
Book Reviews

And Now . . . Here's the New Age

Not Necessarily the New Age. Edited by Robert Basil. Prometheus Books, Buffalo, N.Y., 1988. 395 pp. Cloth, \$19.95.

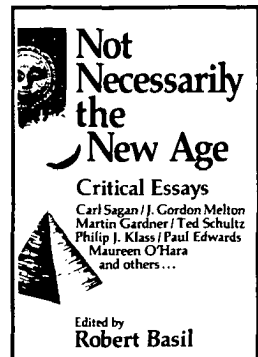
Channeling into the New Age. By Henry Gordon, with a Foreword by Isaac Asimov. Prometheus Books, Buffalo, N.Y., 1988. 198 pp. Cloth \$18.95; paper, \$11.95.

Wendy Grossman

ROBERT BASIL, the editor of *Not Necessarily the New Age*, felt frustrated by the lack of a "balanced and multifaceted examination" of the New Age movement and collected these essays to provide one. In *Channeling into the New Age*, Henry Gordon has mounted a detailed examination of Shirley MacLaine, the New Age's kingmaker. Loosely speaking, of the two, Basil's book is far more detailed, and much of it more academic. Both books begin with a historical overview. Gordon's, although a bit thin, is more practically oriented and much easier going, particularly his (albeit limited) account of the history of New Age beliefs.

In Basil's tour, J. Gordon Melton, director of the Institute for the Study of Religion, traces the beginnings of the New Age to Theosophy, Eastern mysticism. Emanuel Swedenborg, and a synthesized vision of the limitations of materialism and the possibilities of personal transformation. Author James Webb then gives a detailed examination of the sixties' contribution to the foundations of irrationalism in America. Webb considers crucial the fusion of three elements: anxiety, a broad base of Bohemianism, and successful political organization. He also makes the point that the New Age is better defined in terms of goals and ideals than in terms of a set of beliefs.

Basil's book continues with critical examinations of specific ideas. These show how derivative the New Age really is, and how it has claimed credit for ideas already



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discredited, some of them centuries ago. Philosopher Paul Edwards tackles the philosophical, moral, and practical problems of belief in reincarnation and karma. He also discusses the recent development of hypnotic *progression*, by which hypnotists help their subjects to explore future lives. Edwards quotes the progressionist who lamented that “we have been programmed to believe that the future hasn’t occurred yet.” Melvin Harris then examines hypnotic *regression* in his report on research into the Bloxham tapes. This essay, reprinted from his *Investigating the Unexplained*, shows clearly how forgotten conversations, novels one has read, and so on, can contribute to hypnosis-induced fantasies.

Maureen O’Hara, a psychotherapist and professor of women’s studies, describes humanistic psychology’s contribution to the New Age and pleads for a “recommitment, in humanistic psychology, to an ideal of disciplined scholarship.” Psychologist Susan Blackmore examines out-of-body experiences and proposes physiological, scientifically testable explanations for them. To say these experiences are merely imagination or hallucination, she argues, does no service to the cause of understanding them. Martin Gardner’s essay on Shirley MacLaine (adapted from two chapters in his recent book, *The New Age: Notes of a Fringe-Watcher*) examines the logical consequences of her ideas and solipsism, and recommends Chesterton-style radical therapy to convince her that being God is “too big a strain.” Philip J. Klass takes on UFO-abductions (excerpted from his *UFO-Abductions: A Dangerous Game*), and recounts the careers of Budd Hopkins and Whitley Strieber (and their subsequent disagreements). In a lengthy interview with Brad Steiger, a prolific contributor to the New Age literature, Basil is told that Steiger became interested in occult beliefs after a near-death experience at the age of 11. Finally, music critic Leslie Berman critiques the formless white sound that is called New Age music. (I, a musician, think some of it can be compared to Chinese water torture.)

The next section of this book, titled “The Politics,” addresses wider issues. Jay Rosen, who teaches journalism at New York University, compares television’s continual imitation of past successes with the New Age’s recycling of comforting beliefs. *Whole Life* editor Marc Medoff’s chapter on “New Age-Gate,” the most passionate and angry piece in the book, describes the damage done both to individuals and to the community as a whole by the charlatans who promoted the Airplane Game. This was an illegal pyramid scheme that reached great heights of popularity in 1987. Carl Raschke, a professor of religious studies, examines the implications of the application of New Age ideas to business practice and concludes, “The Japanese are probably having a good giggle.”

In his striking personal memoir, editor and critic Ted Schultz recounts his early struggles to understand why his Lutheran religion had it “righter” than any other. This led to skepticism. His later desire for change led him through New Age practices to the study of science and technology, as he came to understand that change in the world has been most effectively brought about by scientists and engineers.

The final section of the book is a guide to skepticism and its practice: a reprint of Carl Sagan’s “The Burden of Skepticism,” his keynote address at the 1987 CSICOP conference; Alan M. MacRobert, an editor at *Sky and Telescope*, on how to recognize pseudoscience; and physicist-biologist Al Seckel on how to evaluate and protect oneself from pseudoscientific claims.

Henry Gordon’s *Channeling into the New Age* is divided into two main sections. In the first he examines the New Age generally, then trance channeling, and finally Shirley MacLaine’s career. The second section analyzes specific quotations from MacLaine’s published or broadcast utterances. He includes such gems as:

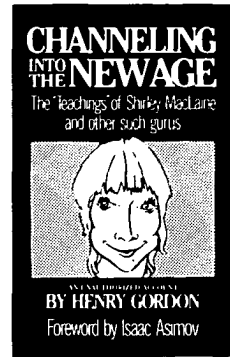
“Consciousness changes everything. If you are angry, your car won’t start”; and “All science is looking for the explanation of God.” Gordon’s comments range from debunking explanations to sarcasm (“Kick the tires, Shirli!”).

Gordon’s discussion of MacLaine’s specific uses and abuses of science parallels the wider and deeper examination of the same topic in Basil’s book. Science is used if it bolsters a belief and discarded as “materialistic” if it contradicts it. Often science is misunderstood or distorted. Here is MacLaine explaining about the use of crystals: “Crystals are amplifying minerals. You have a crystal in a radio—it amplifies the sound waves. You have a crystal in a television set—it amplifies the light waves. When you hold crystals, they amplify the thought waves.” Gordon deals with this one gently (for him), but thoroughly.

Gordon and most of the contributors to Basil’s book agree in tracing the contemporary origins of the New Age to the sixties, the human-potential movement, and what is called the “me generation.” Both books cite Marilyn Ferguson’s 1980 *Aquarian Conspiracy*. Gordon thinks the New Age is different from earlier waves of belief in the paranormal because of the heavy backing of the publishing industry coupled with the support of popular stars. Most also agree on the contradiction between New Agers’ professed “self-dependence” and their actual dependence on their various gurus. James Webb quotes John Wilcock (writing about California in 1966): “There’s always some screwball out here who’s got some new cult or ism working and a band of happily unrealistic acolytes around him who are now convinced that they’ve discovered the True Path to everlasting health, wealth, and satisfactory orgasm.”

There are more common themes. The slogan “I am God” makes the speaker wholly responsible and all personal versions of truth equal. The belief that there is no right or wrong makes the believer infallible and any action acceptable. Medoff says that many victims of the Airplane Game still describe it as a “growth experience” and cannot admit that they got taken. This is the problem: How can you learn from mistakes if you’re unable to define them as mistakes? Rosen calls this a longing for everything to come out all right, as in a soap opera. Another common theme is that of personal transformation. While Gordon calls this the “fast fix,” Webb sees it in terms of freedom—not, he explains, political freedom, but “freedom from being human.” Schultz contrasts his dedication to scientific proof with two vital New Age tenets: (1) believe what “feels right,” and (2) if you believe in something hard enough, it will come true. O’Hara refers to this when she talks about the application of “critical mass” to beliefs and changing “consensus reality.” Gordon and Medoff explain further that the belief that truth either doesn’t matter or doesn’t exist makes it impossible to identify useful ideas. Schultz and O’Hara agree that the New Age has added to our understanding—for example, that one’s emotional state may affect one’s immune system. But what makes ideas useful is their standing up to testing and practical application, not that they “feel right.” Schultz has managed to fuse a scientific career with a personal ability to learn from a metaphorical understanding of New Age beliefs and to enjoy some New Age practices.

It is a bit surprising that Basil’s book does not include a hard-edged analysis of the financial side of New Age industries, à la the *Wall Street Journal*, and that



there is so little discussion of alternative medicine. And, because the book focuses so much on the mainstream, there is no mention of the radical feminist community's adoption of witchcraft. Some of these neglects are covered by Gordon's book. One might say that Basil's book gives a clearer picture of how we got here, and Gordon gives a better overview of exactly where "here" is. A skeptic will derive instruction and entertainment from both books. ●

Time-Life's Descent into the New Age

Cosmic Connections. By the Editors of Time-Life Books. Time-Life Books, Alexandria, Va., 1988. 160 pp. \$12.99.

Mind Over Matter. By the Editors of Time-Life Books. Time-Life Books, Alexandria, Va., 1988. 144 pp. \$12.99.

Visions and Prophecies. By the Editors of Time-Life Books. Time-Life Books, Alexandria, Va., 1988. 160 pp. \$12.99.

Psychic Voyages. By the Editors of Time-Life Books. Time-Life Books, Alexandria, Va., 1988. 144 pp. \$12.99.

Kendrick Frazier

TIME-LIFE BOOKS' "Mysteries of the Unknown" series was introduced just as interest peaked in the so-called New Age phenomenon. The series has been something of a phenomenon itself. It already is the most successful series in the history of Time-Life Books. According to *Publishers Weekly*, the first book in the series, *Mystic Places*, broke all sales records for Time-Life's continuity programs.

Why the great success? Well, first is Time-Life's experience and marketing expertise. It is skilled in first learning what the public wants, and then giving it to them. The direct-mail promotion campaign for the series was flashy, highly sensationalized, and obviously effective. That it was also full of distortions and stooped to many supermarket tabloid tricks undoubtedly was only a marketing advantage. (See our news reports on the series and its promotion campaign, *SI*, Spring 1987, Summer 1987.) The approach taken in these slick direct-mail brochures continues to offend many scientifically concerned people. "Every canard, rumor, or piece of hogwash of the past hundred years or more has been resurrected for this abomination," a Chicago lawyer wrote us in January 1989. "It is being passed off on a naive humanity

Kendrick Frazier is Editor of the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER and editor of two anthologies of SI articles, Science Confronts the Paranormal and Paranormal Borderlands of Science (Prometheus). His latest books include People of Chaco: A Canyon and Its Culture (W. W. Norton) and Solar System (Time-Life Books).
