

# Beyond New Age Thinking: An Appreciation and Critique

**John Hoad**

ON A VISIT to Hawaii, in August, 1991, to visit relatives, I was introduced by a resident to a deeply felt story about the goddess Pelee that focused on the Haleakala crater on Maui. Pelee, the legend goes, is the volcanic goddess, and visitors to her mountainside who remove rocks and take them back to the mainland suffer bad luck. The volcanic rocks are her children, and the jealous goddess punishes those who steal them. At one time, over 400 letters were on display at the Park Rangers station from people who had suffered that bad luck and had written back to express regrets. We went to look for the letters, but the tourist bureau had removed them, not wanting to give the impression that Pelee was unfriendly to visitors. Commercialism was attempting to mitigate the harshness of the myth.

We may smile at this unscientific naivete, and we would, of course, propose ways of testing the legendary hypothesis. How would bad luck be defined: Is it an accident? An illness? Loss of a job? Loss of a loved one? And, what constitutes bad luck over and above the chances and changes of life? And how much of that bad luck occurred in the population of those who took volcanic rocks from Pelee compared with a control group of the general population, or of those who had visited Haleakala and not taken volcanic rocks away?

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Protest Movements

That reasoned approach makes good sense to us humanists but it might miss an important point. What I sensed in Hawaii was often a movement of protest and protection: protest against being taken over by mainland values, and protection of another set of values. This somewhat gentle protest falls into the category of those documented by Vittorio Lanternari's *Religions of the Oppressed* (English, 1963). Lanternari pointed out that there are messianic cults all over the world - in North Africa, Melanesia, South America, North America. These messianic cults are protests against the "boss culture" of the white man. One finds them among North American Indians (in the peyote cult and ghost dance). They include the Ras Tafarians of Jamaica - all seeking freedom from the boss culture of the white man.

With that in mind, I suggest that New Ageism is a protest, similar to such protests of the 60's as the psychedelic drop-out and drug-culture; the civil rights movement; and the women's movements - protesting lack of authenticity, racial injustice, and sexual inequality in the dominant culture. For its part, the New Age protest is against scientific technology, against science without a soul, against rationalism without a purpose, and against the intellectual without a human face.

The New Agers do not, of course, turn their back on the benefits of science: they will still flip the switches that give them electric light and run their appliances. They will still drive automobiles, use CAT-scans, and turn on their computers. But they will find that science lacks a soul, that, for them, there is something missing at the level of meaning and individual significance and personal engagement for living. New Age thinking is thus a protest against the perceived deficiencies in the previous protest - the Enlightenment protest out of which humanism was born. Humanism protested on behalf of free thinking against imposed dogma, for reason against superstition, for reason against sensationalism. But, to the New Ager, reason too has failed. As Hamlet put it, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." Humanism's exclusive dependence on science in the modern world has made it - according to this way of thinking - practically useful and holistically sterile.

Humanism has been fighting back against this New Age criticism. Many humanists go to great lengths to tag down

every false claim to the paranormal, almost to the point of becoming "true believers" possessed with an anti-spirit: anti-fundamentalism, anti-New Age, anti-religion. I have invented a word for this obsessional allergy, and I have called it "super-trans-meta-paranoia:" which is an allergy against any word or concept that begins with one of those prefixes - supematural, transpersonal, transcendent, metaphysics, paranormal, and so on.

But let me issue a qualifier: my strictures against this obsession are only against an extreme preoccupation with being anti-something. There is an important struggle against superstition, and I affirm that it should continue. But we need to engage New Age thinking with something more than a knee-jerk allergic reaction. We have been attempting to take that larger perspective. So let me summarize where I have drawn the lines between the two worldviews.

### **Ideological Roots**

The ideological roots of humanism and New Ageism differ profoundly. Humanism is based on reason and the critical faculty - a faculty that combines intellect with the scientific method of hypothesis and experimentation. Our ideological roots are in the critical testing of our perceptions of reality. New Ageism is based on a premise of higher powers that impinge on and are available to the natural powers of the human mind. Its critical faculty is often in abeyance, while its imaginative faculty is heightened without adequate and ongoing scientific testing.

From humanism's point of view, it is dangerous to get caught in New Ageism's pervasive and all-embracing ideology. It can become substitute for reasoned and rational judgment, it can abstract from self-empowerment into other-control, it can depend on illusions, it can find its end in self-satisfying emotional experiences. New Ageism has been a happy hunting ground for spiritual guides who prey on credulity and gullibility, get rich quick artists who get rich at our cost, and "saviors" with no coherent commitment to social justice.

But New Ageism can also teach us something. The New Ageist shares with us an interest in the development of human potential. Even from a shaky ideological root, New Ageism has found useful methods for exploring the reaches of human potential. Firmly rooted **in** our own ideological base, what can

we learn from, and how can we go beyond, the New Age program?

### The Spiritual Dimension

Questionable as we may find the word "spiritual" to be, humanists would do well to explore the dimension of human life indicated by that word. Humanism's wariness towards the transcendent, makes it shy also of higher reaches of human potential. But a humanism shut in only on all that can be said in terms of scientific study of the human condition is missing a trick or two in the development of human aspiration. The spiritual dimension is still a very human dimension, but it is human functioning under the guise and guide of the ideal and the holistic. Robert Nozick, speaking on the holiness of everyday life, says that "the most ordinary objects yield surprises to attentive awareness" (*The Examined Life*). The spiritual dimension has something to do with heightened awareness. When LEAR magazine asked distinguished authors to contribute to a discussion on spirituality, John Updike rejected "a tricky dependence on the unseen," with which humanists would agree, but then he went on to see spirituality as an embodiment of an "alternative to the obvious - to bank accounts and syllogisms, to death and taxes." It is he declared "the shadow of light humanity casts as it moves through the darkness of everything that can be explained." That's heady stuff for humanists, for so often we want to stay only at the level of what can be explained. Whimsically, Updike added to his definition of the spiritual: "It's Buddha's smile, it's Einstein's halo of hair, it's birthday parties, it's common politeness and the quixotic impulse to imagine what someone else is feeling." This spirituality is not some reputed out-of-body experience, but the creative lifting of the human experience of the mundane onto levels of art and poetry and music and drama.

### Positive Thinking

Humanists spend a lot of time on the cognitive, they need to spend more time on the attitudinal. An analytic thought is not the same as a positive attitude. Both are needed. The attitudinal is important to the pursuit of relationships. Donald Meyer's *The Positive Thinkers* (1965) traces the history of

positivism in American thinkers all the way from Mary Baker Eddy and Quimby, and Trine's *In Tune with the Infinite*, through Dale Carnegie and Norman Vincent Peale to its present day proponents. The story includes such intellectual heavyweights as William James and Emerson. In *Illusions*, Richard Bach, author of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, states the fundamental theme: "Argue for your limitations, and sure enough, they are yours." The corollary being: "Argue for your possibilities and sure enough, they are yours." There is a way to educate attitude and emotion and intuition as well as intellect.

#### Resources for Living

Humanism needs to develop resources for living. We do indeed already have many, but we need to label them and deliberately organize them. People need more than stimulation of thought. They need help with living. To begin with, organizing a community is itself such a resource. And within that community there needs to be a caring network that can be supportive as people pass through transitions of various kinds. But we also need to share programs for better living. Friends of mine who have been influenced by new age thinking, do things like pasting up affirmations on their refrigerator or on their front door as reminders of attitudes that make a positive contribution to coping in face of the challenges of living. Many Ethical Society programs are aimed at providing this kind of knowledge and experience.

#### The Religious Dimension

Humanism needs to develop a religious dimension. I am very aware of the controversies surrounding that word, but I have long thought about it and I have been unable to find a more popular word for gaining access to that area of human functioning which brings us together to reflect on values and their application to personal and social life. Many people on tasting some brands of humanism find them too self-focused, too preoccupied with the here and now human. The religious impulse swings our thoughts out into a wider orbit, in which, although our perceptions remain human perceptions (what others can we have?), our perceptions do not treat our human selves as the center of the universe. Our humanism will be

rational, but also idealistic, holistic, positive, exploratory, socially responsible, environmentally responsible, resourceful, and responsive to belonging to the universe. Baptism in the waters of doubt is a rite of passage for serious contemporary thinkers, but we rise from those waters to take up the positive challenge of our larger evolution.

We also need to note certain deficiencies in New Ageism. I will mention two.

#### The Social Justice Corrective

We as humanists go beyond new age thinking wherever new age thinking limits itself simply to personal growth. A New Age book that I browsed in a bookshop tells the story of how a New Ager on entering a shop asked the woman attending him how she was. To which she answered, "Dreadful," - because it was raining outside. He then worked with her to get her to recognize that that answer was dependent on a point of view. Were she at home by the fire, reading a book, the rain would enhance her sense of coziness. So he changed her mind and got her to admit that it was a good day after all, despite the rain. Well, one could fix one's mental attitude in such a way as to be indifferent to the weather outside, but what if it were a homeless mother with her children outside? Feeling good inside is not adequate to that situation. We need something socially transforming, and not just for one individual but for a community for which that mother's homelessness may be read as a symptom of inequities and injustices.

#### The Pragmatic Corrective

A West Indian prophet Bedward about a hundred years ago in Jamaica had a dream that he would one day fly to heaven. His protest movement belongs with Lantemari's religions of the oppressed., But he was not very realistic. He climbed a tree and jumped and spent the rest of his life in a mental institution. When Martin Luther King, Jr. had a dream, he translated it into letter-writing, and court cases, and marches, and protests. The humanist dream needs to include a social methodology for facing and doing something about the tragic problems of our time.

Meditations need to activate muscles; cognitions need to run out along nerve-endings; dreams need marching feet; and the human potential movement needs to throw its energies into environmental impact and social activism, and into the affirmation and enhancement of the diverse community that we are.