

# Where New Age Beliefs Come From



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As a spiritually inclined person raised in a divisive white church and trained in secular social science, I am gratified that in our day we can enjoy public discourse on sacred experience unfettered by either religious or materialist ideology. I'm from coastal California, where we have done this for some time.

A lot of that discourse has been shaped by the New Age: a loose movement of personal transformation that from the 1970s onward has linked the American gospel of self-improvement with spiritual beliefs and practices appropriated from a variety of traditions. Many New Age followers think of themselves as seekers outside of religion even while making use of religious rituals, views, and ideals. Nearly all are preoccupied with some form of alternative healing. Most believe that humanity is spiritually evolving.

Initially an offshoot of Western counterculture, the New Age has long gone mainstream, and not only in California. Parts of it have also gone Green.

Odd, then, that more hasn't been said about the actual sources of key New Age beliefs.

What follows is plain about sources and salesmen but not intended to discredit honest New Age practitioners or believers, some of whom don't know the underlying history. May everyone stick with what inspires, helps, and heals. After a look at origins, including Western occultism, we will consider the question of whether so much belief is even necessary for finding spiritual fulfillment.

## Why Belief Origins Matter

Even now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Christian fundamentalists argue for taking their Bible as the literal Word of God. They seem unaware that the Bible consists of copies of copies of copies, some penned by unevenly skilled scribes. The heavily edited gospels saw print centuries after the events they purport to describe. Did Jesus really mean to remove a wooden beam from your eye? To move a mountain just by believing you can? Older biblical edicts call for executing everyone who fails to observe the Sabbath and marrying off your just-raped daughter to her rapist.

Most New Agers would agree that this kind of literalism is impossible. We should consider its sources and extract what wisdom we can. The sources matter. When taken literally, texts written to guide ancient bands of nomadic raiders immersed in a premodern cosmology do not hold up well in our time. Wisdom tales turned into supposedly factual histories are stultifying, not wise. When Jesus pointed out that worn wineskins cannot hold fresh wine, he probably wasn't functioning as an enologist.

As any family therapist can tell you, origins matter even more when they are different from what we assume them to be. Then they operate behind our backs, and we find ourselves replaying old unfinished stories left over from long ago.

Where do the Ascended Masters come from? The Akashic Records? Channeling? Traditional spiritual teachings, we are told, founded on ancient perennial wisdom. Is this true?

### **Origins of Key New Age Beliefs**

A sampling of core New Age items of belief appear below with brief comments about their origins. The list is not comprehensive; rather, the point is to promote discussion about what knowing the actual sources might mean to believers and practitioners.

#### *Akashic Records*

Invented by Helena Blavatsky and named by Alfred Sinnett from a Sanskrit word for "sky," these Records are said to be celestial account books or tablets of astral light containing all human and earthly events ever to have occurred. Only the adept initiated above a certain level that varies by theosophical school can read them. Blavatsky got the idea from reading occult writer Eliphas Lévi.

The image of a heavenly book of accounts recurs in various religious traditions, but one normally has to die to get a glimpse of it. Seldom is it thought of as a literal accountancy. In the hands of Blavatsky, Sinnett, and Charles Leadbeater, it hardened into an archive of private information on anyone, but only visible to theosophical initiates.

#### *Aquarian Age*

Twice a year the Sun stands directly above Earth's equator. In the northern hemisphere, this equinox ("equal night") signals the start of spring and of fall; in the southern, the reverse. Long ago, the Sun stood in Aries during the vernal (spring) equinox; today, because Earth wobbles slowly on its axis, the vernal point is moving out of Pisces and toward Aquarius. This transition of constellations takes roughly 2,160 years.

Exactly when the "Age of Aquarius" begins depends on whom you ask. The range generally varies from 1960, when Uranus joined Pluto in conjunction, to 2600. Orb of influence presents a complicating factor. The conjunction did not represent a full Aquarian equinox, but a "dawning of the Age of Aquarius," as the globally popular 1967 musical *Hair* put it.

This transition's significance for the New Age has to do with a collective advancement of human consciousness, a transition described in utopian terms: away from materialism and traditional religion and toward global wholeness and integration. The term "Aquarian Age" shows up in theosophist Alice Bailey, in Jung, who wrote about this as an archetypal movement reflected in the cosmos, and, farther back, in a 1890 newspaper article on feminism by August Vanderkerkeheve, who declared March 21<sup>st</sup> of that year as "the age the women will be equal to the men."

### *Ascended Masters*

Blavatsky invented the idea of Ascended Masters—a Great White Brotherhood of humans who evolved into hidden spiritual directors—so she could claim their authority for her books and teachings. The fair-skinned and blue-eyed Master Koot Hoomi ("HK" for short) seemed especially adept at keeping followers in line. She might have come up with this—to her—Indian-sounding name by combining syllables from Olcott, an attorney and missionary, and Hume, an ornithologist who eventually moved on from Theosophy. Another Master, Morya, smoked a pipe, lived in Tibet, and wrote letters not only to Blavatsky but to Annie Besant and William Quan Judge, although Besant claimed that Morya had declared Judge's letters to be false.

The actual term "Ascended Master" was coined in 1924 by mining engineer Baird Spalding, who claimed to have met immortal Masters in the Himalayas. He also claimed to have been born on various dates in England instead of in New York. His tales inspired another miner, Guy Ballard, inventor of the once-lucrative I AM cult.

Although Hindu sacred stories detail gods appearing through various avatars, no pre-Blavatsky tradition speaks of such masters directing earthly affairs from afar. They seem to have descended from Rosicrucianism, born from a series of documents written as a lampoon of secret societies by Lutheran theologian Johannes Valentinus Andreae. (He came to regret what he had done because Rosy Cross followers were unwilling to believe his confession.) Blavatsky came across the Masters in the science fiction novels of Edward "Dark and Stormy Night" Bulwer-Lytton, who, having read bits of Boehme, Rosicrucianism, Swedenborg, and Mesmer, wrote about a super race called the Vril in 1871. She imported them into Theosophy, where they proved helpful time and again for rounding up the strayers. The Vril, an underground race, mutated into the Lemurians inside Mt. Shasta and, still later, into superheroes and X-Men.

### *Astral or Etheric Body or Light*

This is a kind of spiritual energy body that coexists with the mortal body. It can travel on its own and be projected, at least according to Blavatsky, who seems to have used the idea to justify her emotional withdrawals from the people around her. Annie Besant recognized two kinds: the astral body proper, which she called the "emotional body," and the earthier "etheric double."

Eliphas Lévi (Alphonse-Louis Constant) wrote about the "astral light," a universal force that could do everything from heal sickness to manipulate the weather. It also forms the basis for all magical operations and stores information in an energetic archive (see *Akashic Records*).

Theosophists and Gurdjieff took over an idea that appears in many religious traditions—the Hindu subtle body, the Egyptian *ka* soul, the Gnostic “Body of Stars”—and remade it into a kind of celestialized doppelgänger with an immortal life separate from the earthly body. The astral body comes equipped with superpowers.

### *Astrology*

Psychological astrology of the New Age flavor began with Dane Rudhyar (Daniel Chénnevière), a musician and philosopher who published *Astrology of Personality* in 1936. He and the psychological astrologers who came after were indebted to the work of C. G. Jung (see *Jungian Psychology* below) and the Human Potential Movement. In this kind of astrology, the emphasis resides not with this or that configuration of planets, but with how they convey life lessons and serve inner wholeness.

Although the psychological emphasis on an inner Venus or Mars is relatively recent, astrology goes back through traditions found in Babylonia, India, China, Greece, and other cultures. In the ancient world, where everyone watched the roving stars for portents, the split between inner and outer transits did not exist.

New Age astrology presents itself as oriented on free will and choice, but in practice its interpretive language alternates between holism and determinism. A particular square between key planets in a couple’s synastry chart, for example, might be described as an inevitable romance-breaker. Planetary “influences” are given causal-sounding explanations like, “Neptune sends a beam into your Ninth House of Spirit and travel.” Fateful-sounding pronouncements about illnesses, job losses, and other life changes fail to invite reflective responses or felt meanings.

All this sounds very different from the branches of esotericism known as Gnosticism and Hermeticism, where humans, possessed by divine creative consciousness, can break through the planetary armillary sphere to touch the very face of God.

### *Atlantis*

Plato invented this fictional island to illustrate the disastrous effects of hubristic governance. The first mention of Atlantis is in the dialogue *Timaeus*, the second in *Critias*. Part of the fiction is that the lawmaker Solon visited Egypt and then translated records he found there. They told of an island of powerful conquerors who drowned in an oceanic cataclysm. Only two generations after Plato, hearers of this story passed it on as literally real. Later commentators thought he might have been referring to North America, although in Plato’s time no conquerors were living there.

Blavatsky claimed that her book *The Secret Doctrine* had been dictated long ago in Atlantis; she was merely forwarding it along. She had read *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World* by grifter and speculative pamphleteer Ignatius Donnelly, a kind of Erich von Daniken of Pennsylvania. He also argued that blue-eyed Aryans originated on Atlantis, a claim that elicited later Nazi interest, and that Shakespeare hadn’t written his own plays. Dion Fortune (Violet Firth) claimed that occult practices came from Atlantis.

## *Auras*

Auras are fields of “vibrations” or “electromagnetic energies” given off by all living beings. Auras come color-coded and can be weakened or strengthened. Because they get dirty, they can be cleansed by an adept. They are sometimes linked conceptually to the astral or subtle body, and their various layers (some say seven) to the chakras (below).

In 1903, theosophist Charles Leadbeater wrote a book that popularized auras and their detection. In 1977, Christopher Hills dusted off Leadbeater’s schema, added color to it, and published it, reigniting interest. (He also looked into dowsing, spirulina, Egyptian pyramids, and negative ion generators.) The fourth Saturday of every November is International Aura Awareness Day. Radiant Human, an outfit that purportedly photographs auras, did so with Gwyneth Paltrow’s at an office of her Goop franchise. Her aura was found to radiate success.

The idea of auras, or haloes, is an ancient one in many cultures and religious traditions. Psychoanalysis has also looked into the “relational field” of transference reactions: unconscious emotional triggers and promptings emerging between analyst and client. Blaming people for having bad vibes or unhealthy auras seems unique to New Age circles.

## *Chakras*

Chakras are subtle energy centers found along the axis of the spine. Channels direct flows of prana (energy) to and from the chakras. Meditation helps move these flows through the chakras. At Sahasrara, the crown shakra, the energies of Shakti and Shiva unite, resulting in unitive consciousness, or enlightenment.

A book in 1918 by Arthur Avalon (John Woodroffe) introduced a chakric system to the West, one elaborated by Charles Leadbeater. Theosophy presents the movement of chakra activation via consciousness as an ascension, although Rudolf Steiner reverses this and adds that chakras evolve, with their system more developed in modern people than in ancient ones. More recently, Caroline Myss refers to chakras as databases that record events into our cells.

Early Buddhist and Hindu scriptures do mention chakras, although their number varies between four and 88,000. The word “chakra” means “circle” or “wheel.” The idea that they function as bodily energy centers started in later Buddhist texts, with the seven-chakra system emerging in the 1500s, and remained peripheral to yogic practices geared toward liberation. Many practitioners down the millennia, especially of Tantra, have held the chakras as meditational aids to body focus: virtual points to visualize rather than literal somatic steps on a spiritual ladder of attainment.

## *Channeling and Mediumship*

Channeling, also known as mediumship, refers to entering an altered state of some kind to convey information from a higher or wiser source: usually the dead, ancient ancestors, Ascended Masters, or spiritual “rays” emanating from somewhere else. Channeling can include various paranormal abilities that begin with the prefix “clair-.”

In the States, channeling gained popularity thanks to Spiritualism, a trend triggered in part from the understandable desire to talk to the souls of those killed during the Civil War. Edgar Cayce claimed to channel insights on past lives, the afterlife, Atlantis, aliens, folk remedies, five separate races of humans created simultaneously, and the destruction of Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York City before the year 2000. In Europe, mediumship has gone in and out of popularity, even interesting the likes of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, famous for both Sherlock Holmes and for being taken in by a false photograph of fairies. In 1922, Dion Fortune and Charles Loveday claimed that Masters channeled them *The Cosmic Doctrine*.

In contrast to honest practitioners, quite a few self-proclaimed mediums, including Helene Blavatsky, have been caught perpetrating frauds while pretending to channel. The young woman Jung wrote about in his doctoral dissertation turned out later to be a fraud; some of her motivation may have come from her crush on her soon-to-be-famous cousin.

Channeling/mediumship is found in many authentic traditions. Traditional channels tend to practice it for donations or barter rather than for ego or profit. In the occult community and the New Age it has been used extensively for gaining and holding power over followers while impressing prospective joiners.

### *Crystals*

Crystals and stones are used to create fields of healing, whether stationed in a room or positioned upon the body. The healing is propagated by “vibrations” that ward off illness or negative energies and bring wellness and calm. In the late 1980s, crystal healing gained new life from books by Katrina Raphaell, who founded a Crystal Academy, and, shortly after, Michael Gienger, who has even published a crystal-based first aid manual and is also into shiatsu and “shamanic healing.” Today, models step down the catwalk wearing crystals prized as fashionable objects of healing.

Talismans and amulets are found worldwide. Rituals of crystal healing (in India, Egypt, Britain, elsewhere) enjoy a long history that until recently did not include child labor for mining the desired minerals. The crystal market in the U.S. comes to roughly a billion dollars a year; worldwide, the number is in the trillions.

### *Energies, Vibes, and So On*

Spiritualism, a key influence on both Theosophy and the New Age, deployed scientific language as far back as the early 1800s in order to seem credible. It was about then that magnetic cures grew popular in Western Europe thanks to purple-caped Anton Mesmer and other wand-waving hypnotist-showmen. Doctors encouraged patients to eat metal pellets to increase their magnetizability. Whereas spiritualism focused on receiving communications from the dead, energy language encountered theosophical marketing and went viral.

Move into new digs in Los Angeles or the San Francisco Bay Area, and chances are at least some of your friends will recommend smudging with sage to get rid of undesirable energies still lurking around.

Some of this language has changed with the time. In the days of early Spiritualism, the telegraph was the primary metaphor of transmission and reception. Television language was a natural for channeling. Today we have “Quantum Yoga.”

Many traditions talk about what in the West would be called an energy or life force: qi, chi, mana, shakti, prana... In these traditions, however, people are not blamed for the kind of “energy” they bear or offered expensive ways to “cleanse” it.

### *Feng Shui*

Feng Shui has a beautiful name: “wind water,” with *feng* a flying bird and *shui* a flowing stream. It originated in China as a Taoist approach to auspiciously aligning buildings and other human sites of activity while taking the stars, land, and time of year into account. A primary goal is for qi energy in landforms, fogs, sunlight, and other natural forces to flow freely from yang to yin. When this flow is blocked, the human occupants of the place affected become ill, hostile, clumsy, or unlucky. Feng shui design includes benign placement of materials composed of the five elements (metal, earth, fire, water, and wood) and various colors (red is lucky, white evokes death). The elements are associated with cardinal directions: metal/W and NW; water/N; wood/E, SE; fire/S; earth/NE, SW, center. Feng shui has been practiced for thousands of years in China; capitol cities are aligned in accord with its principles.

Western feng shui developed from the Black Sect Tantric Buddhist (BTB) approach brought over in the 1980s. It simplifies by ignoring outer directions—in effect, the entire natural world—and concentrating on home layout, with the front door always “north” regardless of land features. In some cases, design considerations have degenerated into interior decorating or scams to get rich or famous. Traditional feng shui does not, for example, include an “8 Life Aspirations Mirror” with sectors for “helpful people,” “career,” “marriage” and so on, nor can the health of a room improve by simply adding a desktop fountain or oil lamp.

Eva Wong defines genuine feng shui as “the art of seeing the pattern of movement and stillness in the land.” In folklore, the Taoist craft is attributed to Fu Xi, the shaman emperor and legendary founder of the I Ching. The traditional practice calls for aligning one’s efforts with the flow of qi in accord with how it changes through the year. “Landscapes can speak to you if you listen. They can reveal their moods if you feel them. They can show you their true nature if you learn to see and experience them directly.” None of this comes quickly or easily.

### *Jungian Psychology*

Jung has been popular with New Age followers for several reasons: his willingness to take spirituality seriously, his emphasis on symbols of wholeness (including Tibetan mandalas), his early work on mediumistic practices, his openness to astrology, his writings about the Ages of Pisces and Aquarius in his book *Aion*, and the perceived similarity of his collective unconscious with theosophical notions of celestial records and Ascended Masters.

Jung was quite critical of Theosophy and certainly would have been of certain aspects of the New Age. From his *Dream Analysis* seminar:

Astrologers are influenced by theosophy, so they say, “That is very simple, it is just vibration!” One astrologer after reading *Psychology of the Unconscious* wrote me, “Why do you bother about developing a libido concept? It is only vibration.” But what is vibration?

From *Alchemical Studies*:

Filling the conscious mind with ideal conceptions is a characteristic of Western theosophy, but not the confrontation with the shadow and the world of darkness. One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious.

In his *Kundalini* seminar he said,

We make roots, we cause roots to be, we are rooted in the soil, and there is no getting away for us, because we must be there as long as we live. That idea that we can sublimate ourselves and become entirely spiritual and no hair left is an inflation.

*Karma*

Theosophy took the Indian idea of karma and made it over into metaphysical comeuppance. You do something bad, and something punishes you for it. Blavatsky referred to it as a law of retributive justice, an “adjuster of wrongs.” Dealing with it means one must “atone for the sins of the past life.”

The traditional understanding of karma is of impartial consequences arising across lifetimes. Karma is not punishment or retribution, and it has nothing to do with the Western notion of sin. In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, karma comes with choice: we are made pure or impure by our decisions and their intentions. The Isa Upanishad describes karma in terms of suffering because of actions that create perceived (not actual) distance from the Divine.

*Lemuria*

At one time continents were thought of as relatively fixed. When British zoologist Philip Sclater wrote the paper “The Mammals of Madagascar,” no one could understand why lemurs could be so plentiful there but less so in India, Australia, or Africa. Sclater reasonably concluded that a continent in the southern Indian Ocean had served as a land bridge over which lemurs had traveled. The continent, Lemuria, had sunk. The lemurs had remained.

By the time plate tectonics theory and geological observation had explained how continents move, Lemuria had bloomed into a lost paradise. As for the lemurs, they had evolved in Africa 54 million years ago and, with Madagascar nearer back then, swum across the water and were fruitful and multiplied in their new habitats.

Another traveler, Helena Blavatsky, heard of “Lemurians” and decided they were seven-foot-tall hermaphrodites who laid eggs and were unpolluted spirits who had gradually become Tasmanians and aboriginal Australians. Her associate Charles Leadbeater even published a map of Lemuria. In 1894, Frederick Spencer Oliver, channeler of Phyllos the Thibetan/Yol Gorro,



published *A Dweller on Two Planets* and moved the Lemurians to California, where even now they live beneath Mt. Shasta and waylay unsuspecting hikers. The Lemurian Fellowship published a sequel in 1940.

### *Mystics, Reverence For*

New Age thought often holds up mystics as the radicals of a religion. Some are borrowed as Ascended Masters, but others are considered spiritual innovators ahead of their time.

Perhaps some were; Meister Eckhart, William Blake, and Giordano Bruno spring to mind. Abraham Maslow, humanistic psychologist and pioneer of transpersonal psychology, described religions as having a left wing of mystics and a right wing of bureaucrats.

What goes unmentioned, however, is that most authentic mystics not only stay firmly within their original tradition, they lend their time, loyalty, and support to it. Despite a corrupt pope watering down his order of poverty, St. Francis never left the Catholic Church. Hildegard of Bingen was fine with the Second Crusade. Rumi, a practicing Muslim, described himself as “a servant of the Qur’an.” Thomas Merton, a progressive Catholic for his time, remained within the church while medicating his depressions with beer and believing himself unfit to be a priest. When his superiors at the Abbey of Gethsemani ordered him to choose between loving a woman and remaining a monk, Merton kept his robes on.

Most mystics seem to need a home base of tradition as an anchor. Most are neither radicals nor reformers.

### *Perennialism*

We frequently hear that all religions are, at bottom, one. That all share certain core experiences of the sacred in common. Furthermore, these experiences can be awakened by learners taught from an underlying and usually hidden wisdom tradition. All this is perennialism.

Perennial philosophy goes at least as far back as Marsilio Ficino, Florentine scholar to Cosimo de Medici and translator of the *Corpus Hermeticum* (to use its current title). Believing it to be a book of ancient Egyptian wisdom, Ficino made a shaky case for its anticipation of Christianity. Perennialism was popularized by Theosophy and Aldous Huxley, the mystic of his family of biologists.

Religious traditions do share some teachings in common, especially about the need to get along with each other. However, contemporary perennialism, especially in transpersonal hands, has taken on the aspect of a competition, with religions ranked according to which is closest to the original wisdom behind all religions. Adherents of these traditions have no say in how they are ranked, let alone on who decides which tradition is the wisest or where such a question even comes from.

### *Pleiadians*

Blavatsky called the Pleiades star cluster “occult” and linked it to Indian rishis and the war god Karttikeya. According to channeler and mystic Barbara Marciniak, the Pleiadians are interstellar spirit beings determined to help humanity transform. Michael Salla defines them as our distant cousins. (Very distant: these seven stars in the constellation Taurus float 136 parsecs from Earth. One parsec = 19 trillion miles.)

Nowadays some New Age believers describe themselves as Pleiadean, by which they mean sensitive, wise, kind, intuitive, and not originally of Earth, that backwater school for spiritual advancement not otherwise significant. In the early 1950s, Sirius was a popular choice, especially for William Pelley, who claimed supernatural powers and a mission direct from Jesus to make America Christian again. Some of his followers joined the I Am cult.

The Pleiades appear in many legends around the world. In one tale from North America, they serve as an escape hatch for a band of girls pursued by angry bears.

### *Shamanism*

I’m writing this in the San Francisco Bay Area. If I throw a lapis lazuli out the window I stand a good chance of hitting a “shamanic practitioner,” which means someone who likes guided imagery and has an animal totem and maybe a drum. Alan Watts showed the way here by calling himself a shaman.

It would seem that the figure of the shaman shows up in many, perhaps all, indigenous societies, with the word itself coming from Siberia. The practices and rites linked to the shaman are deeply embedded in cultural contexts that cannot be replicated outside them. That is not to say people born in other cultures never suffer the harrowing visionary dismemberment or painful ecstatic trances associated with genuine shamanism. The notion of “spiritual emergence” developed in part to address such cases. But within shamanic cultures, shamanism is never an individualistic “dark night of the soul.” It is a terrifying descent and eventual healing that leaves scars on its victims, who then operate on the fringes of the community. They are not known to offer shamanic workshops.

### *Tarot and Divination*

Divination is popular among New Age practitioners. Many systems from many cultures remain in play, going all the way back to ancient China, where professionals interpreted cracks in tortoise shells. This system was gradually codified into the I Ching, whose text is a Chinese classic and one of the world’s oldest books. After using the coin-casting method to create a reading, Jung wrote an impressive introduction to the English Wilhelm-Baynes translation.

Tarot cards are particularly favored. Explanations of their origins abound, popular choices including gypsies, Knights Templar, Indian rishis, artistically inclined alchemists, secretive mystical Christians, and ancient Egyptian priests. The Egypt origin theory was pushed by Antoine Court de Gébelin, a Freemason who wrote about tarot back in 1781, before the Rosetta Stone had been deciphered. He helped popularize tarot, but it really took off when occultist Arthur Edward Waite of the Golden Dawn commissioned a deck from artist Pamela Coleman

Smith in 1910. Her innovations included scenes added to the minor arcana; his, a rearrangement of the major arcana to align the cards with twenty-two pathways linking the sephiroth on the Kabbalistic Tree of Life.

Today, one can find tarot decks done up in every conceivable theme and worldview, including the Hillbilly Tarot, the Zombie Tarot, the Dog Tarot (“Divine the Canine Mind!”), and even a hard-to-find Star Trek Tarot featuring Scotty as The Magician and the *Enterprise* as The Chariot.

In 1415, playing cards were nothing that new in Europe, let alone in the Middle East. Card games were popular, especially at court. In Milan, the paranoid and murderous Duke Fillippo Visconti ordered the design of a new game deck, a popular item of salon decor. The designer, Marziano di Tortona, secretary to the Duke, commissioned artist Michelino di Besozzo to paint the cards, to which he added Trumps, Greek gods, and four suites. After doing this, Besozzo wrote a book of allegorical meanings. It’s possible he got this idea from Marziano, who was also the court astrologer.

The cards reflect the struggles of disease (Death), love (Lovers), warfare (Swords), and temporal and religious power (Emperor, Popess) of medieval northern Italy. The Popess might have been inspired by Sister Maifreda da Pirovano, a Visconti relative. It’s likely that the deck, now lost, was painted in the International Gothic Style favored by the artist. The clothing worn by the colorful figures reflects the costumed carnival characters popular in Italy. Besozzo’s delicate and luminous painting *The Marriage of the Virgin* (1430) hints provocatively at what the card figures might have looked like.

Divination can be wielded as a tool of consciousness or degraded into dependent fortune-telling. Some people won’t make a major decision without consulting an oracle. Fortunately, some oracles come with a built-in reminder to stand on one’s own feet, as when the I Ching pulls up the hexagram *Meng*, “Youthful Folly” and the warning judgment,

It is not I who seek the young fool;  
The young fool seeks me.  
At the first oracle I inform him.  
If he asks two or three times, it is importunity.  
If he importunes, I give him no information.  
Perseverance furthers.

### *Theosophy*

A core source of the New Age is Theosophy, a Western eclectic religion started in 1875 by Russian émigré Helena Blavatsky and attorney Henry Steel Olcott. They were part of a small gathering that founded the Theosophical Society in a New York City apartment. Incidentally, 1875 was also the year Mary Baker Eddy published *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* to argue that illness is an illusion. All you need is prayer. The word “theosophy” came from Jakob Boehme.

Blavatsky had a colorful career. Secretive about her childhood, throughout which she told outlandish tales about herself as recalled by her sister, Blavatsky claimed later journeys into Tibet, at that time no place for a wandering Russian woman. According to her, she had also spent time as a touring concert pianist, a circus bareback rider, an ostrich feather importer, an ink factory founder, a rescuer of an opera singer hunted by assassins, a soldier at the Battle of Mentana, a shipwreck survivor, a trekker by covered wagon across North America, and an interior decorator to an empress.

After trying out various schemes, including starting a chicken farm and publishing Olcott's exchanges with the Masters in *Spiritual Scientist*, which went bankrupt, she formed a Miracle Club to explore the occult. It too failed. She then published *Isis Unveiled* (1877), yet another transmission, widely panned by scholars as dishonest trash but popular among a public eager for esoteric wisdom. The Great White Brotherhood of Masters was born, headed by a Lord of the World who lived in the Gobi Desert but came originally from Venus. Olcott was available for this mission because the Masters had told him to abandon his wife and children.

Although she and other leaders claimed that Theosophy was not a religion, forming instead the basis of all religions, the rituals, sacred texts, hierarchy of authority, claims of direct access to divine wisdom, guru worship, mystification, punishment of transgressors, internal power struggles, contributions from wealthy members, and other religious trappings remained evident even after her death. Letters from the Masters "precipitated" into her rooms ordered Olcott and other followers to sacrifice everything to the cause.

Scandals followed her everywhere. One among many sprouted when the Society for Psychic Research in Britain sent an investigator to Adyar, her theosophical headquarters. He judged her supernatural channelings and manifestations faked, prompting her to leave India, set up a journal called *Lucifer*, and travel Europe (she had been exposed long ago in the U.S.) channeling Masters, writing, hitting up the wealthy and gullible, and making up esoteric languages like Senzar. Leadbeater gathered his own scandals, many involving young boys. In person he claimed to read the Akashic accounts of anyone he wanted to influence and told them what planets they had come from; in his books he multiplied the theosophical bureaucracy by adding Adepts, Arhats, Bodhisattvas, Chohans, Christs, Maha-Chohans, Manus, and Masters. He also kept young Krishnamurti and others in line by promising them World Teacher status and revoking it at will.

When Blavatsky died, the Society split between William Judge and Annie Besant, both of whom claimed authorization from a Master. Power struggles multiplied, one between Katherine Tingley, Wagner admirer and Purple Mother of Point Loma, who wore Greek robes, separated young students from their parents, and spent herself broke, and Annie Besant, who went about creating new Orders and decorations to go with them, ignoring complaints about Leadbeater molesting boys, and doctoring Blavatsky's work to suit herself. Factions split off. Olcott ventured to Ceylon, where he did missionary work. Anna Kingsford prophesied, tried to kill Louis Pasteur with magic, and formed her own Hermetic Society. Krishnamurti broke away, like Peter Pan flying out the window of his parents' house, but kept the World Teacher role, the claim to celibacy, the house in Ojai, the expensive suits, the Mercedes, and the dissociated manner that had protected him when stolen from his destitute father by "Amma" Besant and Leadbeater.

Perhaps it also helped him survive the latter's unwelcome attentions. Steiner went off on his own to found Anthroposophy and create biodynamic farming methods, Waldorf schools, and Mystery Plays inspired by Wagner. James Wedgewood resigned after being repeatedly accused of having sex with boys, only to return later, a broke cocaine smuggler and addict; the Society quietly looked after him.

Theosophist Alice Bailey coined "New Age" in the 1940s to refer to an immanent evolutionary leap forward for humanity on the brink of mass spiritual transformation. Her work, she said, was dictation from "The Tibetan," later known as Djwhal Khul ("DK" for short). The changes she made to theosophical doctrine were mostly minor. She placed Christ on the Master list, gave astrology more importance, and added the fictional planet Vulcan. She also looped in Venus and Sirius, key players in the bright age to come.

UFOs (see below) grew increasingly prominent in theosophy. Founding Share International, Benjamin Crème announced in 1975 his telepathic contact with Maitreya, the Messiah mentioned by Besant and Leadbeater. Maitreya told him that Bailey's New Age, an Age of Aquarius, would dawn sooner rather than later. Merely looking at this Master hidden among us healed the most dire infirmity.

The Theosophical Society, still based in Adyar, has quieted the former talk of Masters, rankings, and World Teachers. It seeks to bridge Eastern wisdom traditions with Western thought and practice. Theosophy has consistently sold itself as worldwide esotericism, with a preference for the East, but its Eastern terminology has always been affixed to its actual source: Western occultism.

### *UFOs*

In 1958, Jung published *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*. His take was that, psychologically, UFOs served as projected symbols of wholeness—mandalas—for a time of collective fragmentation.

This book popularized a craze but came late to it: Blavatsky had already mentioned silver airships with strange new crews aboard. By 1930, the Ascended Masters had become extraterrestrials, and Guy Ballard had founded his theosophical I AM group to be in touch with them, lucratively. George King's Aetherius Society and a host of others soon followed, including Raëlism and Scientology. In the 1950s, George Adamski was contacted by aliens who looked like Nordic Aryans with big eyes. In the 1930s he had founded a Royal Order of Tibet, a land he had never set his own eyes upon. Although an occultist, he did this to sell alcohol during Prohibition.

Stories of aerial beings reach far back in time and around the world. UFOs are a kind of contemporary angelology for the anxious. Who will save us from the many ills that threaten humanity and most of the species we share a planet with?

### *Vortexes*

Vortices (or “vortexes” in common parlance) are locations on Earth that exude a special energy. Some say ley lines intersect there. As examples, Sedona, Glastonbury, and Mt. Shasta usually come up for mention. People feel more spiritual there. Episodes of realignment and healing happen there. They are good places to meditate. No one can define a vortex, but you feel better after landing on one. Crystal shops do well there.

Sacred sites are integral to many traditions. Their sacredness, wisdom, or healing is thought of as intrinsic to the site itself rather than added onto it spiritually or energetically by an outside agent.

### *Wiccans and Druids*

British occultist, civil servant, and conservative right-winger Gerald Gardner founded Wicca in the 1940s, although it wasn't called that until the 1960s. He wandered a vagabond career path. As a customs officer in Malaya, he was supposed to monitor the sale of opium but may have been bribed to look the other way. In Hertfordshire he founded a nudist colony. He joined organizations claiming to be druidic and was part of the Ordo Templi Orientis under the infamous Aleister “The Beast” Crowley. He also claimed, falsely, to have earned two PhDs. As a Rosicrucian, Gardner claimed to have been initiated into a pre-Christian coven nobody had heard of.

Much of Wicca seems to have derived from Crowley (who took it from elsewhere, as was his wont), Western accounts of Buddhist and Hindu practices, and the folkloric speculations of Margaret Murray, an Egyptologist who believed in a pre-Christian witch cult active in Western Europe. Joan of Arc had been burned for being a member; many women accused of witchcraft actually were practicing witches of the Old Religion. The Christian Devil derived from the Horned God, consort to a Goddess. Fairies, Murray maintained, were folkloric remnants of a race of British dwarves who observed the cult's rites, including eight annual festivals, before going extinct. Even in her day, scholarship was not kind to her conclusions. It got even grimmer as time went on.

As for druids, they were ritualists, philosophers, healers, and judges found in the British Isles. They came along well after Stonehenge had been built. What we know about druids derives mostly from a handful of scattered Roman observations: the victors writing the history.

Druidism was devastated by Roman soldiers invading Britain and wiped out by Christian missionaries. Remnants may have lasted until the 8<sup>th</sup> century. No intact traditions survive, although many fans claim to be part of one. I've always wanted to be a druid, but they are gone.

### **The Lure of New Age Belief**

This brief survey of New Age beliefs has left out more than it included. Crop circles, for instance. Who says farmers have no sense of humor? Conspiracy theories. Try convincing astronauts that we never landed on the moon. Ley lines: invisible linkages that align special places to each other. Some *are* aligned, such as Stonehenge, a large stony calendar; but in the hands of Tony Wedd and John Mitchell, ley lines turned into prehistoric signals for guiding in alien spacecraft. Chemtrails: easier to worry about than, say, climate change.

“Why do people believe in such ridiculous things?” is a demeaning question arrogantly posed by the rationalist mindset. A mindset invariably possessed by irrational beliefs, as when chemist and science fiction writer Isaac Asimov, champion of reason, refused to get on airplanes he was certain would crash. The historical irony here is that the search for hidden properties of matter was integral to the Hermetic project: the Renaissance magus philosophizing about amulets, alchemy, and the World Soul is a historical forerunner of the modern research scientist.

A fairer question might be: What makes New Age beliefs appealing?

This isn't a difficult question to answer. Between religions that make the world unreal and scientific devaluations of human experience, spiritual or otherwise, what is left to feel enchanted by? Of course we want to hear a positive message. Most of the news is a protracted horror story of local and planetary devastation, stupidity, and recklessness.

Also, plenty of us grew up as family visionaries whose perceptions were discounted and made fun of. What a relief to find a large group of people with a similar past and a similar eagerness to self-explore.

As the so-called Enlightenment swept the globe in the 1700s, esoteric knowledge, literature, and practice declined, forced into the shadows by the tyranny of reason, order, and materialism, a tyranny as intolerant as Christianity after Augustine. Even the academics spurned esoteric studies. By doing this, the academy abandoned the field to every quack, grifter, and con artist pretending secret wisdom, completely lacking in scruple, and eager to cash in by offering an uneducated public the appearance of what it wanted. But only the appearance: instead of real wisdom, lifelong transformation, or reliable contact with the sacred, seekers bought loads of expensive goop in esoteric packaging.

Obviously, not all New Age guru types stoop to the level of a Blavatsky or a Leadbeater. But in perusing this history, we are forced to see again and again how readily exploiters have mutated, Westernized, and marketed practices from some exoticized elsewhere. No modern public has been educated to resist charismatic and overconfident leaders, even when their blowhard tactics of self-promotion are uncovered. Their own followers make excuses for them.

Such spiritually garbed hucksterism is also evident in occultism, the real root of theosophy, which in turn gave birth (when mixed with a dash of New Thought / Christian Science opportunism) to the New Age. Let us look for a moment at a few of the more obvious occult clip artists.

### **A Fistful of Trawlers**

The occult is a modern category. When the Enlightenment darkened and repressed the study of the esoteric, the shadow cast by hyper-rationalism appeared as what came to be known as occult studies or what Christopher Partridge dubbed “occulture.” Especially in France.

Eliphas Lévi was happy to try out the newly coined word “occultism” (1842) and run with it. The Fox sisters had shown him from 1848 onward how easily the public could be duped by talkative

“spirits” who were nothing more than cracking knee joints. Before them, Count Cagliostro (Giuseppe Balsamo) of Sicily had dazzled Parisian high society of the late 1700s by posing as a healer, soothsayer, and interpreter of what Swedenborg had called “correspondences” between the higher and lower realms. Very often the most convincing lies are the most audacious. Cagliostro may have been the last person put to death by the Inquisition, which garnered some sympathy from later followers.

Appropriating from numerous sources, including Abbott Trithemius and Joachim of Fiore, Lévi presented magic as something anyone could do given the right training. He talked up concealed universal wisdom doctrines and foretold a coming age of the Archangel Michael due to start in 1879 with the founding of a universal empire of peace. It was he who first popularized the tarot. One of his associates was Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, creator of the Vril super race. Lévi is also noted for knowing the insides of French prisons, believing only the elite (trained by him) should rule, popularizing the upside-down pentagram as a devilish device, and having the gall to marry the teenage student of a school teacher he had impregnated.

Lévi influenced not only Blavatsky and Scottish Rite Freemasonry, but coroner and exotic document forger William Westcott, who with two other occultists founded the Order of the Golden Dawn in 1888. One of their first official acts was to promote each other to Adeptus Exemptus grade in the Isis-Urania Temple No. 3. Much of the Order’s procedural structure came from English Freemasonry mixed with Lévi’s made-up rituals. At first, they attempted to practice what the Theosophical Society mainly taught about, but eventually one of the co-founders, Samuel “MacGregor” Mathers, declared Westcott a fraud and took over, authorized by some Secret Chiefs he was in touch with. His other claims included phony Clan MacGregor heritage and a fake rank of lieutenant in the First Hampshire Militia Artillery. Mathers intended to bring out a *Lesser Key of Solomon*, but Aleister Crowley stole it and published it.

In 1903, A. E. Waite initiated a coup, took over the Isis-Urania Temple and the Vault of the Adepts, and renamed the Order. He then issued a “rectified” tarot deck; the tarot, he said, contains a “secret doctrine” available only to the few. Some of those few left the Order, as did Waite himself when he couldn’t push his pro-mysticism agenda there. Waite was also a Rosicrucian and a Freemason, and among the first to write comprehensively about Western esotericism, a topic mostly ignored by the scholars of the time. Crowley hated him so much that he published his obituary even though Waite was still alive.

Crowley, ever ambitious and believing himself to be Lévi reincarnated (he also called himself Master Therion, Laird of Boleskine, Count Svareff, Prince Khan, and other high-sounding titles), did better at the Ordo Templi Orientis (O.T.O.). The group that founded it as a Freemasonic institute included wealthy industrialist Karl Kellner, who said he had learned sex magic while traveling in the East. Crowley claimed to find in Cairo an occult text authorizing his actions: *The Book of the Law*, mandatory reading for the lodges he supervised and for his new religion of Thelema (originally Crowleyanity). “Our Order possesses the KEY which opens up all Masonic and Hermetic secrets, namely, the teaching of sexual magic, and this teaching explains, without exception, all the secrets of Nature, all the symbolism of Freemasonry and all systems of religion.” He was nothing if not ambitious. His occult-themed art bequeathed to us the now-famous Baphomet devil image.



This Law was that of the Age of Horus, the content dictated by one Aiwass, a disembodied Minister of Hoor-Paar-Kraat. The Law emphasized “do what thou wilt,” an astonishingly open reverence for the power of ego. Open too was the anti-Semitic Crowley’s real urge: to “stamp down the wretched & the weak.” (While scaling Mt. Kanchenjunga in Nepal, he had left several in his party to die after an accident, keeping their money afterward.) Thelema also included will-powered “Magick” (the art and science of causing change in conformity with Will), Tantra, extraterrestrials, talismans anointed by sexual fluids, and a higher initiatory grade involving anal sex.

It goes on. A sampler of low points:

- Augustin Barruel (1741-1820) starting baseless and sensationalist Mason-vs-Catholicism conspiracy theories that persist to this day.
- R. M. Bucke not stopping with coining “cosmic consciousness” (1902), but speculating out loud about Aryan superiority.
- Austin Spare, inspirer of “chaos magic,” sigils, and masturbatory sex rituals. He claimed that Freud had acknowledged Spare’s greater genius. With his idealizing fan Kenneth Grant, who knew Gerald Gardner, he dreamed up a South London witch who “initiated” him.
- Gurdjieff traveling on bribes and fake papers, extracting money from followers (“sheep fit for shearing”), abandoning them at will, bullying the passive Ouspensky, impregnating another woman while his wife died of cancer, and, supposedly initiated by a hidden Sarmoun Brotherhood, spreading sadistic chaos disguised as spiritual instruction. His cult produced child abuse, malnutrition, alcoholism, and suicide.
- Steiner talking up Atlantis and Lemuria, fixed racial hierarchies with Teutons on top, Jesus as an honorary German, Round Table Knights as actual people, Buddha on Mars, and the spiritual perils of inoculation against diseases.
- J. G. Bennett drifting around gurules, having been cheated by Gurdjieff and Idries Shah, only to decide just before his death that he was the guru he had sought.
- Dion Fortune’s supposed magical battle with MacGregor Mathers and her mystical protection of London during the Blitz, the Royal Air Force notwithstanding.
- Guy Ballard channeling America’s spiritual mission to save the world.
- George King and his Spiritual Energy Radiators and Batteries. Discounts available.
- L. Ron Hubbard’s highly secretive and Crowley-influenced Scientology and accompanying E-meters, under FDA investigation for false medical claims.
- Nicholas and Helena Roerich, who heard from Master Morya (where had he been?) and sought the mythical paradise of Belovodye.
- Mark and Elizabeth Clare Prophet, self-authorized Ascended Master messengers, friends with Ballard’s ubiquitous St. Germain (in real life the notorious spy and wrinkle-cure salesman Comte de Saint Germain from who knows where), teachers of the Path to Personal Christhood, and predictors of the nuclear end of the world in March 1990. Elizabeth Prophet’s bomb shelters were closed down after leaking diesel fuel into the surrounding countryside.

Most New Age practitioners genuinely believe in what they think and do, all the way down to the intuitional inner voice they take for divine authority and sanction. Many of the the charlatans they revere come into the world bearing talent for contact with alternative modes of doing and being. But instead of serving as mentors of the depths, false teachers turn to the dark side and misuse their gifts for the sake of ego and power. Those among the audience who carry hidden ego and power drives and a desire for arcane abilities turn rapidly into zealous followers, embedded unknowingly in what psychoanalyst Erich Fromm identified as “group narcissism.” They then fight to protect their psychospiritual jailers.

When beliefs rooted ultimately in occultism and cultural appropriation fail to serve, what is left for the earnest seeker? How to steer past both gullibility and cynicism in search of harbors of authentic hope?

### **Beyond Belief**

Plenty is left. Resources abound. What follows are a few suggestions for making use of them.

First, some self-inquiry is in order. What do you really want? Titles and praise? Levels of attainment? Power or authority over other people? Getting rich quick? Falling in line as someone else tells you what to do, think, or believe? Or are you serious about looking for wisdom and fulfillment? If so, nothing fast or convenient will serve. Seasoning requires salt.

Do you watch your dreams? Listen to your body and your moods? Sit with your feelings instead of affirming them away? Do you have a network of supportive friends and loved ones? No one grows alone.

If you’ve ever played a game with a child, you know that at a certain age, children are apt to insist on absolute observance of the rules. Even before that developmental milestone, young children believe what they see on television or in digital games, however fanciful. The monster in a movie could be hiding in the closet; the night fairy might ride into the bedroom on moonbeams.

As we all dig into our deep experience, the need for a new vocabulary grows ever more urgent. It will need to unhook itself from the desire to sound scientific, sticking close instead to expressions of presence, image, relationship, and complexity.

For reasons too complex to get into, the habit of literal-mindedness clings to some of us even after we stop believing in Santa Claus. Protestantism and religious fundamentalism greatly strengthen this habit. Earth was created four thousand years ago because certain texts or teachers say so. Ascended Masters actually live in the Himalayas, among the Pleiades, or on Mercury. (Interesting choice of planet, that one.) Planetary transits arrange personal destinies. And so on.

Maybe we don’t need to believe so much or so hard. In the moral realm, a dose of literalism can serve; imagine if we took “Thou Shalt Not Kill” more seriously. But for the rays and realms, powers and principalities, what if we handled them as symbols and metaphors useful mainly when they light us up inside?

Here the humanities can help. Horace, Cicero, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Romantics like Coleridge and Holderlin, Hesse, Tolkien, Le Guin, and many others have described the suspension of our daytime literal-mindedness long enough to let ourselves be immersed in “secondary belief” (Tolkien): total temporary absorption in a captivating tale. In ritualism this has been called “participation mystique.”

For a playful spiritual consciousness at home on Earth and in the cosmos, divine or demonic figures don’t have to be literal entities. They don’t even have to be psychological, which can become its own kind of literalism: Sophia as my anima, etc. Instead, these figures come at us as fantasy creatures inhabiting fascinating stories that inspire. The imaginal too is real, just not the measurable kind of real.

Telling great stories that endure conveys Truths of existence rather than literal truths—facts, really—about this creed or that master. Confusingly, the English word “truth” is stretched to mean both large truths and facts, but wisdom and data are two very different animals. For those of us weary of authoritarian claims or mushy metaphysics, what if we don’t need a new religion or mythology or any other grand schema, but a post-belief spirituality based on new sets of inspiring wisdom stories and practices and rituals, songs and dances and games, creatively enacted through every conceivable medium?

The greening of the New Age invites another consideration. What if behind our passion for Elementals, crystals, fairies, and devas, the collectively neglected world of nature awaits our care? To the sensitized heart, Earth contains an abundance of enchanting possibilities for reconnection. Perhaps the Elementals are also the elements, the fairies the soulfulness of brooks and trees, the crystals emissaries of soil and earthly depth.

Perhaps—who knows?—our living Earth hides behind the world’s mythological and folkloric figures, ever dreaming them forth anew as times change and our imaginings along with them.

