

# Humanism and New Age Thinking

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IN 1980 *The Aquarian Conspiracy* by Marilyn Ferguson appeared. It was an instant success. Embracing the spiritual movement that was sweeping America, it saw the human future in the development of the human spiritual potential. Reason was not enough. Spirit power and mind power were the keys to human happiness and fulfillment. A New Age of spiritual growth and development would replace the old age of dogmatic religion and dogmatic materialistic science.

Today the New Age movement is expanding and growing stronger. Although amorphous and disorganized, its ideas have entered into the mainstream of American thought. People everywhere are talking about "finding yourself," following your bliss," "centering" and "cosmic consciousness." Although its spectrum ranges from the bizarre claims of Shirley McLaine and the Ramtha channelers to Carl Gustov Jung and Joseph Campbell its devotees are united against what they deem to be the arid rationalism of the liberal past.

Where humanism used to be popular, New Age holds the fort. New Age ideas circulate quite freely among Unitarians, Unity Christians and the political liberals who defend feminism, abortion rights and free speech.

New Age has emerged as the major competitor with humanism among liberal yuppies, the professional bourgeoisie who always provided the foot soldiers for humanist causes. Like humanism it is liberal, open-minded and non-dogmatic. Like humanism it talks a lot about the human potential. And like humanism it hates fundamentalists and

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religious dogmatists. But, unlike humanism, it has managed to engage millions.

What is the significance of this competitive phenomenon?

The New Age movement has its roots deep in the rebellion against traditional dogmatic religion. The Enlightenment and the lovers of Reason were not the only haters of the regime. The rationalists were also assisted by "romantics," who shared their enemy, the Church, but not their philosophy of life. The romantic movement found its home in Germany where the ideas of Fichte and Nietzsche were to wield a profound influence.

Romantics despised the superstitious asceticism and conformity of the Church. But they also despised the elitist smugness and humorless utopians of the rationalist ideologues. August Comte was no more attractive to them than Martin Luther. They were not so sure that science and technology meant progress, or that progress, for that matter, was an ideal to be embraced. They preferred intuition, trusted nature and trained their willpower rather than their reason. Many of them found their ideal in "primitive man" or in the mysticism of Eastern religion.

The rise of the Romantics in the form of New Age was triggered by the fall of Reason. It was the misfortune of Reason to be linked in modern times with the utopian visions of socialism and communism and with the "salvationist" creeds of endless progress through science. It was also its "misfortune" to be linked to realism, which affirmed that the universe was morally absurd and that physical death was the final end of all men and women. The consequence was disillusionment and depression, neither of which was terribly positive for the forces of rationalism. When reason is authentic, its message is too harsh. When it tries to compensate for the harshness with pseudo-reason it promises too much.

By the 1960's radicalism was not only political. The New Left died, but the New Age survived. A "spiritual left" emerged freely experimenting with "new forms" of consciousness, whether through drugs or through meditation. Radical individualism was no longer tied to social and political revolutions. It was married to the mystical traditions of Eastern religion, spouting Hindu and Buddhist phrases, playing tarot cards and reading the I Ching, Bashing Western thought and intellectuality became the substitute for attacking the ruling classes. And internal growth and development became the romantic substitute for industrial expression.

The message of New Age, in so far as it was a coherent and sophisticated doctrine, was an attack on two enemies, the narrowness of established religion and the arrogance of established science, both were guilty of elitist oppression. Both were the ruthless exploiters of nature, seeking to control it and dominate it. Both stressed the limitations of human power, either by postulating a transcendent bossy God or by denying the existence of mental or spiritual energies. Both found heaven in some other place, an earthly paradise to come or a celestial Garden of Eden.

New Age, on the contrary, claims that its "revolution" is the most profound. It affirms the autonomy of every individual and the subjectivity of all truth. What is true is what I experience as true. It applauds nature and bids us return to it in the spirit of reverence and love, Nature knows best. It urges us to own up to our own power and to train our mental and spiritual potential to perform feats of healing and self-control. God is within us. It insists that supreme happiness comes from spiritual awareness and that cosmic consciousness is accessible whenever we want it. Heaven is now.

Unlike the old religion and the new science, truth does not lie in scriptural revelation or scientific journals. It lies deep in our unconscious mind where we must search for it. When we find it, it has all the answers.

The message of New Age is very attractive to the same constituency that we, as humanists, are trying to reach. It hates dogma. It loves the autonomous individual. It praises human power. It believes in personal growth. It strives to rescue nature and the environment. It is wary of Western religion. It adores love. Its devotees are often comfortable calling themselves "humanists."

New Age is not to be mocked. We must learn from its successes. We have much to learn from its espousal of radical freedom and individual autonomy. Maybe freedom is less than wonderful when it chooses to be God.