

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

**Part 1**

**Chapter 3**

**The Age of Aquarius**

**Chapter Description**

Since the early part of the twentieth-century the terms New Age and Age of Aquarius have often been used as synonyms. As an astrological phenomenon, the Age of Aquarius is based on the idea of the gradual shift of the stars and constellations in relation to the sun's location at the spring equinox, 21 March, a phenomenon known as the precession of the equinoxes (see Mitton 1993: 306-7). Modern astrological theory holds that the major shifts in human civilisation conform to major movements of the constellations or zodiac signs in relation to the equinox. The next age, the Age of Aquarius, often corresponding to the New Age, will be inaugurated when the sun rises in Aquarius on 21 March. In this chapter the development of the idea of the Age of Aquarius will be examined. It will be argued that it is a modern phenomenon which can be traced back to no earlier than the 1880s amongst British astrologers. Earlier than that its roots date back to parallel but related strands of Enlightenment and radical thought in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-centuries: firstly, the theory that all male divinities, including Christ, were originally solar in nature and, secondly, that the forms of religious worship evolved over time in line with the shifting of the stars relative to the sun's position at the spring equinox. These ideas were adopted by H.P. Blavatsky who popularised them through the Theosophical Society and her books *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888).

**Precession of the Equinoxes: astronomy and history**

The zodiac developed by the Babylonians in the first millennium BCE was defined according to the position of the stars and is therefore known as sidereal. Because the stars shift in relation to the equinoxes, the entire sidereal zodiac changes position in relation to the seasons. In around 25,872 years the sidereal zodiac goes through one complete revolution in relation to the equinoxes. One sidereal sign of the zodiac therefore takes 2156 years to precess over the spring equinox. This is defined in the modern astrological literature as one astrological age. The sidereal zodiac is still used by Indian astrologers.

However, since the second-century CE western astrology has fixed the zodiac to the seasons; the first point of Aries, the first sign, is defined as the sun's position at the spring equinox on March 21st. This is known as the tropical zodiac. The tropical and sidereal zodiacs now diverge by about twenty-five degrees. Whereas on March 21st the sun enters Aries in the western, tropical zodiac, in the sidereal zodiac it is in Pisces.

As was discussed in chapter 2, apocalyptic events were traditionally measured by planetary cycles, chiefly Jupiter-Saturn conjunctions. There is though, not a single example of the use of precession of the equinoxes by astrologers until the late nineteenth-century. Arguments that precession was used by astrologers in the ancient world (see for example Ulansey 1989) are based entirely on circumstantial evidence and lack any textual support. Indeed, precession was consistently used as a means to attack astrology, on the grounds that the signs of the zodiac no longer occupied the same part of the sky as did the constellations which bore the same names. During the Middle Ages, when it was believed that one complete cycle of precession lasted 36,000 years, the figure defined by Ptolemy in the second century in the *Almagest*. This was the same period as, it was thought, one Platonic great year, and it was therefore believed that precession did have a role in history and was therefore connected to the

periodical cataclysms which punctuated Platonic years. Yet there are no extant classical or medieval astrological texts which attribute any astrological or historical significance to precession. Instead the increasing separation between the tropical and sidereal zodiacs was used to discredit astrology, on the grounds that the planets no longer occupied the parts of the zodiac claimed by western astrologers.

The earliest extant example of precession being used to undermine astrology was penned by the Church father Origen (c.185-254), evidence that precession was used against astrologers, not by them (Tester 1987: 54). In the late middle ages and during the Renaissance the shift of the constellations away from the signs of the zodiac was regarded by some of the most notable astrologers, such as Guido Bonatti in the thirteenth century (Shumaker 1979: 40) and Thomas Campanella in the sixteenth century (Tester 1987: 214) as a major problem. At no time was it considered a possible source of astrological forecasts.

### **The Origin of the Idea of the Age of Aquarius**

The origin of the belief that the Age of Aquarius is imminent can be traced to three strands in eighteenth-century European thought. The first was the attempt, central to Enlightenment ideology, to establish a common origin to religion. The means by which this was to be accomplished was the study of comparative religion, the deliberate aim being to diminish Christianity's claim to unique status (Sharpe 1975: 46; Stark 1999: 41-5). The second was the use of the apparent shift of the stars caused by the precession of the equinoxes as a means of dating the history of the Indian sacred texts, the Vedas. This project was underway as early as the 1760s (Costard 1764) and expanded into an examination of the history of astronomy as a whole. An essential component of this investigation was the examination of Indian chronology, particularly the use of long periods known as yugas (Dowson 1995: 381-3). The third strand was increasing respect given by the Romantics to eastern, especially Persian and Indian, religion and the sun as

a potent symbol of divinity. The study of comparative religion and the 'Oriental Renaissance' have been identified by Hanegraaff (1996: 404) as components of the secularisation which is a major feature of modern esotericism and hence of the New Age.

### **'The Sun is God'**

In the visual arts one of the leading English Romantics was the painter J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851). According to Turner's biographer, John Ruskin, just a few weeks before he died the painter had remarked 'the Sun is God' (Gage 1989: 39). Turner was well-versed in classical mythology, had studied Hinduism and was therefore aware that the Christianised imagery of the west was just one way of representing the sky as an allegory. He may have picked up this idea from Alexander Dow's 1768 *History of Hindostan* or from Payne Knight's essay in comparative religion, the sensational *Account of the remains of the Worship of Priapus lately existing in Isernia*, published in 1786. Knight, for whom Turner worked in 1808, was deeply anti-religious but the orientalist William Jones, who greatly influenced Turner, was both a devout Christian and respectful of Hinduism. Jones' work on oriental languages which spanned the years 1770-94 stated that there must be a relationship between the Hindu and classical Greek Pantheons, and that both were fundamentally expressions of the sun. He concluded,

It seems a well-founded opinion that the whole crowd of gods and goddesses in ancient Rome and modern Varanes [Varanasi], mean only the powers of nature, and principally those of the SUN, expressed in a variety of ways, and by a multitude of fanciful names.<sup>1</sup>

From Turner's statement, 'the Sun is God' I propose the use of the phrase the 'asun god', to describe the theory that all major male deities originated as solar gods.

### **Enlightenment Radicalism: the astronomical origin of religion**

These three separate strands of inquiry (investigation into the astronomical origin of religion, the universal symbolism of the sun and the long-chronology of the yugas) were combined by the French Enlightenment radical Jean Sylvain Bailly (1736-1793). Bailly expounded his arguments on the astronomical origin of religious forms in two major works, *Histoire de l'astronomie ancienne* (1775) and *Traite de l'astronomie indienne et orientale* (1787). Bailly believed that a highly scientific civilisation had existed before the Deluge, an idea he discussed in correspondence with Voltaire who himself thought it quite likely that ' long before the empires of China and India, there had been nations cultured, learned, and powerful' , an opinion later cited approvingly by H.P. Blavatsky, the founder of the Theosophical Society (1888: II.742).<sup>2</sup> However, in the context of late eighteenth-century scholarship this was hardly a controversial idea, finding its rationale in Plato's own account of the destruction of Atlantis (*Timaeus* 24E-25D). Bailly discussed the supposed beginning of the Kali Yuga, the current era of Hindu chronology, in 3102 BC, by which time, he calculated, the vernal point had precessed to the ' Eye of Taurus' (the star Aldebaran) (Bailly 1787: xlvii, xxix). In other words, the sun rose in Taurus at the spring equinox.

Bailly's work was developed by his fellow radicals Charles Dupuis (1781; 1795; 1857; 1875) and François Henri Stanislas Delaunay's 1791 work *L'Histoire générale et particulière des religions et du Culte*, an attempt to establish the foundation of religion in astral worship. Delaunay was the first to consider the implications of the precession of the vernal point into Aquarius which he thought had taken place in 1726. This was too close to Delaunay's own time for him to specify its cultural correlations. Instead he wrote simply ' Plus de changements' (Curry, Campion and Halbronn, 1992: 89). Dupuis' ideas were also propagated by his radical colleague Constantin François de Volney in his shorter, more polemical, *Les ruines des empires* (1791), an English translation of which appeared in 1795, four years later. Both *Les ruines* and Volney's earlier argument in favour of nature religion, *The Law of Nature, or Catechism of a French citizen*

(1793) were translated into English, the former in 1795, after which Volney became one of the most influential freethinkers in the English and French-speaking worlds. According to Joscelyn Godwin (1994: 35), ' *The Ruins* became one of the foundational works of free thought in the English-speaking world, causing its author's name to be coupled with that of Voltaire as religion's greatest foe'. A more romantic strand of thought, though, was represented by Fabre D' Olivet (1768-1813), described as ' the great metaphysician of Esotericism of the nineteenth century' (Sperling 1975: iii), who discussed precession in connection with the Hindu Yugas in 1813 (D' Olivet 1975: 70-71).

The sun-as-god theory was well known in England by the mid-1790s. It entered radical circles with the publication of Volney's *Les ruines* in 1795 and was felt worthy of a serious rebuttal by the radical dissenter Joseph Priestly (1797) and a scathing parody by John Prior Estlin (1797: 35-85). The first major evangelist for the sun-as-god theory in England was the anticlerical deist (and former Tory MP and diplomat) Sir William Drummond (see Godwin 1979b). He was followed by Samson Arnold Mackey (see Godwin 1994: 68-76) who, in 1822, published the *Mythological Astronomy of the Ancients Demonstrated*, in which he expounded at great length on the mythological significance of changes in the stars' apparent location, the Golden Age, the yugas, his own invention, the age of horror, and the new idea that ten avatars incarnate on the earth to teach as the astrological ages change (Mackey 1822: 17-18, 25). The ' sun-as-god' theory became a staple of English radical deism and atheism and the solar nature of all deities was preached by Robert Taylor (1831: 30). Godfrey Higgins (1772-1833), meanwhile expounded at length on the changing forms of religious worship as the signs of the zodiac precessed over the vernal point. (1836: I.34-5, 43). Paraphrasing Taylor, he wrote, ' the history of the sun is the history of Jesus Christ' (1836: II.144; see also I. 24-6, 152, 264, 634, 637). In apocalyptic mood, he looked forward to a ' new aera' (1836: I.268, 638, II.445; see also Heelas 1996: 17).

The sun-as-god school lost its political radicalism but gained mainstream respectability with the work of Max Müller, or Mueller (1823-1900), the nineteenth-century's most distinguished orientalist and 'one of the founding fathers of the "science of religion"' (Klimkett 1987: 154). His *Ancient Hindu Astronomy and Chronology* (1862) introduced Europeans to an authoritative survey of the Hindu system of yugas or great ages, and detailed discussion of precession as a dating method for Indian civilisation. In the history of religious studies Müller is revered as the founder of the scientific study of religion and of comparative religion (Sharpe 1986: 35-41, Pals 1996: 3-4, Thrower: 1999: 106). Yet he followed firmly in the French tradition of Baillie, Delaunaye, Dupuis and Volney; the main distinction between his work and theirs being the detail and quality of his argument. He believed that the development of religion since earliest times was a decline from an original pure religion of nature focussed, as all seasonal beliefs must be, on the sun, the 'father in heaven' (Müller 1873: 276; also 172). Müller's disciples included, as Sharpe admits, the eminent classicist, the Rev. George William Cox (1827-1902), whose series of popular expositions of sun-as-god theory included the *Manual of Mythology* (1867), *The Mythology of the Aryan Nations* (1870) and *Introduction to the Science of Comparative Mythology and Folklore* (1881).

### **Panbabylonianism**

The sun-as-god school was to face a rival from 1874, when the first Mesopotamian cuneiform inscriptions were published by Archibald Sayce in *The Astronomy and Astrology of the Babylonians*. Sayce became one of the most influential of the Panbabylonians who, without denying the antiquity of Indian culture championed by Müller, argued that Babylonian cosmology had reached its final, complete form by 4,000 BCE at which time it provided the basis for the original version of near-eastern religion. Discussion of precession of the equinoxes was crucial to attempts to identify the date of Babylonian creation of the zodiac. Although Panbabylonianism was

discredited by the early years of the twentieth-century (Cumont 1960: 5), their theories were influential in the last quarter of the nineteenth and have remained so amongst proponents of a technologically sophisticated Golden Age.<sup>3</sup> The extant Babylonian astronomical texts indicate no known knowledge of precession (Hunger and Pingree 1999: 200-2), but the argument that they were familiar with it was to lend immense credibility to the previous arguments that religious forms evolved to conform with precession.

### **Theosophical Cosmology and Historiography**

This was the intellectual milieu in which H.P. Blavatsky founded the Theosophical Society in New York in 1875. The society may be the most important single institutional influence on the New Age movement, if only because of its global reach, from the United States to France, Britain, Germany and India, and the number of leading intellectuals who were members in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries (see Campbell 1980). Blavatsky set herself two goals. The first was to recover what she considered to be the lost wisdom of a once universal human civilisation by bringing together its surviving fragments from Indian, Platonic, Hermetic and Kabbalistic thought. The second was to form a body of people who, by studying and practicing ancient wisdom, could prepare the world for the imminent shift into a new historical era. Influenced by the German idealist philosopher George Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), whose theories of history, she argued, had 'their application in the teachings of Occult science' (Blavatsky 1888: I.641), Blavatsky set out her theory of cyclical history, in which complex patterns of cycles regulate a cosmos in which physical evolution is dependent on spiritual evolution.

The revolution of the physical world, according to the ancient doctrine, is attended by a like revolution in the world of intellect - the spiritual evolution of the world proceeding in cycles, like the physical one.

Thus we see in history a regular alternation of ebb and flow in the tide of human progress. The great kingdoms and empires of the world, after reaching the

culmination of their greatness, descend again, in accordance with the same Law by which they ascended; till, having reached the lowest point, humanity reasserts itself and mounts up once more, the height of its attainment being, by this law of ascending progression by cycles, somewhat higher than the point from which it had before descended (1888: I.641).

When Blavatsky published *The Secret Doctrine* in 1888, both the sun-as-god school and Panbabylonianism were still powerful and academically reputable approaches to the histories of religion and astronomy. Blavatsky cited Sayce approvingly (1888 I.320, II. 203, 226, 691, 693; see also 1877, II. pp. 459-65), finding support for her own theories of the antiquity of ancient civilisation in his extension of the date for the high point of Babylonian civilisation back to 4000 BCE. She disapproved of Müller' s argument that all mythology was a disease of language (1888: I.304) yet the assumptions of the sun-as-god school pervade her work equally. She supported the interpretation of Old Testament stories as allusions to the twelve zodiac signs, going as far as to state that ' the whole scheme is built upon' such metaphors. Yet she was contemptuous of attempts to claim that the zodiacal links were specifically Jewish or Christian rather than universal (1888: 649-503).<sup>4</sup>

Blavatsky had read Volney (1877: I. 24, 268, 347, II: 142, 288, 456), Bailly (see 1877. I. 171; 1888 II), and Dupuis (1877 I.24; 1888: I.652, II.32). She cited Higgins extensively and discussed Bailley' s and Dupuis' opinions on the yugas and origin of religion (1877: I. 24, 347), acknowledging the solar origin of all male deities (see for example 1877: I.48, 270; 1888: I.xliii) and discussed theories of world ages, including the Platonic great year (1888: II.784), at great length in *The Secret Doctrine*. She borrowed from Mackey a concern with the movement of the poles (1888: 2: 353-4, 785-6) and the yugas (1888: I.664-665, II.68-70), her essential argument being that ' the history of the world since its formation and to its end "is written in the stars," i.e., is recorded in the Zodiac' (1888: II.438).

Blavatsky had previously set out her zodiacal historiography in *Isis Unveiled* (1877: II. 455-7). Each of the endless series of universes, she wrote, is divided into twelve phases represented by the zodiac. The entire cycle, which begins with Scorpio (equivalent to Cain and destruction), involves a descent from an initial subjective, spiritual condition into a gross, objective state in Pisces (equivalent to Noah and the deluge). The forward movement from Scorpio to Pisces indicates that this is not a precessional cycle, even though Blavatsky notes Volney's opinion on precession (1877: II.456). The cyclical zodiacal process begins in Scorpio and then descends, via a series of Hermetically-inspired racial stages (1877: I.295; 1888: II.442-4) to the current, gross, fifth Piscean phase, from which low point humanity will commence its return to its pure, spiritual, subjective condition (1877: II.455-6). She believed that humanity was currently half way through the fifth root race (1888: I.xliii). Following Empedocles, she argued that, when the cycle of existence finally climaxes, the entire universe will dissolve. All humans will either escape from the cycle of existence into nirvana, or will commence a 'new cycle of transformations' (1877: II.456; see also 1877: I.32, 342). Following Plato, Blavatsky argued that everything in the universe contains soul and that movement between the four natural kingdoms is continuous (1877: I.328-30). Each zodiacal shift is a 'transformation' so profound as to practically constitute an entry into 'a new world' (1877: II. 455). Although she incorporated the Berossian prophecy of alternative destructions by fire and water, she did not specify whether these took place at the junction of zodiacal ages or at the conclusion of the entire cycle (1877: II.455; see also 341). In addition, as matter is 'indestructible and eternal' (1877: I. 328), there could be no real destruction, only transformation into a new state. In spite of the eternal sequence of change, though, the overall nature of the universe is harmony in nature, corresponding to justice in the spiritual world (1877: I.330). The means by which this spiritual harmony is maintained is the geometrical universe of Pythagoras and Plato (1877: I.318).

Blavatsky's achievement was to take sun-as-god theory and turn it from a means of attacking Christianity, by showing that Christ was just another solar deity, to a means of elevating all religion to the same high status formerly occupied, at least in western culture, by Christianity alone. By embedding the theory in the neo-Platonic and Hermetic traditions, reinforced by eastern teachings and communications from her 'Masters', she turned the idea that, if all religion had a common origin, it must all be equally meaningless, into the certainty that, as the legacy of the once universal ancient civilisation, all religions shared a core of profound truth. These truths were revealed by a succession of great teachers and revealed as the universe evolved from one epoch to another, a process timed by the movements of the stars over great periods of time.

### **The Age of Aquarius: Gerald Massey**

Blavatsky had no awareness of the concept of the Age of Aquarius and included just one reference to the sign Aquarius, inspired by the poet, Chartist, spiritualist and ardent sun-as-god evangelist, Gerald Massey. This concerned his reading of the twelve tablets of the Nimrod epic as a solar allegory (1888: II.353). It was Massey who elaborated on previous sun-as-god theorising to produce a meaningful scheme which explained world history and the evolution of religion according to the precession of the equinoxes. His ideas were set out in detail in *The Natural Genesis* (1883), *The Coming Struggle* (1873), a discussion of the contemporary meaning of the apocalyptic texts in Ezekiel and Daniel, and *The Hebrew and Other Creations* (1887b). He linked the Platonic Year to his 'Equinoctial Christianity' and, adding Blavatsky's belief in successions of world saviours, wrote,

The birthplace (of the divine child, the Messiah or the mythos) was always that of the equinoctial colure,<sup>5</sup> whether the sign of the Fishes, the Ram, the Bull or any preceding sign (1883: II.337, see also 1887: 7).

Massey was as bitterly anti-Christian as the French radicals, and held true to their anticlerical principles. By distorting its true astronomical nature, he argued, Christianity

had turned the sun from a symbol of life to one of death. In his opinion, paraphrasing Dupuis,

The Christian religion is responsible for enthroning the cross of death in heaven...(and had) taught man to believe that the vilest spirit may be washed white, in the atoning blood of the purest, offered up as a bribe to an avenging God. The Christian Cult has fanatically fought for its false theory and waged incessant warfare against Nature and Evolution (1887: 25).

Crucially, though, Massey took the step which his predecessors had declined to do and anticipated the Messiah of the next precessional stage, that of the Waterman (Aquarius) though without yet mentioning the phrase ' Age of Aquarius' : he wrote that the prophecy that a Messiah will be born again,

will be...fulfilled when the Equinox enters the sign of the Waterman [Aquarius] about the end of this century, to which the Samaritans are still looking forward for the coming of their Messiah, who has not yet arrived for them (1887: 8).

Massey' s work was later taken up in his own time by Karl Anderson (1892), who examined astrology' s role in the Bible and by George Saint Clair (1898, 1901, 1907), who documented what he saw as the role of precession as a model for Greek, Egyptian and near-eastern mythology. Massey' s legacy is still evident in modern ' alternative archaeology' , ' earth mysteries' and ' sacred geography' , which provide a cultural milieu in which the belief that precession is historically significant flourishes.<sup>6</sup> His work has remained an inspiration for later astrologers for whom the beginning of the Age was of crucial significance, including the theosophist H.S. Green, a close associate of Alan Leo, as well as of Dane Rudhyar and Alan Oken<sup>7</sup> (see chapter 6).

### **The Age of Aquarius: Astrologers**

Apocalyptic traditions were evident in the work of a number of leading nineteenth-century British astrologers, including Robert Cross Smith (1795-1832), who published astrological books, magazines and almanacs under the angelic pseudonym Raphael.

Smith claimed that the Jupiter-Saturn conjunction in Aries in 1821 inaugurated the apocalyptic period which would include the Jewish rebuilding of Jerusalem, around 1849, all the disasters prophesied in Revelation, and the death of a third of the world's population. His edition of the *Prophetic Messenger*, published in 1828, announced that its purpose was to prepare humanity for the coming of the kingdom at the end of the nineteenth century (Godwin 1994: 145). Richard Morrison (1795-1874), who wrote under the pseudonym Zadkiel, was described as a Christian supremacist who believed in the 'pure religion of the heart' and devoured the 'idea of a community based on love of one's neighbour', ideas possibly, in Godwin's opinion, taken from Samson Arnold MacKey (Godwin 1994: 177).

Within this context Massey's work on precessions spread fast, assisted by Theosophical expectations of the coming historical shift. In spite of a century of debate about the religious significance of precession, astrologers themselves were slow to incorporate it into their work, and the earliest known reference to the precessional ages occurred in the English astrologer A.J. Pearce's *The Textbook of Astrology*. Pearce put forward a theory of religious evolution, in which, paraphrasing Higgins,

the Sun was named, universally Buddha and was worshipped accordingly under that appellation' in the age of Gemini,<sup>8</sup> was known as 'Heifer Baal' in the Age of Taurus and as 'Bel-aram' in the Age of Aries (1879: 1.10).

There is a clear lineage of ideas underpinning Pearce's model of religious development, dating back to late eighteenth-century arguments that Indian religion was the oldest on earth, that Buddhism was both a solar religion (O'Brien 1832) and the original form of Brahmanism (Blavatsky 1877 II.123) and that the original Christianity was essentially Buddhist (Blavatsky 1877 II.123, Higgins 1833-6, see Godwin 1994: 83). In particular Pearce cited Higgins' view, from book 1, chapter 1 of *Anacalypsis*, that the four faces of the cherubim (man, ox, lion and eagle) were defined as the four cardinal points of the zodiac when the vernal point was in Taurus, after 4000 BC (1880: 216). However,

Pearce stuck to the standard interpretation that Christianity' s origins corresponded to the vernal point' s passage through Aries rather than, as Massey was arguing at the same time, Pisces. In Pearce' s opinion,

From the remotest antiquity there has existed a belief that the world was created at the vernal equinox. It is a remarkable fact that the Christian era is connected with the epoch of the vernal equinox in Aries - the scriptural ram or lamb (1889: 2.15).

However, Pearce made no mention of the Age of Pisces and uttered no prophecy of the Age of Aquarius. His interest was in demonstrating astrology' s role in the history of religion, rather than with any immediate apocalyptic concerns.

### **The Nature of the Age of Aquarius**

The general view of the Aquarian Age' s nature and characteristics was formed in the 1880s and has changed little since then. A formative description, which directly links nineteenth-century ideas to Renaissance Hermeticism, was given in a text issued to its members by the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor (Godwin 1994: 337, 345, 357-8). This was *La Clef*, a commentary on a work by John Trithemius (1462-1516) on the angelic rulers of the seven ages of the world entitled *The Secondaries, or Ruling Intelligences Who, After God, Actuate the Universe*. Each age was 354 years and 4 months long and was ruled by one of the planetary angels. However, the Hermetic Brotherhood' s commentator reduced the length to 308 years, so that seven ages added up to one precessional age of 2156 years.<sup>9</sup> The Brotherhood was set up in 1884 as a specific reaction to the Theosophical Society' s reliance on Indian teachings and attempted to relocate western esotericism in a European context. According to the text' s anonymous commentator the world had entered the seventh of the latest phase of ages, that of Michael, related to the sun, on 21 December 1880, and the Age of Aquarius in February 1881. Others disagreed. For example, Eliphas Levi thought that the Michael Age was to begin in 1879 (Godwin 1994: 345).

The fact that 1881 was cited subsequently as the beginning of the Age of Aquarius suggests that the Brotherhood's literature had entered the general astrological world. One such statement was made in 1952 in a lecture to the Astrological Lodge of the Theosophical Society in London by John Addey, who was later President of the Astrological Association. In his summary of Addey's lecture, Charles Carter, the Lodge's President, stated that,

According to an old tradition, the source of which he [Addey] preferred not to divulge, the Aquarian Age had begun when the Sun entered Aquarius in 1881 (At the Lodge 1952: 91).<sup>10</sup>

According to one of H.P. Blavatsky's closest companions in London, the astrologer Sepharial, writing in 1925, this date was based on the length of the Great Gallery of the Great Pyramid of Giza, 1881 inches (Williams 1977/8: 19). Sepharial referred to the Aquarian Age as the 'Age of Knowledge', a description reminiscent of the Hermetic Brotherhood's description of the Age's first phase, the Age of Michael:

This will be a period of Imperial Greatness, Empires will shine full of glory, the Human intellect will have full play and all Churches, Religious Creeds and Ecclesiastical Dogmas will fall to the ground and become things of the past. Parsons, Vicars and Bishops will have to work in different fields if they mean to obtain an honest livelihood. Yes, I repeat this prophecy. The Churches and Chapels will fall with a terrible crash, and be destroyed. But from their ashes, Phoenix-like, shall arise a new Religion, whose shining Motto will be: Veritas Excelsior, Truth Above. This era shall proclaim the rights of man. It is essentially the age of reason dreamed of by Bruno<sup>11</sup> and Thomas Paine<sup>12</sup> (Godwin 1994: 358).

With the exception of the prophecy of Imperial greatness, which was at odds with the Age of Aquarius' normal egalitarian character, the Hermetic Brotherhood's statement set the model for descriptions of the Aquarian Age. Although the Hermetic Brotherhood's prophecy envisaged the destruction of the old church, the new religion was heavily influenced by Christian esotericism, including Swedenborgianism. The late 1870s and early 1880s had witnessed a tension in the Theosophical Society between the 'easterners' and the 'westerners' (Godwin 1994: 338, 340, 344) The latter who found a home in Britain in The Hermetic Society, elevated esoteric Christianity above the esoteric Buddhism of the easterners, and initiated a strand of theosophical thought in

which ' the Christ' is the major teacher and which may be seen as a reforming branch of Christianity. Rudolf Steiner and Alice Bailey were to be part of the ' western' school. Godwin has already noted that Raphael and Zadkiel, the two leading astrologers of the early and mid-nineteenth century, were attracted respectively to Christian apocalypticism and a possibly Swedenborgian Christianity based on love for one's neighbour (Godwin 1994: 145, 177).

The theosophist Max Heindel (1865-1919) gave what may have been the first relatively detailed version of the astrological ages in his *The Message of the Stars*, first published in the 1900s. Heindel joined the Theosophical Society after moving to Los Angeles in 1903 and formed the Rosicrucian Fellowship after 1907 and his teaching, writing and publishing activities made him an important figure in the spread of astrology in the early-twentieth century (Holden and Hughes 1988: 75; Melton, Clark and Kelly 1991: 290-1). The Aquarian Age, he announced, ' will be illuminated and vivified by the solar precession, for the upliftment of the Son of Man (Aquarius), by the Christ within, the Lion of Judah (Leo), to the estate of Superman' (1929a: 12). He considered it likely that the Age will bring Christ's second coming, the ' wedding feast of the Higher Self to the lower' (1929a: 13). Heindel's Christ was ' the Christ' , the cosmic Christ, who may manifest in different periods, as he did in around 2,500 BCE when he inaugurated the Arien Age and the religion of the Lamb (1929a: 25). Christ was the great ' Sun spirit' and the sun is ' exalted' in Aries, the ruling sign of the first Age of the Arien Epoch (1929a: 28). Heindel concludes his section on the Ages with a proclamation of the salvation to be expected as the Age of Aquarius dawns. By sacrificing himself,

Christ, the Son of Man, Aquarius, is born within us. Thus, gradually the third phase of the Aryan religion will be ushered in and a new ideal will be found in the Lion of Judah, Leo. Courage of conviction, strength of character and kindred virtues will then make man truly the King of Creation, worthy of the trust and the confidence of the power orders of life as well as of the love of the Divine Hierarchs above.

This, the mystic message of Man's evolution, is marked in flaming characters upon the field of heaven, where he who runs may read. And when we study the

revealed purpose of God, we shall in turn learn to conform intelligently to that design, thereby hastening the day of emancipation from our present cramped environment to the perfect liberty of free Spirits, risen superior to the law of Sin and Death, through Christ, the Lord of Love and Life (1929a: 29).

The cosmic Christ, as lord of the Aquarian Age, but with a typically theosophical regard for the east, was the focus of Levi Dowling's 1907 *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ*. This gospel was reputedly channelled from the Akashic records which claimed that Jesus had studied with Buddhists and Brahmins (Levi 1980; see also Newport, 1998: 161). 'The Christ', as opposed to the Jesus Christ of mainstream Christianity, was defined in another of Levi's channelled texts as the God of Love, the son of the Almighty God, the God of thought. A Christ, as opposed to the Christ, is the teacher, the 'master spirit' allotted 'to every world and star and moon and sun' (Levi 1980: 12).

### **Rudolf Steiner**

Heindel's work was paralleled by Rudolf Steiner, leader of the German Theosophical Society until 1912, after which he left to found his Anthroposophical Society (see Steiner 1980; Ahern 1984).<sup>13</sup> Steiner developed a historical cosmology which postulated a major shift into a new spiritual age, known by later advocates, including Robert Powell, as the New Age (Powell 1999: I; see also 1, 9, 14, 54; 1987: 82-4; 1989: 327, 335, 337; Vreede 2001: 204-7).

Steiner also relied on the Indian yugas, arguing that the Kali Yuga had commenced in 3101 BCE (Steiner 1983: 77), arguing that it had inaugurated a loss of any ability to connect with or directly observe the spiritual world, to which access could then only be gained through initiation. Then, in 1899, Steiner argued, the Kali Yuga had come to an end, giving way to the Satya Yuga, the new Golden Age, the age of light (Steiner 1983: 15, 36-7, 77, 82, 96; Leviton 1994: 81-84). This age, Steiner predicted, was to bring an essential democratisation of spirituality in that the incarnation of souls with the

appropriate faculties would eventually open contact with the spiritual realms, including Shamballa, the home of the theosophical Masters, to everyone (Steiner 1983: 87). Humanity, in short, was to be transformed. In 1910 Steiner noted that,

There is much talk about periods of transition. We are indeed living just at the time when the Dark Age has run its course and a new epoch is just beginning, in which human beings will slowly and gradually develop new faculties and in which human souls will gradually undergo a change...What is beginning at this time will slowly prepare humanity for new soul faculties (Steiner 1983: 15).

Steiner envisaged a time scale in which, although relatively few souls with these new faculties were being born at the time of writing, 1910, the number was set to increase sharply between 1930 and 1940, with 1933, 1935 and 1937 being especially significant:

Faculties that now are quite unusual for human beings will then manifest themselves as natural abilities. At this time great changes will take place, and Biblical prophecies will be fulfilled (Steiner 1983: 15).

The key event of the beginning of the age of light is Christ' s second coming but not in physical form. Steiner insists that he will never again take on a material body, but only exist in the atmosphere, as he did after his crucifixion. ' Christ is always present' , he wrote, ' but He is in the spiritual world; we can reach Him if we raise ourselves into that world' (Steiner 1983: 19; see also 178, 20, 39).

In Steiner' s astrology precession was regarded as an essential guide to the universe' s spiritual evolution and hence to the individual' s relationship with the cosmic whole (Vreede 2001: 101). Steiner elaborated on Blavatsky' s system of world ages in his *Occult Science* (1969), published in German in 1909, in a series of lectures given in Helsinki in 1912 (Steiner 1981b). His foundational lectures for the Anthroposophical Society in 1923-4, made it clear, on behalf of the society' s new members, that their purpose was to ' dedicate ourselves in selfless cultivation of the spiritual life' at the

current ' turning-point of worlds' (Steiner 1977: 150). Steiner differed from Blavatsky in his emphasis on esoteric Christianity and the central role he attributed to the ' Christ Will' which ' holds sway in the Rhythms of the Worlds' and is analogous to the sun and light (1977: 152-3). He was also influenced by the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor' s teaching on the coming of the Age of Michael (Godwin 1994: 345); David Spangler (1975: 50) described Michael as ' the managing director' , representing ' the power of the Christ as it brings things into manifestation, that is the creative power of the Christ' (Spangler 1975: 70). Michael' s purpose was to invite human beings ' to manifest their freedom by perceiving spirit in matter - *as* matter - in a day time, wakeful cognition' (1994: 73). In 1910 Steiner noted that,

There is much talk about periods of transition. We are indeed living just at the time when the Dark Age has run its course and a new epoch is just beginning, in which human beings will slowly and gradually develop new faculties and in which human souls will gradually undergo a change...What is beginning at this time will slowly prepare humanity for new soul faculties...Faculties that now are quite unusual for human beings will then manifest themselves as natural abilities. At this time great changes will take place, and Biblical prophecies will be fulfilled (1983: 15).

The key event of the beginning of the age of light is Christ' s second coming though not in physical form. Steiner insists that he will never again take on a material body, but only exist in the atmosphere, as he did after his crucifixion. ' Christ is always present' , he wrote, ' but He is in the spiritual world; we can reach Him if we raise ourselves into that world' (Steiner 1983: 19. See also 17-18, 20, 39). It is therefore the duty of Anthroposophists to communicate this news to the rest of the population (1983: 15-16, 19-20, 39).

### **C.G. Jung**

From the 1910s onwards, the early part of his career, the ' sun-as-god' theme was developed strongly by C.G. Jung, whose theories on the matter, according to Hanegraaff, represent a ' Cult of the Interior Sun' (1996: 501). Hanegraaff relies heavily

on Richard Noll who in turn identified a strong influence from Max Müller within Jung's solar mythology (Noll 1994: 114-23). Noll notes that Jung adds 'libido' and 'hero' to the existing list of solar correspondences (light, god, father, fire, heat) and notes that the matching of external and internal qualities encourages the notion of a god within (Noll 1994: 120), which was to be central both to his psychotherapy and to New Age thought. In Jung's theology Christ became a symbol primarily of the self rather than the sun, although his portrayal as a fish in early Christian iconography was indicative of the manner in which human psychic projection onto the universe shifted when the vernal point moved into Pisces (Jung 1959a). Like Massey and Blavatsky, neither of whom he cited, Jung was concerned with precession's deeper numinous meaning. Nevertheless, the belief that early Christians were consciously aware that their new religion was signified in the heavens by precession of the vernal point from Aries to Pisces is widely accepted amongst astrologers (Jacobs 1995: 119).

Jung also followed Massey's opinion that precession of the vernal point into Pisces coincided with the origins of Christianity. He set out a historical philosophy in which cultural change follows shifts in the collective unconscious which, in turn, are revealed by psychic projections on to the cosmos. Jung argued that,

If, as seems probable, the aeon of the fishes is ruled by the archetypal motif of the hostile brothers, then the approach of the next Platonic month, namely Aquarius, will constellate the problem of the union of opposites. It will then no longer be possible to write off evil as the mere privation of good; its real existence will have to be recognised. This problem can be recognised neither by philosophy, nor by economics, nor by politics, but only by the individual being, via his experience of the loving spirit, whose fire descended upon Joachim, one of many, and, despite all contemporary misunderstandings, was handed onward into the culture. The solemn proclamation of the *Assumptio Mariae* which we have experienced in our own day is an example of the way symbols develop through the ages. The impelling motive behind it did not come from the ecclesiastical authorities, who had given clear proof of their hesitation by postponing the declaration for nearly a hundred years, but from the Catholic masses, who have insisted more and more vehemently on this development. Their insistence is, at bottom, the urge of the archetype to realise itself (Jung, 1959a: 87).

Jungian analyst Ean Begg, speaking at the Astrological Association conference on 9 August 1999, represented the Aquarian Age tendency amongst Jungians, announcing that 'The eclipse we have come here to celebrate foretells the world's entry into the New Age...We have to sort out all that was repressed in the Age of Pisces before we can move into the next thing...There is unfinished business'<sup>14</sup>. Begg also reported a discussion with Gret Baumann Jung, Jung's daughter and herself an astrologer, after the BBC's centenary documentary on Jung in 1975. Begg asked her what she thought her father's major contribution was. In this account she responded 'I don't like to talk about it, but I think that he was one of the people sent to prepare for the Age of Aquarius' (Begg 2000: 22).

### Chapter Summary

The use of the precession of the equinoxes as a means of dividing historical epochs has no basis in astrological tradition prior to the late nineteenth-century. It emerged out of late eighteenth-century radicalism and the attempt to establish sun-worship as the original form of all religion, including Christianity, an argument I have described as the 'sun-as-god' theory. The logical consequence of this proposition is that the forms of religious worship would have changed as precession of the equinoxes caused the stars to shift against the sun's location at the spring equinox. Whereas radicals such as Bailey and Dupuis used this argument to demonstrate the meaninglessness of all religious iconography others, such as Fabre D' Olivet and Godfrey Higgins, who were no less opposed to mainstream Christianity, began to regard precession as revealing essentially meaningful shifts in religious forms. Although H.P. Blavatsky was highly influential in popularising such work via the Theosophical Society, it was Gerald Massey, whose work she also cites, who, in 1883, produced the first substantial argument that different precessional eras were expressed through the world's religions. The first astrologer to use these arguments was Alfred Pearce in 1879. By the 1900s the concept of a current or imminent shift into a new precessional age was central to the work of Rudolf Steiner

and of a move into the Age of Aquarius to Max Heindel. The prophecy that the New Age, as a future era, is inevitable, is therefore dependent on the astrological prediction of the Age of Aquarius. This prediction, though, relies on an application of astronomy that marks a break with the traditional means of astrological apocalyptic prediction, celestial signs and wonders on the one hand, and Jupiter-Saturn conjunctions on the other. In addition, precession of the equinoxes was, for eighteen-hundred years, considered a problem for astrology. Its adoption as the basis of a new form of astrological historiography in the late nineteenth-century may therefore conform to Heelas definition of New Age astrology as ' detraditionalised' (1993)

### Notes

1. A.M. Jones (ed.), *The Works of Sir William Jones with the life of the author by Lord Teignmouth*, London 1807, vol. 3, p 385-6, cited in Gage, Turner, p 42.
2. Citing Voltaire, *Lettres sur l' Atlantide*. 15.
3. See Santillana, Giorgio de and von Dechend, Hertha, *Hamlet's Mill: An Essay Investigating the Origins of Human Knowledge and its Transmission through Myth*, Boston Mass: David R. Godine 1977 (1st edn. 1969); Sellers, Jane B., *The Death of the Gods in Ancient Egypt*, London: Penguin 1992.
4. See also Blavatsky 1877, II. pp. 456-68.
5. The colure is the intersection of two great circles, in this case the celestial equator and the ecliptic, the point the sun occupies at the spring equinox.
6. See Campbell (1979), de Santillana von Dechend (1969: 326), Bauval and Gilbert (1994), Hancock (1995), Vidler (1998), Gilbert (2000), Ulansey (1989), Fideler (1993), Lockyer (1894; 1906), West and Toonder (1973) and Schwaller de Lubicz (1949) and Michel (1969), the latter the foundation text of the modern ' earth mysteries movement' (Sullivan 2000).
7. H.S. Green argued that the Aquarian Age began in 1900, citing Massey, *The Hebrew and Other Creations*, in *Modern Astrology*, April 1912. The same date was reproduced in the *Magazine of the American Rosae Crucis*, cited by a correspondent in the *British Journal of Astrology*, September 1916, Vol. IX, no. 12. The date was also repeated by Pauline Stone in a lecture at Astrological Association conference, 9 September 1990, based on a date of 254 BC for the beginning of the Age of Pisces citing Alan Oken, *As Above, So Below*, but without a detailed reference. Dane Rudhyar argued that the Aquarian Age began in 1905, also citing Massey, assuming a starting date for the Age of Pisces in 255 BC and a rate of precession of thirty degrees in 2,160 years. See Rudhyar 1969, p. 115.
8. Gemini is ruled by Mercury, which is known as Budha in India.
9. Trithemius' work is on line at [www.geocities.com/seersnz/de\\_septum\\_secundeis.htm](http://www.geocities.com/seersnz/de_septum_secundeis.htm). See also Godiwn 1994, p. 358.

- 
10. Sepharial, quoted in David Williams, 1977/8; Elbert Benjamin (C.C.Zain - see above); W. P. Swaison in *The Occult Review* (February 1925), quoted in Julius Bennet, *The Riddle of the Aquarian Age*, p. 20, published by the London Astrological Research Society, 1926.
  11. Giordano Bruno, the Hermeticist and radical thinker, 1548-1600.
  12. Thomas Paine, the English radical and author of *Commonsense* (1776), *The Rights of Man* (1791) and *Age of Reason* (1793), 1737-1809.
  13. For Steiner's influence on modern astrologers see Matthews 1984: 75 and Straker 2000: 63.
  14. For Begg's own Jungian analysis of the shift of the astrological ages see Begg, Ean, *Myth and Today's Consciousness* London: Coventure 1984.