern, astro-psychology.⁸³

⁸¹ Geoffrey Cornelius, 'Astrology: The Post-Modern Shape Shifter', lecture delivered at the International Academy of Astrology Online Conference, 19 November 2010. Recording available: <http://www.astrocollege.com/campus/libraries.cgi>

⁸² Stephen Flowers, *Hermetic Magic: The Postmodern Magical Papyrus of Abaris* (Boston: Weisder Books, 1995), p. 14.

⁸³ Glenn Perry, 'The New Paradigm and Postmodern Astrology', International Forum on New Science, University of Fort Collins, Colorado, 27 Sept. 1991, (accessed 20 January 2007), <http://www.aaperry.com/index.asp?pgid=21>

Perry's postmodernism, though, is not a rejection of modernism, but a synthesis of its finer qualities with those of the premodern world. Candy Hillenbrand took a similarly nuanced view, looking beyond the modern rather than rejecting it:

It is time, I believe, for the discipline of astrology to engage in a much-needed philosophical overhaul, to bring itself more in line with more modern, or more correctly, post-modern developments in thinking.⁸⁴

Hillenbrand argued that the world has gone beyond modernism because it was inadequate, not because it was incorrect. Other astrologers have distanced astrology from modernism without espousing postmodernism as an alternative. Robert Hand argued that astrology is pre-modern, since it 'has never been part of the modern world and cannot have a post-modern period'.⁸⁵ He does agree that there is a postmodern astrology, but argues that it is characterised by a rediscovery of classical and medieval astrology, the same process which Cornelius rejects as a sentimental distraction.

The reasons why the notion of postmodernity appeals to those who are sympathetic to astrology (as well as those who are critical of it) may be found in Philip Sheldrake's work on contemporary spirituality. He considers that postmodernity 'resists attempts to reduce events or people to mere instances of some overarching theory...[and] defends the otherness, particularity and difference of all people'.⁸⁶ The notion of 'otherness' being valued rather than rejected, and of

⁸⁴ Candy Hillenbrand, 'An Archaic Astrology Cast Adrift in a Post-Modern World',

<http://www.aplaceinspace.net/Pages/CandyPostmodern.html> (accessed 20 January 2007). Gerry Goddard, 'Beyond a Post-Modern Astrology: a Response to Candy Hillenbrand', <http://www.astro.com/astrology.net/resp-can.html>. See also Bill Sheeran, 'Astrology, Patriarchy and Postmodernism', *The Mountain Astrologer* (Apr./May 1999).

⁸⁵ Robert Hand, 'Towards a Post-Modern Astrology', Paper Presented at the Astrological Association Conference of the British Astrological Association, York, 2005.

http://www.astro.com/astrology/in_postmodern_e.htm (accessed 20 January 2007);

⁸⁶ Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred* (London: SCM Press, 2001), pp. 12–13.

astrology recognising the uniqueness of the individual is appealing to astrologers. The problem for the identification of astrology as postmodern, however, is that astrology does precisely what postmodernism is supposed to reject; it imposes an over-arching theory on a diverse practice. Thus Cornelius, for example, speaks of the recognition of astrology's divinatory nature as 'required'. This opens up what we might describe as the 'post-modern paradox'—that an appearance of diversity of claims from a sociological perspective, is not matched by a recognition of diversity within individual truth-communities. Instead individuals or groups who are identified as postmodern may resist one of the supposed core features of postmodernism.

Patrick Curry follows Bauman in rejecting the notion of the modern and postmodern as necessarily historical periods and preferred to consider them as styles of thought. However, his location of the challenge to modernist thought in recent times comes with its own historical assumptions, such as that modernism in the early twentieth century was characterised by consensus. However, if for example, we consider modernism in early-twentieth century politics (taking modernism as characterised by a worship of Progress), we find anything but consensus: democrats of different shades competed with Nazis and many varieties of Marxism. There was, actually, a complete absence of consensus. The problem is this: do we characterise individuals, groups or ideas as modernist because they lay claim to the absolute truth, or do we consider whether modernism in general, as made up of individuals, groups and ideas, embodies a consensus. The issue is a serious one and, as far as astrology is concerned, suggests that we should consider its essential nature on the one hand, or its cultural context on the other. Curry argues that astrology is, in its essential nature, postmodern, while astrologers' culturally-conditioned rhetoric has tended to be modern.

ASTROLOGY AND THE MODERN

Curry had identified a paradox: that astrology is in its very nature postmodern does not conflict with the existence of modernizing astrologers. It is just that the modernists are deluded as to astrology's true nature. The modernising trend in western astrology is evident in the nineteenth century, but was made explicit by the Theosophical astrologer Alan Leo

(1875–1917), one of the most influential astrologers of the early twentieth century. Leo was a devout believer in the coming of the Age of Aquarius and argued that astrology had to be reformed in order to serve this purpose. 'I am actuated', he wrote, 'by the primary motive of expressing what I believe to be the true Astrology, for the new Era that is now dawning upon the world'.⁸⁷ His stated aim was to 'modernise the ancient system of Astrology'.⁸⁸ Leo rejected what he saw as the 'exoteric' (concerned with outer events), predictive astrology of the nineteenth century and developed a modern astrology (he founded a journal called *Modern Astrology* in order to promote his ideas), in favour of an 'esoteric' astrology which emphasised spiritual awareness and, in relation to earlier forms of horoscopic astrology, greater technical simplicity.

The modernist tone was established by H. P. Blavatsky, founder of the Theosophical Society. Blavatsky stated that,

Astrology is a science *as infallible* as astronomy itself, with the condition, however, that its interpreters must be equally infallible; and it is this condition, however, *sine qua non*, so very difficult of realization, that has always proved a stumbling block to both. Astrology is to exact astronomy what psychology is to exact physiology. In astrology one has to step beyond the visible world of matter, and enter into the domain of transcendent spirit.⁸⁹

In two sentences Blavatsky had set out a manifesto for a modernising astrology: under no circumstances can her assumption of infallibility, and hence implicitly of scientific demonstration, be considered postmodern. Her core argument was that astrology, is infallible but that astrologers, being only human, are all too fallible.⁹⁰ If only astrology could be improved, it would serve the purposes of humanity with much greater efficiency.

Leo's modernising spirituality was developed by the American theosophist, Dane Rudhyar (1895–1985). Echoing

⁸⁷ Alan Leo, *Esoteric Astrology: A Study in Human Nature* (London: Modern Astrology, 1913), p. v.

⁸⁸ Patrick Curry, *A Confusion of Prophets* (London: Collins & Brown, 1992).

⁸⁹ H.P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, 2 vols (Pasadena: Theosophical University Press, 1976), facsimile of 1877 edition, vol. 1, p. 259.

⁹⁰ Annie Besant, 'An Appreciation', in Bessie Leo, *The Life and Work of Alan Leo*, (London: Modern Astrology, 1919), p. 8.

Leo's reference to the 'new aera', Rudhyar claimed, with an astonishing faith in his own powers, that it represented the birth of a new epoch'.⁹¹ More cautiously, the *Larousse Encyclopaedia of Astrology* considered that the book 'is generally acknowledged to be a classic'.⁹² Rudhyar's own description of the book was that it,

was an attempt to reformulate traditional astrology in terms of the modern philosophical and psychological outlook...It established new foundations for a consistent system of symbolism, using astrological factors as its symbols. Its goal was the formulation of an 'algebra of life', using organic life-qualities as its primary elements, defining these qualities particularly at the psychological level in terms borrowed from C. G. Jung's analytical psychology.⁹³

In 1974, thirty-eight years after its publication, the book was voted second in 'a survey of 100–200 opinions on 'The 7 Best Books in Astrology'.⁹⁴ Rudhyar's modernising tendencies were evident his second book, published in 1938, where he issued a call to build a new world couched in the language of Hermetic cosmology

Today is a new birthday for the ancient gods. New men call for new symbols. Their cry rises, beyond their logical intellects ashamed of mystical longings, for new gods to worship and to use in order to integrate their harrowing mental confusion and to stabilize their uprooted souls. Young gods, fresh and radiant with the sunshine of a new dawn, glorified with the 'golden light' of a new Sun of Power, ecstatic with virgin potentialities after the banishment of ancient nightmares.⁹⁵

As modernists—as representatives of modernity—Leo and Rudhyar's fellow travellers were Kandinsky, Yeats, Holst, and Breton. They were aesthetic modernisers. An alternative, but allied school of modernisation favoured the development of astrology through what we might call scientific devel-

⁹¹ Dane Rudhyar, *Occult Preparations for a New Age* (Madras and London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1975), p. 77.

⁹² Jean-Louis Brau, Helen Weaver, and Allan Edmunds, *Larousse Encyclopaedia of Astrology* (New York: Plume Books, 1982), p. 244.

⁹³ Dane Rudhyar, *New Mansions for New Men* (New York: Lucis Publishing Company, 1938), p. xii.

⁹⁴ Dean and Mather, *Recent Advances*, p. 3.

⁹⁵ Rudhyar, *New Mansions*, p. xiii.

opments, and the accumulation of empirical evidence and the identification of interpretative techniques which work in contrast to those which don't, although often still within a broadly theosophical context. Blavatsky's assumption that astrology is infallible was adopted, but without the edifice of Theosophical spirituality. A key protagonist of this school of thought was the British astrologer, John Addey (1920–1982), one of the founders of the British Astrological Association. Addey believed that

astrology is evidently about to undergo a rebirth and a period of new growth. It will be no ordinary rebirth and no ordinary period of growth. From being an outcast from the fraternity of sciences, it seems destined to assume an almost central role in scientific thought.⁹⁶

Jeff Mayo (1921–1998), a Principal of the Faculty of Astrological Studies, for many years from its foundation in 1948 the main British school of astrology, considered the situation amongst practising astrologers, appealing to science and applauding the rejection of esotericism. He claimed that,

Astrology as practised today by trained astrological-consultants is, by its correlation to modern psychology and the eradication of many muddle-headed esoteric theories and 'fortune-telling sensationalism', far removed from the astrology of even the turn of this century.⁹⁷

Dennis Elwell, another British astrologer, adopts a third position, being neither a theosophist nor an advocate of science. He does, though, regard astrology as a modernising force:

There is no area of knowledge, no activity, immune from the revolutionising effect of a genuine astrology...Astrology is the best...hope of religion, because it offers a meeting ground for the scientific and religious views of reality, reconciling many of their differences.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ John Addey, *Astrology Reborn* (London: Faculty of Astrological Studies, 1971), p. 3.

⁹⁷ Jeff Mayo, *Teach Yourself Astrology* (1964; repr. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981), p. 7.

⁹⁸ Dennis Elwell, *Cosmic Loom: The New Science of Astrology* (London: Urania Trust, 1987), p. 3.

The few astrologers who have engaged with the topic argue that astrology offers a postmodern escape into pluralism, diversity and democracy, a world in which individuals count. But, if modernism is characterised by the self-confident creation of the future in line with a single meta-narrative, Elwell is a modernist. Further, if modernists think 'compulsively about the New' and look for 'new worlds' as Jameson put it, then astrologers such as Alan Leo, Dane Rudhyar, John Addey, and Jeff Mayo, were thorough-going modernists.⁹⁹

CONCLUSION

Unfortunately, the very use of terms such as modern and postmodern encourage scholars to fall into the trap of categorisation: this thing is modern, that is postmodern, as if such distinctions can possibly be made in any other than a rigidly binary universe. When we look at human society with all its rich, messy complexity, such theoretical boxes reduce clarity rather than enhance it. New Age culture may therefore be postmodern in some respects, modern in others. As Hexham and Poewe pointed out, the counter-culture of the 1960s contained elements of both modernism and post-modernism.¹⁰⁰ And so it is with astrology.

Some astrologers may be modernists, others post-modernists. Many may be both. For example, Robert Hand has argued that the development of psychological astrology, the most influential development within modern professional astrology, may be an indicator of a modernist trend within twentieth-century astrology, the argument that astrology is a science that can be proved, or the New Age proposition that its widespread acceptance will change the world for the better—are clearly aspects of modernism whereas this need not imply that all astrology is necessarily modernist.¹⁰¹ Patrick Curry took a similar line, writing of the esoteric and psychological astrology which was developed at the beginning of the twentieth century that, 'Far from being an irrational aberration, the new occult astrology was

⁹⁹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. ix.

¹⁰⁰ Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe, *New Religions as Global Cultures* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), pp. 149–51.

¹⁰¹ Robert Hand, 'Foreword' in Olivia Barclay, *Horary Astrology Rediscovered* (West Chester PA: Whitford Press, 1990), p. 15.

perfectly suited to the capitalism and individualism of the age'.¹⁰² But, then he also argues that astrology is postmodern in that, in the astrological consultation, pluralism reigns: 'the astrologer and/or the client', he wrote, 'bring a complex set of values, assumptions, problems and strategies to *every* situation', a situation which can never be repeated and so cannot represent an absolute truth'.¹⁰³ The question largely depends on our particular view point. We might stand back from astrology as a whole and be struck by the diversity of competing voices, of multiple narratives, and this may look postmodern. But, if each school of astrology is proclaiming a grand-narrative in which astrology can explain or, at least, comment on, absolutely everything known to humanity, and some of those schools assume that they are engaged in creating a better world, we see unabashed modernism: one of modernity's key features, aside from a belief in the creation of a new world, is the belief in a set of absolute criteria by which judgments can be made and certainty arrived at. And then we can turn to a variety of sociological argument, promoted by Grace Davie and others, that religious pluralism is not a postmodern reaction to modernity but is actually a feature of modernity. Whatever way we turn the argument, astrology is not part of a postmodern aberration, a symptom of a failure to cope with modernity, a bizarre relic from a superstitious past, as the scientific modernists would put it, but a normal part of the modern world. This tells us nothing about the truth of its claims, but it does enable us to begin to find a position where we can at least assess what its practitioners are doing and how they relate to modern culture. When we consider astrology, then there is indeed a certain postmodern relativism in astrologers' rhetoric, the widespread assertion by astrologers, for example, that the techniques of astrological interpretation are purely matters of convenience with no intrinsic, objective value: the majority of delegates at two major astrology conferences in the UK and the USA in 1999 and 2002 stated that the reliability of astrological techniques depends on the astrologer using them.¹⁰⁴ Such relativity could undoubtedly be considered postmodern.

¹⁰² Curry, *Confusion*, p. 132.

¹⁰³ Roy Willis and Patrick Curry, *Astrology, Science and Culture: Pulling Down the Moon* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), p.97.

¹⁰⁴ Nicholas Campion, 'Prophecy, Cosmology and the New Age Movement: the extent and nature of contemporary belief in

Yet time and time again, with a few notable examples, the representatives of particular schools of thought in astrology, the 'traditionalists', supporters of divination, advocates of science or psychology, assert the absolute truth of their positions. Theirs' is the grand-narrative of cosmic truth. And how much more true this is of those followers of Leo and Rudhyar for whom the creation of a new world to which everyone, with no exceptions, will be subject, is the overwhelming priority. But, if astrologers are overwhelmingly modernists in their promotion of the modern and their adherence to the meta-narrative of cosmic truth, my research also shows significant subtexts which can clearly be described as postmodern, such as the finding that a significant number regard the techniques of astrological interpretation as a matter of subjective convenience ('each astrologer uses the techniques which work for them'¹⁰⁵). Even then, though, there is an ancient lineage to support such a proposition; in the influential tenth century work, the *Centiloquium* attributed to Claudius Ptolemy, we read 'He that is desirous to study any Art, hath in his Nativity without doubt some Star of the same Nature very well fortified'.¹⁰⁶ Is astrology, then, postmodernist as mode of thought? Perhaps, but then, why use a word which implies a succession to the modern? The problems of using the word in this sense is that, if we apply it to Ptolemy we have to apply it to his entire cultural milieu: does it really make sense to label Stoics as postmodern? Bauman's statement that postmodern is a state of mind rather than a historical period is half-way to rejecting to the term postmodern as a description of astrology, but does not go far enough.

Astrology exists within a view of modernity in which religion and spirituality are not dying out, as traditional secularisation theory claims, but diversifying. Its survival in the twenty-first century is therefore not an anomaly to be explained, but an aspect of the modern world to be examined

astrology' (PhD thesis, University of the West of England, 2004), p. 248.

¹⁰⁵ Campion, 'Prophecy, Cosmology and the New Age Movement', p. 248.

¹⁰⁶ Claudius Ptolemy, 'Centiloquium', in John Partridge, *Mikropanastron, or an Astrological Vade Mecum, briefly Teaching the whole Art of Astrology - viz., Questions, Nativities, with all its parts, and the whole Doctrine of Elections never so comprised nor compiled before, &c.* (London: William Bromwich, 1679), para 3.

on its own terms. Neither, as the failure of the insecurity hypothesis has it, is it an aspect of modernity in crisis: there is just no evidence to support this view. As Bowman and Sutcliffe wrote of New Age culture, the 'alternative' may be now better seen as 'mainstream'.¹⁰⁷ The major part of the astrology of the modern west is not part of the supposed crisis of late-modernity. It is an integral part of modernity itself. The implications are wider than the narrow concerns of modern astrology, though. On the wider level, we should abandon any notion that practitioners or 'believers' in the esoteric, 'alternative spiritualities', or New Age disciplines are somehow excluded from the modern world, standing outside the general flow of history. This is essential if we are to understand the diversity of contemporary spiritual culture.

My starting point for discussion throughout has been the existing body of literature, primarily sociological and historical works. However, as Michael Hill observed acutely, all academic disciplines 'which pursue the goal of a rigorous and systematic investigation of the empirical world sooner or later come up against the "pure" and "applied" dichotomy'.¹⁰⁸ Postmodernism and Modernism may exist in the minds of various writers as 'pure' types, but their application to particular practices is frequently misleading. This is often the case with astrology. Those sociological works which refer to contemporary astrology tend to ignore the actual theory and practice of modern astrologers, its 'applied' nature, and assume *a priori* that astrology should be categorised in 'pure' terms, as postmodern, or a religion, new religious movement, New Age discipline or superstition, and that its claims are false. It is also assumed that astrology can be treated as a single entity, as if all astrologers think the same and work according to a single code. Yet astrology is, like any other discipline, marked as much by its diversity as by its uniformity. As David Hufford remarked, when arguing that belief cannot be considered in isolation from disbelief, 'we must be prepared to tolerate some theoretical uncertainty and even dissonance while we develop a comfortable theoretical consistency primarily by selectively avoiding

¹⁰⁷ Marion Bowman and Steven Sutcliffe, *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 11.

¹⁰⁸ Hill, *Sociology of Religion*, p. 6.

pertinent information and by forcing that information into appropriate, preconceived patterns'.¹⁰⁹ In this respect Festinger's notion of cognitive dissonance removes the need to look for consistency of thought or practice amongst astrologers any more than within any other discipline.¹¹⁰

Actually, although there may be some phenomena which might clearly be labeled 'post-modern', such as architecture which mixes vernacular styles, or 'modern', such as architecture which rejects the past, once we have moved beyond such tangible examples, the distinctions between the postmodern and modern cease to make sense in most contexts. One person's modern is often another's post-modern. In the arts the distinction has ceased to make sense, and similarly in astrology. Thus, whether astrology is modern or postmodern seems to be largely a matter of individual taste, and an adjunct to whatever argument which is being proposed. Thus for Bauer and Durant astrology is 'late modern' because its advocates are unable to cope with the modern, while for Cornelius it is postmodern because the modern is at odds with its essential nature. Thus astrologer and critic of astrology find common cause in detaching astrology from the contemporary world. As Stuart Sutcliffe said of 'New Age', modern and postmodern are emblems which people adopt to denote their cultural affiliations.¹¹¹ As an 'emblem', anyone who has an instinctive idea of what 'the Modern' or 'Postmodern' is can then attach ideas or activities to them. We may then refer to Curry's application to astrology of Bauman's view that modernism and post-modernism describe styles of thought rather than historical periods. Individual astrologers or schools of thought in astrology may be described as modern or postmodern. This does not mean that they *are* modern or postmodern. And to suggest that astrology as a whole *is* post modern or *should be* modern imposes a universalising tendency which contradicts the diversity of truth claims which have characterised western astrology since the Hellenistic period.

¹⁰⁹ David Hufford, 'Traditions of Disbelief', *Talking Folklore* 1, pt. 3 (1987): p. 27.

¹¹⁰ Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (1957; repr. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968).

¹¹¹ Stuart Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age: A history of spiritual practices* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 9–11.

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