

Power and Authority

- as understood in Humanism, New Age and Nihilism

SETTING THE SCENE

Understanding where authority is located and how power is conceptualised and used is critical in understanding any worldview. The conceptualisation of power, what it is, how it should be used and who is the authority when there is conflict between holders of a worldview often help us to see the subtle but significant differences between different worldviews. Comparing how power and authority 'work' in Humanism, New Age and Nihilism are instructive.

HUMANISM

What is Humanism?

*Some opening thoughts:*¹

'Isn't it a noble, an enlightened way of spending our brief time in the sun, to work at understanding the universe and how we have come to wake up in it? This is how I answer when I am asked – as I am surprisingly often – why I bother to get up in the mornings. To put it the other way round; isn't it sad to go to your grave without wondering why you were born? Who, with such a thought, would not spring from bed eager to resume discovering the world and rejoicing to be part of it?'

- *Richard Dawkins Unweaving the Rainbow, 1998*

'The crucial test of ethical values is whether they apply to strangers, and those afar, not just in our midst.' - *Bernard Crick Essays on Citizenship, 2000*

'Repay injury with justice, and kindness with kindness.' - *Confucius Analects, C 500 BCE*

Rationalism is an attitude of readiness to listen to contrary arguments and to learn from experience... of admitting that "I may be wrong and you may be right and, by an effort, we may get nearer the truth. - *Karl Popper The Open Society and its Enemies, 1945*

'A humanist is someone who does the right thing even though she knows that no one is watching.' - *Dick McMahan, New York Humanist, 2004*

As with any movement it is difficult to generalise about what humanists believe and practice. Thus, it may be useful here to make some generalisations before proceeding to highlight areas of contestation or difference.

A definition of Humanism:

Although Humanism has no central organisation recognised by all who would call themselves humanist, there are organisations which are well recognised and give a good

¹ All quotes taken from the British Humanist Association Website



indication of what many who would call themselves believe and practice. For British Humanists the *British Humanist Association* is the main organisation which works to further the Humanist cause. They may also turn to journals such as *The New Humanist*. Internationally, humanists would turn to the *International Humanist and Ethical Union* (IHEU).

In 1996, the IHEU General Assembly adopted the a resolution (below) which any organisation wishing to become a member is now obliged to signify its acceptance of this statement:

‘Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality.’

The Humanist Manifesto

To understand a little further what many Humanist believe and how this effects what they do in their lives the *Humanist Manifesto* is also a useful indicator. *The Humanist Manifesto* was prepared in 1933 and endorsed by 34 leading Humanists, and published in the 1933-May/June issue of *The New Humanist*. This was updated in 1973 in the form of the *Humanist Manifesto II* and then again in 2003. It is quite a substantial document but the following are themes which it contains:

- Humanism has its roots in Ancient Greece
- A high value is placed on reason and material evidence
- Humans know about life and the world by observation, experimentation and rational analysis
- The theory of evolution is accepted as the process, which brought your life into being.
- Humans are an integral part of nature
- The responsibility for the world- nature and each other- rests with humans
- A rejection of a personal God – humans are supreme
- Moral values are derived from experience not from a deity
- Religious ‘promises of immortal salvation or fear of eternal damnation are both illusory and harmful’
- Humanists have a history of supporting the separation of church and state
- Progress has resulted from the movement towards secular values and the rejection of religious beliefs and practices
- Humanist have encouraged the promotion of democracy and the rejection of theocratic or secular dictatorships as these are dangerous to individual freedoms –personal freedom is highly valued
- Humans only live once so life is precious and human suffering should be alleviated wherever possible
- Their beliefs tend to lead to liberal beliefs about the controversial ethical topics such as homosexuality, abortion, euthanasia, the death penalty etc.
- Life’s fulfilment is to be found in the service of humane ideals
- Humans are social by nature and find meaning in relationships



Many types of humanism

While it would be true to say that the majority of Humanists would be able to agree with much of the above it is important to understand that different Humanists have established different types of humanism with emphases on the areas which particularly interest them or strike them as particularly important in their sphere of experience. This has led to a number of different types of Humanism developing:

Types of secular humanism

- *Cultural Humanism* – Emphasises the role of rational thought and experimentation as the way knowledge is obtained and that this should be the basis of how we decide to act as humans and to understand our experience.
- *Ethical Humanism* – Focuses particularly on the development of ethics from the basic humanist principles and particularly focuses on the ethical values which unite people, particularly from different backgrounds and cultures.
- *Literary Humanism* – Particularly emphasises the place of the humanities – the study of literature, philosophy, history and language as important in understanding and developing ‘human virtues’.
- *New Humanism* – A type of humanism which particularly emphasises the importance of developing an awareness of humanity on a global scale. Such examples include awareness and action toward combating climate change and the awareness of issues of social justice in other states.
- *Philosophical Humanism* - Philosophic Humanism can be distinguished from other forms of humanism as it works to develop a philosophy that helps define how a person should live and interact with other people.
- *Renaissance Humanism* - A movement which can be traced back to the end of the Middle Ages which renewed an interest in classical studies and promoted the concept that truth could be discovered by human effort.

As is very clearly the case in the *Humanist Manifestos* many Humanists do not see that religion and a belief in a transcendent being are compatible with being a Humanist. To put it another way, many Humanists argue that you cannot be a Humanist if you believe in a God. That to believe in a God and participating in the associated traditions and practices in itself goes against one of the main tenets of being a Humanist. However, there are Humanists (probably the minority) who do not believe that Humanism means that you must relegate the possibility of the existence of a transcendent being to be a Humanist. These are listed below.

Types of humanism which draw religious and secular types of Humanism together

- *Ecumenical Humanism* – This focuses on what needs doing in the world to achieve a better life for all humanity. It is a pragmatic understanding of Humanism, which does



not separate secular and religious humanism but holds that as long as they share they same goals there is not a problem.

- *Modern Humanism (or Progressive Humanism)* - a type of Humanism which has developed from both religious and secular sources. It particularly emphasises the importance of reason and science, democracy and human compassion.

Religious Humanism

Christian Humanism – A long-standing tradition of the union of many Humanists beliefs in freedom and individualism with Christian theology and practice.

Islamic Humanism – Many medieval Islamic thinkers pursued similar rational and scientific discourses similar to those associated with Humanism today. A wide range of Islamic writings in literature, theology and history show that medieval thought was open to typically Humanist ideas of individualism and even secularism at times. However, in later centuries others overtook these discourses. It is only more recently that such discourses have been revived mainly by Muslims who have come to live in the western world and have explored the tensions between their identity as a human, as a Muslim and as someone living in the Western World.

Jewish Humanism – This particularly emphasises the part of the Jewish tradition that values freedom of thought, social justice, egalitarianism, and respect for the 'other'. Most Jewish Humanists would believe that Jewish history is a human saga, a testament to the significance of human power and human responsibility and that humans possess the power and responsibility to shape their own lives independently of a supernatural being.

Religious Humanism – A type that is similar to secular humanism, except that it is practiced in a religious setting with fellowship and rituals, as in *Ethical Culture Societies*, congregations associated with the *Society for Humanistic Judaism* and some groups affiliated with the *Unitarian Universalist Association*.

Spiritual Humanism – a more organised version of humanism which characterises itself as a religion 'based on the ability of human beings to solve the problems of society using logic and science'². This is different to religious humanism in that it does not use religious traditions and rituals but rather created its own.

The roots of Humanism

As has been shown above, Humanism is a broad 'movement' with many influences and possible emphases. This has been the case from the emergence of Humanism as it developed in different places and has been affected by the events, which have influenced how people view humanity and the human condition. In the Western World many people tend to associate Humanism to Ancient Greece. Whilst this is true there is also significant evidence to show that similar ideas were developing other parts of the world, particularly in the East. Both Buddha and Confucius also developed similar philosophies in the fifth century BCE. Many of the same discourses can be seen in the writing and teachings of

² www.spiritualhumanism.org/what.htm



those philosophers in Ancient Greece and in the East. There was a shared emphasis placed on the value of life and of experience and the use of rationality and thought to understand the world.

Early in the sixth century BCE in Ancient Greece the way was prepared for what has come to be known as Humanism. Those such as Thales of Miletus and Xenophanes of Colophon, which questioned the prevailing truth of the day, developed pantheism that there was a divine source of truth, unity, beauty and creation. By the questioning of a unified concept of God 'intellectual space' was created in which thinkers such as Anaxagoras started to develop science as a method of understanding the world and our experience of it. In the development of science thinkers in Ancient Greece started to recognise that the material world could be studied in its own right separate from any transcendent sphere. In short, the sixth century BCE was a time when rationalism started to develop and slowly started to become more valued.

This exploration of rationality and science continued and grew through the centuries. As civilizations developed and there was greater movement of people between them there was greater cross-fertilization of ideas and increasing experimentation and attempts to understand the material world in its own right. Focusing purely on Ancient Greece or even wider at the 'Western world' misses the significant influence of developments in the Islamic science and understanding of logic and practice of rationality.

However, it was not until the early fifteenth century and the establishment of a course of study, *studia humanitatis*, that humanism started to emerge as a more formalised world view. The *studia humanitatis* originated in the renaissance period in universities in Europe and concentrated on those educational disciplines outside of theology and natural science (such as grammar, poetry, rhetoric, history and moral philosophy). The *studia humanitatis*, as this course of study was known, were based on the educational and political ideal of *humanitas*, an ideal, which much of Renaissance Humanism strove toward and has really formed the basis of the Humanist project for centuries after.

The concept of 'humanitas'

Humanitas referred to the idea of the development of human virtue, in all its forms and to its greatest extent. This not only referred to qualities related to the intellect such as creativity, understanding, judgement but also much more practical qualities such as the love of honour, eloquence and prudence. The balance between action and reflection was seen as key to the development of a person towards this ideal. The curriculum in developing students in pursuit of this ideal was also much broader and concerned with developing the whole person today than our education systems in the Western world are today. As well as the education that we would associate with our schools, colleges and universities today, students were also guided in developing realistic social criticism and ideas of how to change society for the better and then were then encouraged to act on these insights. In acting in the world for positive change, it was thought that society would slowly change, one person at a time.

It is perhaps important to note that much of the structure and method for the '*humanitas*' project was based on classical Greek and Roman literature. Authors such as Cicero, Livy, Plato were all highly valued and central to this project. Indeed, it was deemed that the



literature of the time was inferior and that there was much to be gained by going back and rooting the concept of *humanitas* in documents which had stood the test of time. The writers who wrote in Ancient Greece were deemed to be so valuable because they were largely free of the dualism in medieval thought between the secular and Christian forms of spirituality. Classical literature was also valued for its eloquence and the power that this held to drive its audience to action.

Humanism in the Modern Era

However it was not until 1877 that the term 'Humanism' was publicly used for the first time, and even then it was used as a criticism. Instead those who would now be known as Humanists talked more about building an 'ethical culture'. Even now the International body, the International Humanist and Ethical Union still includes this emphasis on ethical living in this organisation which is seen by many to represent Humanists around the world.

It was not really until end of the 1920s that the terms 'Humanist' and 'Humanism' were adopted and used by those who were seeking to live an ethical life without religion. In 1929, Charles Francis Potter founded the first *Humanist Society of New York* which was then followed a year by the publishing a year later of a book by his wife, Clara cook Potter, *Humanism: a New Religion*. In the next few years *The New Humanist* (a journal for those looking to discuss humanism and those issues of interest to humanists) was established and the *Humanist Manifesto*.

Since this point Humanism has grown and developed as a recognised worldview across the globe. There are many people in the world who think that it is useful way of labelling themselves and a way to meet with others who hold similar views and have similar values. In some countries Humanism has gained the same status as religions within the law of the land. For example, in the United States, the Supreme Court recognized that Humanism is equivalent to a religion in the limited sense of authorizing Humanists to conduct ceremonies commonly carried out by officers of religious bodies. This example and others only serves to show the influence that Humanism has as a worldview in many parts of the world.

Power and Authority in Humanism

Power structures and authority

Humanists reject any hierarchy in principle and very much emphasise the role of the individual as the main authority in their own lives. However, Humanists do tend to have structures, which can act as authorities to which many Humanists turn. Plus there is a tradition in Humanism of association and therefore there are structures that support this act of association and to some extent provide an informal power structure.

The process of rationality as authoritative

Rationality is a key quality for Humanists. They see the process of rationality as foundational although they also invest the process of action and experimentation as a way to understand the world and to continuously understand and develop 'human virtue'. Those who are judged to have developed rationality with concrete actions, such as Nelson Mandela or Che Guevara, for the benefit of humanity would be seen as particularly authoritative as they were successful, through reflection an action to contribute to increasing the individual freedoms of people.



What knowledge and personal characteristics are likely to make a person influential?

Humanists particularly value experience and therefore it is likely that those who are older and have significant experience of life are more likely to be influential. This emphasis on experience also means that those who are knowledgeable about history are also likely to be seen as authoritative.

Further than this it is not clear that there are many personal characteristics that are particularly valued by Humanists. Rationality is of course important, so those who are able to think and act rationally are significant. However, art, music and literature are seen as being key to understanding the human condition and moving people to action. So those who are able to express ideas and motivate people are valued.

It also seems unavoidable that people with an education will gain status and be seen as having authority. Humanists place great emphasis on being a self-determining individual who is able to act to create personal meaning. Nevertheless, it is arguable how possible this is without the development of a person's critical faculties so they can think through many of the issues, thus allowing one to become better able to distinguish between the different discourses that provide meaning in our lives. This being so, one would need to have quite a high level of education to be able to distinguish the difference between humanism, structuralism, existentialism or any other way in understanding meaning, and then be able to make this real in their own lives.

NEW AGE

What is New Age?

A distinction can be made between the concept of the New Age as a specific phase in human history and the New Age movement and techniques:

New-Age as a phase in human history

This understanding sees the New Age as the dawning of a new period in human consciousness, a paradigm shift associated with the 'age of Aquarius', an astrological age said to replace the 'age of Pisces' around the year 2000. The first use of the term in this sense is credited to the theosophist Alice Bailey (1880-1949). It has also been pointed out that the 'New Age' is a biblical term signifying 'the age to come', which God is going to establish at the end of 'this age'. An interesting connection can further be drawn to the Hindu concept of the Kali Yuga (age of Kali), the fourth age of the world, characterized by strife, discord, quarrel and contention, in which humankind is furthest from God. According to Hindu scriptures it began in 3102 BCE and will last for 432,000 years. Whilst New Age thinkers do not necessarily highlight this particular connection to Hindu thought, the interconnections between the New Age thinking and Hinduism are significant, as will be explored further below.

New-Age movement

The New Age is not a new religion, but a diverse and constantly evolving set of ideas, beliefs and practices that predominantly make reference to the spiritual sphere of life when



explaining their existence. The diversity and range of these approaches to spirituality make the metaphor, “a laboratory of experimentation” an apt one. Thus it is more accurate to talk about people who locate their spirituality within the New Age movement, than people who are New Age believers. Even this description is somewhat misleading as following some of the negative associations and stereotypes that have arisen in relation to the term New Age (the money hungry guru or charismatic leader who requires sexual intimacy with his followers), many who practice techniques that would situate them within the New Age movement, prefer not to describe their spirituality in this way, yet would be happy to refer to the individual techniques that they practice. This also highlights the fact that the New Age movement is not one unified movement but a loosely connected collection of ideas, beliefs and practices.

New-Age techniques

There is a strong focus within the New Age movement on the transformation of consciousness, personal, social and planetary. Thus the emphasis is on practical, experiential techniques that achieve results. As long as the technique is effective, it is good. Some of the many techniques used in the New Age to achieve transformation of consciousness, healing and wholeness include: aromatherapy, ashtanga yoga, bach flower remedies, bio-music, bower therapy, breathing workshops, chakra tuning, clowning, cosmic energy alignment, creative dance, crystal healing, dancing chi, deeksha, digeridoo, drama, drumming, dynamic yoga, ecstatic dance, emotional kinesiology, family constellations, feng-shui, five rhythms dance, Georgian singing, hatha yoga, homeopathy, intimacy workshops, kundalini meditation, laughter workshops, life coaching, macrobiotic cooking, nia, nuad thai massage, oriental medicine, overtone, pilates, polyphonic singing, visualization workshops, qi gong, rebirthing, reiki, rolfing, sacred geometry, shamanism, shiatsu, tai chi, tantra, mediation, yoga and many more besides...

New Age in constant flux

Those who have attempted to write about New Age movements are swift to point out that the speed at which these movements are evolving makes it impossible to both write about them and keep up to date with developments at the same time. They also make clear that it would be inaccurate to suggest that New Age movements operate within a clearly identifiable, shared framework of thought and as such suggest a number of metaphors to aid thinking. Russell Chandler notes two, that of the New Age as a hoover, sucking up everything in its path and creating a strange mixture inside the bag, and a similar one provided by one of his interviewees who called it, “the sweepings of the ages”. Others might prefer to think of it as a vast river, being fed by a myriad of tributaries on its journey to the sea of expanded consciousness. What is particularly fitting about this latter image is the sense it conveys of something that is constantly changing and developing. New Age movements are perhaps accurately described as such because if there is one thing they all share, it is the fact that they are in constant flux.

The New Age story and timeline

- *Late 19th century – Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (Madame Blavatsky)*, cofounder of the Theosophical Society, announced a coming New Age. She believed that theosophists (who embraced Buddhist and Brahmanic notions such as reincarnation) should assist



the evolution of the human race and prepare to cooperate with one of the Ascended Masters of the Great White Brotherhood whose arrival was imminent. Blavatsky's successor, Annie Besant predicted the coming of a messiah, or world saviour, who she believed was the Indian teacher Jiddu Krishnamurti. While esotericism grew, theosophy suffered significant setbacks. Blavatsky was accused of faking miraculous events associated with her contact with the Ascended Masters. In the early 20th century the Theosophical Society was hit by a series of sex scandals involving its leaders, and Besant was personally embarrassed by the defection of Krishnamurti in 1929.

- *1940s - Alice A. Bailey*, founder of the Arcane School (an organization that disseminated spiritual teachings), suggested that a new messiah, the Master Maitreya, would appear in the last quarter of the 20th century. After Bailey's death, former members of the Arcane School created a host of new independent theosophical groups within which hopes of a New Age flourished e.g. Findhorn Foundation
- *1960s - The Universal Foundation* appeared. Its wealthy leader, Anthony Brooke, travelled widely beginning in the mid-1960s, predicting that an apocalyptic event would occur during the Christmas season of 1967. Although the event never took place, an international network of New Age groups emerged. Suzuki brings Buddhism to the west. Resurgence of interest in Native American culture - "God is Red", plus the Goddess spirituality movement.
- *1980's - the zenith of the New Age?* Movement popularised by media personalities e.g. Shirley Maclaine
- *End of the 1980s – loss of momentum.* New Age movement derided for its acceptance of unscientific ideas and practices (especially its advocacy of crystals and channeling). Then Spangler, Los Angeles publisher Jeremy Tarcher, and the editors of several leading New Age periodicals announced that although they still adhered to the goals of personal transformation, they no longer believed in the coming New Age.
- *Mid-1990s - evident that the movement was dying*, and New Agers in Europe began to speak of the move from "New Age to Next Stage."
- *21st Century* - the continuing presence of New Age thought in the post-New Age era is evident in the number of New Age bookstores, periodicals, and organizations that continued to be found in nearly every urban centre.

Is the New Age really that new?

Many of the ideas and influences on New Age thinking are anything but new and stretch back into several thousand years of human history. Many of the key perspectives and beliefs found in a high number of New Age movements draw significantly on Hindu ideas in existence in at least 500 BC. However, the emergence of the concept of a New Age and the associated New Age movements is a historical phenomenon that is connected specifically to Western European culture from the late 19th century and throughout the 20th century. It could be said that it was in its infancy during this period and came of age in the immediate post WW2 decades, during the social revolutions of the 1960's, experiencing a marked breakthrough into mainstream culture and public consciousness in the 1980's, aided considerably by support from high profile media personalities such as Hollywood actress Shirley Maclaine with her 1987 film *Out on a Limb* and several metaphysically oriented books, Paul McKenna, the Beatles patronization of Ravi Shankar.



Why did New Age become so popular in the 20th Century?

As discussed in the introduction, the New Age is partly a reaction against key ideas in Western culture. Why is this, and why should the late 19th and 20th centuries in particular have provided such fertile ground for the growth of New Age? Key social and cultural changes had been taking place throughout Western Europe and North America since the late 1600s. This is not to imply that society before this was static, but that the nature of the changes associated with this period were of a significantly different type and heralded the beginning of a new era.

- In the philosophical arena the emphasis on rational thought and logic that became known as 'Enlightenment' thinking, and the development of a scientific approach to knowledge that required empirical evidence and material proof, emphasised the importance of the intellect as a tool for discerning truth. Why is this a New Age driver?
- In the economic sphere the application of these scientific methodologies was fuelling the industrial revolution with its associated changes to work and social patterns and the growing dominance of the individual as a social and economic unit, leading towards the 20thc concept of the individual as consumer and the spread of Capitalism as the dominant model of economic organisation. Why New Age? People felt that this somehow wasn't right.
- Colonial expansion and modern systems of transport had led to a growing awareness of the existence of radically different cultural and religious systems, leading some to profoundly question the basis on which Western cultural beliefs were legitimized and raise unsettling questions about claims to ultimate truth and knowledge. Why New Age? Because Indian ideas became available, raising awareness of other possibilities
- Loosening of power of the Church as an influence in society – more space to question and experiment.

The defining historical event for Western Europe in the 20thc was arguably the 2nd World War.

- The loss engendered through this experience and the awareness that the Enlightenment project's bright hopes for humanity's continued progress towards self-improvement and peace, had had been rendered powerless by the brutal facts of mass violence and atrocity, led to a sense of disenchantment with the false promises of modernism and a loss of faith in institutional authority.
- This sense of disillusionment was running in parallel with the economic boom and sense of unlimited potential of the 1960's in which a consumer mentality began to bed down through the growth of mass media communications and advertising in particular. It is not surprising that the hippy generation felt compelled to follow Timothy Leary's advice and "tune in, turn on and drop out".
- A widespread social consciousness that traditional explanations and approaches to life and meaning had failed, left the religious-spiritual marketplace open for god-shoppers to choose the system that held most resonance for them as individual consumers.
- Consequently those in search of ultimate meaning were pushed to seek it either by staring the bleak truth of an absurd universe squarely in the face via existential philosophy, or to reject the death of God and see God in all things as a New Age practitioner of a varying techniques to transform human consciousness. It could be argued that the New Age reaction against rational logic, to a certain extent represents a



retreat from the stark and painful truth of events such as the holocaust (cf. Hannah Arendt Eichmann and 'The Banality of Evil').

Central New Age ideas

What follows are generalizations that will not apply in all cases. The New Age movement is a fabric of fragments and whilst it is useful to try and highlight some of the key perspectives, any attempt to systematize its ideas into a single framework misrepresents its essential nature.

Reality is pantheistic: Monism – All is one

The cosmos is pure, undifferentiated, universal energy – a consciousness or “life force”. Everything is one in one vast, interconnected process. Marilyn Ferguson, intellectual poster girl for New Age philosophy, describes it thus, “The mystical experience of wholeness encompasses all separation”. The essential belief of monism is that the universe is comprised of one ultimate reality or energy and that in ultimate terms there are no distinctions or opposites. Difference therefore is an illusion caused by our blindness or, “Metaphysical amnesia” which has caused us to forget our true identity. This view is directly traceable to the Hinduism of Vedanta in which *Maya* is the illusory veil cast over ultimate reality and creates the appearance of difference and distinction between things. The spiritual task of the individual soul (Atman) is to achieve enlightenment by realizing this is so, and in so doing realizing that the individual soul is in fact but one among many drops in the great universal soul (Brahman). The point of *Moksha*, or release from the karmic wheel of *Samsara* and endless rebirth, is this realization that Atman and Brahman are one and the acceptance into the One. A similar understanding operates within Buddhism through the concept of nirvana, the extinguishing of the individual soul like the light of a candle ceasing. New Age physicist Fritjof Capra argues that in the ultimate state of consciousness, “all boundaries and dualities have been transcended and all individuality dissolves into universal, undifferentiated oneness”. Connected to this is the idea that there are not many selves but one and that thus all humanity is one. Thus the New Age view of ultimate reality could be summed up: All is one. We are All One. All is God. And we are all God. Jack Underhill, publisher of the New Age *Life Times* magazine puts it like this, “You are God. Honest. I know your driver’s licence says differently, but what does the DMV know?”

All religions are essentially one

Jesus, Krishna, Buddha, Lao-Tse and other founders of major religions all taught essentially the same thing: how to become one with the One. This is called *syncretism*. As such, there is no attempt to debunk or disprove the insights of religious figures such as Jesus. Many New Agers regard him as an enlightened master and use the phrase Christ-consciousness to denote the spirit of self-realisation and enlightenment incarnated in the man Jesus.

Reincarnation – death is an illusion

Whilst not all New Age perspectives include an explicit focus on reincarnation, it is a commonly held view amongst many participants of the New Age movement that the rebirth



of the soul is a reality. Drawing from its roots in eastern religious thought, and even further back to the Gnostics, Hellenistic mystery cults and Pythagoras' theory of the transmigration of souls, if 'All is One', death is an illusion. The body may die but the soul continues to exist within the one. Successive physical incarnations simply provide further opportunities for the realization of this mystical reality. Thus, whilst death is denied, this position is not necessarily life affirming as significant suffering may take place throughout one's life until the soul grasps hold of the essential reality of non-duality that underlies all things. A link may be drawn here to the Buddhist concept of *Dukkha* (suffering) and the Buddhist maxim that, "All is suffering", a reality which must be accepted before Nirvana can be achieved. The cosmic law of karma governs the process of reincarnation.

Ignorance, not evil, is the enemy

Knowledge, or *gnosis* is the key to being awakened from our ignorance of divinity. Harmful acts are the result of the ignorance of the individual nature of all things, causing the misguided belief in difference and the fear of the other, which stems from this misperception. Each individual may "actualize" his or her divine nature or "Higher Self" and achieve union with the Ultimate Unifying Principle by applying a wide range of consciousness-changing techniques to body, mind and spirit. Undergirding the New Age worldview is the premise that humans have access to a source of transcendent knowledge not limited to time and space. Thus the key focus is on techniques to enable access to this source.

How do we know?

New Age emphasises intuitive right-brain gnosis, over rational left-brain empiricism. The source said to be tapped intuitively by the brain's right hemisphere. One must rid oneself of the limitations imposed by the human brain's left hemisphere reasoning which Western culture, by way of its technological advances, holds in such high esteem. The pathway to godhead lies not in left-hemisphere logic but in the right hemisphere's 'knowing' and creativeness.

In addition to these key beliefs, there are a number of basic premises that are common to New Age thinking although there is no unanimity in the detail.

- *Nature is holistic.* The universe must be understood as a whole; the emphasis should be on inter-relationship not dissecting things into parts (the sum is greater than the parts). The material and spiritual must interlock.
- *Change is non-linear.* Parts interact in unpredictable ways and with increasing complexity, often inexplicable simply in terms of small steps (cause and effect). The material and spiritual must interact.
- *Truth is intuitive.* Scientific measurement and analysis is only one limited way of knowing; much of life is untouched by this method (e.g. relationships, beauty). Imagery, symbolism, contemplation are vital. The material and spiritual give insight.
- *Relationship is cooperative.* Discovering new ways of living and relating are necessary; lifestyles need to be simple, gentle and supportive - without hierarchies.



What is the New Age saying to the Church?

Opportunities

The spiritual awakening and hunger expressed in the New Age movement is something that should excite Christians and is a wonderful opportunity for the church. Some significant areas of common ground between Christians and the New Age are:

- *Cooperation*: personal support and shared lifestyles;
- *Networking*: building community and links with others;
- *Peace*: non-violence and promoting reconciliation;
- *Globalism*: having an international perspective;
- *Ecology*: conservation of bio-systems and resources;
- *Environment*: the development of gentle, sustainable lifestyles;
- *Health*: good diet and physical wellbeing;
- *Creativity*: quality, spontaneity and innovation;
- *Potential*: encouraging positive attitudes and fulfilment;
- *Transformation*: a total change of mind and thought.

The New Age is often misunderstood by the church, which can at times appear to think that anyone who has so much as been to a yoga class is tainted by witchcraft. However, an interesting perspective to take on the New Age is to view it as the fullest possible conception of humanity in a world without God. God has created humanity in his/her own image and thus we do carry within us the spark of the divine. Perhaps self-realisation can be understood as humankind's most full appreciation of the element of divinity that is within their created form. However, this experience of life is one in which a direct revelation of the source of creation, the Creator, has not occurred. Those involved in the New Age have yet to experience their kairos moment, in which something new and qualitatively different, the spirit of God breaks into their experience and demands their attention.

Risks

- *Peace over justice - the problem of evil*: The value of peace is highly prized by many New Age thinkers but it is worth considering whether this peace is conceptualized as a relationally worked out peace between people or a denial of the existence of conflict. Is it peace as blind-eyed tolerance or peace as reconciliation of painful conflict? If I am God and All is God and all paths lead to God, there is no need to challenge another person's pathway to a transformed consciousness? But what if that pathway involves the misuse of another person? What moral framework is there against which to secure the sacredness of each human life? Pushed to its limits, it could be argued that if we are all God, your body is my body. There is also no imperative to reconcile with those you are in conflict with because there is no way of judging right or wrong. Ultimately, this has the potential to undermine the richness and beauty to be found in the often-painful pursuit of human relationships. Finally, the dismissal of the value of intellectual analysis is also a concern. An overemphasis on the importance of the rational mind leads to the exclusion of the emotional and embodied aspects of life, but equally giving the analytical mind no role in human life runs the risk of delusion.



- *The tyranny of human perfection* – If the purpose of life is to achieve godhead, a pure and perfect state of being, where does leave those who are not perfect but weak and broken? The New Age does not accept human weakness but struggles to purify the self from human imperfection and ugliness, which is seen as a barrier to enlightenment. Brokenness, human limitation and the inclusion of weakness are not on the agenda.
- *Mixing up ideas* – There are potentially damaging effects when powerful mind and body altering techniques are used outside of the cultural context in which they have developed e.g. shamanism takes place within an agreed set of ritual practices. Ironically, the criticism that holistic health practitioners level at traditional medicine for its extraction of active ingredients from healing plants to create overly powerful drugs that throw the body out of balance, can be levelled at the New Age movement with regards to its extraction of healing techniques and practices from out of the historical and cultural context in which they have been developed Arguably these contexts contain the communally developed ethical boundaries that can contain this power. The psychological techniques and seminars used by the New Age movement to reconstruct ways of thinking and enforce new values can seriously undermine some people. Similarly, the exploration of the animist experience opens the door to powerful spiritual forces and changes in behaviour, which become fixed and reinforced through ritual actions and words.
- *Occult practice and witchcraft*: the experience of channelling, I-Ching, horoscopes, pendulums, crystals and so much more, open the personality to destructive spiritual powers. The interest in religious experience has led to the exploration of ancient rites leading some directly into witchcraft and black magic and all its attendant evils.
- *Temporary transformations* – There is a strong focus on spiritual experience but to what extent do these experiences translate into changed behaviour in daily life? Are they permanent changes to character or stimulating temporary experiences that have no lasting impact on ethical values and behaviour?

Power and Authority in the New Age

In New Age thinking “power-to”, is located not with an external God but within each individual. You are the source of your own salvation because you are God. In order to achieve greater power you simply need to journey within and locate the mystical source of power that is god-within-you. As such, authority is granted to those who appear to have an advanced capacity to access the God within and to lead others on the path to accessing the God within them. Power can be gained by offering practical techniques for self-realisation. As many New Age seekers may not be looking for full mystical union, techniques that offer an increased sense of well-being, sense of harmony with the world and others, improved psychological health and concentration, or better sex lives, also have currency. Spiritual seekers thus grant authority to specific individuals on the basis of the efficacy of their techniques, or their ability to convince and persuade others of the efficacy of their techniques. These legitimised individuals thus have “power over” others. In a situation where there are is no source of authority outside of these powerful individuals, the potential for them to misuse their power is high and there have been numerous such examples within the New Age movement.



Case study: Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh

"In the summer of 1981, India's most controversial guru packed up his large commune in Poona and reassembled it on an immense, isolated cattle ranch in central Oregon known as 'the Big Muddy'. Within two years, the religion of Rajneesh and his \$60 million empire had settled in: crops covered more than 3000 of the 64,000 acre spread, watered from a huge reservoir. A five-wing "university" where orange-clad disciples absorbed a heady mix of Rajneesh-style eastern mysticism and West Coast sensory therapy crowned some 250,000 square feet of buildings. For years, Rajneesh had wanted "a new site, isolated from the outside world – a community to provoke God." This new commune, he wrote in 1979, would be "an experiment in spiritual communism...a space where we can create human beings who are not obsessed with comparison, who are not obsessed with the personality". But by late 1985 the commune was disbanded; Rajneesh had been deported; and many of his top aides were doing time for crimes ranging from wiretapping to attempted murder (including mass poisoning of 700 people) to arson to arranging sham marriages in order to circumvent immigration laws" (Chandler, 1988, 60).

Other examples of guru led communities in which utopian dreams appear to have floundered in accusations of sexual or financial misconduct include the SYDA Foundation of Swami Muktananda Paramahansa, plus Si Baba and Zen Master Rama. It is also worth noting that high profile channellers such as J.Z. Knight (the channel for Ramtha), Jach Pursel (the channel for Lazaris) and Jane Roberts (a medium who wrote many books on the 'energy personality essence' known as Seth) made large financial profits. Whilst this does not mean their claims are fraudulent or say anything specific about the New Age (similar points can be made about many high profile US tele-evangelists), the temptation to abuse power for financial reward no doubt increases in direct correlation to the potential financial rewards available. What is particular to the New Age is that there are no sources of validation (sacred scriptures, ethical codes) outside the efficacy of the technique alone, thus taking power on the basis of transformative techniques is easier than in other religions. If authority is located in the individual's access to the spiritual realm and does not rely on the sanction of an institutional framework or require any specific priestly qualifications, the importance of the persuasive powers of the individual increase. The more charismatic and convincing an individual is, the more likely it is that they will be able to win over followers to their specific brand of consciousness raising technique.

NIHILISM

What is Nihilism?

Some opening thoughts:

"Where has God gone? I shall tell you. We have killed him — you and I. We are all his murderers... God is dead. That which was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet possessed has bled to death under our knives. There has never been a greater deed."

- *Friedrich Nietzsche*

'We are born to scrawl our own designs upon this morally blank world' 'Existence has no pattern save what we imagine after staring at it for too long'. - *Alan Moore*

"Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player. That struts and frets his hour upon the stage. And then is heard no more; it is a tale. Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury. Signifying nothing." - *Macbeth in Shakespeare's Macbeth*



"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?"
Qoheleth in the Book of Ecclesiastes 1:2-3

Discovering Nihilism

▪ *Definition*

The word 'nihilism' comes from the Latin *nihil*, which means 'nothing'. It is the belief that past and current human existence is without any meaning, value or purpose whatsoever, and that this is universally true.

▪ *Explanation*

Nihilism needs to be understood differently from the religious traditions. Nihilism is fundamentally different in that it has its roots in observing the world and deriving one's conclusions from one's observations rather than from religious texts or from holy men and women. It is perhaps more useful to think of nihilism as a moment of realisation of the futility and meaninglessness of life from which, one can never look at the world again in the same way. Or perhaps like the dropping of a pebble into a pond which then sends ripples out into all areas of one's life.

At its core is the belief that there is nothing but the material world and therefore no meaning in life, save that which we construct. For most of human history there has been an assumption that there was a transcendent presence of some kind and that this gave meaning to life. However, as science has shown this to be questionable, many great thinkers have started to explore the implications of there being no transcendent presence or source, which provides us with meaning.

It is worth saying here that there are few individuals who would want to be known as 'nihilists'. Rather the 'death of God', the death of the idea of a single source of truth or meaning, the 'nihilistic moment' and the acceptance of this fact normally leads to some project to deal with this fact. To label someone a 'nihilist' could be seen to be a derogatory way of labelling. Such a realisation can often lead to a great deal of creativity, something which labelling a person a nihilist does not always communicate. In this document this is not intended to be the case. Rather, to refer to someone as 'nihilist' is simply for ease of expression rather than writing, 'a person who has accepted the lack of inherent meaning in life and rather works to construct meaning' every time.

Origins of Nihilism

Greeks and Russians

The actual term 'nihilism' was first used early in the nineteenth century by Friedrich Jacobi to negatively characterize transcendental idealism. However, it became popular after Ivan Turgenev used it in one of his novels, *Fathers and Sons* (1862), to describe one of his characters, Bazarov, who espoused an outlook of total negation. However, it is much more complicated to trace the concepts behind nihilism as to see where it began.

It is perhaps possible to say that it is in origin, a western concept which is largely, but not exclusively associated with the western world. Perhaps the earliest recorded manifestations of a nihilistic outlook are those Ancient Greek thinkers who are known at



the Sceptics. They were what we would call epistemological nihilists – people who did not believe that anything could be known for certain, i.e. that knowledge was relational. So while they did not exclude the possibility that there was truth, they did not see it as available to us. As Demosthenes (c.371-322 BC), for example, observes, "What he wished to believe, that is what each man believes."

Such thoughts and discussions continued to varying degrees and in various forms for centuries. However, many point to the mid-nineteenth century Russia as the most significant manifestation of nihilism, and indeed was when the term was coined. Nihilism became identified with a loose revolutionary movement between the 1860s and 1870s that rejected the authority of the state, church and family as they viewed all of them as obstacles to personal freedom. The movement emphasised rationalism and the material world as the only sources of knowledge and individual freedom as the highest value. Although this movement deteriorated into an ethos of subversion, destruction and anarchy by the late 1870s the concept did not fade from view.

Friedrich Nietzsche

At the same time as the nihilistic movement in Russia started to implode, a German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, was developing the understanding of nihilism. Indeed, it is Nietzsche whose work is often seen as the watershed or the junction from which many thinkers since has explored the implications of his work.

Nietzsche is seen as particularly influential in the last one hundred and forty years of Western thought because he was able to articulate:

- That it was impossible, due to advances in science and rationality, to avoid the 'death of God' (or to put it another way, the collapse of metaphysical and theological foundations and sanctions for traditional morality);
- The consequences of this realisation, particularly the challenges it presented;
- The resistance that would be present in accepting this fact.

'God is dead'

This provocative sentence, 'God is dead' (in his book 'Gay Science' first published in 1882) should be understood as a sociological and historical statement rather than one about religion or theology. This was Nietzsche's way of saying that the idea of God is no longer capable of being a source of a moral or ethical code. What Nietzsche is saying is that there is no answer to the 'why?' of life. There can no longer be a single or moral base from which we can derive absolute beliefs. There can be no one single source from which we derive what we deem to be 'truthful', 'beautiful' or 'aspirational'.

Implications of the 'death of God'

At first, particularly to people of some kind of faith, it is quite difficult to grasp what Nietzsche may mean. After centuries in which it was believed that there was absolute truth and a meaning to life it is difficult to grasp what a world would be like without it. All of the answers that we have grown up with and imbibed in our societies are seen to be myths. They have, at best, served us by creating ways of coping with the total lack of meaning of our lives. While for many centuries we could escape this conclusion, advances in science and technology have meant that we can now not escape the conclusions of nihilism. For Nietzsche, nihilism was an inescapable conclusion:



'What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: *the advent of nihilism* For some time now our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end' (*Will to Power*)

Resistance to the 'death of God'

There is resistance to accepting the implications of the 'death of God'. Nietzsche was very clear that the dawning of nihilism on the collective consciousness would be very destabilising. He was convinced that most people would not be able to accept a world in which there was only meaninglessness and purposelessness and saw this as the greatest challenge 'man had ever faced':

'I praise, I do not reproach, [nihilism's] arrival. I believe it is one of the greatest crises, a moment of the deepest self-reflection of humanity. Whether man recovers from it, whether he becomes master of this crisis, is a question of his strength. It is possible. . . .' (*Complete Works* Vol. 13)

Nietzsche thought that most people would need something to replace the place of God, to become, in effect, a surrogate God. At the time, in the nineteenth century, he saw that one such possibility was the emerging nationalism of his day that represented one such surrogate God. He explored the possibility that the nation-state would be given a similar value and purpose, which could only lead to confrontation and death on a mass scale. And indeed, his hypothesis in time turned out to be true in the form of two World wars.

'Recovering' from nihilism

Nietzsche did not underestimate the challenge that nihilism represents to humanity. However, he did argue that if humanity could find a way through this realisation of the lack of a source of ultimate reality then mankind could develop a new 'master morality' which valued personal excellence over 'forced compassion' (as Nietzsche viewed the Judeo-Christian tradition). Nietzsche argued that instead what would be preferable is for individuals to act as if their very existence was *a work of art*.

Nietzsche was quite critical of the nihilistic tendency to discard any hope of meaning. Rather, he suggested that we needed to discard the old measures and develop alternative measures of significance and value. Nietzsche saw that there was much possibility if we were able to move from the old way of deriving meaning to slowly developing a new way of constructing the meaning of things in our lives based on a rational process, which would rid us of the irrationality of religion.

For the last 120 years or so some Western intellectual time has been exploring much of the agenda that Nietzsche identified following the realisation that 'God is dead'.³ As everything is laced with meaning it has meant that many thinkers have been drawn to

³ This is not to say that everyone agrees with Nietzsche's analysis or that they refer much to his work. Rather his work can be seen as defining a point from which increasing energy was put into re-thinking and re-imagining the world.

different areas of existence to work out the implications of the 'death of God' and in areas of life such as sport, relationships, art, literature, science, sociology, law, philosophy, politics to name but a few. For centuries, all of these had been imbued with meaning derived in great measure from the values which stemmed from the Judeo-Christian religious tradition. And now, all of this is up for contestation and to be 'picked apart'. To this end the following are a number of the major movements which have explored what a lack of objective truth and meaning mean for us in many areas of our lives.

Exploring the 'death of God'

There are different avenues of exploration following the 'death of God'. The 'death of God' has implications for absolutely every area of life. However, the majority of thought has gone in investigating its implications in one of four areas:

- *Epistemology* (the study of knowledge) – Philosophers have explored what the denial of the possibility of knowledge and truth means. If there is not one source which created the world then there is not one source of knowledge and there is no such thing as objective truth, only personal perspectives.
- *Politics* – If there is no such thing as objective truth then it means that what has been held as the common good for so long is all open to challenge and debate. It also raises questions about how decisions should be made and calls into question the very structures of governance.
- *Ethics and morals* - With the death of God 'good' and 'bad' become nebulous at best. The possibility of absolute moral or ethical values is rejected. Values related to good and bad also become subjective and can be seen as mere products of social and emotional pressures in society.
- *Existence* – Perhaps the greatest area of investigation – philosophers and academics have explored implications of the notion that life has no intrinsic meaning or value.

Importance of Nihilism

Why is it important to understand if it is not one of the main religious traditions? Nihilism is important to understand because it is an assumption, which is increasingly present in Western thought and is manifest in Western society. It is an observation or premise, which shapes much of the way people; see the world in the Western world without necessarily being aware of the roots of this in nihilism. The way that we spend our leisure time, the things that we buy, the organisations for which we work, the relationships we enter into – at the heart of all of these there are value judgements that we make. If these value judgements are not at least in some way shaped by a religious tradition or some kind of framework then all values are up for negotiation without a source of absolute truth. So for example, it is equally valid for an individual to spend one's time watching contestants on Big Brother lick crisps and sort them by flavour, as it is to feed the homeless at the nearest shelter.

Power and Authority in Nihilism

For Nihilists power and authority are very similar, in many ways, to the worldviews and practice found among Humanists. Nihilists reject any hierarchy in principle and very much emphasise the role of the individual as the main authority for their own lives.



Nihilists would reject the whole concept of authority, as there is no such thing as objective truth and so how could there be any such thing as a single or unitary source of authority? However, in reality it is important to note the fact that academics and intellectuals are normally held in quite high esteem by nihilists as they use rationality to negotiate a meaningless world. Theoretically, individuals are supposed to be the authority of their own lives. However, in reality the vacuum of authority, which opens up once you accept the principles that have led you nihilism, generally mean that those with the 'loudest voices' (those who control the public discourses) are the ones that actually have the most power to persuade people to act in the way they desire.

Rationality is the key quality for 'nihilists'; following a *rational process* is what is authoritative and the only way to attempt to mediate between different views.

Nihilists (like Humanists) place great emphasis on being self-determining individuals; people who are able to act to create meaning in and of themselves. Education and the development of critical faculties are therefore particularly important here.

So power and authority are factors we find within ourselves. What would be the point of looking to anyone else, when ultimately nothing whatever has any meaning at all?

Further reading:

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