

New Age Transformed

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Introduction

The term New Age refers to a wave of religious enthusiasm that emerged in the 1970s and swept over the West through the 1980s only to subside at the end of the decade. As with other such enthusiastic movements, however, it did not just simply go away, but like a storm hitting a sandbar, it left behind a measurably changed situation among those elements of the religious community most centrally impacted.

The New Age has frequently been cited as among the most difficult of contemporary religious phenomena to comprehend. Two obstacles slowed study of the movement and the appreciation of its significance. First, the movement hit just as the field of New Religious Studies was struggling to establish itself as a valid sub-discipline within the larger world of religious studies. Scholars of New Religions, the people to whom we would ordinarily turn for some interpretation of the New Age, had specialized in very different forms of religious life. The average New Religious Movement had come into the West from other parts of the world, existed as a discrete entity with very visible boundaries, and primarily recruited young adults in the 18-25 age group. In contrast, the New Age Movement had emerged essentially within Western culture and had the appearance of an amorphous decentralized social phenomenon that contrasted sharply with the more prominent New Religions such as the Unification Church, the Divine Light Mission, or the Hare Krishna. In visiting New Age organizations, one saw some young adults but were struck by the distinctly middle-age make-up of adherents.

Second, but equally important, the New Age was seen as having some relationship to the older world of the occult. Historically, the world of occultism was not one to be understood, but denounced. Much of the history of Western scholarship has been shaped by the desire to move beyond magic and occultism, which was equated with the crudest forms of superstition and supernaturalism. In one sense we already understood gullible people who were attached to occult superstitions, and our primary response to the continual presence of occult organizations was the passing of laws to prosecute individuals who used occult beliefs to con people out of their money. This perspective has now been institutionalized in the anti-pseudoscience movement. [1](#) A related perspective, that denounces the New Age as a competing supernatural worldview, can be found in the writings of the Christian counter-cult movement. [2](#)

Thus it was that only as the New Age peaked and began to fade that studies outlining the New Age movement's place in the rapidly changing religious scene in the modern West were published. However, beginning in the 1990, a series of books on the New Age have appeared from which some overall perspective can be constructed. [3](#) This paper will attempt to summarize our present understanding of the New Age, its origins, its basic nature as a social movement, the significance of its appearance and demise, and the post-New Age world.

Toward a Definition of the New Age

It is a more-than-helpful exercise to confront a few of the issues that emerge in gaining some common perspectives on the New Age. First, we need to make a sharp distinction between the New Age and that class of religious groups that are variously termed New Religions, cults or sectes. As a whole, New Religions are small relatively new religious organizations distinguished by their intrusion into a dominant religious community from which they make significant dissent. A New Religious Movement brings people together around a singular history, belief, practice, and leadership. The great majority of New Religions are sectarian, that is, they are new variations on one of the older major religious traditions. Hare Krishna is a sect of Hinduism, the Divine Light Mission (now known as Elan Vital) is one of the many Sant Mat groups; and the AUM Shinrikyo was a Buddhist organization. Many New Religions are Christian sects that adhere to the great majority of traditional Christian beliefs but either dissent on one or two important doctrines and/or champion a different lifestyle (communalism, separatism, high-pressure proselytization, sexual freedom, etc.). Most of the remaining groups attempt to create a synthesis of two or more of the older religious traditions, the Unification Church being the most notable example.

In sharp contrast, the New Age Movement was never a single organization, but originated as an idea spread by a group of theosophical organizations that shared a common lineage in the writings of Alice A. Bailey. Movement leaders never challenged the integrity of these organizations or of anyone's attachment to them. In this regard, in its earliest stages, the New Age movement was much like the Christian Ecumenical Movement prior to the formation of the World Council of Churches. Without attacking the integrity of the various churches, Ecumenism looked for a Christian community that could give a more visible expression to the shared Oneness among Christians in the object of Christian worship. As the New Age movement grew, some theosophical groups became enthusiastic supporters, some were mildly accepting, some indifferent, and a few were quite hostile. A similar spectrum was presented by different Christian denominations to the Ecumenical Movement.

Much of our confusion about the New Age also derives from the different ways we use the term "movement." As applied to New Religions, "movement" generally refers to the dynamic and informal nature of many first generation religious organizations that are still in the process of rapid change and the creation of the structure that will carry them into the next generations. As applied to the New Age, however, "movement" refers to its likeness to broad social movements such as the Civil Rights movement or the Peace Movement. These movements include a bewildering array of people devoted to the cause but very diverse in their institutional affiliations, definition of particular goals, and adherence to variant strategies on reaching common ends.

As the New Age developed it reached out from its beginning among the Baileyite groups of the United Kingdom, to speak to the hundreds of Theosophical groups and soon invited the entire spectrum of magical, metaphysical, Spiritualist, and other occult groups to consider its basic vision. In the process of its spread, many individuals not previously associated with any of these

older groups became excited about the New Age ideal and formed entirely new organizations to add their energy to the cause.

Thus, it is best to see the New Age, not an organization itself, but as an effort to bring older organizations and the people associated with them together and constitute a new sense of oneness among them. As the New Age movement matured through the 1980s, it could also be compared to contemporary Evangelicalism. Evangelicalism exists as a number of conservative Protestant denominations that doctrinally represent a spectrum from Presbyterianism to Pentecostalism. Some of these denominations are quite small and some Evangelical groups consist of but a single congregation (there being a strong anti- denominational theme within Evangelicalism). The Evangelical movement is also served by a number of schools, missionary agencies, specialized ministries, ecumenical associations, and publishing houses that are independent of any one denomination while trying to work with all of them or at least a particular set of them.

In like measure, the New Age consists of many different groups, some large international bodies, some smaller, and many consisting of but a single center. The movement as a whole was served by a number of schools, publishing houses, specialized organizations, networking services, and outreach groups that attempted to serve New Age adherents across their allegiance to a particular occult/metaphysical "denomination." Because of the movement's minority status and anti-institutional biases, New Age organizations tend to be far more fragile than similar Christian organizations in the West.

The New Age in Historical Perspective

It was an important clue to unraveling the nature of the New Age movement to note that all of the primary elements constituting the "New Age" had been around for a century or more prior to the emergence of the movement. That is, there was very little about the New Age that was new. Astrology predates any written records we have. Meditation is integral to all religious traditions. Channeling, under different names, is present in the ancient records, including the Bible, and has continually popped up generation by generation. We are all familiar with the practice of assigning occult meanings to crystals through the now thoroughly secularized practice of giving and receiving birthstones.

Most New Age health practices (chiropractic, naturopathy, etc.) were products of eighteenth and nineteenth century science, though some, such as herbalism and Chinese medicine, are rooted in prehistory. Even the idea of a "New Age" has been around for at least two centuries, it having emerged prominently among Rosicrucian and Masonic groups who supported the French and American revolutions. From Masonry, it actually made its way onto the seal of the United States. Early in the twentieth century, it became integral to the thelemic magick of Aleister Crowley in his proclamation of the "New Aeon" of Horus the Crowned and Conquering Child.

Taking seriously the fact that there was little new in the New Age was the first step in understanding what was distinctive in this new movement. The second step has come in the assembling of the history of Western Esotericism, a religious alternative that has continually

reappeared under variant modes generation by generation in Western culture. In recent centuries, the religious history of the West has been dominated by the study of the Christian movement, its rise to dominance and its contribution in building the culture of Europe and North America. The displacement of Christianity as the single word on the religious life of the West in this century, however, has allowed a fresh look at Western intellectual history, both in terms of the radical divisions within the Christian community and the diversity of religious life. A most important insight in this new view of Western history has been the definition of Western Esotericism and the various esoteric perspectives that were offered as alternatives to orthodox Christianity through the centuries. [4](#)

Western Esotericism can be traced to the various Gnostic groups of the second century of our Common Era (C.E.) and to various groups that emerged through the first millennia of the Christian Era (such as the Manicheans and Bogomils). Prior to the break up of Western Christianity at the time of the Reformation, the history of these groups is broken, as they were frequently suppressed out of existence, and the relationship of various esoteric currents and groups to one another remains a matter of intense debate. However, beginning with the emergence of Christian Cabalism at Wittenberg during the Reformation, there has been an unbroken presence of different esoteric currents that was spread in the writings of outstanding proponents, such as Paracelsus (1493-1541) and Jacob Boehme (1575-1624), and by a handful organizations, such as the original Rosicrucian groups formed in the seventeenth century and through Speculative Freemasonry, that emerged to prominence in the eighteenth century.

During the Enlightenment, Esotericism warred with the new science, the latter challenging traditional occult notions just as it did religious ones. However, in the wake of the Enlightenment and contemporaneous with the rise of science and technology, a new form of Esotericism emerged with several trained scientists-the Austrian physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1733-1815) and Swedish metalurgist Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772)- taking the lead in articulating its perspective. Much of the older Esoteric thought (at least in its popular manifestations) died with the Enlightenment, but we now can trace the steps by which a new "scientific" Esotericism was born through the 19th century. The post-Enlightenment Occult Revival culminated in the formation of a spectrum of new organizations that went under names such as the First Church of Christ, Scientist, the Theosophical Society, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and the National Spiritualist Association, to mention only a few of the more prominent.

Through the nineteenth century, a number of outstanding thinkers would supply the intellectual dimension of the now rapidly growing tradition. Building on Mesmer and Swedenborg would be writers such as Louis Claude de Saint-Martin (1743-1803), Eliphas Levi (1810-1875), Pascal Beverly Randolph (1825-1875), Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891), Emma Hardinge Britten (1823-1899), and Gérard Encausse (1865-1916). These thinkers operated on a spectrum between those like Franz von Baader (1765-1841) who tried to emphasize the similarity of esoteric thought with Christianity, to Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907), president of Theosophical Society, who formally converted to Buddhism.

While having many differences, the modern esoteric thinkers tended to agree on several points that distinguished them from orthodox Christians. First, they tended to view God primarily in impersonal terms rather than as a Father. In speaking of the Divine, they were more comfortable

with ideas of principle and law, rather than love and community. Also, the Divine was ultimately so transcendent as to be unknowable. Hence, on a practical level, they shifted the emphasis away from God and possible interaction with Him/Her/It to the beings that inhabited the realms that were located between this lower physical world and the ultimate Divine reality. These beings went under a variety of names from gods/goddesses to angels to spirits to Ascended Masters. They also emphasized the means by which we could interact with these realms either by visiting them (astral travel), communicating with their inhabitants (channeling/mediumship, meditation), or controlling them (magic).

As it developed in the latter-half of the 19th century, Esotericism was recast in light of Newtonian science and its emphasis on natural law and Darwinian evolution. One can see both operating in the "Declaration of Principles" adopted in 1899 by the National Spiritualist Association, which affirmed that "the phenomena of Nature, both physical and spiritual, are the expression of Infinite Intelligence" and that living in accord with such expression constitutes true religion.

The tiny esoteric community expanded internationally as a succession of popular movements swept across the western world. Enthusiasm for Swedenborg's thought led to the founding of the Church of the New Jerusalem. Then the Magnetist movement introduced the idea of a subtle power that underlay and gave life to the cosmos. The direct apprehension of that power is possibly the most commonly shared experience within the larger esoteric community and is now referred to under a host of names from cosmic light to holy spirit to odic force to orgone energy to, most recently, tacksyon energy.

The Magnetist movement gave way to Spiritualism, which became the seed ground for both Theosophy and Christian Science. As Theosophy grew, it also divided into numerous factions. At the same time, it provided initial training for a host of new teachers who would go on to found their own movements, most prominently Guy W. Ballard (1878-1939) and Alice A. Bailey (1880-1949). Christian Science would give birth to New Thought that in typical fashion also divided into a spectrum of denominations from the very Christian-oriented Unity School to Religious Science, which stripped itself of uniquely Christian language.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, Western Esotericism, heretofore carried by a relatively small number of organizations, developed a numerous organizational expressions that represented the differing currents of Esoteric thought. Through the 1880s and 1890s, these organizations made a significant leap forward in opening space in Western culture for occult thought.

During the first seven decades of the 20th century, we can now trace the growth of the esoteric community as each of its major components spread across North America and Western Europe. Spiritualism, for example, had jumped the Atlantic and would enjoy notable success in Great Britain and France. From its headquarters in India, Theosophy established centers in all the major European cities. Rosicrucianism flourished through a variety of independent groups, and the Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis would grow into possibly the largest esoteric group in the world. Alice Bailey's Arcane School spread through the English-speaking world, and following the death of its founder, gave birth to several dozen new groups. The "I AM" Religious

Activity founded by Guy Ballard also parented numerous groups, among them several 1950s flying saucer groups.

The majority of the several hundred splinter groups that formed out of the relatively few esoteric groups that existed at the beginning of the 20th century were built around what today we call channeling. Within Spiritualism, channeling was called mediumship. Madame Blavatsky received her monumental work, *The Secret Doctrine*, from the Mahatmas. Alice Baliey served as the spokesperson for Djwhal Khul, the Tibetan Adept. Guy Ballard was the messenger of St. Germain, Jesus and a host of Ascended Masters. George King, George Van Tassell, and Truman Betherum received communications from various inhabitants of the flying saucers who seemed remarkably similar to the theosophical masters. [5](#) The orientation on channeling, to some extent, also accounts for the continued splintering of the esoteric community. As adherents to various movements emerge as channels, they tend to leave (or be pushed out of) the group in which they discovered their channeling abilities and found a new community constructed around their immediate experience.

The orientation of most modern esoteric groups upon a single channeler and her/his channeled information from otherwise hidden realms also accounts for another dominant attribute of the esoteric tradition, its tendency toward ahistoricity. Esoteric groups lack a sense of history. History tends to begin anew for the participant with the contact that s/he or a particular teacher makes with the higher invisible realms, and all that preceded that contact is dismissed as irrelevant. There is little appreciation by most teachers of participating in the flow of a stream of belief and practice that originated in the ancient past or having received their overall worldview from more mundane preexisting sources such as a previous generation of teachers.

The esoteric community also supported and nurtured all the various forms of the divinatory arts. Through Protestantism and then the Enlightenment, the older forms of divination were dealt an almost-fatal double blow. Many went out of existence altogether and others almost disappeared. However, astrology began a comeback through the 19th century as a set of stargazers learned the language of astronomy and mathematics and integrated the evermore-exacting measurements of planetary and stellar movements in preparing horoscopes for their clients.

On the heels of astrology, palmistry and tarot card-reading found new life. Palmistry found its scientific anchor in medical and anthropological studies of physiological variations, and the acceptance of fingerprinting as a police tool. The Tarot had been integrated with Kabbalistic thought by Eliphas Levi and became an integral part of the magical system of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Numerology found new life in the scientific quest to quantify all data. While many of the early attempts to relate esoteric thought and practice to science may seem naïve to us today, they were quite in keeping with the spirit of the times and paralleled similar efforts in the Christian community to incorporate insights from biology, psychology, and sociology. Just as the Christian dialogue with science has reached new levels of sophistication decade by decade, so has that within the esoteric community.

The point of this brief excursion into history is to emphasize that as the 1970s began, a healthy, if relatively small, community, the product of the various currents of Western Esotericism, had spread across the West. It was present in all the major urban centers with particular strength in

places such as Los Angeles, Chicago London, Paris, Milan, and Geneva (site of the European headquarters of the Arcane School). What would become the New Age movement was born within a select number of esoteric groups and would first broadcast its message to this community of Western esotericists. The New Age spread quickly because there already existed an audience who had accepted the basic worldview upon which the New Age movement was constructed and who were open to the new vision that it brought.

So What's New about the New Age?

Twentieth century esoteric thought had been graced with a sense of optimism. Though small by the world's standards, it exuded a belief that its day had come. Christianity had begun as a very small community in the Mediterranean Basin, and had subsequently enjoyed two millennia of success. But its day was over, and at the beginning of the new century many were confident that they were watching its death throes. Esoteric teachings would now arise to take its place. One symbol of that shift from the older Christian era to the arrivakl of a new Savior figure. That idea especially came to the fore in the Theosophical Society during the presidency of Annie Besant, who placed her faith in Jiddu Krishnamurti as the vehicle of the World Savior. Her vision crashed to the ground when in 1929 Krishnamurti resigned his exalted state. Subsequent attempts to name a new Messiah and prepare a community to receive him would lead to the current effort of Benjamin Crème to make us pay attention to Maitreya (a Buddhist figure that had been united with Jesus in Theosophical thought).

A second symbol of hope had been the Aquarian Age. The idea that humanity was entering a new astrological age symbolized by Aquarius somewhat paralleled the idea of a coming Messiah. As the new Savior signaled the end of the reign of Christianity, so the coming Aquarian Age would supersede the Piscean Age, symbolized by the movement that had taken a fish as its symbol.

The New Age movement would begin with a variation on the hope for the coming Aquarian Age. When initially announced in the mid 1970s, the New Age was seen as a vision of a coming new era defined by the transformation of our broken society-characterized by poverty, war, racism, etc.-into a united community of abundance, peace, brotherly love, etc. The energy to make the change, which, it was believed would occur over next generation, was a new release of cosmic energy. This influx of cosmic energy was caused by (or at least signaled by) the changing stellar configuration at the end of the twentieth century. Less understood about the original vision of the New Age as articulated by David Spangler, the movement's primary architect/theoretician, was the role of work. For the New Age to appear, groups of people would have to receive the cosmic energy and actively redirect it to their neighbors and a ever-increasing population of people would have to unite their efforts to create the coming New Age. [6](#)

The New Age vision could be seen as a positive progressive millennialism. It offered to the larger occult community the hope that early in the 21st century, a new society dominated by occult wisdom would arise. It is this single idea that gave the movement its name and proved powerful enough to energize previously existing Spiritualist, New Thought and Theosophical

adherents to work together groups, and to bring large numbers of people with no previous relationship to the occult to their cause.

As the movement progressed, Spangler's simple idea, that the New Age would soon arise as energized people worked for it, came under some scrutiny. Through the 1980s, people were aware that in spite of hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people identifying with it, they were still a miniscule segment of the whole. They might constitute the largest segment of the alternative religious communities in the West, but were still small compared to, for example, contemporaneous Christian revival movements. They seemed to be making little impact upon the growing forces of secularization. While Christian groups were building multiple cable television networks, the New Age had only a minimal presence in either television or radio. Also, while possessing global aspirations, New Age leaders were very wary of building global institutions, or for that matter, any organizations that had the power to bring about the changes they sought. Sociologically, their organizational phobia operated as a built-in self-limiting mechanism.

The New Age would not come by any ordinary means,. Then how? One writer, Ken Keyes, drawing on what we now know to be a false report of what some anthropologists had reportedly seen while observing monkeys on an isolated Japanese island, suggested that if we could assemble a representative sample of the population who possessed a better, higher idea, then that idea would as if by magic quickly spread through the general population. If a critical mass of people who possessed, for example, a peace consciousness could be assembled, then the idea would explode around the world.

Keyes' idea, was spread in a small booklet called *The Hundredth Monkey*, [7](#) of which more than a million copies were printed and distributed between 1982 and 1984. It would lead to a variety of mass events, the most famous and successful being the Harmonic Convergence of 1987 when New Agers gathered at selected sacred sites around the world. Those calling for the gatherings looked for a symbolic 144,000 who would be the critical mass needed for a collective shift in consciousness on the planet. The Harmonic Convergence would turnout to be the largest single coordinated event expressive of the New Age.

On a lesser note, the progressive millennialism of the majority of New Agers was challenged by several more classic apocalyptic visions. For example, Ruth Montgomery, whose series of books of channeled material were bestselling New Age titles, offered a vision of widespread destruction as the instrument pushing the New Age to the fore. In her 1985 book, *Aliens Among Us*, she suggested that a Golden Age would only be realized following a massive shift of the earth's magnetic poles that she predicted would occur in 1999. The pole shift would destroy civilization as we know it (along with a third of the world's population). It was her belief that a number of space beings had taken over the bodies of humans, and that these aliens would build the New Age on the ruins of the old. [8](#) By 1999 Montgomery's prediction had long since been discarded.

Whatever the mechanism of its arrival, the New Age transformation of the whole society would be heralded by the personal transformation of individuals and their adoption of a life-style of continued transformation into a total spiritual being. Such transformed people would provide the leadership for the coming New Age. Questions naturally arise, of what does such transformation

consist, and how may it be obtained, and how may transformation be sustained? These questions were answered in a multitude of ways, however, some general directions were offered.

For some, transformation begins with physical or psychological healing. New Age literature has abundant examples of such healings, and the stories follow much the same spectrum from the mundane to the spectacular that are found in Roman Catholic and Pentecostal literature. (I am currently monitoring a colleagues research into stories from a "New Age" community in the state of Washington that has produced a particularly rich set of healing stories.) For others, possibly the majority, transformation began with a spiritual awakening and/or the adoption of a radically new worldview. These accounts are very similar to Christian stories of conversion and mystical encounters.

New Age groups provided a social context promoting transformative experiences and provided the means by which these could be facilitated. Across the movement the initially transformed individual could find a range of what were termed "tools of transformation." For example, for those suffering from various forms of physical and mental problems, the movement offered a range of alternative therapies. These included various alternative medicines (homeopathy, naturopathy), body work (chiropractic, massage), diets (vegetarianism), and psychotherapies (Jungian, Past Life Therapy). These therapies, led by professionals who were seeking recognition within the larger society, evolved into a parallel and overlapping movement, the holistic health movement, that sought legitimization of these different therapies with government and medical authorities.

The heart of the New Age has been interaction around the different tools of spiritual transformation. Organizations great and small invited participation in a spectrum of spiritual practices designed to produce altered states of consciousness that are the precondition for a variety of unusual spiritual experiences. These tools ranged from the ingestion of psychedelic substances, at one end of the spectrum, to kundalini yoga, intense breathing exercises, and chanting, to the most popular single tool, meditation. These psychoactive practices provided most people with a more intense spiritual experience than that available in the average synagogue or church service.

The movement also provided mediated experiences for those who for whatever reason wished to have more content in their spiritual life than that provided by their own spiritual highs produced by meditation and yoga. Channels and those who practice the various older occult arts-astrology, tarot, palmistry, etc.--provide such mediated experiences. For those who have made their own initial contacts with spiritual reality through meditation, a broader picture of the spiritual world and some guidance in spiritual development can be added by sitting at the foot of a channeler, who is in contact with evolved spiritual beings. These evolved beings are considered to speak authoritatively about the larger spiritual world, in which they reputedly reside, and provide overall spiritual guidance for the believer. One alternative teaching accepted by most New Agers is a belief in reincarnation. For those who need more immediate insight about a very personal or particular problem, the old divinatory arts are readily available and appear to actually have led in the acceptance of the New Age within the larger society. Once we began surveying the public in the 1970s, we discovered that upwards of 20 to 30 percent of Westerners had a positive attitude toward astrology.

While it utilized and promoted the older forms of occult practice, the New Age at the same time had a profound effect upon them. It changed them from simple divinatory arts into tools of transformation. The change is not simply cosmetic. For example, astrology was lifted out of the older deterministic context in which it had previously resided and placed in an open system. Rather than going to an astrologer to divine the future, astrology is now used as a tool in self-understanding. Rather than show what will necessarily occur, one's fate in the stars, one now learns about talents, potentials, and auspicious forces in the psyche which may be utilized in creating one's future. Mediums, that used to make contact with deceased relatives, are now approached for guidance on significant life decisions.

The New Age in effect transformed the whole occult world. It also gave occultism an entirely new and positive image in society and to did away with popular notions tying it to Satanism and black magic. It is significant that we no longer talk about the occult, but about the New Age. At the same time it is significant that we identify the New Age as another competing religious system, not the special world of anti-Christian activity.

However, in spite of its success, by the end of the 1980s, the New Age had come to an end as the vision upon which it had been built dissolved back into the ethers from which it had emerged. The death of the New Age was not a spectacular event and it was several years before its obituary was written and eulogies delivered.

The Death of the New Age

The New Age movement had received a significant boost in the fall of 1987, only weeks after the Harmonic Convergence, when actress Shirley MacLaine's autobiographical book, *Out on a Limb*, was brought into millions of American homes via TV. The bestselling book had described her entrance into the New Age and the two-part made-for-television movie vividly portrayed all of her psychic adventures including a memorable out-of-the-body experience. MacLaine went on to teach a set of well-attended and expensive New Age classes, the income of which was used to set up a still vital New Age village at Crestone, Colorado. [9](#)

However, even MacLaine could not relieve the general feeling that signs of the transition into the New Age had failed to appear. Whatever people might say about the success of events like the Harmonic Convergence in changing affairs in invisible realms, there was no indication that any of the hoped-for changes were occurring in the visible world. The first widespread admission of the loss of the New Age vision occurred in 1988. In the spring, without significant fanfare, a number of prominent spokespersons of the movement, seemingly without prior consultation with each other, published statements confessing their loss of belief that the New Age was imminent. No less a personage than David Spangler, the person who had originally projected the vision of a New Age authored several articles announcing his loss of faith. Not long afterwards, the bottom fell out of the crystal market, and prices dropped radically as investors tried to recover part of their loss. Possibly the most visible sign of the demise of the movement was the disappearance of references to a "New Age" in the literature that continued to be put out by former New Agers.

By 1990 it was noticeable in the United States that the spirit had departed and that disappointed believers were looking for a new direction. Having missed the demise of the New Age, we also failed to document the ferment accompanying the revision of the New Age worldview. However, in hindsight, we now see that it progressed in very typical fashion, and can be fruitfully compared to the Millerite movement. In the 1830s William Miller announced that Christ would return in 1843. Christ did not return, and several immediate attempts were made to adjust his calculation and suggest that he was off by six months or a year. However, when 1844 passed with no visible Christ, a wave of disappointment swept through the movement that had spread across North America.

While a few people, including Miller himself, abandoned their faith, the great majority sought for the kernel of truth in what Miller and his colleagues had taught. They were not ready to simply abandon the new life they had found. Over the next two decades various segments of the community suggested different courses of action. One part of the community persisted in revising Miller's calendar and projecting new dates for Christ's appearance. As each date failed, and a new denomination emerged as part of the community abandoned date-setting. While most of these groups remain small and unknown outside of the United States, one, the Jehovah's Witnesses, has become an organization of some global significance.

A second part of the Millerite community claimed that Miller was essentially correct. In 1844, Christ had indeed taken the first step in his reappearance on earth. He had left heaven, but had been delayed with a task that had to be completed on the way to earth, the cleansing of a heavenly sanctuary. Once that task is completed, in the very near future, He will visibly appear. The Seventh-day Adventists adopted this view and gradually settling into a more conventional church life, also in the 20th century becoming a world church of note. [10](#)

In the wake of the disappointment of the non-appearance of the New Age, through the 1990s, we can see the same two reactions to the disappointment that occurred among the Millerites in the 1840s. It is estimated that three- to five-million people identified with the New Age during the 1980s, the great majority of them being new adherents, not previously identified either with theosophy, New Thought, astrology, or related phenomena. They did not simply abandon their faith, but looked for ways to cope. At the same time, thousands of people had adopted a New Age career as a channeler, holistic health practitioner, publisher/editor/writer, or workshop teacher. The disintegration of the movement would place all of these people out of work. They had every reason to perpetuate the movement.

An immediate reorientation for New Age believers had been offered by Spangler, New Age publisher Jeremy Tarcher, and others in 1988. They suggested that what had held them in the movement through the previous decade of waiting for the New Age to appear had been the personal transformation they had experienced. They now realized that their own personal spiritual enlightenment and new self-understanding was the valuable asset that they had received from participation in the Movement, ultimately of such worth as to make the loss of the New Age vision of relative unimportance. Even though there was little reason to believe that a New Age would appear as a social phenomenon, there was every reason to continue personal processes leading to healing, awareness, and mystical union. The great majority of professionals

in the movement were practitioners of various occult arts concerned with facilitating individual growth and healing.

They appeared quite willing to fall back into older occult metaphysical systems that utilized more spatial metaphors rather than evolutionary historical ones. At the personal level, the appropriation of psychic experience was very like psychic awakenings at any point in time. It is apparent in the post New Age era that many are content with this approach. It is also apparent that as occurred in the Post-Millerite era, new leaders not ready to abandon millennialism in toto have arisen to suggest new directions.

Post New Age Millennialism

Among the more prominent new date-setting schemes is that being promoted by Solara, a guru/teacher now residing in Montana. She appeared in the late 1980s with a new post-Harmonic Convergence program that would lead people, not into the New Age but to Ascension. As we shall see, Ascension is the new symbol that has replaced the New Age as the goal of post-New Age believers. She called people's attention to a new symbol, "11:11." Eleven-eleven, she described as the insertion point of the Greater Reality [God] into human existence. As she called attention to 11:11, people began to see it everywhere, from calendars (November 11) to digital clocks. When 11:11 appears to you, she suggested, it is a divine wake-up call to your soul.

The 11:11 symbol was becoming more prominent in the late 1980s, however, because it was calling attention to a massive event of importance to all humanity. 1992, she asserted, would be the beginning of a 21-year period during which humanity could take a step forward in evolution, a step into the Greater Reality. We can move from our life now, trapped in the illusion of duality and ascend into Oneness. According to Solara, more than 144,000 people worldwide joined with her and some 500 followers gathered at the Great Pyramid in Egypt at 11:11 PM (Greenwich Mean Time) in activities coordinated to open a Doorway or Bridge between our world of duality and the Greater Reality. During the period between 1-11-1992 and 12-31-2011, these two realms will overlap. [11](#)

Within the Doorway, there are eleven Gates. The Gates are likened to locks on a canal. By passing through each gate one is gradually lifted to a higher level of consciousness. The opening of each successive Gate occurs periodically through the years of the existence of the open 11:11 Doorway. As one enters each gate, specific experiences occur, that is each gate symbolized a specific identifiable change in one's individual consciousness. Upon entering the first gate, which was made possible on January 1, 1992, we experience a healing of our hearts (emotions). The second gate, symbolic of a fusion of our deepest desires with our spiritual aspirations. Its opening occurred on June 5, 1993, again accompanied by a massive coordinated global ritual. The third Gate was opened with three distinct rituals in 1997 and the fourth Gate in 1999. The remaining openings will be spread out over the next decade.

Many of the people who have adopted the 11:11 symbol are associated directly with Solara and her Star-Borne Unlimited organization. However, after learning of the 11:11 program, many

have assumed a role in the 11:11 program in independent parallel organizations. One such group, the Star-Esseenia Temple of Ascension Mastery, headquartered San Pedro, California, describes itself as a "full service 11:11 Ashtar Command Ascension Center sponsored by the Angels of Light, the Ascended Masters and the Ashtar Command for the purpose of facilitating accelerated mental, emotional and spiritual growth for Earth based Lightworkers dedicated to the Ascension path." It is headed by Commander August Stahr. Stahr, a Reiki healer had an unusual experience in 1991 during a solar eclipse that included her receiving a message to abandon Reiki for a new form of healing deigned to bring in the energies needed for planetary ascension. She subsequently developed healing modalities to assist people handling the changes accompanying the opening of each 11:11 Gate. As her program grew, she developed the Star Team Mastery Program to train facilitators who could work with the growing audience. [12](#)

Commander Stahr's Star Esseenia Temple is but one 11:11 group. A cursory Internet search onbut a single search engine yielded more than 2,000 hits for "11:11+ascension." Through the Internet, not to mention more mundane means, the 11:11 concept has spread internationally and provided an alternative vision for those who gave up on the New Age.

Ascension

As noted above, through the 1990s "Ascension" is the term that superseded "New Age" as the symbol around which former New Agers reoriented their hopes of the future. Like "New Age," Ascension is a symbol to which many conflicting images can be attached, however, the new term indicates a subtle but very real shift in thinking. [13](#) As New Age was basically a collective symbol indicating vast changes in society, but carrying implications for the individual, Ascension is the opposite, basically a personal symbol, with possible broader social implications. In terms of the occult world, it emerged early in the New Thought movement and then was adopted by Guy Ballard as a major emphasis of the "I AM" Religious Activity. [14](#) In Ballard's Christianized theosophy, there was little place for resurrection since embodied existence was a lesser state, and the story of Jesus' death and resurrection were largely ignored in favor of a total focus on his Ascension. The goal of "I AM" practice is the gradual raising of the consciousness and refining of the body so that one can escape death and consciously ascend.

It was assumed within the "I AM" Movement that Ascension would be limited to those who engaged in the spiritual exercises that Ballard advocated. However, through the "I AM" and the organizations that grew out of it, such as the Church Universal and Triumphant, teachings on Ascension entered the larger occult community. It is of particular importance that in the 1950s, several people integrated "I AM" teachings with interest in flying saucers. Several groups channelling messages from a reputed hierarchy of extraterrestrials, provided a new conduit for occult teachings in general, and the idea of Ascension in particular, to spread among the general public.

Through the 1980s, channels oriented on both the Ascended Masters and extraterrestrials became a defining element of the New Age. The original New Age vision had been derived from and shaped by channeled messages, and thus it is not surprising that channelers would take the lead

in redefining the post-New Age. The most prominent group of channelers who have come to the fore in elevating the idea of Ascension are those loosely associated with the periodical Sedona: Journal of Emergence. This magazine began in 1989 in Sedona, Arizona, a revered location among New Agers as a sacred site of global significance. During the decade many New Age practitioners had relocated to Sedona, and the magazine presented their common message. [15](#)

Initially, Ascension is a personal goal. In the "I AM" teachings, it is a sign of personal accomplishment. Ballard believed that individuals could ascend instead of die, and included an episode in one of his early books describing an ascension he claimed to have witnessed. [16](#) This belief led to an adoption of vegetarianism and to live a celibate life as a necessary discipline preparing the body for the Ascension process. Ballard's own premature death led to a revision of that belief. Now, almost all "I AM" groups teach that Ascension is of the soul at the time of bodily death. As Ascension teachings spread in the late 1980s, teachers emphasized the soul's self-understanding, spiritual awakening, and personal development all of which led to an attunement with the cosmos.

But channelers also began to suggest the possibility of a global or planetary Ascension. Integrated through the many and variant offerings from the hundred or more channelers who contribute to the Sedona Journal, is a belief that a large group of people (though certainly a tiny minority of the world's population) are in the midst of a significant transformation of consciousness. The transformation is described variously, but essentially will lift them to a new way of seeing the world in its essential unifying and loving reality. As these people attain this new state they will be a magnet through which the whole world will ascend, eventually come to the truth of this higher consciousness.

What is evident in this post-New Age message is the lack of a timetable by which the planetary ascension will occur, though everywhere there is the hint and hope that it will occur in this century. Second, there is the realization that for the present only a relative few will be engaged in activity focused upon their ascension, though the work of this group will ultimately have planetary implications.

A statement of this new vision, has been offered in the mission statement of New Heaven/New Earth, an Arizona-based post-New Age online newsletter created in 1994:

We also believe that our planet is passing through a time of profound change and are seeking to create a global community of like-minded people that can safely pass through whatever changes may come our way and help give birth to a new way of life on our planet. [17](#)

What one finds in the post-New Age is the successful shift of those who abandoned the millennialism of the 1980s to a post-millennial perspective which has now projected the long-term gradual spread of the higher consciousness that has been the perennial goal of occult activity.

This transition from the "premillennialism" of the New Age to the contemporary Ascension/spiritual emergence movement that has followed it, is nowhere better demonstrated than in the international bestselling books by James Redfield. Redfield, a psychological

counselor had been attracted to the New Age during the 1980s, and became an avid reader of New Age and human potentials books. By the end of the 1980s he had become so absorbed in this material that he quit work and concentrated upon creating a synthesis of everything he had learned. The result was a novel, *The Celestine Prophecy*, self published in 1992. The book would win no awards for either plot or character development, but was a hit with people previously attracted to the New Age. Picked up by a major publisher, it soon topped the News York Times nonfiction bestseller list, and was subsequently translated into a number of languages. Sequels appeared annually through the remainder of the decade.

In *The Celestine Prophecy*, Redfield laid out his perception that a growing (if unspecified) number of people are engaging in a new spiritual awakening that is permeating the population. A critical mass of people are coming to view their life as a spiritual journey. They are gaining some psychic awareness and making contact with the universal energy that under girds the universe. At some time in the near future all of these people will gain a collective understanding of what is happening to them and arrive at a common vision of the course of humankind in this century. Eventually whole groups of people will experience the higher vibratory states that others call ascension (though Redfield himself does not use the term). In his second novel, *The Tenth Insight*, Redfield poses the goal of spiritually evolved individuals cooperating on the creation of a new global spiritual culture. [18](#)

Conclusion

Through the 1990s, what was called the New Age Movement in the 1980s made a transition from the premillennial vision of an imminent golden age of peace and light to a postmillennial vision of a small group of people operating as the harbinger of the future evolution or Ascension of humanity into a higher life. The New Age Movement led to a dramatic growth of the older occult/metaphysical community, recast the older occult practices in the light of contemporary psychology, and created a much more positive image for occultism in Western culture. The transition of the 1990s, in the wake of the disappointment that the New Age had failed to make an appearance, has allowed the gains of the 1980s to be consolidated. Under a variety of names, the older occult community has been established as an alternative faith community (or more precisely, a set of alternative communities) which share a common hope for their own prosperity in the next century as well as their meaningful role in the evolution progress of humanity.

The New Age may have died, but the community it brought together continues to grow as one of the most important minority faith communities in the West. While showing no signs of assuming the dominant religious role in the West, it is reclaiming and resacralizing a small part of the secularized world. In the future, it will add its strength to those causes that it shares with other faith communities (peace, environmentalism), and as the religious community becomes ever-more pluralistic have an increasing role in inter- religious dialogue and cooperation.

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Oecumenique de Bossey, Celigny, Switzerland, July 17-21, 2000. It appears here with the kind permission of the author. Copyright. J. Gordon Melton. All rights reserved

Footnotes

1. Recent literature representative of the anti-pseudoscience movement's appraisal of the New Age would include: Michael Shermer, *Why People Believe Weird Things* (New York: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1997); Martin Gardner, *The New Age: Notes of a Fringe Watcher* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1988); Henry Gordon, *Channeling into the New Age: The Teachings of Shirley MacLaine and Other Such Gurus* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1988), and Robert Basil, ed., *Not Necessarily the New Age: Critical Essays* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1988)..
2. Evangelical Christian appraisals of the New Age range across a wide spectrum from a more sober critique from a doctrinal perspective represented by Karen Hoyt and the Spiritual Counterfeit Project, *The New Age Rage* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1987) and J. Yutaka Amoto and Norman L. Geisler, *The Infiltration of the New Age* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1989) to the more extreme Santanic conspiracy theories seen in Texe Marrs, *Mysteries of the New Age: Satan's Design for World Domination* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988) or David N. Balmforth, *New Age Menace: The Secret War against the Followers of Christ* (Bountiful, UT: Horizon Publishers, 1996).
3. Cf: J. Gordon Melton, James R. Lewis, and Aidan Kelly, eds., *The New Age Encyclopedia* (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Company, 1990), J. Gordon Melton, James R. Lewis, and Aidan Kelly, eds., *New Age Almanac* (Detroit, MI: Visible Ink Press, 1991); James R. Lewis and J. Gordon Melton, *Perspectives on the New Age* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992); Richard Kyle, *The New Age Movement in American Culture* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995); Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: Celebrating the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1996); Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden Brill, 1996); Michael F. Brown, *The Channeling Zone: American Spirituality in an Anxious Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Jon Klimo, *Channeling: Investigations on Receiving Information from Paranormal Sources* (rev. ed.: Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1998); and John Saliba, *Christian Responses to the New Age Movement: A Critical Assessment* (London/New York: Geoffrey Chapman, 1999).
4. Helpful in defining Western Esotericism are Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany, NY: State University Press of New York, 1994); Antoine Faivre, *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition: Studies in Western Esotericism* (Albany, NY: State University Press of New York,

- 2000); and Antopine Faivre and Jacob Needleman, eds., *Modern Esoteric Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).
5. A start on organizing the chaotic mountain of channeled material that has been produced over the last two centuries has been made by Joel Bjorling in *Channeling: A Bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing, 19--).
 6. Integral to understanding the beginning of the New Age are David Spangler's several books, *The New Age Vision* (Forres, Scotland: Findhorn Publications, 1980); *Revelation: The Birth of a New Age* (San Francisco: Rainbow Bridge, 1976); and *Towards a Planetary Vision* (Forres, Scotland: Findhorn Foundation, 1977).
 7. Ken Keyes, *The Hundredth Monkey* (Coos Bay, OR: Vision Books, 1982).
 8. Ruth Montgomery, *Aliens Among Us* (New York: Putnam's, 1985).
 9. Shiley MacLaine, *Out on a Limb* (New York: Bantam Books, 1983).
 10. Franci D. Nichol's *The Midnight Cry* (Tacoma Park, MD: Review and Herald, 1944) remains an excellent survey of the events surrounding the Millerite enthusiasm.
 11. The 11:11 program may be tracked through Solara's several books such as *The Star-Borne: A Remembrance for the Awakened Ones* (Charlottesville, VA: Starborne Unlimited 1989) and *How to Live Large on a Small Planet* (Whitefish, MT: Starborne Unlimited, 1996), or from her website at <http://www.nvisible.com>. For an alternative map to the future with a different chronology see "The Children of Light" proposals at <http://www.childrenoflight.com>.
 12. See the Star esseenia Temple webpage at <http://www.star-esseenia.org>.
 13. The literature on Ascension is now vast, however, it has been extensive and comprehensively surveyed in the multi-volume series, *The Easy-to-Read Encyclopedia of the Spiritual Path*, by Joshua David Stone. The initial volume, *The Complete Ascension Manual: How to Achieve Ascension in This Lifetime* (Sedona, AZ: Light Technology Publishing, 1994) is a helpful starting point. A sampling of Ascension titles include: Tony Stubbs, *An Ascension Handbook: Channeled Material by Serapis* (Livermore, CA: Oughten House Publications, 1992); Aileen Nobles, *Get Off the Karmic Wheel with Conscious Ascension and Rejuvenation* (Malibu, CA: Light Transformation Center, 1993); MSI, *Ascension* (Edmonds, WA: SFA Publications, 1995).
 14. See particularly, Godfre King [pseudonym of Guy W. Ballard], *The Magic Presence* (Chicago: Saint Germain Press, 1935)
 15. Sedona itself has become part of the post-new Age worldview and the subject of a growing literature. See: Tom Dongo, *The Mysteries of Sedona* (Sedona, AZ: Color Pro Graphics, 1988; Richard Dannelley, *Sedona Power Spot, Vortex, and Medicine Wheel Guide* (Sedona, AZ: R. Dannelley with the Cooperation of the Vortex Society, 1991); *The Sedona Guide Book of Channeled Wisdom* (Sedona, AZ: Light Technology publishing, 1991); Dick Sutphen, *Sedona: Psychic Energy Vortexes* (Malibu, CA: Valley of the Sun Publishing, 1986).
 16. Ibid. pp. 270-94

17. New Heaven/New Earth may be contacted through their Internet site at <http://www.newheavennewearth.com>.
18. See James Redfield's several titles: *The Celestine Prophecy* (New York: Warner Books, 1994); *The Celestine Vision: Living the New Spiritual Awareness* (New York: Warner Books, 1997); *The Tenth Insight* (New York: Warner Books, 1996); *The Secret of Shambhala: Search for the Eleventh Insight* (New York: Warner Books, 1999).
19. Paper uploaded: 01/02/01