

CHAPTER FIVE

Pluralism and the New Age

What is loosely designated “New Age spirituality” in America today clearly has its roots in what Catherine Albanese calls “metaphysical religion.”¹ Recall the four defining characteristics of metaphysical religion that she provides. First, it focuses upon mind and its powers, where mind is an expansive concept leading all the way to psychic notions such as clairvoyance. Second, it emphasizes a correspondence between a divine macrocosm and the human microcosm (an emphasis consistent with Harold Bloom’s contention that characteristically American religion regards the soul as older than creation: the soul essentially is the divine in microcosm). Third, metaphysical religion’s approach to reality emphasizes movement and energy. And fourth, the metaphysical quest seeks therapeutic effects for the agitated human soul.

If so-called New Age spirituality is a contemporary manifestation of this metaphysical spirituality, with metaphysical spirituality having been a part of nearly the whole of American history, what distinguishes the New Age from the rest of that history? Albanese suggests that the “New Age movement” came into being sometime in the 1970s and 1980s when a critical mass of metaphysical practitioners became aware of their own impressive numbers and when, as a result, both the practitioners and the press became convinced that they could identify a genuine, discreet spiritual movement in American culture.²

A perusal of the New Age section of a typical bookstore or of an internet bookseller’s New Age offerings will inevitably reveal the following topics, among others: astrology, Tarot, the *I-Ching*,

channeling the dead (that is, communicating with the dead via a “medium”), the body’s *chakras* or energy centers, aroma therapy, healing through the manipulation of energy fields (Reiki, for example), the meaning of dreams, extra-sensory perception, the power of crystals, palmistry, casting spells, Native-American spirituality, eco-spirituality, past lives regression therapy (where one is aided in recalling one’s previous incarnations on the wheel of rebirth), and devotion to the Goddess or goddesses. This list, though inevitably incomplete, makes it clear that the New Age is the pluralistic spirituality *par excellence*. But its pluralism is not simply a function of how many practices it offers its devotees – the plethora of the sources upon which it draws – but also of the fact that the individual New Age practitioner is free to take up as many of these practices as he or she sees fit. In other words, the pluralism of the sources of New Age spirituality is coupled with what might be called an internal pluralism: a quester is likely to experiment not just with one offering collected under the New Age heading but, rather, an array of practices that suits his or her individual needs.

Our interest in pluralism in this study, however, has been with its potentially disconfirming powers. More specifically, we have considered how a reasonably orthodox adherent of one of the great world religions deals with the fact that the other world religions profess beliefs contrary to her own, and that she recognizes the fact that she has no more evidence to back up her beliefs than members of other religions have to support theirs. The latter part of this formula is crucial: the Christian will claim divine revelation as a source of his beliefs, but the Muslim will also claim divine revelation as the source of her convictions. Note, however, that this second component of the disconfirmation dilemma probably will not come into play when the New Age believer confronts the traditional world religions. The devotee of the New Age will, in most cases, not appeal to divine revelation contained in a sacred Scripture, for example, which is something that at least the three Abrahamic religions certainly will. The matter is more ambiguous when we attempt to compare New Age claims about sources of truth with something such as the claim made on behalf of the Upanishads, namely, that

their content was intuited by special seers. Because we are concentrating upon spirituality and religion in the United States, however, it is most pertinent, for our purposes, to think about how New Age spirituality lines up with the Abrahamic traditions, Judaism and Christianity in particular. And to the extent that the New Age mentality will make appeal to very different sources of evidence than do Judaism and Christianity, the New Age believer is not as likely to be confronted with the threat of disconfirmation from those traditions. For, given that the New Age sources are genuinely different than those claimed by the Abrahamic traditions, the devotee of the New Age can always claim that the basis for New Age convictions is more profound and reliable than what props up the beliefs of Jews and Christians.

The very idea of a "new age," after all, suggests that we can tap into a new spiritual dispensation, one unavailable to, or at least unrecognized by, the traditional world religions. Recalling Albanese's four characteristics of metaphysical religion and condensing them into a summary formula that can be used to describe just what New Age practitioners see as the source of New Age rites, we can say that they claim that a potent energy fills the universe and that enlightened human beings can tap into it and experience first-hand its therapeutic effects. They can do so since all humans are from the start, whether or not they are sufficiently enlightened to recognize it, connected to this supernal energy; the soul, once more, is older than creation. Our conclusion, then, is that a self-described New Age spiritual seeker will not confront the disconfirming Other when considering the beliefs of Christianity or Judaism, for that quester will inevitably point out that those older religious traditions simply do not afford the New Age's much more immediate relation to the energy that fructifies the universe.

But we have seen that New Age spirituality is tied up with American spiritual pluralism not only in the vast array of spiritual traditions (traditions most often outside Judaism and Christianity) upon which it draws, but that that spirituality is inevitably internally pluralistic as well. Might not the problem of the disconfirming Other arise here, since now we are not juxtaposing

the New Age with Christianity or Judaism, but, rather, considering persons who all fit under the New Age umbrella that we have described above? What we appear to have in many instances of what gets labeled New Age spirituality is a whole host of spiritual practices that differ in their specifics yet all rest upon a worldview according to which the properly prepared mind (and body) can participate in some type of encompassing, therapeutic energy field, whether that field is most easily accessed by reading the stars or by manipulating the body's own chakras. Now we seem to have the necessary ingredients for a disconfirmation challenge: my New Age practices will differ from those of some other practitioners and may seem to contradict those other practices, yet my defense of the efficacy of my practices – the ability of the enlightened mind to tap into healing energy – will be little different from that advanced by those engaging in practices apparently incommensurable with my own. Suppose I look to a medium and communication with the dead in order to see into the future, while you do not believe in such “channeling” and turn instead to casting the *I-Ching* or look to a psychic who claims no connection with the departed. Aren't we now right back where we started, namely, with Charles Taylor's “mutual fragilization” of belief, the challenge of the disconfirming Other?

One clue that the answer to this question may be “No” is to be found in our description of New Age spirituality as being internally pluralistic, meaning not just that many different practices can go on under one big conceptual tent, but that the individual New Ager, *qua* individual, frequently adopts a multitude of spiritual practices, practices which may appear to an outsider to be mutually exclusive. One finds empirical evidence of this by, for example, attending one of the Celebrate Your Life conferences that have been held for several years across the United States, where one finds seekers enthusiastically participating in a menagerie of New Age events. Of course, we might choose to argue that the practices do in fact often rest on contradictory notions that become apparent when we push beyond the superficial New Age similarities (the notion of energy fields and the like) and that therefore we ought to conclude that

New Age practitioners are employing one or more of the avoidance tactics that we explored in Chapter One – compartmentalization, overstepping the bounds of logic, and self-deception – in order to ward off disconfirmation. But this would, I think, be an overly hasty conclusion, for the ease with which an individual New Age devotee is able to pull together a conglomeration of different spiritual practices suggests that there are dynamics at work in the New Age mentality that are simply not ordinarily a part of the mainline religions.

It turns out that there are at least two important answers to the question “How is the New Age devotee protected from disconfirmation given that he or she is allowed, if not encouraged, to adopt a potpourri of New Age practices?” The answers are not independent of one another, but fit together into a coherent New Age package. First of all, one should note that the list of New Age options proffered above is not, first and foremost, a conglomeration of different belief-systems. It is, rather, more akin to a list of different *techniques*. If we were to compare these options to what goes on in the Christian tradition, we would have to conclude that they are more akin to intercessory prayer than to reciting the Apostle’s Creed. And while it would be foolish not to recognize that some persons are attracted to metaphysical and New Age spiritualities precisely because of the speculative worldviews that they offer – some devotees of theosophy might fit in this category, for example – the New Age is above all a therapeutic approach to the human condition and its sundry challenges, an approach meant in a very direct sense to help you through the practical challenges of life and to cure what ails you, whether your ailments be physical, psychological, or left over from a previous life. And just as there may be several treatment options open to a decidedly non-New Age physician in treating a patient’s illness, so the New Age offers a host of techniques that, while they may appear to contradict one another when mistakenly understood as essentially belief systems, avoid contradiction when understood as techniques. Different belief systems or worldviews conflict; different practical techniques need not.³

Second, it is hard to miss the element of commodification in New Age spirituality. I can personally testify that a visit to a New Age convention, such as the aforementioned Celebrate Your Life events, affords one the opportunity to walk up and down the aisles of an exhibition hall with its myriad books, DVDs, and other New Age wares in almost the same way that one goes up and down the aisles at the supermarket: I see many things in the supermarket that I don't care to eat, but that does not bother me in the least, for there will also be a whole host of foods that I do like to eat. As long as my nutritional needs and desires are met by my supermarket, I have no reason to begrudge others access to foods that are to their taste but not to mine. In other words, I am expected to "shop," not just in the literal sense that occurs at a New Age convention, but to shop also among different spiritual techniques by trying them out in my quest.

These two considerations fit together nicely: techniques offer themselves up for commodification in a way that worldviews do not. One does actually pay for a session with a medium or a treatment intended to put one's energy centers back in balance. By contrast, while the traditional mainline church attendee may put money in the collection plate on most Sunday mornings, this is hardly a matter of directly purchasing the belief system proclaimed in that church.

It is essential to note, however, that while the New Age emphasis on technique and commodification means that the New Age is, with the inevitable exceptions noted above, less invested in belief-systems than many other forms of spirituality, the belief system dimension cannot easily disappear altogether for *any* New Age practitioner, but is simply relegated to second-tier status. We have already mentioned the general New Age conviction about access to special forms of cosmic energy. Furthermore, the techniques that the New Age sells its devotees, from astrology to channeling the dead, each presuppose certain more specific convictions. Astrology, for example, clearly commits one to the belief that the stars have a powerful connection with the fates of individual human beings. And in order to buy into the notion of

channeling the deceased, one must believe that there is some form of life after death and that the dead are sufficiently interested in those of us here below that they are willing to provide us with guidance.

Yet, the mixing and matching of individual spiritual practices that characterizes the life of the New Age seeker suggests that the belief systems behind the practices do not ordinarily conflict with one another to the point of disconfirmation. Perhaps they can, after all, work together smoothly under the overarching belief that enlightened human beings can tap into special sources of spiritual energy. But this does not protect New Age spirituality from disconfirmation. For the New Age's investment in technique brings to the fore a different kind of disconfirmation threat: the claim that a particular technique provides physical healing or allows one to make accurate predictions about the future can be empirically tested.

Let us consider a concrete example, one connected to one of the New Age's most audacious claims, namely, that certain persons dubbed mediums have the ability to contact the dead and to receive various sorts of information from them, including information about events that will occur in the future. Two of America's currently most famous mediums are John Edward and James Van Praagh. They appear regularly on U.S. television, and they have sold millions of copies of their many books. Most often these alleged mediums are seen not working with simply one inquirer (though one can pay to have such one-on-one sessions) but with a whole room full. One would expect skeptics, especially those with the training to engage in statistical analysis, to have challenged the claims of alleged mediums, and indeed they have.

Mediums such as Edward and Van Praagh frequently begin a session by asking their audience a question such as "Does the name Eddie mean anything to anyone here? I am getting a very strong impression connected with that name." In any group of twenty people or more – and mediums such as Van Praagh and Edward usually work with significantly larger groups – there is bound to be someone who is named Eddie or who at least knows someone of

that name. Where the latter category is concerned, someone in the audience will inevitably say that they had a dog named Eddie or that their second cousin is named Eddie; some person in the audience will find a connection with the name, however tangential. Suppose, for instance, that an audience member volunteers that she had an uncle named Eddie. Now the medium is on his or her way. He or she will ask questions of the particular person now in the spotlight, questions such as “Was Eddie ever injured in any way?” “Did Eddie have a dark complexion?” “Did Eddie’s job have something to do with the business world?”

It turns out that the answers to the medium’s questions will more often be negative than positive, but inquirers are apparently impressed by even a very low number of “hits” (sometimes no more than ten percent), no doubt because, as has been suggested by skeptical analysts, these inquirers so desperately want to connect with a deceased loved one. Skeptics have actually gone so far as to pretend to be mediums and have demonstrated that by carefully listening to the responses they get from their inquirers, they can come up with as much or more accurate information than the alleged mediums do.⁴

Of course, channeling the dead does not constitute the whole of the New Age. For example, many New Age techniques are invoked for physical healing. In some cases, the claim will be that a gifted New Age practitioner can directly heal an ill person by manipulating the patient’s energy fields. In other instances one consults a New Age shaman who claims to be schooled in so-called “alternative” treatments and in the therapeutic use of various substances, the farther outside the scope of traditional scientific medical practice in the United States the better. It will come as no great surprise to those outside New Age circles, however, that, when rigorous tests are performed to assess the sorts of alternative therapies that are now so popular among New Age practitioners, here too the claims cannot be verified.⁵

Long before there was a movement known as the New Age, there has been an intense interest in America in claims about “psychic phenomena,” involving everything from telepathy to the

existence of ghosts to the mind's ability to manipulate matter at a distance. What is more, there have been, and continue to be, a whole host of institutes and "research centers" dedicated to investigating psychic claims and trumpeting positive results from their inquiries. The Edgar Cayce Institute is a good example, named after one of the country's most famous twentieth-century claimants to psychic abilities. But, alas, once again, when science of the most rigorous kind puts the claims of the psychics to the test, those claims almost invariably prove thoroughly unfounded. The experience of psychologist Susan Blackmore, who began her Ph.D. studies convinced of the reality of psychic phenomena, is instructive in this regard:

I did the experiments. I tested telepathy, precognition, and clairvoyance; I got only chance results. I trained fellow students in imagery techniques and tested them again; chance results. I tested twins in pairs; chance results. I worked in play groups and nursery schools with very young children (their naturally telepathic minds are not yet warped by education, you see); chance results. I trained a Tarot reader and tested the readings; chance results.

Occasionally I got a significant result. Oh, the excitement! I responded as I think any scientist should, by checking for errors, recalculating the statistics, and repeating the experiments. But every time I either found the error responsible, or failed to repeat the results.⁶

Blackmore tells us that "parapsychologists called me a 'psi-inhibitory experimenter,' meaning that I didn't get paranormal results because I didn't believe strongly enough. I studied other people's results and found more errors, and even outright fraud."⁷

I have suggested that the belief-system component of spirituality takes a back seat to technique and commodification in New Age spirituality. And we have seen how this emphasis on technique and commodity and the relegation of a belief system to second-tier status protects the New Age devotee from the kind of

disconfirmation with which we have been concerned in previous chapters of this book, namely, disconfirmation via the other believer. We have gone on to note, however, that New Age claims about techniques face their own kind of disconfirmation challenge: precisely as clearly delimited claims about specific phenomena that New Age spirituality can effect, New Age contentions leave themselves open to scientific falsification, or at least to the scientific conclusion that there is no tangible evidence to back up New Age contentions.

This state of affairs leads to two pertinent observations. First, while there seems to be less emphasis on commodified techniques among the world religions and more emphasis upon a religion as a belief system, those traditional religions do sometimes venture into territory that seems to parallel New Age claims regarding techniques. For instance, Christians of some stripes put a great deal of emphasis upon petitionary prayer, that is, prayer in which they ask God to accomplish some particular feat, such as healing a diseased loved one. Cannot one scientifically test the Christian claim that God responds to prayer and heals the sick in much the same fashion as one can test New Age claims (and find them wanting)? As a matter of fact, one can indeed do so, and the most rigorous tests done thus far on petitionary prayer for the ill have turned up largely negative results. Ill persons being prayed for showed no more improvement in their health than did control groups for whom no prayers were said.⁸

But the notion of petitionary prayer is embedded in a complex fashion within Christianity as a belief system such that the believer can fairly easily deal with such negative evidence from scientific tests of the efficacy of prayer. For example, the believer will trust that God has very good reasons for not answering some prayers. Perhaps a particular bout of illness that befalls John fits into God's overarching plan for John's life and will ultimately serve a good end. Or consider the fact that there is biblical precedent for not "putting God to the test" (Deuteronomy 6:16). Hence, the believer may conclude that while, under ordinary circumstances, petitionary prayer can have miraculous consequences, a controlled

study testing prayer is not a project in which the Almighty chooses to participate.

The second observation resulting from the New Age's susceptibility to scientific testing of its techniques is to note that, interestingly enough, some New Age commentators have fought back by reversing the decision to place the intellectual or belief-system component of their spirituality in the background: they have attempted to articulate a detailed explanation of what Albanese has pointed to as metaphysical spirituality's perennial reference to movement and energy. The thinking here is of the "If-you-can't-beat-them-join-them" variety. That is, numerous New Age thinkers have attempted, in essence, to protect New Age practice from scientific disconfirmation by arguing that the very latest scientific discoveries about the human mind, energy, and the place each holds in the structure of the universe actually support New Age claims.

The most fertile ground among the sciences for such New Age counterattacks is quantum physics, with its notoriously mind-bending claims about the counter-intuitive way the universe works on the most microscopic of levels. In her book *The Field: The Quest for the Secret Force of the Universe*, New Age author Lynne McTaggart focuses on the energy fluctuations that quantum physicists talk about as existing in what they call the quantum field. For her, the quantum physicists' failings are in not going beyond the purely scientific implications of their discoveries and neglecting the metaphysical implications. If one does the latter, which she sets out to do in her book, some of the most fantastic of New Age claims supposedly become plausible, including its all-important claims about alternative methods for healing: "The field is the force, rather than germs or genes, that finally determines whether we are healthy or ill, the force which must be tapped in order to heal."⁹

To take a second example, the writing team of Phaedra and Isaac Bonewits claims in their book *Real Energy: Systems, Spirits, and Substances to Heal, Change, and Grow* that the genuinely astute student of the universe's energy can seamlessly combine energy as understood in contemporary physics with Ceremonial Magic, Voodoo and Santeria, Taoism, t'ai chi, tantra and kundalini yoga.¹⁰

If there is one overarching and overawing assertion made by those who claim quantum scientific backing for New Age beliefs, it is probably, as Victor Stenger has suggested, that it is our own thinking that creates reality.¹¹ This is, after all, the central notion, in one of its many permutations, behind the hugely popular book, *The Secret*, and it is trumpeted throughout the surprisingly successful New Age film, *What the Bleep Do We Know?* (which is particularly strenuous in claiming quantum physics on behalf of the New Age).¹²

Here is the strategy, then: argue that the familiar scientific tests of New Age claims, such as those undertaken by Susan Blackmore, are not tuned into the newest and most profound scientific discoveries, that is, those found in quantum physics. If quantum physics is understood aright, then New Age claims suddenly become plausible, even intellectually respectable. After all, there is no more prestigious claimant to the title of intellectual arbiter in contemporary Western culture than the scientist. The problem, of course, is that this New Age strategy falls flat if the vast majority of quantum physicists dismiss it as a wild misreading of their field, which is in fact what has happened. New Age talk of quantum physics is what Michael Shermer, with a nod to Nobel laureate Murray Gell Mann, has dubbed “quantum flapdoodle and other flummery.”¹³

At this point, it behooves us to step back and regain the big picture, lest we lose the proverbial forest, our central concern in this investigation, for the equally proverbial trees. Let us look back over what we have found. What, precisely, is the relation of New Age spirituality to pluralism? The New Age movement is wholeheartedly pluralistic in the number of different sources upon which it draws. More important, it is internally pluralistic in that it encourages individual practitioners to imbibe as many New Age products as he or she sees fit. But does not this internal pluralism, in particular, lead to a form of disconfirmation? Does not the individual New Age devotee find that the various practices that he or she tries contradict one another? Not necessarily, and we have attributed this particular instance of resistance to disconfirmation to the fact that the New Age is more about a pluralism of techniques, indeed techniques that

have become, for all practical purposes, commodities for sale, as opposed to being about belief systems.

However, this emphasis upon technique and commodification opens the New Age to a different kind of disconfirmation: the individual techniques, thanks to the specificity of the claims attached to them, can be empirically tested in order to determine if they deliver what they promise. What is more, there is still a connection with pluralism in this version of the challenge of disconfirmation: pluralism does raise the threat of disconfirmation here, but not by confronting different belief systems with one another. Rather, the sheer number of practices offered by the New Age mentality – practice taking pride of place over worldview in this instance – coupled with the assumption that these many practices can be mixed and matched, tends to turn those practices into commodities. That is, in the case of the New Age, commodification is in large measure a function of offering the quester so many choices that the spiritual quest becomes essentially a shopping spree. This suggests that pluralism within the New Age, especially what we have called internal pluralism, reinforces, if it does not explain all by itself, commodification. And the commodification of New Age wares is in sync with the emphasis on technique over worldview. In summary, insofar as New Age claims are susceptible to empirical disconfirmation, and to the degree that the emphasis on technique and commodification that is largely responsible for this form of disconfirmation is tied to the New Age's thoroughgoing pluralism, the link between pluralism and the threat of disconfirmation remains, albeit in a different form than that represented by the disconfirming Other, the bane of adherents of more traditional religions.

And, alas, the attempt of some writers to rescue New Age claims from the special kind of disconfirmation to which the New Age's commodified techniques are susceptible by tying them to quantum physics or other branches of contemporary science (that is, to focus more on cognitive claims and a bit less on technique and commodity) has been, at least from the perspective of the larger scientific community itself, wholly unconvincing. One can only

conclude that, where the New Age is concerned, pluralism, via its connections with commodification and the notion of New Age practice as technique, has found a way to raise the specter of disconfirmation here too. We are hardly in a position here to offer a final pronouncement, the last word, on New Age spirituality. It is indeed much too “new,” on the timescale of history, for us to know where it will all end up. But in its present configuration, and given its vulnerability to disconfirmation via empirical testing, the New Age movement seems simply to offer an alternative form of pluralism-induced disconfirmation.