

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

Part 2

Chapter 4

The New Age

Chapter Summary

This chapter discusses current theories concerning the origins and nature of the contemporary New Age movement. The purpose is to identify its principal characteristics and provide a basis for discussion in subsequent chapters for its relationship to the Age of Aquarius and to the question of components of New Age thought in contemporary astrology.

Introduction

There is some confusion over the origins of the New Age movement, which is perhaps not surprising for there is no single history of it. It is assumed to be a contemporary millenarian movement, an argument set out by evangelical critics (Miller 1990: 27), and assumed by academic commentators (Davie 1994: 83; Hanegraaff 1996: 96, 98-103; Sutcliffe 2003: 9, 11, 17). There has, though, been little attempt to document this, other than Lemesurier's popular text (1990). Lemesurier's conclusion is that, as a millenarian phenomenon, the New Age movement shares common roots with other movements which may have millenarian characteristics, such as Marxism, progress theory and evolutionary Darwinism (1990: 4-5; see also Campion 1994; Hexham and Powe 1997: 93-6). The most reliable academic texts, by Lewis and Melton (1992), York (1995), Hanegraaff (1996), Heelas (1996), Sutcliffe (2003) and Kemp (2004), are all contemporary studies which locate New Age beliefs in the past but without tracing those connections in detail. For example York (1995: 1) summarises the New Age's debt to the American metaphysical tradition, transcendentalism, Theosophy, Swedenborgianism, New Thought, eastern religious philosophies and practices and

'other European non-mainstream developments' while Alexander (1992: 30-47) elaborates on the influence of Theosophy and New Thought, and Diem and Lewis examine the influence of Hinduism (1992: 48-58). Wessinger (1997: 53) meanwhile refers to the direct transmission of theosophical millenarianism to the modern New Age movement.

The pseudonymous New Age author Leo, who should not be confused with Alan Leo, writing in the 1930s or 40s, acknowledged the millenarianism nature of Aquarian Age ideas when he wrote that 'Those who have been trained in another terminology would use the term, *The Millennium* to describe the spiritual reality of it' (Leo: 7).

The derivation of the term 'New Age'

The term New Age appeared in the 1790s and 1800s in the works of Volney (1795: 127-133) and William Blake (Hanegraff 1996: 95 n.6; see also Raine 1979: viii). However, as Ellwood pointed out (1973: 64, 66; see also Stanley 1988; Heelas 1996: 17), the concept of the New Age as one of spiritual enlightenment is directly derived from the teachings of the Christian reformer Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688-1782). There may also be a lineage of teachings derived from Joachim of Fiore, the thirteenth-century spiritual Franciscan whose apocalyptic prophecy focussed on the coming spiritual Age of the Holy Ghost, which he believed was to begin in 1260 (Reeves 1969, 1976; see also Hanegraaff 1976). Swedenborg, though, is clearly the direct modern inspiration for the notion of a spiritual New Age. Influenced by the argument that, in a sense, the Kingdom of God was already present, one only had to look for it (see Mark 16.43; Strahan 1913: 333-4), Swedenborg argued that the *parousia* had occurred in 1757 but only on a spiritual level (Garrett 1984: 69). Swedenborg's followers in London formed themselves into 'The Theosophical Society Instituted for the Purpose of Promoting the Heavenly Doctrines of the New Jerusalem' and, after 1787, the 'New Church'. They thrived briefly in the millenarian context of late eighteenth-century

England in which 'Spiritual enlightenment and human regeneration would come about through events on this earth, including both natural and political, until the wicked had been defeated' (Garrett 1984: 67). There was an emphasis on the transformation of the world rather than, in traditional Christian millenarianism (at least as a first stage), on its destruction, as well as a profound consciousness of the need for inner change. Garrett cites one Swedenborgian, Richard Clarke, who wrote in 1772, 'In our own *inner* man, lies the foundation of the new Jerusalem' (1984: 68). For a while Swedenborg's vision of a new world aroused considerable enthusiasm and Joseph Priestly wrote in 1791 'This kingdom of Christ, and consequently Swedenborg's doctrine, is speedily to prevail over the whole world, and to continue for ever' (Priestly 1791: 6). Swedenborg's opinion was that, on the one hand the new Jerusalem had begun in 1757, but on the other it was a constant spiritual state to which one could gain access at any moment. Although not acknowledging Swedenborg as a source, this point of view is common in the modern New Age movement. For example, in 1977 David Spangler wrote that 'For each of us the New Age is here now. It has always been here' (1991: 29; see also Lemesurier 1990: 232).

Although the peak of the New Church's popularity passed quickly (Garrett 1984: 81), Swedenborg became a profoundly influential figure in esoteric circles. Blavatsky (1877: I.73; II.471) regarded him as, if not an adept, at least 'the greatest among modern seers', although she kept an open mind on his precise proclamation of the New Jerusalem. Discussing the anthropomorphising of God, a phenomenon which she regarded as distancing humanity from a real understanding of the divine, she cited Swedenborg's solution: that, rather than making God in his own image, 'man imagines God after his own image' and then forgets that 'he has set up his own reflection for worship' (1877: I. 308). This idea, that divinity lies within, remains a central tenet of modern theosophy. A recent summary of theosophy makes it clear, relying heavily on Neo-Platonism for its

authority, that the key to spiritual development is the 'awakening of the inner man' (Farthing 2000: 31-3).

The use of the term New Age crossed the boundaries between mainstream Christianity, Swedenborgianism, spiritualism and psychical research and Theosophy. The publication of the periodical 'The New Age' in 1845 is one of the earliest instances, and Warren Felt Evans published a spiritualist paper called 'The New Age' in the 1850s and a book, *The New Age and its Message*, in 1864 (Heelas 1996: 17). By the 1870s the term became an established metaphor for the Swedenborgian spiritual era and by the 1900s it was being used by Theosophists such as Alfred Orage and Holbrook Jackson, editors of another periodical, *The New Age* (Webb 1980: 195-212, 206).

The Counter Culture

There is a strong body of opinion that the New Age movement dates from the 1960s or later, an argument which was developed in the evangelical literature. As Groothuis put it, 'the often laughable claptrap of the sixties has been replaced by a more mature and completing world view that seeks to draw all areas of life into its confidence' (Groothuis 1986: 51; see also 17, 37-8, 40). The dominant Christian evangelical view was that the New Age movement of the 1970s and 1980s resulted from the unholy alliance of 1960s moral laxity with eastern teachings, especially Hinduism (Baer 1989: 1, 37, 164).¹ The idea that the New Age movement originated in the counter-culture of the 1960s has since become widely accepted in the academic literature, especially since Melton set the launch date as 1971 (1991: xi-xvi, 1).²

The concept of the New Age as a recent, and hence transient, phenomenon has encouraged the view, fuelled by veteran New Agers' anger at the movement's commercialisation in the 1980s (Lemesurier 1990: 185; Spangler 1996: 55), that the New Age is over. Thus Irwin (1991: 17) pronounced the New Age 'dead', Melton

(2001b: 142-3, 8) talks of 'post New-Age' and Massimo (2001: 61-2) discusses the 'Next Age'. However, the New Age culture of the 1970s-1990s should properly be seen as popularisation of the theosophical New Age movement which dates back to the beginning of the twentieth-century.

It is widely acknowledged that contemporary New Age culture's intellectual lineage is to be found in such nineteenth and early twentieth-century movements as New Thought, Theosophy, and individuals such as Bailey, Steiner, Gurdjieff and Ouspensky (York 1995: 1, Alexander 1992). Given that the term New Age was current in theosophical circles from the beginning of the twentieth century, it is unrealistic to argue that New Age culture is a post 1960s phenomenon. David Spangler, who joined a New Age group in the 1950s, proposes an alternative view: that the New Age movement 'piggy backed' on the counter-culture (1993: 86; see also 1996: 55). That is, the New Age movement dates from the 1890s-1900s but became a mass cultural phenomenon in the 1970s. This possibility is suggested by Hanegraaff (1996: 97, 521), who argues that the shift in the 1970s saw the earlier New Age *sensu stricto*, which originated in the late nineteenth-century or early twentieth-century, becoming subsumed within the new and much wider New Age *sensu lato*³ (see below).

The Origins of the New Age Movement

The theosophical prophecy that a New Age was about to begin required, within the framework of Popperian activism, a social and political programme to enable its smooth inauguration. From the moment of its foundation in 1875 The Theosophical Society fulfilled this purpose, having a clear mission to prepare for the coming of the New Age through organised activity, primarily spiritual activity and education.

The Theosophical Society's political project extended to its spin-off groups. In 1928 the Aquarian Foundation, set up by the charismatic leader (and fraudster), Edward Wilson,

also known as Brother XII, in British Columbia, had eight thousand devoted members, including Alfred and Annie Barley, the English theosophical astrologers and confidantes of Alan Leo (Oliphant 1991). Barley had been the sub-editor of Leo's magazine and propaganda vehicle for theosophical astrology, *Modern Astrology* (Leo 1911: 311). The conscious sense of participating in a movement intended to encourage the smooth transition to the New Age extended to the world of theosophical astrology. By 1940 the following slogan had been added to the back cover of the magazine *Astrology*, the quarterly journal of the Astrological Lodge of the Theosophical Society.

Astrology is no mere system of fortune-telling. It is a universal philosophy founded on demonstrable scientific fact. The object of the Lodge is to form a strong body of earnest students, able to study and promulgate astrological truth, and to purify it from unworthy associations of all sorts. In this work we bespeak the help of every serious student, each according to his or her own capacity (The Work of the Astrological Lodge of London, 1940).

Alice Bailey⁴ was, with the exception of Rudolf Steiner, the most prominent leader of a theosophical splinter group. The group she founded was named the Arcane School. She was quite explicit that she was creating a group of individuals whose purpose was to bring the New Age into being. There are essentially two groups, Bailey argues. On the one hand there are those who are working consciously with the Christ and, on the other, those who are consciously working for greater awareness but are unconscious of the operations of the spiritual Hierarchy. Bailey's work began in 1921 when she and her husband Foster, who was secretary of the Theosophical Association of New York, formed a small meditation group 'to discuss the Plan of the Masters of the Wisdom and to meditate for a while on our part in it' (Bailey 1951: 191). The volume of correspondence generated by her first three books, *Initiation Human and Solar* (1922), *Letters on Occult Meditation* (1922) and *The Consciousness of the Atom*, and her classes on the *Secret Doctrine*, resulted in the formation of the Arcane School in April 1923, with the nucleus of the meditation group as collaborators with Bailey. In 1948 she wrote,

In the age into which we are now emerging, the Aquarian Age, this mode of group work will reach a very high point of development, and the world will be saved and reconstructed *by groups* far more than by individuals...In them is vested a spirit of construction; they are the builders of the new age... They are disciples of the Christ, working consciously and frequently unconsciously for His reappearance (1948:182-3).

Bailey estimated in 1951 that thirty thousand people had passed through the school and that there were 'many hundreds...still with us' (Bailey 1951: 193). In 1937 Bailey had discussed the importance of the creation of groups, a process she began in 1931, in order to bring God's plan into being, and help inaugurate 'the New Age, the Age of Aquarius' (1937: 28). The creation of the educational tools through which the new consciousness could be developed and a new culture built required collective action. She insisted, using italics for emphasis, that '*the new truths of the Aquarian Age can only be grasped as a result of group endeavour*' (1937: 30). Once again Popperian activism is central to the millenarian endeavour. There were, she wrote, different components of the group, of whom one of the most important is the New Group of World Servers, those who 'seek to express the spirit of Christ' (1940: 205) 'conceal and nurture the germ or seed of the new civilisation of the Aquarian Age' (1937: 35).

Alice Bailey's followers maintain the concept of a political programme. For example, in 1984 an advertisement for the Lucis Trust, the organisation set up to perpetuate Alice Bailey's teachings, announced that the

Lucis Trust is dedicated to the establishment of right human relations through Education, spiritual discipline, and meditation. The foundations for a new world order can be established... [through]...group work in preparation for the Aquarian Age (Lucis Trust 1984).

David Spangler, who discovered the New Age through Alice Bailey in 1959 (Spangler 1991: 2), in his two books *Festivals in the New Age* (1975) and *Revelation: the birth of a new age* (1976), brought the term New Age in its Swedenborgian and Baileyite sense into a wider usage (see also Trevelyan 1977). The sense of being part of a movement is important to Spangler (1993: 101), although the term does need further definition. The

difficulty is made clear by William Bloom who simultaneously discusses the nature of the New Age 'movement' (1991: xvi, 2) while denying its existence. In his opinion,

The New Age is neither a movement nor a religion set apart from others. It is not something one can choose or not to join. It is essentially a view of the time we live in and the world we are creating. It is therefore for everyone (1991: xiii).

He continues:

I see the New Age phenomenon as the visible tip of the iceberg of a mass movement in which humanity is reasserting its right to explore spirituality in total freedom (1991: xv-xvi)

In 2002 Steve Nobel, a director of the influential group 'Alternatives', based at St James', Piccadilly, wrote

I often feel that there is something stirring in the hearts and minds of humanity which is the beginning of something potentially quite amazing. Many spiritual teachers are now speaking about a mass awakening of consciousness occurring on the planet (2002: 28).

For Nobel the movement's strength is derived from its collective nature. In 2003 he wrote in the 'Alternatives' newsletter,

The outgoing age of Pisces is said to have lasted for 2000 years and has helped us learn about love, devotion, service through sacrifice, suffering, martyrdom, the individual rather than the community, and dealing with ideological conflict. Now, the coming age of Aquarius offers many new lessons and possibilities such as interdependence, community, cooperation between groups, and co-creation between nature, spirit, and humanity (2003: 1).

That there is still a consciously defined New Age movement is quite clear. A reminder of this was included in the November/December 1998 issue of *Insight*, the journal of the Theosophical Society in England. It set out the Theosophical Society's members' historicist duty in typically activist terms:

it is ourselves we must change. To bring about permanent change for the better in the world, a nucleus is needed of enlightened people, people who have themselves experienced the oneness of life and who act accordingly, so that their every action is quite spontaneously in the interests of the whole as well as in their own interest; this is the ultimate aim of the First Object - and it will take time to achieve...but we must also start with the First Object by changing the keyword of our actions from 'competition' to 'cooperation' (Barton 1998: 6).

Is there a New Age 'Movement'?

There is a substantial debate as to whether there is such a phenomenon as a New Age 'movement'. The issue was first raised in the Christian evangelical literature by Cumbeys (1983), who argued that there was a real worldwide conspiracy, by Groothuis (1986: 14, 32-36; see also Chandler 1989: 17), who argued there was a series of networks rather than a single movement, and Miller (1990: 14) who introduced the term 'metanetwork'. Lewis, following Lemesurier (1990: 183), deals with the issue by citing Eileen Barker on Ludwig Wittgenstein's theory of 'family relationships', in which different concepts and activities are linked by the words used to name and describe them; thus different aspects of the New Age movement may be linked through their similar ideologies rather than through any substantial connection (1992: 6). York's most recent subtle solution is to acknowledge the movement's diversity by referring to New Age movements, in the plural (2003: 15; see also 1995: 22). York (1996: 325) also uses Gerlach and Hine's (1973: 163) definition of a movement as 'a group of people who are organised for, ideologically motivated by, and committed to a purpose which implements some form of personal or social change; who are actively engaged in the recruitment of others; and whose influence spreads in opposition to the established social order within which it originated'. Following York's argument; it may be suggested that the obligation to actively recruit new members should not in itself be a necessary precondition for a group to be categorised as a movement. New Age groups may then be defined as movements on ideological rather than institutional grounds. Gerlach and Hine (1973: 67) also emphasise the extent to which every social structure, as every biological structure, is a system, that different systems are interdependent and overlapping, that the nature of the system may alter depending on one's distance from it and that systems alter in time. The term movement, as a system, then, need not imply the existence of a fixed entity either in terms of ideology or organisation.

The New Age *Sensu Stricto* and *Sensu Lato*

One solution to the problem of whether there is or is not a movement is to distinguish two elements within New Age culture, as Steven Sutcliffe recognises (1998: 43 n1). First, there are the small groups of individuals who are well organised, believe that the New Age is coming and that, by their actions, they can actively assist this process. Second, there is the larger community of individuals who may be accustomed to ideas and practices generally included as New Age, whether feng shui, spiritual development, astrology or the use of alternative therapies, but who have either no concept of, or interest in, the approaching entry to the New Age as a major historical shift. Thus it may be possible to define the New Age Movement on the one hand and a general New Age as a cultural phenomenon on the other, without the sheer diversity of the latter compromising the existence of the former.

Lewis and Melton attempted an answer to the problem by developing a two-fold typology of the New Age, proposing a 'narrow' New Age consisting of 'the phenomena, personalities and events featured in the media since the 1980s' on the one hand, and a broad new age consisting of groups who might actually reject the label but still fall inside its scope from an academic point of view on the other (1992: x).

Wouter Hanegraaff provided a model which may be more useful. He distinguished the New Age *sensu stricto*, in a restricted sense, from the New Age *sensu lato*, that is, in a wide sense (1996: 96-103). The restricted New Age has its roots largely in Britain, is heavily Theosophical and Anthroposophical and is concerned with the coming historical transition, the entry into the Age of Aquarius. The restricted New Age, however, is but one component of the wider New Age, which is better defined by the diverse alternative ideas which emerged out of the 1960s counter-culture, is not dependent on the idea of an imminent historical transition and has its roots in the USA, primarily in California and principally in New Thought. Hanegraaff therefore provides

a possible answer to Michael York's question as to whether a formal initiate and a delegate to a creative management training session are both New Agers (1995: 22). The former may be members of the New Age *sensu stricto* and the latter members of the New Age *sensu lato*. The New Age *sensu stricto* is one component of the New Age *sensu lato*, but other parts of the latter may have little in common with the former.

Hanegraaff's typology is very useful and will be used as a model for the analysis of astrology in chapters 6-7 and 11-13. However, it is necessary to clarify the debate further, for there is a real difference between the use of the term New Age in different contexts within the literature on the subject. Three types of definition of New Age may be identified. Types 1 and 2 are emic definitions which reflect the experience and world view of insiders involved in New Age culture. Type 3 reflects the assumptions of the etic literature.

1. A present culture (St. Aubyn 1990) or future world (Bailey 1937/1957) founded in a real phenomenon, a genuine shift of the Ages, tied to objective astronomical motions. This corresponds broadly to Hanegraaff's New Age *sensu stricto*.

2. A genuine cultural shift, one in which the astronomical changes should be seen primarily as a metaphor (Spangler 1993: 88). That is why Thompson (1991: 17) can proclaim that the New Age is over, a nonsensical statement in terms of definition (a). Spangler himself began as an advocate of definition (a) but moved to support for (b) (Spangler 1996: 55). This corresponds broadly to Hanegraaff's New Age *sensu lato*.

3. A cultural phenomenon which has its immediate roots in the 1960s, developed in the 1970s and achieved its high public profile in the 1980s, and in which belief in astronomically measured changes is a minor feature, and in which the validity of the beliefs are (a) either not judged (Lewis and Melton 1992, York 1995, Heelas 1996,

Hanegraaff 1996), (b) critiqued (Bruce 2002) or (c) deemed false (Faber 1996). In this sense New Age is a 'mnemonic device far more than a prophecy' (York 1995: 49).

Defining the New Age

Most of the literature on New Age belief is either written from an evangelical Christian perspective or an academic, sociological one. Indeed Melton (1992: 15) noted the influence of hostile commentaries, especially religious ones, in shaping etic discourse on the New Age. The key features of what is now considered to constitute New Age culture were compiled from works on the counter-culture (Roszak 1969, 1972; Braden 1971; Evans 1971; Satin 1976) and spirituality in the 1960s (Wuthnow 1976; Glock and Bellah 1976). Ferguson's *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (1982) established what are now taken as some of the core principles of the New Age world view - 'transformation, innovation, evolution' (1982: 25). It triggered a wave of evangelical Christian attacks on the New Age, beginning with Cumbeys (1983), who argued that there was a tightly organised set of groups and individuals aiming to take over the world on behalf of Satan. New Age culture was seen as a global threat and, quite possibly, a sign of the Last Days, arguments which were developed by other writers.⁵ The most alarming feature of New Age culture, according to such writers was its Gnosticism, belief in the cosmic-Christ and combination of Christian ideas with eastern teachings.

The difficulty of defining even the contemporary New Age is acknowledged by Melton, who attributes the problem to the fact that the major commentaries on it in the 1980s were written from an overtly hostile perspective, both religious and academic (1992: 15). The direct result, he argues, is an absence of unbiased commentary. Yet, the New Age movement is also diverse. As Michael York (1995: 22) writes,

Even the concept of a New Age is vague: on the one hand, there is the formal initiation; and on the other, is someone who attends a t'ai chi ch'uan workshop or a talk by Peter Russell on creative management automatically a New Ager? (1995: 22).

In this respect attempts to define the New Age reflect similar efforts to define the counter-culture (Wuthnow 1976: 12). In Hanegraaff's opinion (1996:2),

the initial fact about the New Age is that it concerns a *label* attached indiscriminately to whatever seems to fit it, on the basis of what are essentially pre-reflexive intuitions. As a result, the New Age means very different things to very different people (1996: 2).

The etic categorisation of groups and individuals is therefore highly problematic (Hanegraaff 1996: 9) and the result is often an appearance of disorder, of a 'movement' in which the differences between groups may be as noticeable as the similarities. Although the description of the New Age as a 'label' can be indiscriminate, especially by external critics such as the sceptic Martin Gardner (1988), it is nevertheless possible to identify a coherent set of ideas. For David Spangler the New Age is essentially experiential, transformational, spiritual and holistic. It is fundamentally, he writes,

a spiritual event, the birth of a new consciousness, a new awareness and experience of life. It is humanity becoming more fully integrated with the being of Gaia, more fully at one with the presence of God (Spangler 1984: 81; see also 1996: 13-23).

Bloom identifies four facets of New Age: new science (including new forms of healing), ecology, new psychology and spiritual dynamics (1991: xvi). For Heelas, New Age beliefs can be summed up as 'self-spirituality' and he sees it as based in the 'self-ethic', the need to take responsibility for one's own actions (1996: 18, 23; see also Miller 1990: 26). Summaries of the core elements of New Age ideology were given first in the evangelical literature, particularly Groothuis (1986: 18-48) and Miller (1990: 17-18, 25-7) and, from there, summarised in the academic literature, especially in Lewis (1992: 6-9), Heelas (1996: 15-40) and Bruce (2003: 83-85, 89-101). Most of these qualities are also identified in studies of the counter-culture, for example in Wuthnow's study of shifts in meaning-systems in the 1960s (1976: 6). These may be combined in a manner which suggests a coherent scheme more than a random collection of ideas.

1. A belief that the divine exists within each human being, rather than being purely external. The individual is, then, essentially spiritual. There is therefore an emphasis on inner development, whether psychological or spiritual (see also Wuthnow 1976: 4; McCulloch 2002: 149-150; Roof 1993: 122-3). New Age religion is therefore fundamentally Gnostic, influenced by Blavatsky (see for example 1877: I. 1-54) and C.G. Jung (see for example, 1959b). God in New Age thought, meanwhile, is more typically the Neoplatonic deist creator, rather than the personal Christian God (Hanegraaff 1996: 183-9; Spangler 1975: 70-1). The monist nature of New Age theology, its assumption that the divine and the visible universe are one, was summed up by David Spangler when he wrote, 'God is the New Age, the original and only New Age, the Spirit that makes all things new' (Spangler 1993: 105).

2. Following directly from the idea of the inner divine is the implication that the individual is the highest authority. Heelas (1996: 21) refers to 'epistemological individualists' for whom knowledge essentially arises from the self.

3. It follows from this that individual experience, whether of nature or the divine, is the ultimate arbiter of truth.

4. From this in turn is derived a distinct cultural relativism. As the evangelical Elliot Miller wrote, the New Age assumes that belief systems are created to meet cultural needs (Miller 1990: 25-26).

5. The implication of cultural relativism is, in turn, eclecticism and syncretism, in which ideas from many cultures may be adopted either individually, or combined to create new systems.

6. The tendency to syncretism is linked to holism, a belief that the entire universe is one interdependent whole. From this idea there develops a concern with the environment.

7. The universe is thought to be in a constant process of evolutionary spiritual development (Hexham and Poewe 1997: 93-6). As Omraam Mikhaël Aïvanhov, the French teacher and member of the Universal White Brotherhood wrote in 1972, 'The law of life is evolution, that is development all the way to perfection. That is why Jesus said, "Be ye perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect".' (Aïvanhov 1981: 25.19).

8. Popperian activism. The astrologer Rupert Gleadow, who was profoundly sceptical of the Age of Aquarius, wrote that 'its only virtue is that it encourages us to look on the future, despite rebuffs, as something for which we must continue to do our best' (1968b, p 137). In other words, true or not, it is a call to action. In the words of David Spangler (1984: 84) 'The New Age offers action' and is a metaphor which galvanises people into action, 'an image of transformation and potential' which can endow people with the power to transform themselves and their society (1993: 88; see also 1976: 180-1; 1984: 76; 1996: 55; Bailey 1949: 36; Trevelyan 1984: 82, 139-147; York: 1995: 34, 39-40, 49, 57).

8. Education. The preparation for the New Age is achieved partly via education and any practice designed to facilitate spiritual growth. The literature on correct preparation for the New Age is extensive, from theosophists in the first part of the twentieth-century (Bailey - *Education in the New Age*) and the last (Spangler 1980: 12-33).

8. Transformation. Linked to activism, meanwhile, is the transformation which will make the inauguration of the New Age possible as the evangelical critics Groothuis (1986: 11), Chandler (1989: 17) and Cole et al (1990: 6), pointed out. To quote Michael York again,

What unites all New Agers, however, is the vision of radical mystical transformation on both the personal and collective levels. In fact, the awakening to the potential abilities of the human self - one's individual psychic powers and the capability for physical and/or psychological healing - is the New Age springboard for the quantum leap of collective consciousness which is to bring about and constitute the New Age itself (York 1995: 39).

As Lemesurier put it, 'transformation is one of the New Agers' favourite concepts' (1990: 197; see also Melton, Clarke and Kelly 1991: 3; Spangler 1984: 76).

9. Secularism. Braden considers that astrologers who forecast the Age of Aquarius are 'humanists', noting that the key to the prophecy concerns 'long-term prospects for man' (Braden 1971: 17) rather than, as traditional Millenarianism would have it, the inauguration of the kingdom of God. This theme was developed by Miller (1990: 4), who identified the New Age in the lineage of western intellectual history, arguing that it is broadly descended from Enlightenment secularism, especially in its humanism, naturalism and existentialism, although in a 'spiritualized' form (Miller 1990: 4; see also 20). This idea was developed by Hanegraaff, who argued that the New Age is 'characterised by a popular western culture criticism expressed in terms of a secularised esotericism' (Hanegraaff 1996: 409, 521). Its secularised components are those shared with Enlightenment rationalism; the study of comparative religion, notions of causality, evolutionary theory and psychology. As Godwin has pointed out, Blavatsky's theosophy was as much a product of the Enlightenment as a reaction against it (Godwin 1994: xi).

Christian Attitudes to the New Age

The first significant Christian work on the New Age was Constance Cumbey's *The Hidden Dangers of the Rainbow*, published in 1983 as a direct response to the wave of publishing that began in 1975 with David Spangler's *Revelation: the Emergence of a New Age*. Cumbey took an extreme view. The New Age movement was part of a deliberate demonic conspiracy to inaugurate the rule of the Antichrist. It was a fully

fledged religion, not unlike Nazism (1983: 40, 42, 58, 99-120) whose deliberate appropriation of Christian imagery was itself a warning of the Last Days. It was, Cumbey claimed, the first movement of the last two thousand years that truly meets the scriptural definition of the political movement of the antichrist (Cumbey 1983: 41).

Alice Bailey's followers, Cumbey (1983: 52) announced, were planning,

religious war, forced redistribution of the world's resources, Luciferic initiations, mass planetary initiations, theology for the New World Religion [sic], disarmament campaign [sic], and elimination or selling away of obstinate religious orthodoxies...the last stages of the New Age scheme to take the world for Lucifer.

It is quite clear that Cumbey's alarm was motivated largely by the fact that theosophical Christianity was the New Age's ideological core. She was quite right to point out Blavatsky's hostility to the mainstream Christian churches (1983: 44-5), but the Christian rhetoric of post-Blavatskian theosophy was, if anything, more threatening. Statements about Jesus such as those in Levi's *Aquarian Gospel*, or Benjamin Crème's proclamation of the second coming represented a direct challenge to evangelical Christians, especially as they themselves often cited Christian texts (Cumbey 1983: 13-25, 31, 41). Gnosticism's role as a disturbing feature of the New Age was attacked by Groothuis (1986: 42).⁶

The dominant Christian attitude to the New Age is therefore one of overt hostility. As the evangelical writer Jeremiah wrote (1995: 26), 'I believe the New Spirituality is the greatest threat to the Christian world-view today'. The Roman Catholic church took a similar line in 2003 in its press release, *Documents on Christian Reflection on the New Age* (2003), stating that 'the New Age proposes theories and doctrines about God, man and the world, that are incompatible with the Christian faith'.⁷

New Age Christianity

In chapter 3 the emergence of a 'western' faction, deeply influenced by esoteric Christianity within theosophy was discussed and Rudolf Steiner's argument that the coming Age of Michael will see the triumph of Christ-consciousness was noted. Alice Bailey, meanwhile came from a devout Christian background and never lost her respect for Christ, even within a theosophical context. She spoke in terms that any Christian evangelist would understand. But, while her view of the Aquarian seed-men was essentially elitist, at least in the short-term, before the Aquarian Age had been fully inaugurated, her Christianity was so inclusive as to include people of all faiths and none. 'I would point out', she wrote, 'that when I use the phrase "followers of Christ" I refer to all those who love their fellow men, irrespective of creed or religion' (1945: 468). What was unpalatable to the mainstream churches, though, was her firm view, following Blavatsky, that they were destined to be replaced not by their vision of the New Jerusalem, but by hers. As David Spangler argued in 1975, in the New Age Easter would cease to exist because death would no longer exist as a fearsome concept (1975: 46).

The New Age's apocalyptic Christian origins are deliberately referenced to Revelation 21.1 by David Spangler, who wrote in 1976 that 'the New Age is a concept (that) does indeed lead to greater things, in this case to a new heaven, a new earth and a new humanity' (1976: 91; see also 180). Both Spangler and Bloom also acknowledge New Age Gnosticism's roots in the esoteric Christian tradition, emphasising the value of 'an acquaintance with, or knowledge of, the God within' (Bloom 1996; see also Tumber 2002: 33-8; Gilhus 2000: 130). Lucas, meanwhile, has pointed out the striking similarities between New Agers and Pentecostals and evangelicals, including a shared emphasis on millenarianism, prophecy, healing and the direct experience of God (1992: 210):

For ages man has looked outside himself for what he receives, not knowing that he draws all things to him by virtue of his own consciousness. Now he is being directed

within to know the promise, the hope, the creativity that is within him, and he is being asked to release these qualities through positive action into his world. Revelation is not a great Being telling man what to do. It is his own being asking to release itself. It is his own personal and collective future asking to be admitted into his present. It is his own New Age seeking to blend with the New Age of others to create a new heaven and a new earth. Limitless Love and Truth is his own Divine nature speaking to him, calling forth the promise within him. Man himself is Revelation; the continuance and unfoldment of Revelation is now up to him (1976: 181).

The New Age threat experienced by the evangelicals might therefore be better seen as deriving less from a non-Christian source as from a new, reformed, 'Humanistic' Christianity. Davie (1994: 43), recognising the Christian component in New Age ideas which, she argues, contributes to their popularity, refers to 'nominal' as opposed to 'organised' Christianity, the Christianity of loose belief rather than institutional commitment. From her perspective such a component is inevitable, given that religion is 'acquired' in early family upbringing, rather than 'learnt' (Davie 1994: 29-30), and so the New Age's rejection of Christianity may be more apparent than real. It is the church which is rejected, along with the letter of its teaching, rather than the spirit. As Lucas (1992: 204; see also Kemp 2003) observed, the similarities between New Age and Pentecostal religion, such as their rejection of contemporary materialism, may be due to a common millenarian lineage. Smart distinguishes two types of Christianity, traditionalist and prophetic. (1973a: 22-3). It may be then, that Bailey and Steiner may be identified as belonging to the prophetic tradition. According to Hanegraaff,

It is remarkable how often New Age authors talk about Christ or *the* Christ, as a divine reality, power or person. In spite of the religious inclusivity of New Age thinking, in spite of its interest in Oriental religions, and in spite of its criticism of mainstream Christianity, it is still Christ who dominates New Age speculation wherever the need is felt to explain the relation between God and humanity by some mediating principle. Not even the Buddha, generally regarded by New Agers as a model of spiritual enlightenment, comes even close to the unique metaphysical status enjoyed by Christ (Hanegraaff 1996: 189).

The fluid boundary between the New Age and Christianity was recognised by Constance Cumbey, who complained bitterly that the New Age movement, particularly in its respect for eastern teachings, has penetrated the Christian churches, including the Roman Catholic and Episcopalian (Cumbey 1983: 39). Others saw the same process

manifested in the development of the interfaith movement (Chandler 1989: 210; Cole *et al* 1990: 42-57). As Kemp (2003) has shown, there is a strong argument to be made for an overlap between some Christian groups and the New Age. The papers in Ferguson (1993) actually represented an attempt to find common themes between Christianity and the New Age, while Curtis' work (1973) straddles the boundary between Baileyite and evangelical Christianity. Frost (2001) was a rare Christian who set out to attack the New Age but instead found its ideas entirely compatible with his Christian faith. Therefore, when Robert Wuthnow (1976: 213) asks whether 'new meaning systems will not so much replace the old ones as provide the basis for them to be reorganised and revitalised, the same question may be posed of the New Age: is it inherently hostile to Christianity or a possible means of reviving it?

Chapter Summary

The development of the New Age movement, as a self-conscious set of groups and individuals with the common aim of actively preparing for, and working for, a New Age of spiritual enlightenment can be traced back to eighteenth-century Swedenborgianism and nineteenth-century theosophy. As such it both parallels the development of the idea of the Age of Aquarius, which has origins in late eighteenth-century comparative religion and assumed its prophetic qualities only after the foundation of the Theosophical Society. The key characteristics of New Age culture conform broadly to the list of key millenarian features given in chapter 2: an imminent historical crisis to be accompanied by the appearance of a saviour, followed by a major improvement in the condition of the world according to a predetermined pattern which, paradoxically, may require human intervention; Popper's historicist activist model is also central to Bailey and Steiner's insistence that, although the New Age is inevitable, it is necessary to work for its peaceful inauguration. In addition New Age thought emphasises Gnosticism and a post-Enlightenment focus on the self, features which are bitterly attacked by Christian evangelicals. However, New Age culture in its 'western'

form, with its prophecy of Christ-consciousness, may be seen as a Christian reform movement rather than an anti-Christian movement. Hanegraaff's distinction of two forms of New Age culture, the millenarian *sensu stricto* and the non-millenarian *sensu lato* has been discussed and will be applied to astrology in later chapters. It should also be noted that the New Age *sensu stricto* is also necessarily dependent on astrology in the sense that its prophecy that the New Age is inevitable is dependent on the precession of the equinoxes.

Notes

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1. See also Walter (1989: 8), Miller 1990 (15, 23-4), Cole *et al* (1990: 9-11), Newport (1998: 8, 163).
 2. See also Lewis and Melton (1992: xi-xii), Curry (1992: 161), Sutcliffe (2003: 11, 28), Hanegraaff 1996: 10-11, 18), York (1995: 1, 21-22, 37-38, 49-50), Heelas (1996: 34), Hutton (1999: 411), Greenwood (2000: 9).
 3. However, Hanegraaff takes a different line elsewhere, asking whether early twentieth-century movements such as Anthroposophy can be considered New Age, but concluding that they can not because the term itself was not current (1996: 521). Similarly, he finds the roots of New Age religion 'not later' than the early decades of the twentieth-century (1996: 521) and in the late twentieth-century (1996: 388).
 4. For Bailey's life see Bailey (1951).
 5. See Matrisciana (1985) and Groothuis (1986), Livesey and Livesey (1986), North (1986), Amano and Geisler (1989), Baer (1989), Chandler (1989), Cole *et al* (1990), Miller (1990) and Livesey (1990), Mangalwadi (1992), and the more liberal Newport (1998) and Inghman (1986).
 6. See also Lewis (1986: 11), Miller (1990: 5), Newport (1998: 20), Quispel (1987: 568), Newport (1998: 6, 16).
 7. For the full report see *Jesus Christ, the Bearer of the Water of Life: A Christian reflection on the "New Age"*, Pontifical Council for Culture, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, 2003, <http://www.christaquarian.net/>.