

The New Age Movement/New Spirituality

History and Development

There is nothing “new” about the New Age. The “New Spirituality”? Old news. Just into “Spirituality”? Been there done that- for thousands of years. Why then all the flash and hype? In America, people figured out long ago that promotion and marketing seems to be the only thing that matters. Americans after all will buy rocks if they are packaged as pets! While this is provably so, it still seems trivial. But in actuality it points to a major tool of the NAM. The preferred name among the more intellectual people in the NAM is “the perennial philosophy”. This is a way of saying that the ideas we are going to talk about have been around forever. They are literally *perennially* so. Whether one listens to Joseph Campbell’s PBS program *The Power of Myth* or reads Ken Wilbur or David Spangler, Marilyn Ferguson and so on, the motif is that these ideas are truly eternal and transformative. Once heeded they will literally bring about a revolution of the human race and even the universe. A revolution where all is god and all is one – no more war, crime, racism, environmental destruction, sexism and so on.

In her autobiographical book *The Hunger of Eve*, futurist Barbara Marx Hubbard outlines both her journey from nominal Christian to New Ager while at the same time showing her departure from her “boring” husband and marriage, to a much more liberated view on sex. The cover of the books shows an apple

with a bit out of it and inside the apple one sees the universe. The imagery is supposed to reflect the “true” import of the Genesis 3 account. According to Barbara, Lucifer is the good guy of the story. Lucifer wanted us to discover our true “higher” selves. When Eve bit the apple – she opened up the universe for all of us. Jehovah of course then is the bad guy who jealously wanted us to keep us from our true selves. No explanation is given for this – it is simply built into the interpretation that Jehovah is evil and wants us to see ourselves as sinful, limited human beings. This gives us a picture of an ancient Gnostic idea coming back into vogue – the evil Jewish God Jehovah who made this prison (world) and trapped the divine sparks/aeons in matter.

This leads us to an understanding of what the NAM really is – a pastiche or smorgasbord of ancient ideas, which have been re-imagined, re-cast, re-packaged, edited and shaped for modern and postmodern consumption. And consumption is a big part of the picture – Between sales of crystals, books, Runes, wholistic healing techniques, yoga classes, psychic readings and so on – the NAM is a multi-billion dollar enterprise. While appealing to ancient Hindu and Buddhist texts, Western practitioners have morphed ideas that have traditionally been wrapped in asceticism and transformed them into a materialist marketers dream; Buddhist monks being used to sell everything from Jeep Cherokees to mutual funds.

One could argue that the birth of the NAM in the United States really began with a tremendous outbreak of cults and small sects in the 19th century. Within

a time frame of roughly thirty years, numerous groups such as the Mormons, Adventists, Spiritualists, Oneida, Jehovah's Witnesses and others began out of the backwash of the 2nd Great Awakening. The Transcendentalist writers were reading the ancient Hindu text the Bhagavad-Gita and many philosophers and thinkers in the United States and Europe such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Shiller, and Schopenhauer were entranced by the same text as well as Buddhist literature that was coming to Europe due to the British colonization of India. In the 1870 – 1880s groups like the Theosophical Society (Madame Blavatsky), Anthropomorphical Society (Rudolph Steiner), Unity Movement (Charles and Myrtle Fillmore) and especially the Christian Science Movement (Mary Baker Eddy) started attracting large groups of people. Collectively known as “New Thought”, these groups were drawing much interest on the Eastern seaboard among the cultured elites of the larger cities. One dramatic event, which galvanized the New Thought communities, was the appearance of Vivekananda – the first Hindu missionary to the west in 1893. Trained in the Advaita Vedanta tradition (Non-Dual Knowledge) Vivekananda had a vision of the goddess Kali that taught him of the oneness of all religions. He was received at the first Parliament of World Religions as a huge celebrity. Much the same way the Dalai Llama is treated today, the cultural elites, media and intelligentsia of the day saw in him the dawning of a new exciting transformation from decadent Christianity to the Spirituality of Human Potentiality.

Next generation spinoffs such as Mind Science (Ernest Holmes) and a rising underground interest in witchcraft (Gerald Gardner) and Satanism (Alistair

Crowley) cropped up in the 1940's – 1950's. Scientology and the introduction of Zen to the west crowned the new turns in the late 1950's. The stage was now set for the true cultural shift which marked the turn away from Judeo/Christian thought to a whole “new” world.

The song that best literally embodies the hopes and aspirations of the birth of the modern NAM in the 1960's was the iconic Age of Aquarius by the Fifth Dimension. Seen by the nominal secular and Christian culture as hippy fluff – the words reflect serious theology to the true believer;

When the moon is in the seventh house and Jupiter aligns with Mars
Then peace will guide the planets and love will steer the stars
This is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius, the Age of Aquarius, Aquarius! Aquarius!
Harmony and Understanding - Sympathy and trust abounding
No more falsehoods or derisions – Golden living dreams of visions
Mystic crystal revelation and the mind's true liberation
Aquarius! Aquarius!

Astrology, crystals, Hopi calendar date – setting, and the thought that now a movement was born which would lift the culture out of the despair and futility of rampant materialism and cold war fears that had marked the country since the end of WW II.

The Cultural Revolution has so many tributary streams that it is nearly impossible to address them all in a short work but some of the main contributors must be examined. The drug movement, broached by the Beatniks of the 1950s,

became a monstrous issue in the 60s. It was led by the Pied Piper of Harvard University Timothy Leary, who coined the phrase “Turn on, Tune in, Drop out”. His partner at Harvard in the drug experiment program, Richard Albert, was disturbed at the side effects of the new experimental drug LSD and left for India to find a different path. Coming back many years later as Baba Ram Dass, he wrote the bestseller *Be Here Now* with the knowledge gained in the east that Mindful meditation will bring about the desired result without the destructive side effects. The desired result was the bypassing of the conscious state of mind, a literal breakthrough to the “other side” as sung by Jim Morrison of the Doors.

It is important to remember that even though it was Christian pastors who were so often at the forefront of the Civil Rights movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King, that Christianity was increasingly seen as the “Old Age” by many important voices in the Culture. Weakened internally by the race issues which had become so divisive up to and after the Civil War of 1860-1865 and by the attack on the Bible by higher critical scholars in Europe and the formerly Christian schools of the US such as Harvard and Yale, and externally by the onslaught of Darwinism which began with the publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859 and soon spread through all the University programs, Christianity was hopelessly split into primarily liberal and fundamentalist camps. Tired of the hypocrisy that was so often seen, especially in the racism and endless fighting among the denominations, thousands of young American and Europeans left their homes and their nominal Christian background and went to Tibet, Nepal and of course India seeking a new way of looking at the

human condition. Along with this, UCLA professor Carlos Castenada, whose books of his journeys with a Shaman (Mexican medicine man) who introduced him, through peyote and mescaline –to the altered state of consciousness sought now by so many. At the same time, many Asian Gurus or teachers, saw an opportune time to come to the west and expand their following. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Mahara Ji, Sun Yung Moon and many others came and soon attracted millions of followers. The Christianity of the west was truly decadent and often didn't even realize how vast the cultural shift was. Mahesh had learned the true secret of spreading his Advaita Vedanta faith in America – packaging. Removing the Ashram (community) the robes and other outward trappings so often associated with Hindu practice and thought, Maharishi founded a movement that came to be known as simply Transcendental Meditation. Chant twice a day, for twenty minutes a day, and all your problems and societies problems as well will soon disappear. Presenting this as a non-religious practice, Maharishi's marketing strategy was brilliant – by the mid 1970's TM was being offered in schools, YMCAs and churches.

One of the Maharishi's most adept students was Werner Earnhardt, who learned both the teaching and the marketing techniques and founded EST or Earnhardt Seminar Training. Bizarre bathroom stories aside – Earnhardt successfully positioned his teachers ideas as Human Potentiality. Knowing your true inner divinity and shedding all the Christian hang-ups about sin and limitation, will bring about business and personal success. Soon Nightingale Conant was selling tapes and programs over how chanting and meditation will

improve your sales by 20%! Led by popular educator and author Jack Canfield, schools were now being introduced to the wonders of meditation and channeling. Guided imagery and visualization techniques designed to suppress the conscious mind were all the rage. The irony of mindlessness being taught by the public school system was not seen then and probably not now as well. In Medicine and Nursing, wholistic/holistic techniques were being introduced to the culture through seminars and university programs. Acupuncture, Reiki, Aryurvedic, Neuro-linguistic Programming, Osteopathic, Homopathic and many other alternatives cures now wrestled with traditional allopathic or western medicine for the big dollars. This type of influence can be seen in virtually every part of culture. Today it is ubiquitous – Churches doing yoga and Buddhist chanting, new age gurus raising money for aids patients – syncretism is the norm.

Scripture

The NAM is open to numerous scriptures from various religions or none at all. Kabalistic Jewish writings, Sufi Muslim writers, “ancient runes” off the counter at Borders or a poetry book might all serve as inspirational. Many see the word of mediums or channelers as the equivalent of scriptures. Messages from ancient warriors from Atlantis or aliens from different universes like the Pleiades are all authoritative to someone. Some literally listen to their pets or the “voice of the mother earth” as heard in a waterfall or some other phenomenon of nature. For many others psychic readings are authoritative and

can come through astrology or tarot, crystals, aura fields and innumerable other potential paths of “knowledge”. As mentioned before, some are inspired by actual religious texts such as the Bhagavad-Gita, the Lotus Sutras or the Tibetan Book of the Dead. Since the discovery of the Nag Hammadi collection, the interest in Gnostic literature such as The Gospel of Thomas or the Shepherd of Hermes has dramatically increased.

Jesus

The figure of Jesus is a controversial one within the NAM. Some see Jesus as a master magician, others as a “cosmic buffoon” for thinking he could pay for others karma. Ernest Holmes of the Mind Science group pictures Jesus not as “the Way” as orthodox Christianity would see him, but rather as “the Way Shower”. In this role Jesus becomes a teacher of the esoteric wisdom who discovered his own divinity and inspires us to likewise discover our own divinity ourselves. Many channeled books such as *The Aquarian Gospel* by Levi Dowling, or books like *The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ* by Nicolas Notovitch see Jesus as a guru who traveled to India, Nepal, Tibet, China, Egypt, etc who learned the perennial philosophy and then returned to Israel to teach it. As a side note, it is interesting to note that all of these contradictory accounts claimed that the source of the information is the Akashic records – an intra- dimensional records hall of sorts.

For Roman Catholic nee Episcopalian priest Matthew Fox, Jesus represents an individual who discovered his connection to the Cosmic Christ – the divine

source of all life and power in/of the universe. As such Jesus is not the Christ per se, but only an individual just like any of us and therefore each person can also be the "Christ". Deepak Chopra, the Hara Krishna's and other Hindus often picture Jesus as an Avatar, an embodiment of the divine Brahman. Despite all the wide range of views there are some commonalities; Jesus is not the unique Son of God, or the 2nd person of the Trinity and Jesus is definitively not the only way to God.

Supreme Being - God

This is one of the key ideas of the NAM- the Question of God. The simplest way of understanding this is to define monistic pantheism. Central to ancient Advaita Vedanta, monism is the belief that there literally is only one thing in existence anywhere. Pantheism is the belief that all that is - wherever it is - is divine. So all is one and that one thing is God. In Hindu parlance this is Brahman, which permeates the entire universe. The atman is the individual piece, which is to be seen as part of the whole. One of the very popular ancient illustrations of this is that of the ocean. The Ocean is Brahman, and each individual drop is atman. So either God is "behind" the universe, or God is embodied in the universe. Similar to the conversation within the Advaita tradition of old, there are New Agers who agree with Shankara (d.732 a.d.) who had the strongest view of Maya -the dream of the mind, which is ultimately an illusion. The world of perception is a false world. The underlying unity of the world is hidden by Maya and the different paths off the wheel of Samara (the

cycle of birth, death, and rebirth). Another advaitist was Ramanuja (d.1137 a.d.) who had to “rescue” idolatry from the strong view of Maya advocated by Shankara. Ramanuja posited a view that argued for value in the practice of idolatry and there was some limited reality in the world, but like Shankara still believed that ultimately all was illusion.

As described commonly by New Agers today, God is a force or energy field or consciousness within the universe or something similar. God is present in all things (panentheism) and or God is all things or God is the animating force of the universe. It all depends upon whom you talk to. This is seen as a liberating view, literally a Gospel/good news by people within the movement. There would be no more war or crime or sexism or racism if we all just understood our inner connection. Why don't we? It is because we have gotten caught up in the illusory world and haven't experienced the oneness of all things yet. Although Brahman or the one or the “force” of George Lucas's Star Wars, was seen classically in Vedic literature as Nirguna Brahman or God without attributes, in the mind of most New Agers the divine is seen as the literal embodiment of love. Marianne Williamson and Neil Donald Walsch both stress this point. The world of pain and suffering is merely an illusion. The true world, which cannot be understood logically or found through the rational mind, is instead experienced through one of the many different mystical means already mentioned. So this is a syncretistic meld of one aspect of Christian belief with an ancient Hindu thought. Included in this “God” who is pure love is the notion that God does not judge, as the reality of the world is mere perception. Recently an idea, which has

become popularized in *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne and *A New Earth* by Eckhart Tolle, is the idea that the divine is sympathetic with our desires and if one knows the proper formula one can get whatever one wants in life.

The Human Predicament

The predicament is that the Old Age or Christian era, has held people in its evil sway, teaching that humans are limited sinful beings. For two thousand years the true nature of the universe has been hidden by the malevolent Christian view. This crippling thought has separated God from nature and man from man and man from nature. The “sin” of separation had permeated the universe and kept us from our true higher potential. The false self, limited and ignorant of its true capacity, perpetuates this sin. This false self is the cause of all negative fruit or karma. This has led to war, murder, rape, and so on. From this perspective it is inferred that all negative karma or fruit is merely part of the illusion. Similar in spirit with the Gita, Neil Donald Walsch argues that even Hitler is now enlightened and part of the divine source.

Salvation

Almost as offensive as Jesus being the only way to God, is the idea that there is something wrong with us, that we are sinners. Most New Agers that one meets at any given psychic fair were all raised in some sort of Christian church and have at least an idea of the Christian teaching of original sin or depravity. Therefore there is no need to be saved from Hell or from sin or anything else. As

mentioned above our real problem is ignorance of our true or higher self and thus the solution to the problem is enlightenment – a higher understanding of our true nature and selves. Similar to the Jnana or the knowledge path of Hinduism, once one discovers the true picture of reality and the universe, then all wars, crime, etc will end - the Dawn of the Age of Aquarius. For many new age prophets, then will be accomplished through the principle of “Critical Mass”. A popular illustration of this is the 99/100 monkeys. As the myth goes, scientists were trying to teach monkeys how to wash their tubers before they ate them. They tried with a handful of monkeys and got nowhere. They continually added more monkeys 10 at a time until they reached 90 monkeys. Then they added one at a time until finally they were at 99 monkeys. Still the monkeys showed no inclination to learn. Then the 100th monkey was added and everything changed. Critical Mass has been broached and the monkeys all responded en masse. Each of the monkeys started washing their tubers and teaching their young to do the same. The moral of the store is clear. When enough people become aware of their true higher selves, the world will achieve critical mass and a massive change of consciousness will occur and all will be right in the universe.

Eschatology

As seen earlier The New Age literally is the end time scenario for the NAM. According to most astrologers, each of the ages is two thousand years old. The last age is called the Pisces age. The fish symbol is one of the earliest Christian symbols so New Agers postulate that fact as the supposed proof of their

astrological projections. Others like an old Hopi Indian legend that the year 2012 will be the year that the change happens. Whatever version of the story one reads, once the Christian hindrance is removed, Paradise will blossom.

Witnessing Tips

Dr. Gordon Lewis in his excellent *Decide for Yourself*, emphasized the need to establish common ground with those one is witnessing to. The thing that all people have, regardless of culture or religious persuasion, is the conscience that God gave them according to Romans 2. When people have committed to the idea that the universe is God or that the universe is an illusion, then this puts them into a logical contradiction. Either way they have no answer for the moral convictions and causes that they are passionate about. I call this “the Hitler pill” and I want them to swallow it. If the universe is the divine, then was “God” just killing “God” at Dachau? Or in Rwanda or Columbine or Darfur? If yes then there should not be any moral outrage. God is just at “play”. (The ancient Hindus called this idea Lila or the dance). On the other hand the universe is just an illusion, then again there is no cause for moral outrage at any of tragedies mentioned above. Yet New Agers are activists; they want to save the environment or the whales or stop the war or a trillion other causes. This is often where you can witness by seeing their very real moral concern (e.g. a world without war) as a serious issue, but then contrasting it with their worldview. If the world is an illusion then peace is just as illusory as anything else and has no more positive moral standing than war! In this sense the New

Ager is very close to the Kingdom of God. They can see the evil/sin in the world but they cannot consistently define it and their solution (enlightenment) tells them that the world is illusory and love. So it is love killing love in Kampuchea. Any way you look at this the problem persists. So it is critical to get them to accept the reality of evil, because then you can talk about sin and evil in meaningful ways. Once that is established you can then make the case for the Cross-as God's means for dealing with the very real evil in a very real world. If there is no sin, then there is no need to be saved. If there is no need to be saved, then there is no need for a savior. If there is no need for a Savior – then Christ truly was a “cosmic buffoon”. But if there really is evil then one can build a solid and reasonable case for the cross, for the display of God's holiness (in that God takes evil seriously) and for God's mercy (in that God takes his love for us seriously) and the cross displays both.

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