

HARMONIC CONVERGENCES AND ALL THAT: NEW AGE SPIRITUALITY

By DAVID S. TOOLAN

Aristocratic nations are naturally too liable to narrow the scope of human perfectibility; democratic nations, to expand it beyond reason.

Alexis de Tocqueville

CHARISMATIC SWAMIS, GURUS and esoteric masters are suffering a credit slump these days. The case of the late Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh's ill-omened 64,000-acre ashram in Antelope, Oregon (done in by the guru's paranoia and addiction to drugs, sex and Rolls Royces) is commonly taken to confirm the mainstream's worst suspicions of foreign religious imports. A similar unhappy fate has overtaken New Age crystal gazers and channellers. Shirley MacLaine's pantheism ('I am God') and her favourite channeller, the 15,000-year-old Ramtha, get little but disdain from the press. Perhaps because of this negative media attitude, finding someone in the United States today who will publicly admit being a New Age partisan is a little like locating a liberation theologian in the Vatican. The latest survey of American religious belief, commissioned by The City University of New York, could only find a scant 28,000 who would do so.¹ In short, New Age has become a term of derision—and its leaders and mentors, many of them kidnapped for that role to begin with, stumble over each other in distancing themselves from the label.

Does that mean the cultural insurgency that began in the 1960s with the 'human potential movement', that (with the jet assist of LSD) orbited into the 'Aquarian Age' in the 1970s, and appeared in the 1980s as the New Age, is now dead? Hardly. In 1981, the pollster Daniel Yankelovich estimated that some 17 per cent of Americans were strongly affected and 63 per cent weakly so, by the self-fulfilment ethos in its various psychological, political and spiritual

forms.² Even today, major trade publishers will tell you that there is a significant market, numbering in the many millions, for New Age books, tapes and videos. New York City's 'Open Center', a clone of California's famous Esalen Institute—and like it an emporium of psychological and spiritual cures—is thriving, even in a recession. And I know any number of parishioners at local Catholic churches who regularly drop in there for lectures and workshops, as I occasionally do myself.

No, the cultural civil wars of the sixties may have left little trace in Europe, but in the United States, though they have abated somewhat, the issues are still with us. Given the loose weave of the mores here—and a high degree of occupational and geographic mobility—rootlessness and the search for self-definition are permanent features of life. And new religions and new social movements constitute the time-tested method by which our various silent majorities or vociferous minorities periodically restitch the fabric of their tattered identities. We shall remain what we have been, then, a nation in transition, always on the threshold of starting over again—and hence a liminal people, neither this nor that but betwixt and between (as the anthropologist Victor Turner would have put it)—struggling to build a new world on hostile ground.³ In this respect, there is nothing historically new about the New Age movement; it belongs to an old American revitalization tradition, that of the 'Great Awakenings'. The New Age, at best an umbrella term for a diffuse mood or current of thought, is the vanishing blaze or the first fire (depending on your judgement) of the third such awakening in our brief history.

What is it?

Above ground or underground, New Agers are more betwixt and between, more liminal, than most Americans. On the one hand, they share with many other middle-class people a sense that the American Dream has broken down; that our economic, political, social and ecclesial institutions are no longer functioning well; above all, that modern life is hollow and lacks depth. They sniff death in the air. Only this: they differ from the minimalist writers of the *New Yorker*, who see the same thing and feel morally bewildered. Nor are they Tories or neoconservatives, who harken back to the libertarian free market and the virtuous old days of the Protestant ethic. Nor are they Whigs or conventional liberals who want New Deal business-as-usual (i.e., profit combined with social compassion). No, New Agers are neither nostalgic nor despairing. Quite the contrary, they are bullish

millennialists. They welcome the death of the old as the necessary, if painful prelude to a major cultural realignment. They see themselves as bearers of a paradigm shift in medicine, psychology, science, politics, business and education—and thus as the messianic vanguard of a cultural reawakening that will lead, not just to a mending of society, but to its remaking. Something big and new is about to be born, they claim, out of our social crisis.

In a best-selling 1980 book titled *The Aquarian conspiracy*, Marilyn Ferguson put it this way:

For the first time in history, humankind has come upon the control of change—an understanding of how transformation occurs. We are living in the *change of change*, the time in which we can intentionally align ourselves with nature for rapid remaking of ourselves and our collapsing institutions.

The paradigm of the Aquarian Conspiracy sees humankind embedded in nature. It promotes the autonomous individual in a decentralized society. It sees us as stewards of all our resources, inner and outer. It says that we are *not* victims, not pawns, not limited by conditions or conditioning. Heirs to evolutionary niches, we are capable of imagination, invention, and experiences we have only glimpsed.⁴

You will not be far off if you detect more than a whiff of Ralph Waldo Emerson here, updated with a dose of Teilhard de Chardin—and mixed with Mary Baker Eddy's mental healing and Norman Vincent Peale's 'power of positive thinking'. For good measure, salt with a bit of Joachim of Fiore's new age of the Spirit as well. Ironically, New Agers may be throwbacks, the only Americans still left who wholeheartedly subscribe to the nation's mission to create a *novus ordo saeculorum* (a new world order). Crystal gazers and psychic channellers are the lunatic fringe, the easy targets. One may want to rain on the New Age parade, sober it up with some St Augustine and Karl Barth—or with Hawthorne and Melville—but one cannot dismiss this crowd without thereby denying something in the human soul that demands historical movement, a new world.

History

New Age spirituality is an unruly torrent. Its genealogy is complex; multiple streams feed into it. The first that deserves mention is the contribution of the human potential philosophy, which in its mid-century European roots represented an effort by socially-

minded psychologists like Kurt Goldstein to liberate social workers and labourers from the thrall of the giant organizations of industrial society that dwarfed and overwhelmed them. In the transfer to America, the thing lost much of its political edge, and was soon co-opted (in the form of encounter groups and T-groups) by corporations for what the sociologist Erving Goffman called 'impression management'. Not being able to grasp that institutions carry (or betray) our moral values, and thus blind to the fact that institutional reform is a corollary of individual transformation, we privatized these potentially radical group therapies and gave them a toothless smile. Or tried to. The philosophy of liberation into 'full humaneness', as Abraham Maslow (of 'peak experience' fame) fathered it on this side of the Atlantic, envisioned the liberation of Rousseau's noble savage. As historian Frances Fitzgerald put it, the idea was that

the individual had merely to strip away all the roles, patterns, and neuroses that society had imposed upon him or her to emerge like a Wordsworthian child—innocent, beautiful, spontaneous, and capable of forming authentic relationships with others.⁵

Ernest Becker was to observe acidly in 1972 that therapists of this school should hang out a warning sign reading, 'Danger: real probability of the awakening of terror and dread, from which there is no turning back'.⁶ That is to say, if you want to live an active life in this mysterious cosmos, there is much to be said for the advantages of repression and embedding yourself in the fetishes of the available power structure; strip yourself of these admittedly illusory buffers against death and what you have left is not likely to be either Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy' or Buddhist 'emptiness' but rather Kierkegaard's fear and trembling over the abyss. In the late sixties and early seventies, California's famed Esalen Institute, the central headquarters of the human potential movement, was rocked by a series of suicides that underscored this precise point.

Humanism, evidently, was not enough; nay, more than that, it was part of the problem, the very frail reed that had not been able to stand up to Auschwitz or Hiroshima. At this juncture in the late 1960s, the movement moderated its psychedelic intake, abandoned Voltaire, Marx and Freud, and saw the need for spiritual discipline. It got religion in a hurry. In effect, it followed the countercultural Beatles, who in their search for spiritual peace went to the banks of the Ganges, not to the Jordan. As with the Beatles, there was no love lost for the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The movement placed itself

outside it, or claimed—in the spirit of C. G. Jung and Joseph Campbell—to have transcended all the particularism of historical religion. Remember the context: in the United States especially, our ‘civil religion’—that amalgam of Roman civic virtue and biblical faith that until then had bound the country together—broke down under the stress of civil rights battles, assassinations and the Vietnam War. The young especially were left adrift, all too willing to listen to exotic masters with no connections to the Pentagon. It was a time, recall, when all elders and their various ‘establishments’ were considered to be living lies, and when the *Whole earth catalog* routinely blamed Christianity, not just Francis Bacon, for the Western adversarial relation to nature. Teilhard de Chardin alone escaped the indictment, and was much read—along with Evelyn Underhill.

Gurus and sannyasins

So the well-financed commuted East; the gurus, Zen masters and lamas invaded Europe and America in hordes. It was the phase of fascination with ‘altered states’ of consciousness, and the beginnings of post-Freudian transpersonal psychology, which makes space for ascetical discipline and transcendental experience. From Emerson to Henry Adams, of course, Eastern wisdom had always fascinated certain American élites; what was new here was the popular interest and the fact that for so many their engagement was not merely literary but a matter of actual practice. To be sure, lighting out for an ashram and sitting for hours in meditation could often be, and was for some adolescents and others in mid-life crisis, a convenient way of avoiding the psychosocial developmental tasks at hand. Yet the very resort to such spiritual exercise was another sign that the cultural hegemony of mainline Protestantism, with its long-standing bias against concerted meditation and ascetical practices in general, had collapsed. Though the consciousness-movers little witted it, we Catholic observers knew they were taking up popish practices—and that our contemplative tradition, if only it had been vibrant, gave some degree of common ground.

No one at the time was receptive to such an overture; the mood was to relish otherness, the more heretical the better. Not surprisingly, then, the shadow side of the Western tradition also surged forth. For along with the shift to Eastern sources—and to gurus like Swami Muktananda, Lama Chögyam Trungpa, Maharishi Mashesh Yogi (the Beatles’ choice), Da Free John and Shunryu Suzuki Roshi—came a burst of new interest, as well, in esoteric and occult traditions.

Early Christian gnosticism, the Jewish Cabala, Renaissance hermeticism and Rosicrucianism, the 'cosmic consciousness' of the Canadian Richard Maurice Bucke, Madame Blavatsky's theosophy, Rudolph Steiner's anthroposophy, the 'self-remembering' techniques of George I. Gurdjieff, the Sufism of Idries Shah, and (lately) the myth of the Great Goddess and primitive shamanism—all drew new recruits, especially from the ranks of the more sophisticated who despised crowds, communes, guru-worship, and generally were contemptuous of the severely edited version of Buddhism marketed by Werner Erhart's 'est' or 'Forum' seminars. Shirley MacLaine's airbrushed 'California Hinduism' ('You can be whatever you want') got even lower ratings from movement luminaries.

American holism

The impact of oriental gnosticism, especially of the monistic sort, on New Age folk has been greatly exaggerated. It was pernicious only for a very marginal number, say the immured disciples of autocratic and antinomian gurus like Da Free John and Bhagwan Rajneesh, for example.⁷ Otherwise, most people absorbed Eastern wisdom without noticing the fatalism that is an ingredient in a monistic metaphysics that finds the world illusory (such as Advaita Vedanta). Innocent Huck Finns and Becky Thatchers abroad, Americans were largely anti-intellectual, ahistorical and pragmatically experimental—and nothing was about to rob them of their deposit of American faith in human perfectibility. Whatever ecstatic fusion states they experienced were commonly interpreted through the prism of what Sidney E. Ahlstrom, the premier historian of American religion, has called the 'harmonial' tradition—whose central axiom is that 'spiritual composure, physical health, and even economic well-being are understood to flow from a person's rapport with the cosmos'.⁸ Now, to orthodox Catholic ears, those who claim to be 'tuned to the universe' or 'at-one with the All' may sound like they have regressed into cosmic-soup pantheism, a thing only made worse by saying it cures you of haemorrhoids or augments your cash flow. Yet as Ahlstrom points out, it is the rare American, even if Catholic, whose religious life does not reflect some of these motifs. We expect to get something out of being religious—some reward now or later. Shirley MacLaine is just more brazen in wanting it all now.⁹

The harmonial tradition runs deep. It is not necessarily pantheistic except for the philosophically naive. More accurately, I think, tuning into the omnipresent Infinite—and a kind of natural supernaturalism

that defies all Cartesian dualism—has been the standard idiom when Americans choose to dispose of a despotic Calvinist God ‘way out there’ and affirm their sense of communion with something like Karl Rahner’s ‘Ur-mystery’. At a certain point, that is, the term ‘God’—imagined as a CIA spy satellite orbiting earth—becomes problematic. Thus when Americans are ‘reborn’ by an experience of the ‘God within’, they find themselves apt, like Emerson, to hymn nature, thereby expressing their harmony with the ‘one will, the one mind . . . that is everywhere active, in each ray of the star, in every wavelet of the pool’. Many New Agers, often the unannounced ones, have experienced the world this way, as communicative of divine glory and beauty—and they one with it. Little wonder, then, that they recognize Thoreau and Walt Whitman—not to mention Rachel Carson and Thomas Merton—as soul-mates.

No doubt this is to put the best slant on things; it is to say that New Age cosmocentrism represents a fresh rediscovery that the language of neo-Platonic emanationism—descending from Plotinus, Scotus Erigena, Jacob Boehme and Emanuel Swedenborg—continues to make sense. (And at that, just when most liberal Catholic theologians assume that the multi-storied universe of the Great Chain of Being is obsolete.) But as the allusions to Swedenborg and Emerson may suggest, there are problems. Historically, the Americanization of this robust mystical tradition entailed refraction and distortion. Always prone to a flight of the ‘alone to the Alone’ that meant a rejection of history, neo-Platonism in Emerson’s hands turned radically individualistic, anti-institutional and was virtually blind to evil, pain and death. The stage was thus set for the mental hygienists and popularizers of Emersonian ‘self-reliance’—the Mary Baker Eddys and the upbeat religion of New Thought around the turn of the century—to banalize the thing.¹⁰ New Thought, for instance, took William James’s writings, especially as developed in *The will to believe*, and converted them into an argument to justify religion on the grounds of personal utility, for its ‘cash value’. Norman Vincent Peale’s denial-based ‘positive thinking’ and cock-eyed optimism represents more of the same perversion—God as a kind of gas depot for entrepreneurial spirits. And that the New Age at its worst has a bad case of this religious utilitarianism and its sentimental, pop-eyed outlook is unfortunately also true. For proof, just listen to some of its saccharine synthesizer meditation music or glance at its Day-Glo magazine art. In brief, there is at least a portion of the New Age movement—which includes enthusiasts for Fr Matthew Fox’s ‘creation spirituality’—

that could profitably listen to a video (if only they had had the technology in the eighteenth century) of Jonathan Edwards preaching on the theme of 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God'.

Testing syncretism

Almost by definition, of course, popular movements are out of balance—and this one is. In part, the imbalance is a reaction to an aberration at the heart of organized Christianity, to the fact that for centuries both Catholic and Protestant churches inverted a great Pauline maxim, conveying the impression that where grace abounds, sin doth more abound.¹¹ For that very reason, both the churched and the unchurchd draw a distinction these days between 'organized religion' (bad) and 'spirituality' (good). The latter has to do with experiential practice—the kind of thing parishes too rarely offer but the local spiritual growth centre does in profusion. The eclecticism is maddening but if one selects carefully, there may be treasure: massage, Feldenkreis body movement, rolfing, dietary reform, hatha yoga, water cures, acupuncture, astrology, psychodrama, biofeedback, extrasensory perception, past lives, vegetarianism, organic gardening, Reichan sex therapy, herbal medicine, dream therapy, trance work, astral travel, archaic mythologies, faith healing, sacred ritual adapted from the major world religions—in short, almost any technique designed to heighten awareness. For 'perennial philosophers' of the Aldous Huxley school, which many of the attenders are, everything fits and (almost) nothing is completely alien. These are globalists, members of the planetary village. On the dark side, the thing also encourages and harbours workshop junkies, quick fixers and spiritual vagrants who after getting their momentary hit, remain homeless wanderers, uncommitted to anything but their own elusive self-improvement.

By their fruits, you will know them. The key question for New Agers is, how to transcend the insular, Cartesian self and experience connection and unity—with others and the cosmos. 'The Earth', say many New Agers, 'is our mother, one connected whole.' (They are big on new scientific paradigms and deploy atmospheric chemist James Lovelock's 'Gaia Hypothesis', which proposes that photosynthesizing plants both produce the air we breathe and regulate the temperature of the planet, to suggest that the whole earth is a living organism.) Understandably, the hallmark of the New Age ethos and its principal ethical component has been its preoccupation with the environment—and thus its Green politics. Action on behalf of the

abused planet, I would say, is a better measure of what 'cosmic connection' (or 'All is one') means to them than any supposed Vedantic monism—which, if it were effective, would turn an utterly blind eye toward Valdez oil spills or holes in the ozone layer.

A new gnosticism?

The danger of New Age thinking lies in another direction—in its innocent optimism and flightiness, its appeal to the visionary eternal youth in us who is quick to see through the conventional follies of church and state but has trouble taking responsibility and would rather dream on than do and dare. The menace here is not philistinism, 'tranquillizing oneself with the trivial' as Kierkegaard would have put it, but the sickness unto death of 'too much possibility' and the 'despair of infinitude'. New Age 'openness' has a Walter Mitty quality that runs to the fantastic, and that accordingly volatilizes the self and paralyzes action as effectively as does leaden depression. Come down to earth, I say. Genuine metamorphosis, all the ancient legends tell us, requires more than good will, of which these people have plenty; it demands trial and sacrifice—and patient endurance. And in our complex, high-tech society, that means the trials of reshaping public institutions—school, church, corporation, government and foreign policy—to reflect who we are, to mean what we as a people say we mean.¹² Risk of failure is part of the bargain. Michael Murphy, one of the Esalen Institute's founders, has for years, and long before Mr Gorbachev's *glasnost*, engaged in 'citizen diplomacy' with the Soviets; and other New Agers have done the same or taken up the long-haul cause of democratizing the corporation and the workplace. I wish I could say this was standard practice, or that the New Age slogan, 'Think globally and act locally', was enacted as often as it is recited.

I may be myopic, but I do not see it happening on a wide scale—and for the simple reason that high flyers, like Icarus, plunge to watery graves as soon as things really heat up in dirty office politics. No less than the soporific philistine curled up before the television set, dreamers of the high dream are terribly vulnerable to disillusionment with the nasty, materialistic world. It is one reason, I suppose, why they do not take easily to the bible, whose narratives are almost wholly about political betrayals and disasters. Who wants to take inspiration from a marginal Middle-Eastern people who were never Number One? Or from a marginal Jew who put himself last?

Your average New Ager has discovered the interior life and is captivated by the vision of being a responsible global citizen, a one-

worlder. But all too often the energy of this vision, unsupported by any institutional means of realization, is drained away by the individualistic habit of turning everything into a consumer item for the exclusive benefit of the omnivorous self. New Age spirituality is not Buddhist enough, not self-noughting enough. And let me say it outright: it is not Catholic enough, in the sense of a commitment to a church that denies us the luxury of retreating to a private enclave of the like-minded when hell rages on our streets and paradise is indefinitely postponed. In my experience, both the loosely networked New Age groups and the tighter, more élitist groups engaged in esoteric disciplines (e. g., Gurdjieff groups), tend to take on, after the initial enthusiasm lags, a claustrophobic, inbred quality characteristic of sects concerned only about saving the club-members' own skins. In effect, the evil world is abandoned to those without scruple—and hence the gnostic odour of this stuff. It is the American way, of course: the movement's social piety gets diverted, is used up for solipsistic consolation. Which is to say that the New Age is susceptible to the enfeebling disease of individualism that afflicts all religion in these United States. No one is immune.

NOTES

¹ *New York Times*, 9 April 1991, p. 1.

² See Yankelovitch, Daniel: *New rules: searching for self-fulfillment in a world turned upside down* (New York, Random House, 1981); also Clecak, Peter: *America's quest for the ideal self: dissent and fulfillment in the 60's and 70's* (New York, Oxford, 1983).

³ Turner, Victor: *The ritual process: structure and anti-structure* (Ithaca, New York, Cornell, 1969), pp. 94–165.

⁴ Fergusson, Marilyn: *The Aquarian conspiracy: personal and social transformation in the 1980's* (Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, 1980), p. 29.

⁵ Fitzgerald, Frances: *Cities on a hill: a journey through contemporary American cultures* (New York, Touchstone, 1987), p. 388.

⁶ Becker, Ernest: *The denial of death* (New York, Free Press, 1973), p. 271.

⁷ See Feuerstein, Georg: *Holy madness* (New York, Paragon House, 1991), pp. 80–100 (for Da Free John); Fitzgerald: *ibid.*, pp. 247–381 (for Rajneesh).

⁸ Ahlstrom, Sidney E.: *A religious history of the American people* (New Haven/London, Yale, 1972), p. 1019.

⁹ See MacLaine, Shirley: *Dancing in the light* (New York, Bantam, 1985), *passim*.

¹⁰ Ahlstrom: *ibid.*, pp. 1020–1036.

¹¹ See Delumeau, Jean: *Sin and fear: the emergence of a western guilt culture 13th–18th centuries* (New York, St Martin's, 1990), pp. 1–5, 555–557 *et passim*.

¹² See Bellah, Robert N., Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, Steven M. Tipton: *The good society* (New York, Knopf, 1991), pp. 3–51, 256–287.