

New Age or the *Kali-Yuga*?

— Samuel Bendeck Sotillos

[W]hen the New Age is at leisure to Pronounce, all will be set right.

—William Blake

William Blake's (1757–1827) poetic lines above, composed in 1804, and going farther back to the High Middle Ages when Italian mystic Joachim da Fiore (c. 1135–1202), the Calabrian abbot, spoke of the coming age of the Spirit, provide noteworthy examples that the “New Age” is not as *new* as many presume. Rather, the New Age is very ancient as it relates to the doctrine of the Golden Age of Western cosmology. However, if one were dating the birth of the New Age according to the beliefs of popular culture one might assume its beginnings to be more contemporary, perhaps heralded by the appearance of actress Shirley Maclaine (b. 1934), New Age advocate featured on the cover of *Time* magazine dated December 7, 1987, containing a cover story entitled “New Age Harmonies” (Friedrich 1987), or by Oprah Winfrey (b. 1954), American media proprietor and talk-show host, who has been hailed as a “High Priestess of the New Age” (Amarasingam 2011). Yet this would be to overlook the ancient doctrine of the New Age according to traditional cosmology. The notion of the advent of the “New Age” or “Age of Aquarius,” popularized through the counterculture 1960s, radically departs from traditional cosmologies the world over. The New Age has inappropriately borrowed, or rather plagiarized, much from the deep well of ancient

wisdom, making it difficult to decipher what is New Age in a traditional sense from what is not. And it is this indiscriminate extraction and application of these teachings outside a traditional religious and spiritual framework that has led to much of the confusion that dominates the contemporary spiritual scene. Given the rise of the dialectical phenomena of secularism and fundamentalist religion, both consequences of modernism and postmodernism, there are very good reasons for proposing a “New Age” that would reclaim the lost sense of the sacred, and we would be the last to argue the contrary. However, we must be ever so vigilant so as not to be deceived by the counterfeit spirituality that is making itself more and more sophisticated and appearing to be anything but New Age.

What legitimately qualifies as New Age? This is a difficult question to answer. Due to the many hidden assumptions and nuances attached to the notion of the “New Age,” it is quite challenging to define. For one, the phrase *New Age* itself is typically employed without a clear understanding of what it is referring to. Second, there is no agreed-upon definition of it. At best, it is a nebulous label for a type of spirituality that cannot formally trace itself in a direct line of transmission back to the Divine and is therefore not an expression of one of the Divinely revealed traditions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity,

Judaism, Islam, or the primordial religion of the Shamanic or First Peoples. The following definition of the New Age speaks to the syncretistic *mélange* that characterizes it:

“New age” has been used to refer to everyone and everything from so-called channeled material (like *Seth Speaks* or *A Course in Miracles*) to healing with quartz crystals, to pyramid power, to mysticism, Zen, yoga, est, Gestalt, Bach flower remedies, Shirley Maclaine, *The Tao of Physics*, *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, psychedelics, designer drugs, East/West studies, new paradigms, the Findhorn community, Lindisfarne, Edgar Cayce, holistic medicine, ESP, Windstar, paranormal realities, altered states of consciousness . . . (Wilber 1988:46; see also Perry 1972)

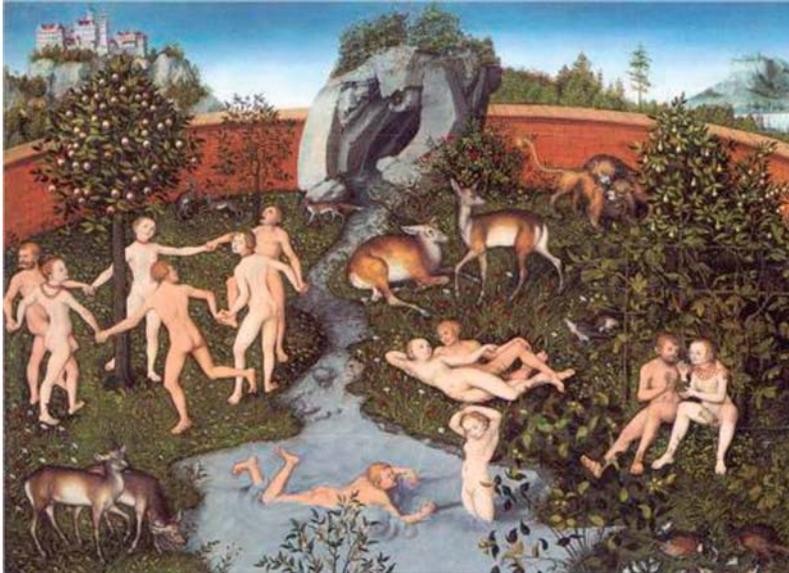
The above throws light on the New Age Movement's tendency to indiscriminately assemble traditional religion and spirituality and mix them with modern science, modern psychology, or various self-help systems, to name only a few examples. Far from being a homogeneous phenomenon, the New Age Movement is a cornucopia of many beliefs that contradict one another, dilute truth, and mix it with error. At the core of the New Age outlook is the assimilation of traditional or premodern perspectives that were anchored in the sacred to modern and postmodern perspectives which are not only antagonistic to the sacred, since they are secular in nature,

but have in effect desacralized the human condition and the cosmos itself. This is the very paradox which the New Age Movement itself has been unable to recognize. The quintessence of New Age thought is perhaps centered on two interconnected ideas: *syncretism* and *psychologism*, yet these are only a simplification of a complex

our true identity *in divinis*. In the Golden Age integral spirituality was the universal Norm, and it is this integral spirituality that has become progressively obscured in the later phases of the temporal cycle. “The *krita yuga* is the perfect age, and therefore it is also called the *satya yuga*; that is, the ‘real’, true, or authentic age. From every point of view it is the golden age, the beatific epoch ruled by

only identifies itself with the re-birth of primordial spirituality that was openly available to all in the Golden Age, when it itself is really an expression of the *Kali-Yuga* or “dark age,” offering only fragments of spiritual teachings from other ages surfacing at the end of the current cycle. “Must not everything be found again at the end of the *Manvantara* [temporal cycle], to serve as a starting-point for the elaboration of the future cycle?” (Guénon 2004c:26). Rather than moving into a New Age we are witnessing the closure of the current age:

[T]he partisans of ‘progress’ have a habit of saying that the ‘golden age’ is not in the past but in the future; nevertheless the truth is that so far as our own *Manvantara* is concerned it is in the past, for it is nothing other than the ‘primordial state’ itself. There is a sense however in which it is both in the past and in the future, but only on condition that attention is not confined to the present *Manvantara* but is extended to include the succession of terrestrial cycles, for insofar as the future is concerned nothing but the ‘golden age’ of another *Manvantara* can possibly be in question; it is therefore separated from our period by a ‘barrier’ completely insurmountable to the profane people who say that sort of thing, and they have no idea what they are talking about when they announce the near approach of a ‘new age’ as being one with which the existing humanity will be concerned. (Guénon 2001:276)



The Golden Age by Lucas Cranach the Elder c. 1530

issue (see Upton 2012; Bendeck Sotillos 2013). “Syncretism’ in its true sense is nothing more than a simple juxtaposition of elements of diverse provenance brought together ‘from the outside’ so to speak, without any principle of a more profound order to unite them” (Guénon 2001:38). Psychologism is the reduction of Reality to psychological criterion that blurs the essential division between Spirit and psyche. “The new age movement has been well-characterized as the secularization of religion and the spiritualization of psychology” (Coomaraswamy 2001:30).

The watchword of a New Age is the longing to realize our primordial nature (*fitrah*), the “image of God” (*imago Dei*) or Buddha-nature (*Buddha-dhātu*),

justice, happiness, and prosperity” (Eliade 1991:63). Similarly, the ancient Greek poet Hesiod (c. 800 B.C.), provides a depiction of the human condition in the Golden Age: “[Men and women] lived like gods without sorrow of heart, remote and free from toil and grief” (Hesiod 2004:3). The projection of a New Age is the yearning to return to the Supreme Identity, the transcendent center of our being beyond the empirical ego. The New Age agenda therefore is the attempt to restore the integral spirituality that existed at the beginning of the temporal cycle: “[E]veryone lives spiritually by his inward Revelation; this is the golden age, in which everyone is born an initiate” (Schuon 1990:20). The New Age Movement mistak-

To comprehend the New Age and the underlying factors that gave rise to it, further analysis is required, especially the social factors that influenced the counterculture psyche of the 1960s which first began in America, continued to England, and then spread to most of the Western world and beyond. It was in the face of the turbulent period of the Vietnam War coin-

ciding with the Civil Rights Movement, the Anti-War Movement, Feminism, the Back to the Land Movement, the Sexual Revolution, the Psychedelic Revolution, and the Vatican II Council (an event that has had disastrous effects but is almost always overlooked or incorrectly perceived as positive; (see Coomaraswamy 2006) that were all part of the fertile ground, that these diverse movements were launched where widespread social unrest and disillusionment with the *status quo* reached unprecedented heights. It was in this context that these coalescing events within the modern West encountered the traditional wisdom of the ancient East. In this encounter the profound deprivation of the sacred became evident on a mass scale, nonetheless it manifested as a double-edged sword, if not a sheer paradox, filled with both promise and peril. It marked the first time that human individuals on a mass scale were introduced to the sublime and immutable truths of the perennial philosophy without any prior preparation or stable context, since many had no religious and spiritual affiliation that would allow them to make sense of these foreign teachings. Within the face of the inpouring of this transcendent wisdom, one might assume that nothing but good could come of it, given the need to correct a widespread secularism, yet this was not exactly the case, in fact far from it. Although some found their way to traditional spiritual paths this way, they were the exception, as the counterculture 1960s opened the floodgates for many abuses and much confusion that have become common in the present-day psyche.

While the origins of the New Age Movement have been traced to modern Theosophy (Godwin 1994), the coining and usage of

the term *New Age* is also of interest. Although the phrase was applied much earlier, as previously noted, some suggest that it was the American David Spangler (b. 1945), a central figure in the countercultural community of Findhorn in Scotland, who popularized it through his book *Revelation: The Birth of a New Age* (Spangler 1976). The term can also be connected to Alice Bailey (1880–1949), disciple and successor of modern Theosophy and Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), who founded the Arcane School in 1923 and its umbrella organization the Lucis Trust in 1922, with her husband Foster Bailey (1888–1977). An important associate of Alice Bailey was the Italian psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli (1888–1974), who was a pioneer within humanistic and transpersonal psychology and founder of Psychosynthesis, as well as a member of the Theosophical Society. What is most significant about Assagioli's relationship with Bailey was the organization of The Meditation Group for the New Age (MAGNA) that formed in 1957, which draws a direct correlation between the New Age Movement and modern psychology, including the Human Potential Movement (see Campbell 1980). The British literary magazine *The New Age* is worth mentioning in this context, as it was very influential under the editorship of Alfred Richard Orage (1873–1934), initially a student of modern Theosophy and then of G. I. Gurdjieff (1877–1949) and Acting Secretary of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) of London. We might add that the father of American Psychology William James (1842–1910), who was a precursor of humanistic psychology and an originator of

transpersonal psychology, was also a President of the Society for Psychical Research and a member of the Theosophical Society. *The New Age* was financially backed by the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950) who was closely associated with Annie Besant (1847–1933), President of the Theosophical Society, who had met Madam Blavatsky in 1889 and subsequently became a member.

The English occultist Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), dubbed “the most evil man in the world,” who was featured on the cover of



Hippy Circle

The Beatles' “Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band” album, affirmed that “The Æon of Horus is here” (Crowley 1991:50) and alleged that the New Age began in 1904. Interestingly, C. G. Jung (1875–1961), another pioneer within both humanistic and transpersonal psychology, predicted that: “1940 is the year when we approach the meridian of the first star in Aquarius. It is the premonitory earthquake of the New Age” (Jung 1973:285). While Crowley's influence was far-reaching, it must also be noted that American psychologist Timothy Leary (1920–1996), dubbed in a similar fashion to Crowley “the most dangerous man in America,” who was key in launching the Psychedelic Revolution, perceived himself to be a continuator of Aleister Crowley's work (Higgs 2006). A core teaching of New Age thought comes from Crowley, who avowed:

“Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law” (1976:9)—a fundamental subversion of Saint Augustine’s (354–430) dictum: “*Dilige [deum] et quod vis fac*” or “Love [God], and do what thou wilt.” Rather than eradicating all mechanisms of self-restraint in order to go beyond individualistic inhibitions and conventional norms, the task is to transcend the empirical ego by conformity to the Divine will, not by giving free reign to egoism.

A striking symptom of the contemporary mindset is its bipolar obsession both with the “end of the world” and the emergence of a “New Age,” on a level perhaps previously unknown, which has taken root within popular culture and expressed itself through film, television, music, Internet, books, ads, etc. While many of our contemporaries hold steadfast to given dates predicting the final hour of this temporal cycle, they lose sight of the fact that the validity of the *Kali-Yuga* does not rest upon a given date, as this is part of the Divine mystery of manifestation, but rather requires human individuals to bear witness to its climate of dissolution while remaining faithful to the maxim “to be in the world but not of the world.” The cycle of manifestation progressively departs from its Principle, always moving from relative order to greater chaos, and this has both psychological and social implications. For this reason the chaos we see unfolding, while immediately attributed to specific human causes, is essentially a natural consequence of what occurs when the Spirit is betrayed on a mass scale. Rather than heralding a “New Age” of abundant authentic spirituality, we are in the New Age of darkness, and this is precisely what the New Age Movement has *de facto* overlooked. “Thus from

a Hindu perspective, the current talk in certain Western circles of a promising new age—the Age of Aquarius—is misguided” (Feuerstein 1998:6). From this perspective the New Age becomes a parody of the Golden Age and simultaneously a sure sign of the *Kali-Yuga*, as it attempts to mimic what was possible at the conception of the temporal cycle, forgetting that such attempts cannot be manufactured through positive thought or good will, for we are discussing an order of reality that is supra-individual or transpersonal and not man-made. “[T]he New Age approach seems to exemplify a phenomenon known as the ‘invention of tradition’”

(Hanegraaff 1998:324). Good intentions without discernment can have unfortunate consequences; as the common saying confirms: “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

Necessary to any discussion of the New Age or the *Kali-Yuga* is a comprehension of what modernism (and by extension postmodernism) is, and we must be very clear about this. “Modern civilization appears in history as a veritable anomaly” (Guénon 2004b:1), due to the fact that, “Modern civilization, by its divorce from any principle, can be likened to a headless corpse of which the last motions are convulsive and insignificant” (Coomaraswamy 1979:15). Due to modernism’s disconnection with the sacred that occurred in the West with the so-called Enlightenment, we must be

wary of contemporaries who hold an apologist position with regard to modernism and its disastrous implications: “We must preserve the dignity of modernity, even while we attempt to overcome the disaster of modernity” (Wilber 1996:130). This displacement if not undermining the sacred within the daily lives of the human collectivity is none other than a definitive sign of the times. This

displacement has acted to destabilize the universal Norm, and thus constitutes a profound distortion of the nature of the cosmos and the human individual. Due to this predicament, which is by no means new as it has been under way for several centuries, we cannot rely on the modern and post-modern outlook to guide us out of

the present-day impasse, as it holds a myopic vision of the past and a fragmented comprehension of the nature of things. This outlook is rooted in a prejudice that it fails to perceive and cannot go beyond. As the modern and postmodern mind dogmatically bars any form of knowledge that transcends the empirical order, a good case could be made that New Age ideas arose in an attempt to remedy the narrow outlook of both secularism and fundamentalist religion during the counterculture 1960s.

In examining the traditional cosmologies both of the East and West, we find a common perspective in the notion that time is divided up into four periods, known collectively in Hinduism as the *Manvantara*: Golden Age (*Krita-Yuga* or *Satya-Yuga*), Silver Age (*Treta-Yuga*), Bronze Age (*Dvapa-*



Kalki Avatar, Rani Ki Vav, Patan, Gujarat

ra-Yuga), and the Iron Age (*Kali-Yuga*). Only after the last age or the *Kali-Yuga* has concluded, can the Golden Age commence anew. While the New Age Movement aspires to usher in the Golden Age, it has lost sight of the fact that it itself is a byproduct of the *Kali-Yuga* or “dark age,” the final phase of this temporal cycle, and it cannot leap beyond itself. Sri Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950), a spiritual luminary of the 20th century, offers the following insight in light of the *Advaita Vedānta*: “[T]here is nothing to attain and no time within which to attain. You are always that” (quoted in Devaraja Mudaliar 2002:177). Rather than denying the reality of temporal cycles and the *Kali-Yuga*, the teachings of non-duality affirm the same truth from a different point of view (*darshana*), that of the Absolute rather than the relative.

The very conception of time as it is viewed by the premodern or traditional civilizations and societies is cyclical, which contrasts with the contemporary idea of time being linear and progressive. This universal doctrine of temporal cycles can be traced from the inception of the Primordial Tradition—both in its expressions of the First Peoples or the Shamanic traditions and also through Hinduism, known as the *sanātana dharma* or “the eternal and universal code of conduct,” which is said to have existed everywhere:

According to Siouan mythology, it is believed that at the beginning of the cycle a buffalo was placed at the west in order to hold back the waters. Every year this buffalo loses one hair, and every age he loses one leg. When all his hair and all four legs are gone, then the waters rush in once again, and the cycle comes to an end. A striking parallel to this myth is found in

the Hindu tradition, where it is the Bull *Dharma* (the divine law) who has four legs, each of which represents an age of the total cycle. During the course of these four ages (*yugas*) true spirituality becomes increasingly obscured, until the cycle (*manvantara*) closes with a catastrophe, after which the primordial spirituality is restored, and the cycle begins once again. It is believed by both the American Indian and the Hindu that at the present time the buffalo or bull is on his last leg, and he is very nearly bald. Corresponding beliefs could be cited from many other traditions. (Brown 1989:9)

The passage of time through the temporal cycles has a powerful influence on the human psyche, for the human soul experienced proximity to Spirit in earlier ages and received the benefits of psychological health and well-being due to its immediate contact with the Principle. The psychological implications of the unfolding of the temporal cycle are more relevant and necessary to understand today than in previous ages, due to the severity of the psychic afflictions and fissures that prevail in the contemporary era:

You’ve heard of the Golden Age? In the Golden Age, all people experienced their essence, no holes. Then came the Silver Age as essence diminished and the holes began to appear; then the Bronze Age. Now we’re in the Iron Age. It’s the darkest, heaviest. Iron is really nothing but defense. We can sometimes feel the quality of iron in our own defenses: the hardness, the determination to protect ourselves. So this is one way of viewing the present time—all defenses against holes. (Almaas 1987:23)

Because of the predominate fissures within the human psyche in the *Kali-Yuga* that give rise to

mental disequilibrium, addiction, destruction of family and society, which are now visible throughout the four directions of the world, we cannot afford to omit the perennial wisdom that is our only hope of restoring integral order. It has been perceptively observed that the “*Kali-Yuga*: [Is] The Age of the Wrong Diagnosis” (Glass 2004:323); this is because only through integral spirituality can one properly diagnosis and treat the symptoms of this eclipsed age. While contemporaries seek to find answers in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), which has only recently shifted its position with regard to the pathologizing of religion and spirituality, we see that the ancients had foreseen the dissolution of the modern and postmodern world and had not only



Rajneesh in Rolls Royce

diagnosed it but also knew its etiology—the very disconnection from the sacred which we are now facing. If methods of diagnosing mental illness fail to take into consideration the quality of temporal cycles, neither the ailments nor the remedies will be integrally understood. Although there are many striking examples, the following is taken from the *Mahānirvāna Tantra*:

With the sinful *kali[-yuga]* in progress, in which all law is destroyed and which abounds with evil ways and evil phenomena, and gives rise to evil activities, then the *Vedas* become inefficient, to say nothing of remembering the *Smritis*. And the many *Purānas* containing various stories and showing the many ways [to libera-

tion] will be destroyed, O Lord. Then people will turn away from virtuous action and become habitually unrestrained, mad with pride, fond of evil deeds, lustful, confused, cruel, rude, scurrilous, deceitful, short-lived, dull-witted, troubled by sickness and grief, ugly, weak, vile, attached to vile behavior, fond of vile company, and stealers of others' money. They become rogues who are intent on blaming, slandering, and injuring others and who feel no reluctance, sin, or fear in seducing the wife of another. They become destitute, filthy, wretched beggars who are sick from their vagrancy. (Quoted in Feuerstein 1998:7)

Saint Augustine's description also has a powerful resonance with these times: "As the end of the world approaches, errors increase, terrors multiply, iniquity increases, infidelity increases; the light, in short . . . is very often extinguished; this darkness of enmity between brethren increases, daily . . ." (Schaff 1888:162).

This same entropic trajectory is recognized within Islam, the final revelation of this temporal cycle: "No time cometh upon you but is followed by a worse" (hadith). Nonetheless, the veiling of Spirit in the current age of the *Kali-Yuga* is not without its advantages, one being that detachment and spiritual realization may be obtained with fewer hardships than in earlier times. This is something that is widely recognized throughout the religious traditions. While less is required of aspirants on the path today than was previously required, this does not then suppose that anything and everything is permissible. Although the contemporary mind seeks for more inclusive ways of looking at Reality, which is a natural response to living in a pluralistic era where

diverse peoples, races, ethnicities, and religions encounter one another, yet these more inclusive ways of looking at things are rarely grounded in the principal knowledge of the sacred traditions themselves. Without this principal understanding, all "integral" or "holistic" approaches miss the mark, as they are incomplete so long as they are not informed by what transcends all points of view, namely the Absolute. The intention to extract the "best" of the premodern, modern, and the postmodern, while very appealing, can only end up by further confusing matters. What is fundamentally overlooked here is that the premodern or traditional world was rooted in the sacred whereas the modern and postmodern are in principle a deviation.

While it is certainly true that "In the Golden Age of this cycle, all religions were one" (Upton 2001:100), the following is also true for Western seekers in the *Kali-Yuga*: "To be precise: there is no spiritual path outside the following traditions or religions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism; but Hinduism is closed for those who have not been born into a Hindu caste, and Taoism is inaccessible" (Burckhardt 1987:251). This will appear to some as a narrow assessment of the integral spiritual paths that are presently available, given the many New Age renditions that propose a "world spirituality" as an alternative to following one of the Divinely revealed religions, yet on what authority do they base this? While there are always exceptions given the All-Possibility of Spirit, these exceptions should not be mistaken for the rule, which has been misunderstood by the proponents of the New Age. Even though various New Age approaches claim to extract the inner or mystical core

hidden within the sapiential traditions, they exclude the necessary outer dimension of religion, losing sight of the fact that there is *no* spirituality or mysticism without religion, for one has to go through the shell (religion) to get to the kernel (the esoteric or mystical).

The attempt to reclaim the integral spirituality that was the universal Norm of the Golden Age, has no efficacy without an essential discernment to guide it; it is not through *ad hoc* approaches that a New Age or rather a Golden Age will come. Our calling is to reclaim the valid paths that have been Divinely revealed to the diverse human collectivities since the commencement of the temporal cycle and live them to the best of our capacities. This is the immutable message of the perennial philosophy and the saints and sages of all times and places, and it is their lived examples that we must follow; neither we nor our contemporaries have permission to change or update this message. And although misguided approaches to spirituality may (or may not) be better than no spirituality at all, even if they are New Age, in view of the fact that the traditional religions are themselves compromised in this era, we must do our best to travel and realize the well-worn path even in the face of all of the uncertainty and myriad obstacles that the *Kali-Yuga* places before us. Even if forgetfulness of all things of a transcendent order is one of the core symptoms of this eclipsed age, it has nonetheless been declared: "Remember Me and I will remember you" (Sūra, *The Cow*, 2:152).

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