

# INTRODUCTION

For the better part of this century, nonmainstream religions did not attract much in the way of sustained public attention. This situation changed with the “cult” controversies of the 1970s. As important as those controversies were, however, the public’s focus on highly structured groups like the Unification Church and the Hare Krishna Movement during that decade tended to obscure a far more significant development, namely the emergence—in the wake of the sixties counterculture—of a large-scale, decentralized religious subculture that drew its principal inspiration from sources outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition. While this subculture was in many respects a continuation of a preexisting occult-metaphysical tradition, the addition to its ranks of a sizable number of former counterculturists in the postsixties period meant that metaphysical religion was no longer a marginal phenomenon: by the eighties, it had become an integral part of a new, truly pluralistic “mainstream.”

In North America, the single most important event prompting general awareness of this subculture was the airing of the televised version of Shirley MacLaine’s *Out on a Limb* in January of 1987. The success of this TV miniseries stimulated the mass media to begin investigating and, in time, to begin generating articles and programs about what came to be called the “New Age” movement. The media’s interest was still high at the time of the Harmonic Convergence gatherings in 1987, causing the Convergence to attract more public attention than any New Age event before or since.

The widespread interest in the New Age, which was intensified by curiosity about the Harmonic Convergence, led, in turn, to the *Time* feature, “New Age Harmonies,” in December of 1987. This piece was the most significant general article on the movement to appear in a major news magazine. Like many previous treatments in the mainstream media, “New Age Harmonies” focused on the flashier, less substantive aspects of the movement. However, perhaps because of the greater weight of *Time* magazine, this article, unlike earlier, similar pieces, influenced many of the more serious individuals within the New

Age subculture to back away from the label *New Age*.

Partially because the mass media portrayed the movement as trivial, and partially because of previously established habits of scholarship, academics were slow to pay attention to the New Age. Even scholars interested in alternative spirituality had tended, like the general public, to focus on high-profile groups like the Moonies and consequently missed the more subtle, but in the long range more important, shift that had occurred in the general culture. Based on superficial impressions, new age spirituality appeared shallow and faddish—a phenomenon that would disappear like Hula-Hoops and bell-bottoms. As a result, little or no attempt was made to study the movement. However, as should now be evident even to casual observers, there are many elements of the New Age that will survive its current wave of faddishness; like it or not, the New Age will persist in some form (though perhaps under a different name) into the foreseeable future.<sup>1</sup> In response to this revised perception of the New Age movement, the present volume has been undertaken in an attempt to fill the gap that exists in the scholarly literature.

### Delimiting the New Age

One of the difficulties encountered while compiling this anthology was deciding where to draw the line between what was and what was not "New Age." Part of the problem is a direct result of the media attention that this phenomenon has attracted over the past four or five years. As has already been indicated, many movement participants have distanced themselves from this label because of the mass media's focus on the more superficial and outlandish aspects of the New Age. This distancing has served to complicate further an already fuzzy boundary problem.

To avoid some of the confusion which has thus come to be associated with the term, it is useful to distinguish at least two meanings of "New Age." The first meaning is what we might think of as New Age in the *narrow* sense, which we can take to refer to the phenomena, personalities, and events given prominence by the media (e.g., channeling, Shirley MacLaine, and the Harmonic Convergence). Prior to the current cycle of media-created faddishness, however, the expression *New Age* was claimed by a broader spiritual subculture—a subculture in which the prominence of things like channeling, crystal healing, and so forth is a relatively recent development. With a certain amount of justification one can, therefore, also talk about New Age in the *broad* sense and include within its scope people and groups who would, at present,

explicitly *reject* this particular label. Without ignoring the faddish aspects of the movement, the papers in the present compilation incorporate much material that lies outside the narrower meaning, but within the broader meaning, of the New Age.

## Background of the New Age Movement

While the New Age is a synthesis of many different preexisting movements and strands of thought, its most influential predecessor was the occult-metaphysical community, represented organizationally by such groups as the Theosophical Society. The New Age can be distinguished from this older metaphysical community by the New Age movement's emphasis on transformation.<sup>2</sup> For example, while traditional astrologers (such as the Reagans' astrologer) focus on such matters as the timing of actions and the prediction of events, New Age astrologers focus on how individuals can use the self-understanding derived from the study of their astrological charts to guide their transformation into better people.

In addition to individual transformation, the very label *New Age* implies a millenarian vision of world transformation that distinguishes the New Age from the majority of its predecessor movements. The most important—though certainly not the only—source of this transformative metaphor, as well as the term “New Age,” was Theosophy, particularly as the Theosophical perspective was mediated to the movement by the works of Alice Bailey. Other preexisting movements, religions, and strands of thought brought together in the new age synthesis were Spiritualism, New Thought, the Human Potentials Movement, the Holistic Health Movement, some of the religions imported directly from Asia, and the religions of such traditional peoples as Native Americans.

When we change our focus from the movement's intellectual heritage to the background of the majority of its participants, we get a very different perspective on the origins of the New Age. As many observers have pointed out, a significant proportion of New Agers are baby boomers, people who two decades earlier were probably participating, at some level, in the phenomenon known as the counterculture. As the counterculture faded away in the early seventies, many former “hippies” found themselves embarking on a spiritual quest—one that, in many cases, departed from the Judeo-Christian mainstream. Thus one of the possible ways to date the beginnings of the New Age movement is from the period of the rather sudden appearance of large numbers of unconventional spiritual seekers in the decade following the sixties.<sup>3</sup> In the early seventies, the movement's focus was somewhat different from what it had become by the mid-eighties when the media began to

pay attention. Those early years were characterized by the prominence of newly imported Asian groups, although many of the older occult-metaphysical organizations were also experiencing a growth spurt. These various groups, in combination with a significant number of less formally affiliated individuals, constituted a fairly substantial spiritual subculture that became the successor movement to the counterculture. This initial phase of the New Age movement looked forward to the transformation of society but did not place an emphasis on many of the things that outside observers now regard as quintessentially New Age (phenomena such as channeling and crystals).

One of the traits of the New Age is that major subjects of interest vary from time to time, so that, particularly to the outside observer, this subculture appears to go through transformation after transformation. The movement away from the prominence of Eastern spiritual teachers (particularly characteristic of the seventies) to an emphasis on channeled entities (in the eighties) is an example of one such transformation. In a similar manner, the interest in channeling seems to be waning as we move into the nineties, and the new emphasis appears to be shamanism and Native American spirituality.

### Outline of Volume

Without claiming to offer final answers, the introductory essay outlines the definitional/evolutionary problem of distinguishing New Age from non-New Age, both methodologically and conceptually. The balance of the book is divided into four sections: The five chapters in Section One examine the historical roots of the New Age phenomenon. Section Two contains six chapters that look at some of the range of the movement, as well as certain reactions to the New Age. The three chapters in Section Three compare the New Age with certain other movements. The anthology concludes with four chapters surveying the New Age's international impact.