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See also: Buddhism – Tibetan; Hinduism; Mongolian Buddhism and Taimen Conservation; Mountaineering; Sacred Mountains; Tibet and Central Asia.

Network on Conservation and Religion

In September 1986, to commemorate its 25th anniversary, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) founded a Network on Conservation and Religion. At the initiative of the then-president of the WWF, Prince Philip of the UK, and Martin Palmer, director of ICOREC (the International Consultancy on Religion, Education and Culture), a strange mix of environmentalists, including grassroots environmentalists, prominent officers of WWF-International, and representatives from the five so-called world religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism) undertook a pilgrimage to Assisi, Italy, the birthplace of St. Francis, the Roman Catholic saint whom the Vatican had in 1979 given official status as a heavenly protector for environmentalists.

The final session was staged as a religious ceremony in the basilica raised above the grave of St. Francis, and included apologies to First Peoples represented by a Maori warrior. Representatives of the religious traditions read their declarations on religion and nature and pledged themselves to cooperate with each other and the WWF in order to help save the planet, Mother Earth, from ecological disaster. The WWF Network on Religion and Conservation (sometimes also called The New Alliance), was thus formally established. Other religions joined the network in subsequent years, including Bahá'í, Sikhism, Jainism and Daoism.

The ideas behind the Network can be summarized as follows: the religious traditions, with their spiritual and ethical values as well as their billions of adherents and their impact on substantial geographical and cultural areas all over the world, can cooperate with conservationists to make a substantial and durable contribution to environmental thinking and practice. Though recognizing that the religions in the past have not always contributed in a positive way to the conservation of the natural environment, the Network sees them as an alternative to a purely materialistic, dualistic, anthropocentric and utilitarian worldview which has been partly responsible for creating the environmental crisis.

The event in Assisi, and the issuing of the declarations (published by WWF-International as *The Assisi Declarations on Religion and Nature: Interfaith Ceremony*,

WWF 1986) set the standard for the activities (interfaith meetings, celebrations of specially designed ceremonies like Harvest rituals, environmental projects run by religious communities in collaboration with scientists and the WWF, publication of more declarations) of the Network from 1986–1995. During this time, the WWF Network on Conservation and Religion published a periodical *The New Road*, and in cooperation with WWF-International and ICOREC it helped pave the way for several other publications, including among others the series *World Religions and Ecology* published by Cassell. In 1995, the WWF Network on Conservation and Religion was subsumed by the Alliance of Religion and Conservation, ARC.

Tim Jensen

See also: Alliance of Religion and Conservation; World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF).

New Age

The New Age movement is an amorphous association of people who identify primarily as spiritual explorers. Many if not most feel that humanity is at the dawn of entering into a new form of consciousness. The new Age of Aquarius, unlike its Piscean predecessor, is to be a time for balance between male and female qualities, the elimination of aggression and power obsessions, and a civilization more in tune with the rhythms of nature and based on a more equitable development of human potential. New Age adherents or associates, inevitably characterized by various forms of spiritual syncretism, are seekers after what they believe to be truth and peace. With this protean mix of nuance and the bizarre, the New Age itself remains among the more difficult of contemporary spiritual developments to comprehend and portray, but as a “religion of commodification,” it parlays with any number of alternative medical or psychological methods ranging from meditation, acupuncture, homeopathy, aromatherapy, astrology, environmentalism, Hermetic practice, Esoteric Christianity and Goddess Worship.

Beneath the popular image of New Age, its antecedents derive from various venerable aspects of what Colin Campbell terms the “cultic milieu.” Among these we find the Spiritualist, New Thought and Theosophical traditions of the nineteenth century. From these particular orientations, New Age inherits its practice of channeling spirits or entities from other dimensions, its belief that both illness and poverty are illusions or diseases of the mind, and its understandings of karma and reincarnation. The “cultic milieu” is itself a mix of non-mainstream spiritual and esoteric ideas imported from the East and blended with Western occult and pagan notions. The bedrock New

Age spiritual position is Gnostic or Transcendental and seeks divine truth as something masked by the physical phenomenal world. From this perspective, nature is considered ultimately an illusion and something that must be penetrated to gain access to "higher understandings."

In the 1960s, at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, the Jewish-German ex-patriot Fritz Perls introduced his Group Gestalt Therapy with its stress on the value of immediate, authentic experience within a framework that takes the mind/body as a holistic organism rather than a Cartesian dichotomy. Perls, along with such seminal thinkers as Wilhelm Reich, Otto Rank, Kurt Lewin, and Carl Rogers and such complementary practices as Abraham Maslow's Self-Actualization and Roberto Assagioli's Psychosynthesis, launched the field of humanistic psychology from which the Growth and Human Potential movements took their birth. Beginning in California and quickly spreading beyond, Human Potential intertwined with the American psychedelic heritage and spawned numerous self-help/psychophysical therapeutic practices. As these became increasingly integrated with the "cultural milieu," the New Age as a self-conscious spiritual movement began to evolve.

Following the emergence of transpersonal psychology from humanistic psychology and concern with the transcendent potential of the individual in self-actualization, New Age represents the spiritualization of the Human Potential movement. Placing relationship with divinity into a holistic worldview, any development of an ecology of self eventually includes an ecology of the planet and the potential for cross-fertilization with the concerns of deep ecology. Succinctly, and grounded by the astrological consideration that we are leaving an age of Pisces for the new age of Aquarius, the New Age is an expectation of individual change that will coalesce into a quantum leap of collective consciousness. Following current theories of complexity that study spontaneous self-organization in which the whole becomes more than simply the sum of its parts, New Age continues the idealism of the counter-culture of the 1960s as a modification if not refutation of contemporary cynical trends by affirming the reality of magic as it relates to self-transformation, communal development and progressive global change.

While New Age derives from specific cultural or sub-cultural trends (Theosophy, spiritualism, humanistic and later transpersonal psychologies), it is nevertheless a disparate conglomerate of different movements and/or religions. Sociologically, it remains difficult to grasp. It is neither a traditional church, identifiable sect, mainstream denomination, nor a single unorthodox cult. There is no institutional mechanism for determining membership or countenancing expulsion, no one who can speak for the movement as a whole, there is no list of creeds, and there is no register of membership. It is instead a loose series of networks, often cellular and replicate, with a constantly

shifting rostrum of spokespeople, therapists and teachers. In short, its fluid organization or even non-organization makes it more of a consumer phenomenon than anything that could be understood as traditionally religious. In fact, New Agers frequently proclaim that they are not religious but spiritual. This non-institutional nature and marketing choice of New Age appears to be its underlying appeal. The New Age represents *a* if not *the* spiritual consumer supermarket that is steadily superseding the appeal of traditional religion in the Western world. In the present-day context of rapid social change, New Age may be cited as an affirmation and celebration of spiritual choice. But this in turn leads to severe accusations of cultural appropriation – especially from identity-endangered peoples such as Native Americans and the Aboriginal peoples of Australia. As a rebuttal, New Age insists that the multi-cultural register is now public domain and accessible to everyone.

In short, an inordinate amount of criticism is directed against its varied practices and more prominent beliefs. Foremost is the critique that dismisses New Age spirituality as essentially narcissistic. The self-preoccupation that has to do with "me" only is described as touchy-feely, airy-fairy, intellectually vapid and eclectically woolly. For many, New Age is described as cheaply false, spiritually kitsch, and a mumbo-jumbo mash that is pastel-colored and lavender-scented. Its central purpose is frequently understood by the non-sympathetic as little more than an effort to make money from those reputedly foolish enough to purchase the many gimmicks and psychophysical therapies that are marketed under the widely embracing label of New Age.

The New Age response to anti-religion criticism accepts that religions have their roots in early practicalities and anxieties but argues that uncertainty and the need for pragmatic solutions is no less a part of our ever-changing and increasingly complicated world. The New Ager is also as likely to retort that if Christianity, Buddhism and the other major religions are now established, they were not always so but were once themselves essentially new religious spiritualities. Despite the wide range of beliefs and practices that might fall under the general rubric of "New Age," as a religious perspective, New Age is no less a shared attempt to understand what constitutes the world, humanity and the supernatural and the relationships between them in ways that give meaning to participants' lives and help them determine what is valuable within some sort of workable framework. The heart of New Age is not such superficial peripherals as candles, crystals and incense, but is instead the increasing awareness in today's world of individual difference and cultural multiplicity that religious choice is a personal decision. Insisting that religious truth is no longer the monopoly of private elites or esoteric cabals, New Age religion may be said to represent a democratization of spirituality within the emergent

information age that validates universal suffrage to spiritual prerogative.

Consequently, the shallow, scented and evasive proclivities of what is termed characteristically New Age are primarily a media-induced creation. The press has tended to sensationalize the practice of channeling, use of crystals and the reputation for “flakiness,” but New Age itself may be something more than these. As holistic theoretician Marilyn Ferguson describes it, there is an “Aquarian conspiracy” that endeavors and promotes humanitarian and ecological consciousness. The problem for New Age in gaining a respectable public image perhaps lies more with the fact that decentralist empowerment policies, citizen diplomacy missions, ecological and educational reform, and integral thought do not sell newspapers. Apart from the unresolved issue of cultural “theft,” New Age’s deepest problem is a public relations issue.

Nevertheless, New Age appropriation from a truly holistic perspective might constitute the movement’s Achilles’ heel. Inasmuch as New Age facilitators exploit indigenous culture for financial profit and self-gratification, they remain largely insensitive to the suppression, denial and socio-economic constraint under which the traditional holders of such culture have labored. They also appear to be callous with regard to the damage and destruction they cause to the heritage of people whose identity and potential for survival are intimately connected to their own spirituality. For those for whom knowledge is something that is privileged and not simply a marketable commodity, the unscrupulous and ruthless exploiter of “sacred knowledge” becomes simply a fraud, charlatan, liar and cheat. The “plastic” shaman and New Age wannabe who claim that practicing native spirituality is “their right” are condemned by those who feel robbed as seeking “a quick-fix or religious Band-Aid.” If it were true that spiritual property can no longer be privately owned, New Agers have consistently demonstrated a flagrant lack of sensitivity to the broader consequences of this issue.

Analytically, New Age may be broken down into three distinguishable and often overlapping orientations: occult, spiritual and social. Occult or esoteric New Agers accept the supernatural as a real and intervening force in human and terrestrial affairs. Frequently there is in this orientation an expectation of violent or even apocalyptic Earth changes (storms, famine, earthquakes, pole shift, plagues) that will constitute the transition into the new era. There is general acceptance of a *deus ex machina* or divine intervention as the instigator if not designer of collective consciousness emergence. By contrast and unlike the media-promoted occult side of New Age with its associations of spirit guides, channeling, crystal meditation and appropriation of symbols from different cultures, the spiritual and social dimensions of New Age place their emphasis on human effort rather than supernatural intervention. The former stresses spiritual development of the

individual – whether through meditation, yogic practice, shamanism, personal discipline, human potential and/or psychophysical therapy. The rationale is based on the belief that as individuals develop and transform, so too will both global society and the human biosphere. Personal enlightenment in enough numbers will bring about collective enlightenment (i.e., a new age). The social dimension of New Age, on the other hand, is epitomized in Ferguson’s 1980 publication of *The Aquarian Conspiracy*. Here the emphasis is on social service and pragmatic work in the areas of educational, institutional, environmental and remedial change. The concern is neither with the self nor with transcendental or magical assistance but with concrete work that brings about empirical transformation. The social-service wing of New Age preoccupies itself with charity work and both humanitarian and ecological reform.

When critics ignore the more serious and less sensational sides of New Age, they tend to dismiss it as little more than a fad. New Age becomes accused of being shallow, self-indulgent, escapist and superstitious – offering little more than a potpourri equivalent of snake-oil cures. But once again, even to the degree that such accusations may contain an element of accuracy, faddism is simply New Age’s means and not its goal. New Age uses the currently popular to explore, test and digest each religion’s symbols, images, objects and “spiritual truths” as resources to understand their validity and usefulness. While to date much of this pursuit can accurately be labeled uncritical and insensitive, New Age’s insistence on the undemanding and pleasant is simply a reflection of present-day consumer-society mores. The critic accuses New Age of adopting the position that “anything goes,” but the reality of New Age experimentation is that everything is tried and sampled. There are no restrictions. This is the way it seeks to uncover meaning and value within a religious framework that applies as much to the individual as it might also to various collectivities, communities, society or the planet.

Despite the great disparities of practice and pursuit encountered throughout the broad range of what can be labeled as New Age, we find certain common denominators of belief. Among these there is the acceptance that we have all lived previously; that our present life is not our first or only life. This attitude is largely to be traced to Eastern ideas of reincarnation that New Age inherited from Theosophy. It is predicated upon the essentially Gnostic belief that the cycle of rebirth is something from which to escape and transcend. In this sense, New Age contrasts strongly with contemporary forms of Western Paganism that embrace the world as a desirable and welcome reincarnation as offering a means for the return to earthly life. The corollary to this, therefore, is that New Age is less likely than Western Paganism to promote environmental activism.

From its Spiritualist legacy, on the other hand, New Age accepts that we can communicate with the dead. Once again, this possibility relates to the idea that this life is not all that there is. With or without reincarnation, or at least between successive incarnations, there is, to use the Spiritualist designation, Summerland – the realm of spirits in the beyond. Spiritualism insists that we can communicate with our deceased family members and loved ones for guidance, knowledge and confirmation. New Age has tended to take this further and, especially through its Theosophical affinities, is less interested in the departed as it is in contacting spiritual masters or mahatmas, extraterrestrial beings or space-brethren, and extra-dimensional discarnates. New Age is not concerned with Spiritualism's desire to *prove* the existence of life after death but rather with the acquisition of "higher wisdom" to assist one's spiritual development in the here and now. At the same time, as environmental alarm increases in the world at large, New Age channeled messages have revealed a growing turn toward more "green" issues.

From its origins in New Thought, New Age assumes that evil is an illusion of the mind. It seeks therefore to eradicate both illness and penury for the individual – at least the evolved individual who comes to understand the almost limitless power of the human brain and its relationship to ultimate universal energy. For New Age, this translates into the doctrine that we can heal ourselves. Its many Human Potential therapies from Roling, yoga, Reiki, shiatsu, reflexology, t'ai chi, gestalt, encounter, bio-energetics, iridology, est, Zen, Aikido, neo-shamanism, Transactional Analysis and Transcendental Meditation are simply different vehicles through which the New Ager seeks self-healing. In other words, these techniques aim to assist the individual toward actualizing the implicit assumption that the negative is simply a figment of the imagination. As New Age shaman Jonathan Horwitz perceives the healing consequences of the illusory nature of evil, the challenge arises from this to "network nature" and halt the "slaughter of the environment" – using the powers of the universe in the optimum way for the planet and all its inhabitants.

The Human Potential aspect of New Age also relates directly to what could be identified as a fourth New Age belief, namely, that we are in charge of our lives. This attitude, along with the belief that the negative or evil of illness and deprivation is an illusion, comprises the singular uniqueness of New Age: its insistence on the positive and utter denial of hindrance. In this sense alone, New Age is an affirmation that demands the world to be as it wishes. Concepts of retribution, original sin and punishment become completely alien in the New Age context, and however naive and foolish such an attitude might be judged to be, New Age represents a daringly courageous spirituality that affirms the power of positive thinking as a means to obtaining progressive ends. If there

is one spiritual principle that distinguishes New Age from the world's other major religions, it is probably this. To the degree that the "negative is encountered," it is seen simply as an "opportunity" for spiritual progress.

And, finally, in keeping with its place in the Gnostic lineage, New Age is the belief that spiritual truth comes from within. Insight is not a product of revelation or external acquisition, but one of inner development and discovery. In this complete valorization of self-experience, New Age affirms its belief in both seekership and the validation of private experience. In this sense, New Age offers a Gnostic form of mysticism – not a mysticism of escape as we find in Hinduism and Buddhism, nor quite the mysticism of union with God that occurs with esoteric Christianity or Sufism, but a mysticism of *becoming* a god. Authority and validity belong to the inner, private individual where, for New Age, lies the source of truth.

All these essential New Age beliefs – that we have lived before, that we can communicate with discarnate forms of consciousness, that we can heal ourselves and are in charge of our lives, and that spiritual truth is something to be discovered within the sanctity of the self rather than in a sacred text, or from a pulpit, or through an ecclesiastical sacrament or via an act of external or transcendental grace – resonate with the contemporary forms of spirituality that appear increasingly to be turning away from traditional institutional forms. In our world of today, spirituality is about choice – perhaps reflecting our increased valuing of the consumer and the right to make decisions that reflect personal needs and desires as apart from automatically following the dictates of established authority.

Because of its Gnostic and Theosophical heritage, there is an underlying bias throughout New Age to consider the environment a secondary concern. At the same time, however, the nature-as-illusion versus nature-as-real dichotomy has not been clearly articulated within much if not most New Age expression. Through such collective efforts as Findhorn, The Farm and Esalen or such communal centers as Glastonbury, Sedona and Ojai, New Age community efforts develop immediate awareness of – and have direct impacts on – their local environments and have tended thereby to emerge as vanguard ecological models for the global audience. Experimentation and incorporation of organic farming methods, renewable energy sources, conservation techniques, vegetarianism, home-spun textiles, alternative technology, cottage industries and cost-efficient production have shown that where New Age types of spirituality meet the Earth, they are fully capable of developing a sustainable environmental equilibrium. Consequently, despite New Age's affinity and continuation of Gnosticism, the movement's overall paradoxical nature as well as its interface with paganism and shamanism encourage a holistic inevitability that encompasses not only whatever other concerns there are

with self and transcendence but also the well-being of the planet as a place upon which “to walk gently.”

Michael York

Further Reading

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- See also: Aboriginal Spirituality and the New Age in Australia; Astrology; California Institute of Integral Studies; Celestine Prophecy; Cetacean Spirituality; Channeling; Dolphins and New Age Religion; Earth Mysteries; Ecopsychology; Ecotopia; Esalen Institute; Findhorn Foundation/Community (Scotland); Harmonic Convergence; Rainbow Family; Re-Earthing; Rustlers Valley (South Africa); Shamanism – Neo; Steiner, Rudolf – and Anthroposophy; Theosophy; Transpersonal Psychology; Unitarianism; UFOs and Extra-terrestrials; Western Esotericism; Whales and Whaling.

New Religious Movements

The expression “new religious movement” (NRM) is a term of convenience designed to circumvent the negative connotations that, sometimes correctly but perhaps more often erroneously, have accrued in the public mind to such sociological constructs as the “cult” and “sect.” More accurate terminology might be “marginal religious movements” or “alternative religious movements.” These terms avoid the question of when ought a group no longer be classified as new, but “NRM” has emerged in the academic *lingua franca* as the currently accepted and pragmatic designation.

Among the higher-profile NRMs are the Church of Scientology, the Unification Church (the Moonies), ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness or the Hari Krishnas), The Family (formerly, the Children of God) and Rastafarianism. Others more contentious in the past but now generally less so, either through internal transformations or through changes in external perception, include Maharishi Mahesh Yogi’s Transcendental Meditation, Guru Maharaj Ji’s Divine Light Mission (now Elan Vital), followers of Rajneesh/Osho, Ananda Marga, Summit Lighthouse/Church Universal and Triumphant, est/the Forum or Centres Network and Subud. On the other hand, certain groups have demonstrated various degrees of violence – either self-directed against themselves (Jim Jones’ Peoples Temple of Guyana; Heaven’s Gate in San Diego; the Solar Temple in both Switzerland and Canada) or engineered against others (Aum Shin Rikyo in Japan) or as themselves the recipients of external violence (David Koresh’s Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas). Less prominent groups that come under the label of new religious movements include the Aetherius Society, Raëlians, Brahma Kumaris, Sahaja Yoga, Sri Chinmoy, ECKANKAR, Church of the Movement of Spiritual Inner Awareness (MSIA)/Insight Transformational Seminars and Nicheren Shoshu Buddhism/Soka Gakkai. In general, NRMs that can be located as or through identifiably organized groups derive chiefly from the traditions of Christianity, various forms of Eastern spirituality (Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh or Sufi) or the more secular Human Potential Movement (including UFO groups). Nevertheless, other influences and innovations found throughout the general alternative-spirituality market that Colin Campbell referred to as the cultic milieu continue to modify and shape Christian, Eastern and secular NRMs. In addition, less organized, structured and/or totalitarian religious expressions have also emerged, namely, the more amorphous New Age and Contemporary Western Pagan movements.

Many of the “older” NRMs developed as counter-responses to the 1960s counterculture in which radical experimentation and rejection of established social mores led to disorientation, polarization, hostility, confusion and