

## New Age, Cults and New Religious Movements Intellectual Output 2, Unit IV



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## Introduction

In the **strict sense** of the term, New Age refers to the spiritual/religious Utopian type of movement that awaits for the coming of a "new age", also called the **Age of Aquarius**, in reference to a cyclical theory of time nourished by astrological conceptions in which the Aquarian Age, a symbol of spirituality, is supposed to succeed to the Pisces era, identified with the Christian religion, or by extension, with all the various institutionalized religions.

In a more extensive and **diluted sense**, the New Age concept refers to a vast nebula of alternative beliefs and practices from a wide variety of sources, ranging from the mystical aspects of Eastern religions (Buddhism and Hinduism in particular) - re-read through the prism of Western occultist schemas - to conceptions derived from alternative psychological currents. This **mystical and esoteric nebula** does not constitute an organized religion but presents itself as a **syncretic network** of widely shared beliefs in contemporary Western societies (including those who declare themselves to be "non-religious people" or "nones").

New Age beliefs postulate the **underlying unity between religion and science** and feed as well as on **floating religious beliefs**, as on **alternative scientific beliefs**, marginal or unrecognized by "official" science.

Among these sources, we find:

- Eastern religions (notably Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism), "primordial" religions (shamanism, paganism), and in general, the esoteric and mystical currents of various religions;
- parallel or alternative sciences (parapsychology, "holistic" vision, spiritual medicine);
- European traditional **occultism** and **magic** (beliefs in invisible forces and beings, "subtle energies", etc.);
- some currents of depth psychology, notably the current of **transpersonal psychology** which postulates the possibility of accessing forms of consciousness beyond the individual consciousness.

Above all, there is a **meta-belief** which is the basis of New Age beliefs; it is **spiritualistic holism**, in other words the idea that the Universe is fundamentally one and that by virtue of this hidden unity, science and religion could superficially oppose, but actually converge at a deeper level. Through a wide range of **psychospiritual practices**, the human mind has the ability to discover and achieve this convergence. This meta-belief is expressed by the omnipresence of the reference to a poorly defined notion of "spirituality" that is used in contrast to both the conventional notion of religion and to that of classical science. The motto is that of **lived experience**: New Age believers are generally convinced that they do not need to believe or have faith, that it is enough to experiment.

**More information on:**

- [What does "Hinduism" mean?](#)
- [What is Buddhism?](#)
- [Definition of Daoism](#)

## The precursor currents of New Age

Despite the "exploded" and disseminated appearance of New Age beliefs and practices, most of the themes highlighted by this magical and spiritual nebula actually recycle some major occultist or religious ideas, which were often shaped in the 19th or early 20th century.

A major crucible where concepts coming from Asian religions have been combined to concepts drawn from European occultism is the **Theosophical Society**, a movement founded in 1875 in New York by two Western esotericists - Helena Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott - who wanted to spread their understanding of Indian religions (Hinduism and Buddhism) to a wide audience in Europe and North America. Actually, many writers of the New Age movement draw on – whether they realize it or not – a repertoire of beliefs initially set up by Theosophists and then relayed by different channels: in particular, the notions of past lives and reincarnation, of the "etheric body" (a subtle body made of energy enveloping the physical body), of "chakras" (knots of energy in the human body), of "astral projection"

(out-of-body experiences), of “primordial tradition”, of “mahatma” or “invisible masters”, etc. All these beliefs reinterpret the original notions, but in a modern Western framing – based on belief in progress – which often radically changes their orientation. For example, reincarnation is considered in Theosophy - and in the New Age - as a means of progression and fulfilment of the immortal self, step by step, existence after existence, whereas in Buddhism the purpose of the spiritual path is on the contrary, to escape definitively the cycle of rebirths and put an end to the illusion of the existence of an eternal self.

**More information on:**

- [Buddhism: Karma and Samsara](#)
- [Buddhism: Four Noble truths, Illumination and Nirvana](#)
- [Buddhism and modernity](#)

### Document 1: The symbol of the Theosophical Society



Source : [Wikimediacommons](#)

The symbol of the Theosophical Society associates symbols from various traditions, which testifies to the syncretism implemented in this organization: the Star of David which encloses an Egyptian cross anse or ankh; the ouroboros (snake biting its tail, a symbol of ancient Egypt then adopted by the Alchemists); the swastika in a wheel, an ancient symbol present in many cultures and religions, especially Indian, and interpreted as a symbol of transformation; finally, on top, the sacred Sanskrit syllable representing the Aum sound.

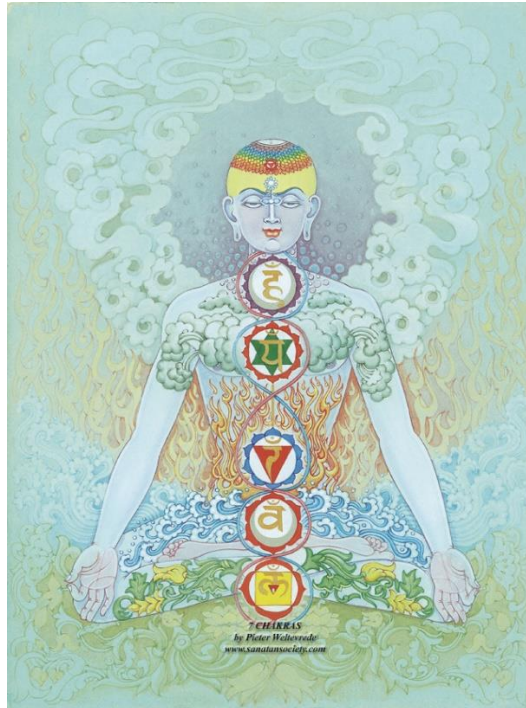
Theosophy – “divine wisdom”, in Greek - intended to associate science, religion and philosophy, which prefigured the New Age view.

**More information on:**

- [What does "Hinduism" mean?](#)

For further explanation about "Aum" symbol, see Source 1 and Source analysis in Teacher's Section

**Document 2: The seven chakras in the representation of the New Age**



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Inspired by the representation of the body in yoga, the theosophical vision of the human being refers to the theory of energetic knots (the seven chakras, from the anus to the top of the skull, through which *kundalini*, the subtle energy of the body rises). Moreover, in this conception, the physical body is surrounded by different subtle bodies (aetheric body, astral body, etc.) that allow the consciousness to experience projections outside the physical body and journeys in the invisible worlds ("astral projection"). This theme of the journey in the invisible dimension intersects with that of the shamanic journey experienced by the shaman during his trance.

**More information on:**

- [Shiva, the deity of Yoga](#)

For further explanation about Yoga see paragraph "Main rites: Yoga".

- **The Goddess and Tantrism**

For further explanation about *Kundalini*, see paragraphs "Main doctrinal tenets: the concept of Shakti" and "Main doctrinal traditions & main rites: Tantrism".

Another source of the New Age nebula is the **Lebensreform movement** ("reform of life" in German) which advocated, in the late 19th century, a return to a healthier life because closer to nature, especially within small communities. This movement, which developed mainly in Germany and Switzerland, helped to spread practices such as **vegetarianism, naturism, yoga**, the use of **so-called natural medicines**, such as homeopathy or naturopathy. This trend appears as an anticipation of the hippie communities that will flourish within the **counterculture** of the 1960-1970s.

### **The formation of contemporary New Age movements**

In the strict sense of belief in the advent of a new age identified with the Age of Aquarius, the New Age is inspired by the astrological theory of a French esotericist, Paul Le Cour, who in 1937 defended the idea that the Earth would soon enter a new astrological era corresponding to the sign of Aquarius which, according to him, should result in a profound transformation of the values of humanity, in particular an overcoming of materialism by a more spiritual vision.

In England, the occult writer Alice Bailey (1880-1949) popularized the term "New Age" in her writings and stated that this "New Age" will not be inaugurated by a new messiah, or a prophet, but that its advent will depend on a global awareness that will move humanity to another level of consciousness.

The New Age is therefore a **millenarian belief**, that is to say the belief in the advent of a reign of universal concord of a symbolic duration of a thousand years called "millennium". However, unlike Jewish, Christian or Muslim millenarianism which is simultaneously a **messianism**—because the millennium depends on the descent to earth of a Savior Messiah who slays the powers of evil —, New Age millennialism is progressive in nature and relies on the ability of human beings, receptive to the forces of the spirit, to network to foster the emergence of a **planetary consciousness**. This new consciousness breaks with the liberal and individualistic values of the capitalist Western model and is similar to the community and utopian values defended by the American counterculture movement.

A pioneering New Age group was the **Findhorn Foundation**, an "ecovillage" created in the north of Scotland in 1962 to experiment with a new way of life that respects the environment. The community was first known for its work with the energies of plants: the members of the group thought they were in "subtle communication" with the elves or spirits of nature, which allowed them, according to them, to obtain beautiful crops on a soil that is not very fertile.

Another more recent example of a community-type New Age group is the **Damanhur Federation** in Italy. The community of Damanhur (name borrowed from a city of ancient Egypt) was founded by an Italian artist, Oberto Airaudi in 1976 in the Piedmont Alps. Inspired by conceptions from the Theosophical Society and referring to Egyptian Hermetism, the group (which brings together 800 people in year 2000) secretly built, starting in 1978, an underground temple under the mountain. This temple of humanity (whose existence was only revealed in 1992) consists of seven monumental rooms connected by underground passages. First doomed to demolition by the Italian authorities, it was finally saved and opened to sightseeing. Members of the Federation can get involved in the life of the group in a communal way or not. Those who choose to reside on the site live in residences of ten to twenty people, and each residence operates autonomously.



Diagram depicting the underground rooms of the Damanhur Temple near the Italian village of Baldissero Canavese.

(Source and credits: <https://www.panoramio.com/photo/92430550>)

Attribution: Oleg Andriyчук)

### The doctrines of the New Age and of the mystic-esoteric nebula

A patchwork of very different beliefs, the New Age or, in the broad sense, the mystic-esoteric nebula, does not have a unified doctrinal body. Nevertheless, several themes are recurrent and structure the worldview of its followers.

The most fundamental and cross-cutting theme at once is a **spiritualistic monism** renamed "holism" or "holistic consciousness": it is the idea that the Universe is essentially one, but that its unity is of a spiritual nature, and since the human being is consciousness, it has the ability to resonate with the entire universe and to communicate with entities in different invisible worlds through work on subtle energies.

This holistic conception gives rise to a representation that considers the Earth as a living entity, capable of self-regulation: it is the **Gaia theory**.

### Document 3: "Gathering of the rainbow"



Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)  
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A "gathering of the rainbow" in Bosnia: the figure of the three circles symbolizes both the unity of humanity and the spiritual progression from the periphery to the inner circle. An Indian teepee refers to the "primordial wisdoms" of humanity: Amerindian religions or shamanisms of different continents.

Another central theme is that of channeling, i.e. communication with invisible entities (angels, spirits of the Earth, spirits of masters belonging to different spiritual levels, etc.). This theme only updates the very old motive of **visionary experience** and **mediumistic communication**.

**Document 4: Doña Ramona, a shaman of the Seri ethnic group.**



*Doña Ramona, a shaman of the Seri ethnic group. Punta Chueca, State of Sonora, Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#) CC BY-SA 1.0*

One of the means used to achieve communication with higher entities or to access **altered states of consciousness** (ASC) is the use of hallucinogenic or "entheogenic" (literally, "leading to the divine") substances, drawn from cacti, mushrooms, various plants, and used by Amerindian shamans of North and South America. In 1968 the Peruvian-American anthropologist and writer Carlos Castaneda (1925-1998) published *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*, the first opus of a work devoted to the power of visionary plants that will have considerable success in Western countries.

The 1970s are conducive to psychic exploration: at the same time, the American psychiatrist Timothy Leary (1920-1996) who used a chemical psychoactive substance, LSD, as a therapeutic tool against alcoholism and depression, began advocating the use of this substance as a means of access to wider consciousness. The spread of this drug in Western countries was such that LSD was quickly placed on the narcotics table. The title of the Beatles' song *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds* is a transparent allusion to the three letters LSD.

Refusing to separate body and mind, New Age practices are intended to promote physical healing as well as spiritual growth: therefore, **body healing** practices and concepts and experiences of **transpersonal psychology** are closely associated.

The latter appeared in the early 1970s with therapists such as Abraham Maslow and Stanislav Grof: it seeks to go beyond the exploration of the individual unconscious (the concept of Freudian psychoanalysis) to promote the emergence of altered states of

consciousness beyond the ego, thanks in particular to breathing techniques or sensory isolation. The Esalen Institute, established in Big Sur on the California coast in 1961, is a place for experimenting and exploring new psycho corporal therapies. In addition, the reference to the work of non-Freudian Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung, which contains many references to alchemy and Eastern religious traditions, is common in New Age circles.

Another important theme of the New Age nebula is the belief in paradigms and theories of **alternative science** (generally considered a "pseudo-science" by classical scientists). Different scientific fields are concerned: cosmology and physics to explain the origin of the world or the passages between "parallel universes"; alternative medicines to account for unexplained healing cases; the domain of history also is concerned with the astrological conceptions applied to the evolution of great civilizations ("cycology") or parallel history and archaeology of civilizations ("cryptology") intended to explain so-called "mysteries" relating to ancient civilizations - for example, the pyramid of Cheops or the Nazca lines in Peru only visible from the sky; the myth of Atlantis or the belief in the extraterrestrial origins of ancient civilizations are often mobilized as explanations.

### **The transformation of New Age**

Millenarian-style New Age, marked by the search for a new life in small communities linked by networks, declines in the late 1980s, at a time when political utopias are losing their credit in the West. Belief in the possibility of collective change is fading away and New Age followers are turning to the pursuit of individual fulfilment. The practices of "**personal development**" come to the fore and the New Age, which wanted to build an alternative society, is gradually becoming part of the consumer society.

### **Sects, cults and new religious movements**

The New Age movement is often unstructured with floating borders between groups and weak institutional affiliations: these groups have "clients" rather than "members" or "followers" as such. However, next to them, there are more organized movements with strong leaderships and clear-cut boundaries between the in-group and the out-group. Sometimes, some of their beliefs are similar to those of the New Age, but it is the relationship between the member and his/her institution that is fundamentally different. These more closed institutions correspond to the so-called "sects", "cults, and "new religious movements".

### **Sects or religious deviance**

All dominant religions have always been confronted with marginal religious groups called "sects" and held as deviant by society, because they take their distance - peacefully or violently, as the case may be - with values, and norms of behavior recognized as legitimate in a society, or even with simple cultural practices or social customs that they deem impious or idolatrous (for example, Jehovah's Witnesses reject saluting the national flag or celebrating birthdays as pagan customs). These radical religious groups intend to obey uncompromisingly the divine authority, which they consider incompatible with the submission to the political power of a State, or with other profane commitments seen as temptations or useless distractions: art, science, the business world, for example. The more total the religious commitment is (which is in principle targeted in a sect), the more the other activities are disgraced or even condemned as obstacles to the realization of religious salvation.

This position, which is at odds with the secular world, creates tension with the authorities of that world, as with the authorities of the religion which is socially dominant, and the reaction of these different forms of authority (and in particular those of the State) can range from worrying vigilance - in the most favorable case - to outright persecution - in the most unfavorable case, to various degrees of control or repression.



### **The complex management of sects' issues by democratic societies**

Even secular, pluralist and democratic societies, where all citizens are in principle entitled to equal treatment regardless of their religious or denominational affiliation, discriminate between different forms of religious practice and are vigilant towards controversial religious groups because of some of their practices (real or sometimes just suspected). The modern secular state often grants advantages (taxes, for example) to socially recognized religions - in the name of their social utility - benefits that are denied to sects: even in a country like France - a country where secularism is conceived in a way that separates religion and politics more strongly than in other European countries, such as Italy or Belgium, where a secularism of cooperation between the State and religions is applied - religions recognized as such see their places of worship exempt from the property tax, while unrecognized religious groups do not benefit from this tax benefit.

### **The "cults" or "New Religious Movements": movements breaking with classical sects**

In countries of Christian tradition, sects were mostly attached to Christianity (although the dominant Churches treated them as "heresies"). They simply wanted to promote an uncompromising version of the Christian religion with a more radical application of evangelical life.

A clear break occurs starting in the 1970s with the appearance in Europe and North America of religious groups of a different nature from the classical sects, groups that were disconcerting because of some of their beliefs or some of their practices: these movements were labelled "New Religious Movements" (NRMs) or "cults" since they were new in character, often more in line with New Age beliefs than with Christian doctrine.

Some of these groups were from Eastern sources such as the neo-Hindu International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON, so-called "Krishna Devotees") or Transcendental Meditation (MT); others were of American origin, from depth psychology, such as the Church of Scientology founded in 1952 by L. R. Hubbard, a sci-fi writer with the talents of a businessman; still others, such as the Unification Church ("Moonies") created by Sun Myung Moon (1920-2012), were messianic movements of Christian matrix but reconfigured through a foreign cultural prism, that of Korea in this case.

#### **More information on:**

- [Modern and contemporary Hinduism](#)

see Source 3 and its analysis for more information on ISKCON or "Krishna Devotees".

### Document 5: The “e-meter” device used by Scientology



*The “e-meter” device used by Scientology*

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Scientology practitioners use a device in their consultations, the e-meter, an electrometer that measures changes in the body's electrical charge that are supposed to correspond to the emotional changes that occur in response to the questions asked by the practitioner. Such use of technology illustrates the unconventionally religious nature of the practices of this movement - which was born as a method of psychotherapy, then claimed the status of religion. More generally, many NRMs are at the intersection of religion, psychology and technology.

### The 1980s and 1990s marked by several dramas linked to NRMs

A small number of groups evolve to the point of becoming closed micro-communities that in many countries are controversial and targeted as **dangerous cults**. Most of these so-called cults are blamed for a personality cult of the leader, as well as for excessive financial pressure on their members.

Some rare but spectacular cases hit public opinion in the mid-1990s and raised a global fear of sects and cults: the three most tragic examples are those of the **Order of the Solar Temple (OST)**, a neo-Templar secret society, whose ruling circle organized the massacre of the closest disciples in France, Switzerland and Canada, in three stages: in 1994, 1995 and 1997; the **Heaven's Gate** movement, a Californian ufologist group (that is to say, believing in the role of extraterrestrials in the future of humanity) organized in 1997 a collective suicide euphemistically presented as a "transit" towards a comet; finally, the Japanese apocalyptic movement **Aum Shinri kyo** unleashed a sarin gas attack in the Tokyo subway in 1995 with the aim of hastening the apocalypse.

However, the event triggering contemporary fear of sects is an earlier one: the Jonestown Massacre in November 1978. This occurred in **People's Temple**, an American-born community living in autarky in the Guyana Forest, that was under investigation by United States Government. After shooting down Senator Leo Ryan, who was leading the investigation, Pastor Jim Jones decided to destroy his community: about 910 adults and children were forced to drink a poisoned potion or shot dead by the guru's bodyguards.

In some countries, notably France, the "danger of the sects" has been perceived as a threat to the individual, the family and society in general: associations were created to free followers from subjection to their leaders, while public authorities were mobilized and created various bodies to fight against groups having a strong hold on their members and against "sectarian excesses", particularly financial ones. The fear of the sects fades after 11 September 2001, replaced by the fear of jihadism.

**See also:**

[Guidelines on prejudices and stereotypes in religions](#)

Chap.3 "Stereotypes and prejudices linked to New Religious Movements".

### **New Age movement and cults: a symptom of the privatization of religion?**

As a syncretic movement based on "**religious bricolage**", the New Age has given rise to multiple, even contradictory interpretations, as well as the "**New Religious Movements**" (NMR) that appeared a little later in the 1970s and 1980s. Some researchers analyse them as a manifestation of a possible "return of the religious" at a time when, moreover, the Muslim world is experiencing a resurgence of political Islam with the Islamic revolution in Iran and the fight of mudjahideen in Afghanistan against the Soviet occupation and the Afghan communist regime.

However, most social science interpretations on the contrary look at New Age and NMRs as a form of "**privatization**" of religion, in the sense that the religious transcendence referred to in this nebula, no longer concerns the whole of a society or even significant minorities, but only micro-groups, networks, or even isolated individuals in search of personal achievement. In addition, in the individualistic phase of the New Age, which followed the initial phase in which a communitarian utopian dimension was present, many practices (training sessions, etc.) were integrated into the commercial sphere. Appearing initially, at least in some respects, as a rebellion against capitalist society, the New Age seems digested by the laws of the market economy as well as by a liberal view of the relationships between individuals. At the same time, the New Religious Movements blur the line between religion, spirituality and psychotherapy, and question the place of religion in a "hypermodern" world.

**More information on:**

- [Religion in modern and post-modern society](#)
- [Religious communities, individualized and lived religion](#)