

Mysticism, New Age Movement not so new

Story by Paige Haggard

Mysticism, according to Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, is the belief that direct knowledge of

God, spiritual truth or ultimate reality can be attained through subjective experience (as intuition or insight).

Mystics and mysticism have been around since the dawn of religions. Christians had the Gnostics and Native Americans had vision quests. For many, the whole point of Buddhism is this search for the ultimate reality.

There have been bouts of interest in mysticism throughout history. Various art movements and artists have used mysticism as inspiration, including Romanticism, the Symbolists and the poet Yeats. The hippies even tapped into Eastern religion for self-knowledge.

However, interest in mysticism is even more widespread these days, forming what is known as the New Age movement.

You've seen the New Age section in the book store with its books on dreams, Tarot and astrology. It's right next to the religion section and rather close to the philosophy section. The ubiquitous presence of incense and incense holders are further evidence of the movement.

So, what's New Age about? Good question.

It's more than incense, candles and funky cards. At its root, the New Age movement is a means of finding a higher truth without typical empiric or scientific

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or even conventional religious methods. How the New Age movement attempts this process is diverse.

Within the movement is an interest in various religions. The mystical sides of the major Western religions are often explored. This includes the Kabbalah of the Jewish religion and Gnosticism of Christianity. Hinduism and Buddhism attract a lot of attention as well, since their basic beliefs and practices are more spiritual elements, at least by our society's standards of rationality.

Yet, it's not just these religions attracting all the attention.

Celtic, Egyptian, Germanic, South-American and Native-American cultures are just a few cultures that have been the focus of many New Age books. These books deal with the mythology and religious practices of these ancient religions.

Another religion is Wicca, which is mostly associated with witches and is based largely on European Mother Goddess traditions.

Obviously, the New Age movement did not create these religions but merely made information about them more accessible.

Divination is another New Age practice. Divination is the art of foretelling the fortune or hidden knowledge through

omens and symbols. Obvious associations are with palmistry or the Tarot deck.

Runes, Medicine Cards, Scarabs, I Ching and pendulums are other means of divination, just to name a few.

The Tarot comes in many forms, and the images in the 78-card deck draw from several mythological and cultural sources, from Celtic to Egyptian to the secret and mystical society, The Order of the Golden Dawn.

The cliché crystal ball is another form of divination, although the crystal ball is not obligatory. Bowls of water, stones and even fire can be used to see images of the future.

Astrology is based on configurations of the stars and planets. Astrology can be used to discover underlying patterns of personality as well as to divine the future.

One more element of the New Age movement is magic. Magic uses one's will to cause events. Several of the aforementioned religions use some form of magic.

Basic tools of magic vary. Herbs, candles, colors, stones and incense can all be used, collectively or separately, in forms of magic. There are many books that discuss how to use divinatory tools like the Tarot and runes in magic as well.

Astral planing is also a very popular

concept. The astral body is a non-physical aspect of our existence, something kin to the concept of the soul, which can be projected outside of the body. The astral body can visit various levels of reality and various parts of this reality.

Associated with this concept of the nonphysical body is the concept of chakras. Chakra is the Sanskrit word meaning "wheel" and is a point of energy located in the etheric body. There are seven chakras, starting at the genital area and progressing up the body to the top of the head. They represent various elements of ourselves, from sexual desire to spirituality.

Meditation is another major element in New Age. Sometimes, meditations are in the traditional styles, such as yoga; other times they are visualization techniques or simply moments of quiet.

Dreams are, of course, a big thing in New Age. There are many dream dictionaries on the market. Dreams can be interpreted as the language of the unconscious, glimpses of the future or products of astral travels, depending on

the dreamer's inclination of interpretation.

Other points of New Age interests include angels, vampires, gargoyles and dragons.

It is important to keep in mind that the New Age movement isn't exactly an organized movement. There is not some New Age council deciding what is in the agenda and what's out; New Age is more of a collective impulse of research and spirituality.

So why this sudden interest in mysticism in today's society? Well, it's not so sudden, since many of these beliefs have been around for thousands of years and have had followers for about as long.

Religion did not begin with Christ or even Shiva — it probably began when man first conceived of the idea of death. Yet, mysticism does seem more prevalent, or at least the attempt at it seems more prevalent.

Personally, I think this trend toward more mystical religions and lifestyles is an inevitable result of industrialization. We are very alienated from our world,

from nature. Technology has helped us predict much about our environment and even control it somewhat.

Still, when faced with natural catastrophes, diseases or even something as simple as a budding flower, we are reminded how mysterious life is.

We live in a time when things are easily explained by science, when everything seems to have an answer. But there are things science can't prove or explain, like the existence of the soul or, at the very least, the mystery of life. Yet, many people do believe in the soul and feel the mysteriousness of life.

Therefore, people search for something that reflects this non-physical aspect of their lives, something that connects them to this "otherness" of life. These people search for something non-materialistic in this increasingly materialistic world.

The New Age movement is an effort to connect with something that is at once bigger than an individual and a part of the individual; it reflects a desire to find something eternal in this world, with all its societies, that is so painfully temporary.



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