New Age Spirituality

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"Gods of the New Age," a popular film on the New Age Movement, opens with scenes from India, emphasizing the close affinity between New Age spirituality and Hindu spirituality. Such an analogy utterly fails to catch the true flavor of New Age spirituality—a form of spirituality that is permeating all aspects of contemporary American life. This religious "revival" is every bit as influential as other religious revivals in American history—perhaps more so.

The New Age Movement does draw from Eastern mysticism, but in all its diversity, is also very eclectic. It draws heavily from Christianity, from other world religions, and from all forms of spiritualism and the occult. As such, New Age spirituality is anything but new. Its forms of worship and beliefs are ancient, and its manifestations can be found in every generation of church history. The present New Age "revival" has served to fill the spiritual vacuum left by modern science and technology and by secular humanism. Although it rises out of the Eastern cults of the 1960s, it is basically the old occult made respectable. No longer do the practitioners ply their trade in back alleys and store-fronts. The "revival" has spread to the affluent and educated sectors of society, and the setting of its weekend seminars is posh hotels or mountain retreats. Nevertheless, the basic religious tenets have changed very little from those of past centuries. Thus, to understand this contemporary "revival" in America it is helpful to look at prior forms of New Age spirituality.

The first "new age" revival of significance to emerge from Protestantism was led by an eighteenth-century "new age" evangelist, Emanuel Swedenborg, who was born in Sweden in 1688, the son of a Lutheran bishop. He was a brilliant scientist, who abandoned his scientific studies in mid-life in order to bring revival to the cold formalism of the Lutheran church. But in his quest for a more experiential faith, he veered far from historic orthodoxy. He became convinced that he was God's special messenger, chosen to transmit (or "channel," to use a contemporary term) messages from spirit guides from the heavenly realm. He was contacted by a spirit guide, who later came again while he was in his bedroom: "That night the same man revealed himself to me again. I was not frightened then. He said that he was the Lord God, the Creator and Redeemer of the world, and that He had chosen me to declare to men the spiritual contents of Scripture; and that He Himself would declare to me what I should write on this subject."
Swedenborg later testified that he had "written entire pages, and the spirits . . . absolutely guided my hand, so that it was they who were doing the writing." What kind of messages did Swedenborg receive from the spirits regarding the "spiritual contents of Scripture"? The spirits from the realm beyond denied the historic doctrine of the Trinity and offered new interpretations of the resurrection, the second coming of Christ, life and death, baptism, and communion. Even the chief hallmark of the Reformation—justification by faith alone—was overturned. "He was quite convinced that he, Swedenborg himself, had succeeded after many efforts, to bring the spirit of Martin Luther to peace at last by causing that spirit to repent of Luther's nefarious doctrine of justification by faith."3

Another historical movement that sheds light on New Age spirituality is Theosophy, founded by Madame Helena Blavatsky in the late nineteenth century. As a young woman, Blavatsky left her Russian homeland to begin a religious pilgrimage that took her to India and surrounding areas. She arrived in the United States in the early 1870s, when it was estimated that nearly half the population was involved in some way with spiritualism. Spiritualists' magazines were popular, and newspaper editors, including Horace Greeley, featured regular stories and columns on the subject. In this atmosphere the Theosophical Society emerged in 1875, under the leadership of Blavatsky. Its roots, unlike Swedenborg's Church of New Jerusalem, were not primarily in the Christian faith, but rather in Eastern mysticism and the occult. But the two forms of spirituality were very similar. Like Swedenborg, Blavatsky claimed she was in regular contact with her personal spirit guide and with a larger group of spirits, whom she referred to as the "Brothers" or "Masters." As the specially chosen messenger for the age, she engaged in automatic writing—her classic work being Isis Unveiled, a survey of occultic thought and practices. Unlike Swedenborg, her focus was not to reinterpret the Bible, but rather to bring an entirely different foundation to spirituality—Eastern mysticism and the occult, with an added feature of the goddess.

A nineteenth-century religious movement that very successfully combined a Christian focus with an emphasis on Hinduism and other Eastern religions was the Unity School of Christianity, founded by Charles and Myrtle Fillmore. "We have borrowed the best from all religions," wrote Charles Fillmore. "Unity is not a sect, not a separation of people into an exclusive group of know-it-alls. Unity is the truth that is taught in all religions."4 The religions he seriously studied and borrowed from included spiritualism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Rosicrucianism, Theosophy, and Christianity. The Fillmores discussed their belief in reincarnation as easily as their belief in the miracles of Jesus—though not as most Christians would discuss those miracles. Wrote Charles:
By the power of his thought Elijah penetrated the atoms of hydrogen and oxygen and precipitated an abundance of rain. By the same law he increased the widow's oil and meal. This was not a miracle—that is, it was not a divine intervention supplanting natural law—but the exploitation of a law not ordinarily understood. Jesus used the same dynamic power of thought to break the bonds of the atoms composing the few loaves and fishes of a little lad's lunch—and five thousand people were fed.¹

To a great extent, it is from these earlier movements that the New Age Movement and New Age spirituality have arisen in the past decade. Also significant was the 1960s Eastern mysticism manifested in such cultic groups as the Hare Krishnas, Transcendentalism, the Divine Light Mission, and the Rajneesh commune. These Hindu-oriented cults paved the way for a widespread acceptance of such Eastern religious concepts as reincarnation, karma, and the ascended masters.

Despite the historical foundations for New Age spirituality, the movement itself is not simply defined. A *Time* magazine cover story offered a definition as ambiguous as the movement itself:

For all its popularity, the New Age is hard to define. It includes a whole cornucopia of beliefs, fads, rituals; some subscribe to some parts, some to others. Only on special occasions, like the highly publicized "harmonic convergence" in August [1987], do believers in I Ching or crystals gather together with believers in astral travel, shamans, Lemurians and tarot readers, for a communal chanting of om, the Hindu invocation that often precedes meditation. . . .

All in all, the New Age does express a cloudy sort of religion, claiming vague connections with both Christianity and the major faiths of the East . . . plus an occasional dab of pantheism and sorcery. The underlying faith is a lack of faith in the orthodoxies of rationalism, high technology, routine living, spiritual law-and-order. Somehow, the New Agers believe, there must be some secret and mysterious shortcut or alternative path to happiness and health. And nobody ever really dies.⁶

Some critics would argue that the New Age Movement is inconsequential. They point to a recent survey conducted by the City University of New York that indicates only 20,000 Americans admit that "New Age" is their religion. But, George Gallup, Jr. says that figure does not represent
the true picture: "The figure is low because many people who would not identify themselves as such are nevertheless drawn to various key New Age beliefs, advertently or inadvertently."  

The New Age Movement is difficult to identify statistically because it is syncretistic. Its beliefs are largely drawn from other religions, Christianity included. Indeed, most people in North America who have been drawn into New Age spirituality in one form or another would identify themselves as Christians.

Even Shirley MacLaine—who has been dubbed the "high priestess" of the New Age Movement—identifies herself with that which is generally associated with Christian spirituality. In *Out On A Limb*, she describes her early years in Sunday school and her childhood doubts. Christianity as she knew it was hollow and unfulfilling, but from her new perspective, Jesus and the Bible offer satisfaction previously unknown to her. Jesus is no longer a God; rather, he is a role model for all who would seek a Christ-consciousness.

MacLaine's book *Out On A Limb*, is, in many respects, one of the best single representations of New Age spirituality. It delves into a wide range of New Age beliefs and practices and analyzes them on a level easily understood by individuals who may not be familiar with the terms and concepts drawn from Spiritualism and other religions. That MacLaine might be considered a lay person and a seeker, as opposed to a "professional," does not detract from the book's merit as a treatise on the New Age. In fact, the lay mentality is one of the chief characteristics of New Age spirituality. Unlike Hinduism, known for its seasoned gurus, or Christianity with its seminary-trained ministers, New Age "experts" often rely on instant enlightenment. John Hanley, founder of a New Age management seminar called Lifespring, represents this attitude: "Nowhere in my extensive readings was I convinced to go to Tibet and meditate upon a mountain top. And even if I did, my reading said that it could take years for enlightenment. Lifespring got me there in 5 days."  

Throughout her book, MacLaine shares the insights she has gleaned from her New Age mentors, and at one place she asks David, a spiritual counselor, how spirituality can help solve the world's problems. His response sheds light on the individualistic nature of New Age spirituality and the effort to relate it to Christianity:

"Well, " said David, "all our 'isms' and self-righteous wars and industrial technology and intellectual masturbation and socially compassionate programs have only made it [the world] worse, it seems to me. And the longer we disregard the spiritual aspect of life, the worse it will get. . . . Christ and the Bible and spiritual teachings don't concern themselves with social or political questions. Instead, spiri-
tuality goes right to the root of the question—the individual. If each of us set ourselves right individually, we would be on the right path socially and politically. 9

The heart of New Age spirituality truly is "setting ourselves right"—a life-long exercise that involves exploring one's inner self—a focus that is acknowledged in the last paragraph of MacLaine’s book. She is reflecting on the spiritual pilgrimage she has recently begun: "Maybe one day I would take a trip to the Pleiades and see what was on the other side. Would it be as full of wonder as the inner journey I was just beginning?" 10

The inner journey into New Age spirituality not only involves "setting ourselves right individually," but also focuses on oneself to the point of self-deification. The most unforgettable scene of the film version of Out On A Limb, showed MacLaine looking out over the Pacific Ocean, with her arms outstretched saying "I am god." Most proponents of New Age spirituality would not publicly make such a claim, but the belief that we are all one with God and are all gods in our own right is basic. Jesus was a god—or God—not because he was miraculously born as God incarnate, but because he had reached the point of Christ-consciousness, even as the Buddha had done centuries before—though many New Age proponents emphasize Christ over other great masters when appealing to Christians.

Here again MacLaine's book offers insight. In response to her question about the significance of Jesus, David, her mentor, replies: "Christ was the most advanced human ever to walk this planet. He was a highly evolved spiritual soul whose purpose on Earth was to impart the teachings of a Higher Order." Even the doctrine of the resurrection is salvaged. When questioned about its veracity, David responds: "First of all, a lot of people saw it, and reported that they were awestruck and even terrified. And second, the remains of his body were never found, and third, a legend of that magnitude would be hard to make up." 11

The most significant reinterpretation of the historical Jesus by New Age proponents relates to his eighteen silent years. Where was Jesus between the time of his visit to the temple in Jerusalem and his baptism by John the Baptist? The most extensive New Age treatise on this subject is Elizabeth Clare Prophet's The Lost Years of Jesus. There are, however, many other books that offer similar accounts, including The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus, purportedly channeled from the spirit world by Levi H. Dowling. As different as these works are, the message is essentially the same: Jesus spent those eighteen years traveling in the East. MacLaine sums up these claims, as David presented them to her:

A lot of people think that those eighteen missing years were spent traveling in and around India and Tibet and Persia and the Near East. There are all kinds of legends and
stories about a man who sounds just like Christ. His description is matched everywhere and he said he was the Son of God and he corroborated the beliefs of the Hindus that reincarnation was in fact true. They say he became an adept yogi and mastered complete control over his body and the physical world around him. He evidently went around doing all those miracles that were recorded later in the Bible and tried to teach people that they could do the same things too if they got more in touch with their spiritual selves and their own potential power.12

New Age believers are primed and ready for the inevitable question. If this is so, why do we not find reincarnation taught in the Bible. Again David answers:

The theory of reincarnation is recorded in the Bible. But the proper interpretations were struck from it during an Ecumenical Council meeting of the Catholic Church in Constantinople sometime around 553 A.D., called the Council of Nicea. The Council members voted to strike those teachings from the Bible in order to solidify Church control.13

Not only is this faulty history (as any church historian who has studied the Council of Constantinople will confirm), but it is also faulty logic to imagine that a particular teaching could have been edited out of the Bible as late as the mid-sixth century when countless manuscripts were in circulation throughout the Mediterranean world.

The Bible is regarded as a very significant sacred record by many New Age proponents, but is reinterpreted to fit their ideology. Visionary accounts in the book of Ezekiel, for example, are regarded as communication from extraterrestrial entities. Also typical is the perspective of John, another mentor of MacLaine's, who views Scripture as the work of ancient psychics:

How do you think Moses wrote of the creation of the world if he hadn't been plugged in psychically? And the same with Christ. I mean, those guys were highly developed spiritual people who felt their mission in life was to impart their knowledge. That's why the Bible is so valuable. It's a storehouse of knowledge. And most all of their writings jibe too. There's hardly any discrepancy in what any of them was saying.14
The Bible, of course, is not the only source of ancient wisdom. There are other ancient religious writings that are of equal value to many New Age proponents, and there are more recent writings that have been channelled by ancient entities. *A Course in Miracles* is an example of the latter. This three-volume work is bound like a Bible and treated like a Bible by many students of the New Age. It has sold hundreds of thousands of copies, and is offered as an elective course in many mainline churches. Its preface reports that the volumes came through a "Voice" heard by Helen Schucman, a professor of Medical Psychology at Columbia University and a self-described atheist. She wrote down "the highly symbolic dreams and descriptions of the strange images" that came to her, and with the help of another professor put together the final product. Who was the Voice? The text obviously identifies the Voice with Jesus, and the topics covered are biblically oriented.

The message from this Voice, however, like that which Swedenborg heard, does not correspond with historic orthodoxy. For example, the Voice denies certain words ascribed to Jesus in the New Testament canon:

If the Apostles had not felt guilty, they never could have quoted me as saying, "I come not to bring peace but a sword." This is clearly the opposite of everything I taught. Nor could they have described my reactions to Judas as they did, if they had really understood me. I could not have said, "Betrayest thou the Son of Man with a kiss?" unless I believed in betrayal. The whole message of the crucifixion was simply that I did not.15

Like most New Age literature, *A Course in Miracles* denies the reality of sin: "Sin is the grand illusion underlying all the ego's grandiosity. . . . The Son of God [a human being] can be mistaken; he can deceive himself; he can even turn the power of his mind against himself. But he cannot sin. . . . Yet for all the wild insanity inherent in the whole idea of sin, it is impossible."16 Not only is sin an illusion, but the individual is the "Son of God." Repeatedly in the workbook section, the student is expected to repeat the phrase: "I am the holy Son of God Himself" or a little verse that carries a similar message: "I am not a body. I am free. For I am still as God created me."17

In some respects, *A Course in Miracles* resembles Mary Baker Eddy's *Science and Health With Key to the Scriptures*—a work that is more significant for its historical than its current influence. Yet, *A Course in Miracles* has found a contemporary audience. Its most recent champion is Marianne Williamson, who preaches Saturdays at the St. Thomas Episcopal Church in West Hollywood. According to *Time* magazine, "she is the most highly visible advocate of a mind-awareness text called *A Course in Miracles," which
"teaches spiritual self-betterment through exercises to clarify the subject's perception of reality." Williamson gives high praise to her spiritual discovery: "The course was my personal path out of hell." Others, however, view the course differently. According to one observer, "The course is a perfect disconnected religion of the '90s. It allows driven, self-absorbed, narcissistic people to continue in their ways."18

In addition to the written records—the Bible, A Course in Miracles, and an assortment of other religious writings—New Age proponents believe that there are unwritten records that offer even deeper secrets of being and of the universe. These memory vibrations of the universe are known as the Akashic Records. According to John, one of Shirley MacLaine's spiritual mentors, they "are a kind of panoramic record of everything that's ever been thought or felt or done." They are "a kind of magnetic plate that attracts all vibrations," and any "really sensitively attuned" psychic "can plug in to those vibrations."19

One such psychic was Edgar Cayce, revered by many New Age proponents as a modern-day prophet. Widely known as the "sleeping prophet," Cayce plied his psychic trade for more than three decades prior to his death in 1945. Known primarily for diagnosing health problems while in a sleep-like state, he also gave readings on people concerning their past lives. A reading on a homosexual who was unhappy, for example, reported that he had taken great delight in baiting and exposing homosexuals in his past life in the French Royal Court.20

In 1938, Cayce's reading on Irene Seiberling Harrison elaborated on her past life as Ruth, a younger sister of Jesus. Interviewed at the age of ninety-nine in 1989, Harrison could only say that she did not know Jesus well as a young girl because he was away in India on a long pilgrimage. She did, however, offer some reflections on her perception of Jesus' identity: "Jesus of Nazareth was a human being like we were human beings. And he was letting this absolute consciousness of God flow through him. But he didn't take credit unto himself. He gave the Father the credit. People put him on this pedestal, but I don't think for one minute he wanted that."21

Belief in reincarnation is very much a part of New Age spirituality, but, as was true with Cayce's readings, it is often a Christianized version of reincarnation. The Hindu concept of moving down the ladder to a lower caste because of bad karma is not emphasized. The knowledge of past lives is used to shed light on the present life, but karma does make a difference, as a conversation between MacLaine and her mentor, John, indicates:

"[What] about reincarnation in relation to our children. I mean, who are our children if every soul has already lived many lives?"
John smiled and took off his glasses.

"Well," he began in a gentle tone, "from the teachings it says that we shouldn't treat our children as our possessions anyway. They are, as you say, just small bodies inhabited by souls that have already had many experiences. So, reincarnation principles help explain some of the crazy contradictions in parent-child relationships."

I thought of the news documentary I had seen on grown-up children beating and abusing their parents. Were these children doing that because they had been beaten in some previous life? Or because the parent had beaten someone else in a previous life? Who was working out whose karma? But John was continuing, "I can tell you," he said, "from some of my past-life recall, that I'm sure that my eight-year-old son was once my father."

One of the most significant underlying dogmas of New Age spirituality is that there are absolutely no absolutes. "Your truth is your truth; my truth is my truth" is an often-repeated maxim of New Age belief. As such, New Age proponents often find it difficult to talk about evil and sin, or right and wrong. To suggest that a heinous murder or rape—or even the Holocaust—is not absolutely wrong is disturbing to many people. Yet, MacLaine attempts to resolve this issue by relating it to the concept of reincarnation. As is typical throughout her book, she is the questioning pupil interacting with her mentor David, who rejects being judgmental of people because "this life is not the only one to be reckoned with."

"You mean we should just be patient with the Hitlers of this world?"

"I mean that six million Jews did not really die. Only their bodies died."

"Beautiful," I said. "That's really great. Tell the families of those six million lucky people that only their bodies died."

David winced as though I had hit him. Sadness bathed his face as he looked out across the ocean. . . . "If Hitler had felt moral responsibility as a person, he would have stopped himself, wouldn't he? You have to make it personal. I don't believe in killing anyone. That's where your question about God and the grand design comes in because only God can judge in that context. An individual can only judge of his own behavior. Ultimately no one can judge another. Besides you know, Hitler is not the only monster that ever lived. . . ."
The insistence that no one can and ought to judge the behavior of someone else is only one aspect of the radical individualism so prevalent in New Age spirituality. Truth is as subjective as its source. So-called "entities" or "spirit guides" or "ascended masters" of every description allegedly speak through channelers, who take the message for themselves or pass it on to others. Yet, MacLaine points out, there is a universal message in this subjective truth. "So much of the message seemed to be universal—that is, entities channeling through a variety of people in many countries in different languages were saying basically the same thing. Look into yourselves, explore yourselves, you are the Universe."24

In some cases channelers literally "look into" themselves or into others, as in the case of two Canadian women who received messages from their unborn infants. To relieve their guilt about having abortions, they called in a friend to contact the spirits of the unborn children. The friend later testified about what transpired in the first instance: "The being who was male, understood and assured her he would wait until she was ready to have another child because he knew she wanted her to be his mother." In the second instance the mother was very depressed, and the spirit of the fetus comforted her and accepted the impending abortion.25

But New Age believers also go outside themselves in their search for truth. Indeed, out-of-body experiences are viewed as an important avenue to self-discovery. MacLaine, for example, gained a new awareness through an out-of-body experience:

What was certain to me was that I felt two forms... my body form below and my spirit form that soared. I was in two places at once, and I accepted it completely. I was aware, as I soared, of vibrational energy around me. I couldn't see it, but I felt a new sense of "sensing" it. It felt like a new dimension of perception, somehow, that had nothing to do with hearing or seeing or smelling or tasting or touching. I couldn't describe it to myself. I knew it was there—physically—yet I knew my body was below me... I began to perceive waves of energy connections and undulating thought energy patterns... My new perceptions were becoming more clearly simple. What I had experienced had a dreamlike quality to it but it wasn't a dream. It was more like a new dimension.26

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, known for her writing on death and dying, has been the most ardent publicizer of out-of-body or life-after-life experiences, and MacLaine cites Kubler-Ross to defend her own experiences. Like MacLaine, Kubler-Ross sees a close connection between such experiences and reincarnation—a belief she once dismissed as a "pastime for far-
out people." In recent years, however, she has openly professed her New Age spirituality: "We all have to go through the tumbler several times before we can emerge as a crystal," she writes. She likewise testifies to personal encounters with spirit guides, though she considers Jesus to be her chief teacher and Master, and claims that he appeared to her in person in her kitchen.27

That New Age spirituality would draw on Christian spirituality should not surprise. The very term "new age" presumably signals that we are moving from one star age into another—from the age of Pisces to the age of Aquarius. Pisces, in the view of many New Age proponents, represented the traditional form of Christianity, as evidenced by creeds and institutionalized churches. Aquarius, on the other hand, ushers in an age which focuses on experience and the supernatural—an age that brings people in touch with their inner selves as well as with the spirit world outside themselves.

The age of Pisces also emphasized the Ten Commandments and the necessity of obeying an all-powerful transcendent God. New Age spirituality, however, erases the problem of sin and guilt. Not only are there no absolutes to inhibit one's style, but also there are ways to circumvent any that arise despite such philosophical subjectivity. If a mother feels guilt about an abortion, a channeler can quickly assuage such feelings by contacting the spirit of the unborn.

Discussion of topics like sin, guilt, and hell are not prominent in New Age writing except to counter them or to offer alternatives. MacLaine, for example, redefines hell as the soul's failure to progress upward: "If it [the soul] chooses to continually regress, it will eventually lose its humanity and become animal-like with no choices for advancement or moral atonement left to it. That is what was spoken of as Hell. If you don't choose spiritual evolution, you don't get the chance after a while, and that's Hell." 28

The god—or goddess—of New Age spirituality has no use for an orthodoxy that treasures the creeds and writings of the Church Fathers. That doubt and questioning are the marks of true spirituality is seen in a sermon series, entitled "Christianity for the Modern Pagan," preached by Robert V. Thompson at the First Baptist Church of Evanston, Illinois—a church which promotes its own form of New Age spirituality. Among the sermon titles were, "Why Monotheism is Dangerous," "Sensual Spirituality," "Trust the God and the Goddess," and "The Holiness of Heresy." 29 What then is New Age spirituality? Amid all its diversity, there are some common characteristics. It is a non-judgmental, non-creedal, informal, experiential, subjective, self-focussed spirituality that places high value on the supernatural and on so-called "miracles" that are grounded in the individual—not in a transcendent deity. It exudes both a personal and cosmic optimism in its emphasis on an inner and global consciousness for oneness and peace. Its attraction, above all else, is that it feels good.

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Is New Age spirituality really spirituality? With all its glitz, glamour, and materialism, it is easy to discount the New Age Movement as a sham, comprised largely of fakes and frauds. The *Time* magazine story on Marianne Williamson gives credence to this analysis. It is entitled "Mother Teresa for the '90s?"—the question mark suggesting that perhaps she is another Mother Teresa. While the article does point to the fact that she raises funds for humanitarian projects, it also reports that she charges people seven dollars to listen to her "sermons." The cost is low in comparison to typical New Age admission fees, but it is difficult to imagine Mother Teresa charging people seven dollars for spiritual counsel.

ENDNOTES


2 Ibid., 211.


10 Ibid., 367.

11 Ibid., 92.

12 Ibid., 234.

13 Ibid., 234f.

14 Ibid., 105.

16 Ibid., I, 375.

17 Ibid., II, 353f., 378-89.

18 Martha Smilgis, "Mother Teresa for the '90s?", *Time* (July 29, 1991), 60.

19 *Out On A Limb*, 104.

20 Ibid., 110.


22 *Out On A Limb*, 102f.

23 Ibid., 99.

24 Ibid., 166.


26 *Out On A Limb*, 327-330.

