

The New Age Spirituality

A Quest to Break Boundaries

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Abstract: The author tries to describe what the New Age spirituality is, how it originated and developed and how it is a challenge to organized religions. The popular appeal of New Age Spirituality can be attributed to its serious attempts to respond to the human longing for harmony, belongingness, communion and freedom from religious and socio-cultural prohibitions leading to spiritual, psychological and physical well-being. The New Age spirituality has the grand vision of a global village but its followers are not committed to its birthing on the foundation of universal values like justice and equality. The New Age spirituality remains a challenge to the adherents of all religious traditions, revealing that the restlessness of humans and the longing for their well-being cannot be satisfied by creating new structures but by providing ways to expand the horizons of the human mind to embrace everything including the ultimate Reality.

Keywords: New Age, cosmic harmony, well-being, Eastern spirituality, pantheism, secularization, boundary.

The New Age spirituality defies all definition. Some consider it a spirituality or religiosity with the pre-conceived idea that all organized religions are bad and all spiritualities are good. Some consider it a movement like other movements that emerged as a response to a particular need of the time. Surprising all those who condemn it as a tabloid religion or a passing phenomenon, the New Age spirituality has come to stay, attracting new adherents everyday without any aggressive evangelism. In this article an attempt is made to describe what this spirituality is, how it originated and developed and how it is a challenge to organized religions.

Unlike all other movements the New Age spirituality has entered into all aspects of human life, namely, religious, cultural, social, political, economic, ecological and psychological. The recent document from the Vatican, *Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life*, prepared by the Pontifical Councils for Culture and Interreligious Dialogue, shows how this religiosity undermines the basic Christian faith-affirmations. From the response of the Church to the New Age spirituality, it is clear that the Church is alarmed by the impact of this new religious phenomenon. The Church cannot wish it away. Nor can it dismiss it as inconsequential as Harvey Cox seems to do. According to Cox, the twain of Western culture with its emphasis on individualism and consumerism cannot meet the mystical Eastern wisdom of 'egolessness' and 'detachment'. So the elements of the Eastern religious traditions cannot be transplanted in the Western world that revels in values contradicting them. In case they meet, the hybrid would be a combination of the worst elements of both cultures manifesting irresponsibility with a spiritual cover.¹ Commenting on the prophecy of Cox that the New Age spirituality would eventually fail, Siddika Angle affirms that it is a premature judgement like that of the prophecy about the disappearance of Christianity or Islam by some at the early stages of their emergence.² Unlike other movements and spiritualities which seek their identity in opposition to anything that is different from them, the New Age has the capacity to absorb and integrate into it even opposing and contradicting views of life and ways of life. It can give space for all possible world-views and ideologies that claim to promote human well-being and cosmic harmony.

I. New Age Spirituality: Its Meaning and Its Claims

The New age movement takes from various belief systems and ideologies, whatever is appealing to the human spirit. Since this movement is a confluence of many spiritualities, philosophies, ideologies, life-styles and physical and mental healing techniques, some authors try to describe its main features rather than define it. According to Roy Wallis there are two fundamental traits in the New Age, namely, the 'epistemological individualism' which sets the individual as the locus of the determination of truth and 'an ideology of revelational indeterminacy' which affirms the plurality of ways

in which the truth is revealed through a plurality of agents.³ Robert Ellwood describes the seven basic characteristics of the New Age. They are: emphasis on healing, use of scientific language and desire to be modern; a monistic and impersonal ontology; eclecticism; optimism, evolutionary view; and emphasis on psychic powers⁴. What is new in the New Age is its appealing integration of contradicting spiritualities and opposing ideologies.

The New Age spirituality takes from pantheism the idea that God is present in everything; from humanism the idea of the divine dimension of every human being; from Hinduism the belief in reincarnation; from Christianity the love-command; from Buddhism the idea of non-violence; from Yoga the psycho-somatic training, from Group-dynamics the value of inter-personal communication, from parapsychology the extraordinary endowments or capabilities of humans; from Feminism the need for deconstructing all types of authority especially patriarchy; from Freedom-movements the idea of a life without anxiety; from Eco-socialism the concern for the protection of the environment; from the primitive religious traditions the myth of the Great Mother Goddess, from Alternative-Lifestyle Movements the challenge of living a simple life; from the French Revolution the principles of equality, liberty and fraternity; from astrology the belief that the zodiacal signs determine a particular epoch; from spiritualism the belief in the continuation of human existence after death; and from the theory of evolution the possibility of further upward development of all beings. It integrates into its vision of reality the principles and beliefs of early Christian Gnosticism, anthroposophy, theosophy, Sufism, 'self-remembering' techniques of George I. Gurdjieff, a number of Eastern mystical and esoteric traditions and even quantum theory. Sometimes it employs the language of science in its articulation of the interconnection between matter and spirit like 'bioenergy,' 'subtle energy,' 'biofield,' and 'electro-magnetic field' etc. to give a certain credibility and respectability to its claims. It is indeed a spiritual supermarket, offering ways and means to make sense out of this otherwise absurd world. Its celebration of diversity baffles those who seek comfort in everything that is well-defined and certain. It could be considered the spirituality of the post-modern philosophy and world-views. Commenting on the mind-boggling diversity of beliefs, ideologies and prac-

tices that make up the New Age movement, Paul Heelas says that beneath this diversity there are some unifying themes. According to him, the dominant tropes include 'the celebration of the Self and the sacralization of Modernity' which means that the individual human self is inherently sacred, or even identical with God and the most accepted values of Western modernity, namely, 'freedom, authenticity, self-responsibility, self-reliance, self-determinism, equality, and above all the self as a value in and of itself'.⁵ The celebration of the self as divine is nothing new. It is as old as the Upanishadic tradition in India. What the New Age movement has attempted to, with relative success, is the blending of this Eastern spiritual insight with the affirmation of the individual self, gained through psychological theories. This glorification of the self is further orchestrated by the market-forces of the capitalistic economic system through all possible techniques of mass-media communications to cater to the wants of a consumerist culture which it has created for its own advantage.

The New Age spirituality is a syncretism of the most appealing kind, unthreatening, non-dogmatic and non-authoritarian.⁶ It appeals to anyone who finds all organized religions authoritarian, their doctrines dogmatic, their theology abstract, their structures oppressive and their attitude arrogant. No wonder, then, that the New Age movement is said to be "the equivalent of a religious H-bomb in sustained explosion"⁷

II. The Origin and Development of the New Age Spirituality

The studies on the New Age movement with its all-inclusive spirituality, claim that it originated in the nineteen-sixties with the awakening of counter-cultural movements in the United States. However its roots go back to the orthodox and the heterodox Christian mystical traditions, as well as other religious traditions which recognize the yearning of the human spirit to enter into communion with God and the possibility of an experience of this union in this world itself. Based on their ecstatic experiences the mystics of all religions claim that they have encountered the unity of the totality of reality. If mystical experience is considered to be the privilege of a few ascetics, what prevents the vast majority of humans from expe-

riencing well-being through communion with the Absolute and the entire creation? Is it due to ignorance or *avidya* about the identity of the Absolute and the relative, or is it due to a rupture between the Absolute and the relative, God and humans? The Western spiritual traditions originating from the Semitic religions emphasize that this alienation is due to sin, and the Eastern religious traditions affirm that it is an illusion that there exists an alienation or rupture between the Absolute and the relative. Whether it is sin or ignorance, it is a fact that humans experience this alienation as a miserable situation from which they seek healing and liberation. How to heal humans of this malady was answered by various mind-cure or mental healing techniques which were believed to effect also physical healing.

In the nineteenth century America, transcendentalism, spiritualism, occultism and theosophy claimed that it was possible to heal humans of their spiritual, psychological and physical sicknesses. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were the most known among the Transcendentalists who were greatly influenced by the Asian religious traditions. Following the Transcendentalists were the iconoclasts of the theosophical society. They tried to blend Buddhism with American spiritualism. It is said that Madame Helena Blavatsky, one of the founders of the Theosophical Society, made terms like karma and reincarnation a household coinage for the metaphysical tradition and emphasized in her writings the emergence of an order that is not static and fixed but evolutionary and progressive.⁸ Probably these movements were reactions to the tendency of driving religion to the periphery from the centre it had occupied in civil society till then. Separating state from religion was thought to be championing the cause of pure secularism. But what they lost sight of in the process, was that every citizen is a citizen of many 'worlds' intimately inter-connected. The spirituality that promoted this inter-connectivity, whether it is from Buddhism, Hinduism, occultism or any esoteric tradition was welcome as long as it provided some meaning to this existence which already experiences alienations of all kinds deep within.

The awakening of the New Age Spirituality in the second half of the twentieth century, especially in the sixties, is attributed to many causes. The 1960's have been characterized by the emergence of a

counter-culture especially by the youth who rebelled against anything authoritarian, formal, static and oppressive. It was a rebellion against the familial, social, cultural, political and religious organizations and structures which seemed to profess values and yet acted in a way diametrically opposed to such values. The emergent counter-culture questioned the institutionalized hypocrisy of the state and religion. The immediate cause of such an outburst of the countercultural movements is attributed to the break-up of the socio-religious fabric of the American society based on Roman civic law and the Biblical faith due to many factors, especially the Vietnam war, civil rights movements and political assassinations. The old order could not hold the traditional structures and values of society any more. The movements led by the youth, the oppressed minorities or by women, had one thing in common: they all encountered the structures of society as authoritarian and oppressive, frustrating the infinite possibilities of the individuals to be what they want to be and to do what they would like to do. They revolted against all forms of tyranny. All of them believed that it is possible to achieve personal transformation through one's own efforts using whatever means is available, be it by the human potential development techniques or hallucinogenic drugs. Siddika Angle observes that for the youth of the New Age, the counter-culture provided a shift from external to internal authority and the task was to find new values and meanings from personal insight and experience. Further, Siddika Angle adds:

Humanistic psychologies, with their optimistic views of human nature and potential, provided an important context and conceptual framework for this self-discovery and self-realization. Taught by theorists such as Abraham Maslow that world transformation begins with self transformation, members of the counter-culture sought physical and psychological healing through numerous methods offered by the human potential movement, from psychotherapy and encounter groups to massage and Tai Chi.⁹

In the process of liberating themselves from the neurosis imposed by society, what the protagonists of the counter-culture discovered was not a paradise of their inner world but their own naked selves condemned to live with an existential angst in a meaningless and cruel world. No wonder, then, that there were a series of suicides in the late sixties and early seventies at the Esalen Institute of

Human Potential Development in California. The New Agers overcame this crisis by recognizing the need for spiritual discipline. They sought a spirituality other than that of the Judaeo-Christian traditions, 'the more heretical the better'.¹⁰ The Eastern religious traditions especially Buddhism, Hinduism, Sufism etc. promised spiritual treasures they were looking for. They were prepared for any discipline provided that it would give them self-awareness, harmony, freedom from imposed religious dogmas, social customs, mores and injunctions which in their judgment emasculated their individuality. However, everything in the Western tradition was not abandoned. The tendency to follow superstitious beliefs and practices long overcome by the Judaeo-Christian religious doctrines found acceptance and respect. "For along with the shift to Eastern sources—and to gurus like Swami Muktananda, Lama Choegyam Trungpa, Maharshi Mahesh Yogi [the Beatle's choice], Da Free John and Shunryu — Suzuki Roshi — came a burst of new interest, as well, in esoteric and occult traditions."¹¹

The New Age spirituality was indeed answering the deepest need of a few generations of Americans who experienced the agony of being rootless, as they all had a history of immigration from another country and culture. This situation was further worsened by the industrial and technological development which forced people to move from place to place in search of better jobs and better living conditions. "[T]he same science and technologies that had expanded both life expectancy and life expectations, had their darker sides: atomic weapons, environmental destruction, materialism, consumerism and a loss for many of a sense of the sacred."¹² Organized religions could not respond to the quest for rootedness, identity, inter-connectedness and belongingness. The quest for a new way of life which would offer identity and freedom, spiritual experience and material comfort, positive appreciation of the human body and mental potentialities, integration of the physical and mystical, providing means for physical health and psychological well-being, found an answer in the New Age movement. Its spirituality offered to the adherents infinite possibilities experiencing what they considered to be meaningful.

3. New Trends in New Age Spirituality

In recent years the New Age spirituality seems to have evolved much beyond the imagination of its adherents of the 1960s. It seems to have abandoned the aggressive countercultural rejection of materialism. The new trend in the New Age spirituality is the sacralization of material prosperity, and, indeed, capitalism. The New Agers are making various attempts to harmonize spirituality with material prosperity. Capitalism, with its ideology of the inalienable right to own private property and an individual's unbridled freedom to acquire, possess and dispose of wealth without any interference from religious doctrines, social obligations, and ecological concerns, has found in the New Age spirituality an ally not only supporting its ideology but also giving it a religious legitimacy. The innate nature of humans for transcendence is identified with the individual's success in having material prosperity. If in the past the New Age movement had appropriated everything that it had selectively chosen from other traditions, capitalism has appropriated everything of the New Age spirituality and domesticated it to serve its own purposes. Capitalist ideology can easily manipulate the New Age spirituality and postmodern philosophy to expand its hold on the people of the global market, not for the unfolding of human persons or for the enhancement of communion among humans themselves or relation between humans and the cosmos, but to expand the world of Mammon to benefit a few individuals. Drowned in the melodious hymns sung by the New Agers glorifying the beauty and bounty of the Mother Goddess Earth, is the sound of the felling of trees in the forests of the Amazon and Africa and Asia, the thunderous sound of weapons in fratricidal wars destroying human communities and reducing to rubble symbols of human civilization, and the last sighs of the birds of the air and fish of the sea. Any religious tradition can be manipulated to legitimize a system however tyrannical and destructive it is.

Capitalism has cleverly aligned itself with the New Age quest for transcendence and freedom by interpreting and re-orienting it to mean that this quest is for material prosperity which is also a spirituality. It has made religion itself a commodity. The logic of this capitalism is the 'extension of the logic of the market place to all aspects

of culture' which according to Habermas makes everything a commodity which can be bought and sold, from art to politics to religion.¹³ "Now forced to compete in the commercial market place alongside other secular business and industries, religion itself tends to become yet another consumer product within the supermarket of values: the religious believer is free to choose from among a wide array of possible beliefs and piece together his or her own personalized spiritual pastiche...."¹⁴ A paradigm shift has taken place from the early capitalistic attitude based on Protestant work ethic, namely, frugality, thriftiness and innerworldly asceticism to a late capitalist attitude based on consumerism, physical pleasure and hedonism.¹⁵ The late capitalism has its own cultural logic which is characterized by its rejection of the belief in any unifying view of the world and human history and a consequent sense of fragmentation and pluralism which mirrors the bewildering diversifications in the consumer society itself. It is the "freewheeling syncretism of wildly diverse elements drawn from disparate historical and cultural eras, patched together solely by the whim of the individual consumer."¹⁶ One may wonder how this cultural logic of late capitalism which rejects any unifying meta-narrative, co-opts the New Age spirituality that seeks harmony with the cosmos and 'at one with the All'. We can see that the late capitalism's celebration of pluralism and the affirmation of 'too many possibilities' are very much similar to the essence of New Age spirituality. Its marriage with the New Age spirituality offers capitalism new possibilities to widen the scope of its markets, creating new wants and financial prosperity. Rajneesh (Osho), the so called Guru of the Rich, who peddled a kind of New Age spirituality with emphasis on Neo-Tantrism, proclaimed that the American type of capitalism was the triumph of the powerful few. He says: "I don't condemn wealth. Wealth is a perfect means which can enhance people in every way and make life rich in all ways. The materially poor can never become spiritual."¹⁷ Many followers of the New Age are not apologetic about the commercialization of spirituality. According to Michael Brown, the market is filling the moral space created by the perceived bankruptcy of institutions like family, church and government. The new religious consumerism is mirroring the society from which it has evolved. Brown says, "Money is viewed simply as energy — 'accumulated human and planetary creative energy' to be

precise — and therefore as a force analogous to gravity, light or sound waves.”¹⁸

Many observers have noted that the New age as a whole tends to foster a consumer approach to religion. It offers ‘a wide array of religious products, as readily available as the products on the shelves at Wal-Mart, and is championing the freedom of the individual spiritual shopper’¹⁹. It caters to the consumer mentality of the present day which looks for instant material and spiritual gratification. In America it goes well with the prevalent mood of society with its avowed adherence to the philosophy of pragmatism which would ‘expect to get something out of being religious—some reward now or later’.²⁰ According to Sidney E. Ahlstrom, the Americans interpreted all ecstatic fusion states through the prism of the ‘harmonial’ tradition whose central axiom is the that ‘spiritual composure, physical health, and even economic well-being are understood to flow from a person’s rapport with the cosmos’.²¹ Along with the commercialization of the New Age spirituality, there is also a market for the professionals in the field of New Age spirituality. There is a new found interest in Management Gurus, Human Resource Development trainers, Alternative Educational Programme experts and Specialists in alternative medicine. What is appealing in the approach of the Management Gurus and other New Age professionals is that they present, in an attractive and challenging way the traditional religious values and virtues to all and sundry without any religious trappings and obligations. This may appear to be catering to the development of a more pluralist and tolerant global community but in fact it caters to the expansion of global capitalism and consumerism and the West’s exploitation of the sacred artifacts of other peoples spreading neocolonialism and cultural imperialism. But the popular celebration of the globalism and pluralism according to Marianna Torgovnik masks the deeper socio-economic disparity that continues to affect the relationship between East and West, between the First and the Third Worlds and ignores the ongoing forces of neocolonialism and cultural exploitation.²²

History is replete with instances of domesticating and manipulating religious traditions by the powers that be for the exploitation of the weak and the poor and the annihilation of cultures and peoples.

The New Age spirituality too is co-opted by the market forces of the the global capitalism to administer a slow death to the weak and the powerless. However, a quest for inner liberation and transcendence, a thirst for the supernatural, a struggle for the recognition of human rights and dignity, a yearning for authentic inter-personal relationships as well as communion with the entire cosmos that gave birth to the New Age spirituality continue to appeal to millions, especially in the western hemisphere.

4. The New Age Quest to Break the Boundaries

It is a basic human experience that everything is not right with this world and there is misery and misfortune, brokenness and fragmentation within and without from which humans seek liberation. Humans experience 'restlessness' (St. Augustine) within and there is a constant search for harmony and peace. All religious traditions claim to offer answers to this deepest human quest for liberation or wholeness. In the course of history many mystics and prophets, sages and monks of all religious traditions claimed to have encountered wholeness and liberation through a deep union with the totality of reality, divine, human and cosmic. However, the religious traditions that are meant to offer ways of liberation to humans become oppressive and enslaving when their doctrines and practices are manipulated by a powerful few to legitimize their nefarious and unscrupulous practices at the cost of the majority.

The innate capacity of humans for transcendence cannot be blocked by any force, whether it be state or religion for a long time. The emergence of the New Age spirituality in America can be attributed to the breaking of the oppressive and dehumanizing boundaries set by religion and state repressing the unfolding of the human spirit. When religions are perceived as not enhancing human transcendence but controlling the human spirit with their untenable doctrines and rigid dogmas, at least some of the adherents of such religions would break the boundaries and recognise their irrepressible desire to go beyond themselves and go within themselves in search of the omnipresent Infinite. According to David S. Toolan,

...[T]uning into the omnipresent Infinite—and a kind of natural supernaturalism that defies all Cartesian dualism—has been the stan-

dard idiom when Americans choose to dispose 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, term 'God'—imagined as a CIA spy satellite orbiting earth—becomes problematic. Thus when Americans are 'reborn' by an experience of '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'²³

This cosmocentric spirituality of the New Age is not new to the mystical tradition of Christianity which has a strong biblical foundation. Though the biblical God-experience has been interpreted by the Judaeo-Christian tradition emphasizing its historical character, there is no dearth of instances in the Bible about the cosmic revelation of God. But the overemphasis on the historical dimension of the Judaeo-Christian tradition and its concrete expression in rigid dogmas and rules and rituals neglected the mystical dimension of religion which is open, flexible, liberating and intensely experiential. The New Age spirituality attempts to recapture the mystical dimension of both the historical religions of the West as well as the mystical religions of the East. It has also re-discovered the mystical tradition originating from the philosophy of neo-Platonism and Plotinus and further developed by Scotus Erigena, Jacob Boehme and Emmanuel Swedenborg. But this mystical tradition was interpreted according to the American world-view. "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."²⁴ If the mystical approach to reality is not balanced by a historical encounter with the actual realities of everyday life and the challenges they offer, spirituality becomes an escape route to a dream world.

The New Age spirituality offers ways and means to journey into one's interiority, discovering by means of 'positive thinking' one's own capabilities and through the Gnostic traditions of all religions the interconnectedness of everything that exists. It is the spiritual vision of a global citizen transcending the limitations imposed by all systems and structures, whether religious, political,

economical or ethnic. “But 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.”²⁵ In fact, the noble attempt to break all boundaries following the very movement of the human spirit to go beyond itself does not end in self-emptying love for others and the Ultimate Other or any commitment to transform the world where all can bloom. But it hits at the boundary of one’s own self still searching for liberation. However, the challenge of the New Age spirituality is serious. It forces all religious traditions to have a fresh look at their own hallowed dogmas, their religious language, codes and cults to see whether they are liberating or enslaving, promoting communion among peoples or causing divisions, celebrating pluralism or harping on exclusivism, focusing on the experiential love of God or offering an abstract knowledge of God .

Conclusion

The popular appeal of the New Age Spirituality can be attributed to its serious attempts to respond to the human longing for harmony, belongingness, communion, freedom from religious and socio-cultural prohibitions, leading to spiritual, psychological and physical well-being. It uses a religious language that can evoke the experience of unity of matter and spirit as well as transcend all dichotomies. It celebrates pluralism in all aspects life and in all dimensions of reality: all fragments are gathered so that nothing may be lost. It offers various ways to attain self-discovery, self-realization and a higher consciousness through spiritual practices like meditation techniques following Zen, Buddhist, Hindu traditions or chanting the holy name of God following Sufism and popular Hinduism. However, the New Age spirituality’s strength is also its weakness. Its maddening syncretism makes space for the values of all religious traditions, practices but ends up providing a shallow spirituality without appropriate moral foundations and without enduring commitment to anything except one’s own well-being. The New Age spirituality has a grand vision a global village but its followers are not committed to its birthing on the foundation of universal values like justice and equality. So it is easily co-opted by the

forces of the global market to legitimize as well as to enhance their unjust trade practices and neo-colonialism. The New Age spirituality celebrates the wedding of the Western cult of individualism and Eastern wisdom and techniques to discover the individual self. Its promise of transcendence and infinite communion with everything that exists, remains a dream that is sold in a thousand ways through the outlets opened by the supermarket-chains. However, the New Age spirituality remains a challenge to the adherents of all other religious traditions, revealing that the restlessness of humans and the longing for their well-being in all aspects of life cannot be satisfied by creating new structures and doctrines but by providing ways to expand the horizons of the human minds to embrace everything and everyone including the ultimate Reality.

Notes

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