



STATEMENT DN060

**The “New Age Myth”: An Outline of New Age Ideology
New Age Series – Part Three
by Elliot Miller**

“The very chaos of contemporary existence provides the material for transformation. We will search [out] new myths, and world visions.” – The Association for Humanistic Psychology¹

“I believe the most fundamental thing we can do today is to believe in evolution.” – Robert Muller, United Nations Assistant Secretary-General²

Social optimism does not come easy in these latter years of the twentieth century. One hundred years ago many sincere Westerners anticipated that by our present time something close to an ideal society would have been achieved. Today, in light of the nuclear arms race, escalating terrorism, and other global threats, people’s hopes are more likely to be that civilization as we know it will still *exist* a century from now.

Ideologies that inspired political and social optimism in the not-too-distant past have lost much of their visionary appeal. Sociologist Robert Lilienfeld speaks of a

...bankruptcy and decline of images and philosophies of society that until now have served as unifying ideas...European history of the past 100 years could be described in terms of a civil war among the exponents of major conceptions of society. With the bankruptcy of notions of the social contract and military defeat of both Nazism and Fascism, the collapse of liberalism from within, and the evident loss of faith among socialists themselves in both the theory and practice of socialism in all its variants, we may be said to live in an “interregnum” [i.e. an interval in time between potent ideologies]. In this sense there is some small core of truth in the otherwise questionable notion of the “end of ideology.”³

Lilienfeld is correct in noting that, in spite of the current lack of unifying ideas, ideology as a social phenomenon is still very much alive.

A NEW IDEOLOGY

Throughout this century a new ideology has been quietly emerging among an intellectual elite in certain scientific/technological, academic, and liberal and international political circles. It is based upon what some would consider the leading edge of scientific and socio-political theory. Starting with humanistic and evolutionary assumptions, it is global (rather than national) in its perspective, and is concerned above all with threats to world survival. Its distinctive emphasis is on finding *holistic* solutions to planetary problems, and this concern usually culminates in a vision of a united world community.

Depending on which aspect of the larger intellectual movement is being considered, different names are used to identify its adherents. In scientific and technological circles they are known as the “systems movement.”⁴ In the political arena they have no single label, but many identify themselves “planetarians.”⁵ In psychology, they have assumed the epithet “The Third Force.”

The new ideology is represented by such elite groups as the Club of Rome, the Institute of World Order, and the Society for General Systems Research and its sister organization, the International Federation for Systems Research. Its leading theorists include futurist Marshall McLuhan, philosopher Ervin Laszlo and economist Kenneth Boulding. The late futurist and inventor R. Buckminster Fuller was also a prominent voice.

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This intellectual elite should not be indiscriminately identified with the New Age movement. Some within it are not spiritually inclined, and most would shun the more outlandish New Age beliefs and practices. However, quite a few in its ranks — including some leading names — are interested in mysticism. They believe it offers the spiritual dimension needed to complete their distinctive world view and ethics.

Certain of these intellectuals have been actively involved with the “new consciousness” (or New Age) subculture (e.g., cultural historian Theodore Roszak, futurist Willis Harman, psychologist Jean Houston, U.N. consultant Donald Keyes, and the late anthropologist Gregory Bateson). Through their influence mystic and occultists who were not originally a part of this intellectual class have found within its writings the scientific and sociopolitical philosophies most compatible with their own beliefs and experience. Having found each other, the intellectual elite and the “Aquarians” recognized their capacity to benefit each other, and to some extent have joined forces (the primary “glue” being those intellectual mystic who fully take part in both movements).

As a result of this convergence the new ideology is building momentum, not only among an influential but small class of intellectuals, but also a large, socially and politically active grass roots movement.

The work of translating this highly technical, somewhat abstruse ideology into more popular New Age terms has been undertaken by a host of writers. None have been more successful, however, than Fritjof Capra in *The Turning Point — Science, Society, and the Rising Culture* (1982), and Marilyn Ferguson in *The Aquarian Conspiracy — Personal and Social Transformation in the 1980s* (1980).

The Turning Point, the more serious work, has served as sort of a manifesto of New Age ideology. A physicist at the University of California at Berkeley, Capra has done an able job of synthesizing the views of the systems movement with the basic New Age belief system.

The Aquarian Conspiracy, while not strictly concerned with New Age ideology, has probably done more to promote it on a popular level than any single book. It provides an overview of a vast array of contemporary ideas and activities, and suggests that they may all be converging to produce a far-reaching social transformation (the “New Age”). Ferguson’s book classically typifies the characteristic New Age optimism in the face of the present world crisis.

In the remainder of this article we will examine the basis for this New Age optimism as I outline the new ideology. Our focus will primarily be on its New Age form, as presented by Capra, Ferguson, and others. When relevant, however, the scientific and philosophical sources for New Age ideas will be considered.

THE PARADIGM SHIFT

New Agers are among the most vocal critics of worldwide political, economic, and military arrangements. Fritjof Capra notes in *The Turning Point*:

More than fifteen million people — most of them children — die of starvation each year; another 500 million are seriously undernourished. Almost 40 percent of the world’s population has no access to professional health services; yet developing countries spend more than three times as much on armaments as on health care. Thirty-five percent of humanity lacks safe drinking water, while half of its scientists and engineers are engaged in the technology of making weapons.⁶

Citing inflation, cancer, schizophrenia, and crime, Capra further points out that “it is a striking sign of our times that the people who are supposed to be experts in various fields can no longer deal with the urgent problems that have arisen in their areas of expertise.”⁷

As far as New Agers like Capra are concerned, the inequities, the deficiencies, almost everything that is wrong with modern civilization can be blamed on a collective intellectual blindness: We are clinging to modes of thought that are themselves outmoded. Marilyn Ferguson puts it this way:

We try to solve problems with our existing tools, in their old context, instead of seeing that the escalating crisis is a symptom of our essential wrongheadedness.⁸

It would follow that if enough people started thinking in a new, more appropriate context, a new age of peace and prosperity would be possible. New Agers say this change of thinking has already begun (mainly with them), and they call it “the paradigm shift.”

A paradigm is a conceptual model that is used for interpreting phenomena. The concept of a “paradigm shift” was first introduced by science historian Thomas Kuhn in his 1962 book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. As the title suggests, Kuhn’s conception of paradigm shifts was limited to scientific theories, but New Agers apply it to world views of entire cultures. Bearing this in mind, let’s allow Marilyn Ferguson to describe for us the dynamics of paradigm shifts:

A paradigm shift is a distinctly new way of thinking about old problems. For example, for more than two centuries, leading thinkers assumed that Isaac Newton’s paradigm, his description of predictable mechanical forces, would finally explain everything in terms of trajectories, gravity, force. It would close in on the final secrets of a “clockwork universe.”

But as scientists worked toward the elusive ultimate answers, bits of data here and there refused to fit into Newton’s scheme. This is typical of any paradigm. Eventually, too many puzzling observations pile up outside the old framework of explanation and strain it. Usually at the point of crisis, someone has a great heretical idea. A powerful new insight explains the apparent contradictions. It introduces a new principle, a new perspective. By forcing a more comprehensive theory, the crisis is not *destructive but instructive*....

A new paradigm involves a principle that was present all along but unknown to us. It includes the old as a partial truth, one aspect of How Things Work, while allowing for things to work in other ways as well. By its larger perspective, it transforms traditional knowledge and the stubborn new observations, reconciling their apparent contradictions....

New paradigms are nearly always received with coolness, even mockery and hostility. Their discoverers are attacked for their heresy....

But the new paradigm gains ascendance. A new generation recognizes its power. When a critical number of thinkers has accepted the new idea, a collective paradigm shift has occurred... After a time that paradigm, too, is troubled by contradictions: another breakthrough occurs, and the process repeats itself. Thus science is continually breaking and enlarging its ideas.⁹

By applying Kuhn’s theory to the entire succession of world views embraced by human culture, New Agers are suggesting that our knowledge of all truth (not just scientific truth) accumulates and evolves in an entirely experimental manner. Consequently, they hold that there should be nothing absolute or fixed about any particular belief system — including their own.¹⁰

In fact, as was noted in Part One, beliefs about reality are viewed as “myths” by New Age thinkers. They are to be evaluated more with respect to how well they serve the culture that holds them than whether they are objectively true (since nothing can ultimately be “objectively true” in the subjective universe of monism). As mankind evolves, his myths must evolve with him.

At this point in his “evolution,” man faces unprecedented complications and difficulties. New Ager and psychiatry professor Roger Walsh writes in *Staying Alive — The Psychology of Human Survival*:

Our various economic, social, and cultural systems are becoming increasingly interdependent. The threat that some impoverished countries might be unable to repay the tens of billions of dollars of loans they have received sends shock waves through the international financial community. A recession in the United States leaves millions unemployed throughout the world. Ecological imbalances, atmospheric pollution, and radioactive contamination do not halt politely at international borders. With each new disruption it becomes more apparent that our biosphere — the totality of earth, water, air, plants, and animals — functions as an interconnected whole. A change in any part affects every part. Increasingly, we are forced to recognize that what we do unto others we are also doing unto ourselves. As Jerome Frank put it, “The psychological problem is how to make all people aware that whether they like it or not, the earth is becoming a single community.”¹¹

In our emerging planetary culture, New Agers say that a new myth is needed — one with a distinctly planetary, holistic character.

SYSTEMS: A WHOLE IS MORE THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS

To understand the nature of the new paradigm that New Agers are calling for, it will help to first understand what they consider the “old paradigm” to be.

Capra tells us that the old paradigm looks at the world “as a mechanical system composed of elementary material building blocks.”¹² It largely originated with Rene Descartes, the seventeenth-century French philosopher and mathematician:

Descartes’ method is analytic. It consists in breaking up thoughts and problems into pieces and in arranging these in their logical order. This analytic method of reasoning is probably Descartes’ greatest contribution to science.... On the other hand,

overemphasis on the Cartesian method has led to the fragmentation that is characteristic of both our general thinking and our academic disciplines, and to the widespread attitude of reductionism in science — the belief that all aspects of complex phenomena can be understood by reducing them to their constituent parts.¹³

New Agers affirm that due to the fragmenting effects of our overemphasis on rationality, we have lost the intuitive awareness of our connection with the Whole. This loss has serious consequences:

To the extent we fail to recognize this interdependence and connectedness, to that extent we feel alienated, become ecologically insensitive, and are at risk for conflict with “others.” Our current global crisis is making this fact desperately clear.¹⁴

We are told, however, that there is cause for hope. Science, the champion of the Cartesian paradigm which threatens to destroy us, is ironically now offering us a new paradigm which has the potential to heal us. Capra explains the new perspective:

In contrast to the mechanistic Cartesian view of the world, the world view emerging from modern physics can be characterized by words like organic, holistic, and ecological.... The universe is no longer seen as a machine, made up of a multitude of objects, but has to be pictured as one indivisible, dynamic whole whose parts are essentially interrelated and can be understood only as patterns of a cosmic process.¹⁵

The thesis of Capra’s *The Turning Point* is that there is a critical need for the holistic perspective of modern physics to be adopted by other disciplines like biology, psychology, and economics, as well as by the institutions and individuals that make up society as a whole.

Capra explains that this new vision of reality is known as the “systems view” and says that it

...looks at the world in terms of relationships and integration. Instead of concentrating on basic building blocks or basic substances, the systems approach emphasizes basic principles of organization. Examples of systems abound in nature. Every organism.... is an integrated whole and thus a living system.... But systems are not confined to individual organisms and their parts. The same aspects of wholeness are exhibited by social systems — such as an anthill, a beehive, or a human family — and by ecosystems that consist of a variety of organisms and inanimate matter in mutual interaction. What is preserved in a wilderness area is not individual trees or organisms but the complex web of relationships between them.

All these natural systems are wholes whose specific structures arise from the interactions and interdependence of their parts. Systemic properties are destroyed when a system is dissected, either physically or theoretically, into isolated elements. Although we can discern individual parts in any system, the nature of the whole is always different from the mere sum of its parts. Another important aspect of systems is their intrinsically dynamic nature. Their forms are not rigid structures but are flexible yet stable manifestations of underlying processes....

Systems thinking is process thinking;....¹⁶

General Systems Theory

This view which Capra elucidates so well was first formulated in the 1930s by Austrian-born biologist Ludwig Von Bertalanffy (d. 1972). By the 1950s his General Systems Theory (GST) had generated an interdisciplinary movement.

Although Von Bertalanffy was not the first to advocate a holistic perspective (e.g., see South African statesman-philosopher Jan Christian Smuts’ 1925 treatise *Holism and Evolution*), he was the first to seek an all-encompassing scientific basis for it. His systematic development and application of holistic theory anticipated several modern movements. For example, holistic health, in theory if not always in practice, is perfectly consistent with the principles of GST.

While there are several movements that emphasize a holistic approach to a given subject (e.g., health care, the environment, defense), the advocates of GST are unique in their *general* approach. GST suggests that there are several natural laws which determine the functioning of all systems (physical, organic, psychological, social, and even conceptual). Von Bertalanffy was convinced that an interdisciplinary study of systems would yield a mathematically precise, experimentally verifiable description of these laws. (Such an “interdisciplinary discipline” has yet to be established.) Then, he affirmed, the knowledge of organizing principles common to *all* phenomena would make possible the long dreamed of unification of the sciences (physical *and* social).¹⁷

Von Bertalanffy envisioned that, with science more unified and a systems view adopted, the presently overwhelming array of societal problems could be approached and resolved comprehensively. All factors would be viewed in the context of an interdependent whole. Capra explains why this holistic approach is especially relevant in today's increasingly interrelated world:

Present-day economics, for example, remains fragmentary and reductionist, like most social sciences. It fails to recognize that the economy is merely one aspect of a whole ecological and social fabric. Economists tend to dissociate the economy from the fabric in which it is embedded, and to describe it in terms of simplistic and highly unrealistic theoretical models. Most of their basic concepts (e.g., efficiency, productivity, GNP) have been narrowly defined and are used without their wider social and ecological context. In particular, the social and environmental costs generated by all economic activity are generally neglected. Consequently, the current economic concepts and models are no longer adequate to map economic phenomena in a fundamentally interdependent world, and hence economists have generally been unable to grapple with the major economic problems of our times.

Because of its narrow, reductionist framework, conventional economics is inherently antiecological. Whereas the surrounding ecosystems are organic wholes which are self-balancing and self-adjusting, our current economies and technologies recognize no self-limiting principle. Undifferentiated growth — economic, technological, and institutional growth — is still regarded by most economists as the sign of a “healthy” economy, although it is now causing ecological disasters, widespread corporate crime, social disintegration, and ever increasing likelihood of nuclear war.¹⁸

Thus, adopting the views of the systems movement, New Agers hold that a change from reductionistic to systemic thinking is a matter of primary importance (perhaps even life or death) for global civilization.

GST and Mysticism

New Agers go further than the systems movement, though, by suggesting that this change of thinking requires acceptance of mystical modes of thought. This is the case first of all because New Agers tend to equate mysticism with intuition, and intuition undeniably plays an important role in systems thinking (e.g., systems thinking requires synthesis as much as analysis: an intuitive ability to recognize wholes, or patterns of relationship). In the second place, since mystical states of consciousness tend to break down ego (i.e., self image) boundaries and create a sense of oneness with one's environment, New Agers assume that they offer the perfect medium for achieving the more holistic perspective that society needs.

For New Agers, then, mysticism is validated by GST, and GST is almost inconceivable without some measure of mysticism. Certainly, there are several areas of compatibility between the two.

One such area lies in their common view of reality as more energy or process than substance or “thing.” In GST this emphasis is focused in Von Bertalanffy's conception of the organism as an *open system* (a central feature of his thought, which he proclaimed to be “an essentially new construct in biology”¹⁹). Citing the fact that all living systems continually exchange materials with their environment, Von Bertalanffy argued that they are not just *in* a state of flux: they *are* flux. He wrote that “living systems are not *in being*, they are *happening*. They are expressions of a perpetual stream of matter and energy which passes through the organism and at the same time constitutes it.”²⁰ He added that what are called structures are slow processes of long duration.”²¹

Systems thinkers point out that the process view of reality is also supported by quantum physics, where subatomic particles are often described more as events than things. Thus, they claim, both biology and physics lend profound corroboration to the systems approach, where all of reality is described more in terms of process (how does something operate?) than substance (what is it made of?).

The compatibility of such a perspective of the world with mysticism is evident when we recall 1) that mystics tend to see God more as a pervasive Energy (the “Force” of *Star Wars*) than an objective entity, and 2) that they generally identify the world with God. Thus, R. Buckminster Fuller perfectly expressed the process perspective:

For God, to me, it seems is a verb not a noun, proper or improper....²²

Although in the opinion of this writer (and I will elaborate on this in Part Four), much of the GST perspective need not be tied to a monistic world view, many of its advocates believe it has definite religious implications. Capra affirms that “the systems view of life is spiritual in its deepest essence and thus consistent with many ideas held in mystical traditions.”²³

New Agers even see “scientific” support in GST for their belief that consciousness is the essence of all reality. They arrive at this by defining “life” and “mind” strictly in terms of systemic (i.e., self-organizing) properties, and then affirming that the same systemic properties are the fundamental force at work in the universe — the “universal mind.”²⁴

Creative Evolution

Von Bertalanffy argued that this self-organizing force behind the universe inherently tends toward *higher* organization. Invoking Aristotle’s dictum that “the whole is more than the sum of its parts,” he proposed that evolution is “emergent,” operating in the following manner: The organizing force of the universe brings assorted objects into increasingly complex relationships. As this occurs properties emerge which are greater than the sum of these parts — a result of their interaction. These are entirely new and higher systems, such as life and mind. Evolution is therefore not random, but purposive and creative. (In all of this, Von Bertalanffy strongly resembles Jan Christian Smuts, though he played the likeness down.²⁵)

The conception of “creative evolution” belongs, not just to Von Bertalanffy and Smuts, but to a larger philosophical movement dating from the latter period of the nineteenth century. This philosophical school, in fact, can legitimately claim to be the progenitor of the systems movement.

After the scientific establishment embraced Darwin’s theory of evolution, sensitive minds quickly perceived its implications. If all of life arose strictly through chance mutation and natural selection, man was deprived of a spiritual base upon which to establish his ethics, hopes, and very identity. Without challenging evolution itself, several thinkers began looking for ways to overcome the futility it seemed to impose on man.

Earlier in the nineteenth century a context for such efforts had been created by the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel. His view of history as God in process envisioned the world and mankind moving ever forward — by thesis, antithesis, and synthesis — to new degrees of freedom. It was not difficult to find a place for biological evolution in such a scenario. It was only necessary to add to evolution a creative principle beyond mutation and selection to guide things upward and (in some fashion) to legitimize spirituality.

Through the writings of such thinkers as Herbert Spencer, Henri Bergson, Lloyd Morgan, Samuel Alexander, Alfred North Whitehead, and, most importantly for the New Age movement, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a process philosophy²⁶ emerged which embraced evolution as the basis for, rather than the destroyer of, man’s spiritual aspirations.

This well-established process view of God and history has been adopted quite naturally (because of their pantheism) by New Age thinkers. Due to their highly eclectic propensities (as described in article one), however, they have expanded the evolutionary drama of process thought into a full-blown mythology.

THE MEGA-CRISIS: EVOLUTION IN NEW AGE IDEOLOGY

In article one it was noted that evolution is central to New Age belief. This fact can hardly be overemphasized. Evolution is inseparable from New Age conceptions of (to use Christian categories) God, creation, man, history, salvation, “sanctification” or spiritual growth, and “eschatology” or beliefs concerning the Kingdom of God and the culmination of all things.

For New Agers, evolution is God in process; hence, it is sometimes assigned a place in their world similar to that which the biblical God occupies for the Christian. For examples, note the quote from Robert Muller at the beginning of this article, or this comment made by New Age philosopher Ken Wilber after discussing the nuclear threat: “But *I really trust evolution*. I really don’t think God would screw us around that bad. God might be slow, but God’s not dumb” (emphasis mine).²⁷

Without such faith in evolution, New Agers would be incapable of maintaining their distinctive optimism. As much as they may believe in the new paradigm’s ability to rectify the world situation, what assurance is there that a significant portion of humanity would be willing to make the sacrifices demanded by such a change of thinking? History and today’s newspaper offer little encouragement.

The new paradigm requires a new humanity. As Donald Keys put it,

A new kind of world — the world into which we are already moving — requires a new kind of person, a person with a planetary perspective, with a different, more inclusive awareness, a person with a more humane and integral consciousness, capable of identifying with the entire human species and with all planetary life. This requires a leap to a quality of consciousness which most

of as do not automatically possess. It implies a quantum shift to a state of being which is fundamentally different from the divided or fragmented consciousness which has gone before.²⁸

New Agers have an historic sense in some respects comparable to that found in many Christian circles — this generation may stand at the threshold of history’s consummation. British science writer and New Ager Peter Russell affirms that “the majority of human beings now alive may experience an evolutionary shift from ego -centered awareness to a unified field of shared awareness.”²⁹

Rapid social change resulting from the industrial and technological revolutions and the rising number of people who have experienced altered states of consciousness are interpreted as evidence that the pace of evolution has been dramatically stepped up. John White, a member of the Institute of Noetic Sciences (discussed in the previous issue) expresses this conviction:

Higher human development — evolution — has been accelerating in the last few centuries. The pace of change now is unprecedented in the life of our species and what is to come is, in fact, a new species. We are witnessing the final phase of Homo sapiens and the simultaneous emergence — still quite tentative because of the nuclear threat to all life — of what I have named Homo Noeticus, a more advanced form of humanity.

....As we pass from the, Age of Ego to the Age of God, civilization will be transformed from top to bottom. A society founded on love and wisdom will emerge.

The change of consciousness underlying this passage involves transcendence of ego and recognition of the unity of life.³⁰

The new humanity, therefore, will be characterized by the intuitive/mystical or holistic perspective already emerging in New Age circles; each individual aware of his oneness with God, the rest of humanity, and his environment. Consequently, the threats of war, ecological disaster, and socio-economic collapse are expected to ultimately vanish.

One might still wonder why New Agers are so hopeful. After all, it is one thing to *say* these global challenges will be answered by a “quantum leap” forward in evolution; it is another to *produce evidence* that evolution is in fact advancing. In spite of what may be said for technological advances, an objective look at the world situation would only seem to indicate that things are getting more fragmented and out-of-hand. In fact, as Keys notes, technology has only magnified and multiplied our problems:

The unprecedented technological prowess developed by humanity during this twentieth century has brought us not only the crisis of the use of nuclear weapons but other major crises as well. The accelerating curves of overpopulation, wasteful use of resources, pollution, unemployment, disappearing agricultural land, the unmet basic human needs in two-thirds of the world and the threat of a runaway nuclear arms race appear to be converging rapidly into a global “mega-crisis”....³¹

In the words of Robert Burrows of the Spiritual Counterfeits Project, “Nothing undermines belief in evolutionary progress more than the gruesome realities of today’s world.”³²

At this juncture, however, a seemingly unrelated trend in scientific thought rescues the New Age vision from ideological shipwreck. This is “punctuated equilibrium,” a new paradigm for understanding evolution proposed in 1972 by paleobiologists Stephen Jay Gould of Harvard and Niles Eldredge of the American Museum of Natural History.

Punctuated equilibrium is quickly gaining ascendancy in scientific circles because the fossil record has not confirmed the expectations of the older and previously favored model of Neo-Darwinism. Newsweek reported in 1980 that

....the more scientists have searched for the transitional forms between species, the more they have been frustrated....

Evidence from fossils now points overwhelmingly away from the classical Darwinism which most Americans learned in high school; that new species evolve out of existing ones by the gradual accumulation of small changes, each of which helps the organism survive and compete in the environment.³³

Marilyn Ferguson describes the new model:

Punctationalism or *punctuated equilibrium* suggests that the equilibrium of life is “punctuated” from time to time by severe stress. If a small segment of the ancestral population is isolated at the periphery of its accustomed range, it may give way to a new species. Also, the population is stressed intensely because it is living at the edge of its tolerance. “Favorable variations spread quickly,” Gould said....

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Most species do not change direction during their tenure on earth. "They appear in the fossil record looking much the same as when they disappear," Gould said. A new species arises suddenly in the geological evidence. It does not evolve gradually by the steady change of its ancestors, but all at once and fully formed."³⁴

According to Punctationalism, then, a crisis in a species' environment can disturb its internal equilibrium and trigger rapid, radical evolutionary change.

Ferguson goes on to explain the relevance of punctuated equilibrium to New Age thinking:

1) It requires a mechanism for biological change more powerful than chance mutation, and 2) it opens us up to the possibility of rapid evolution in our own time, when the equilibrium of the species is punctuated by stress. Stress in modern society is experienced at the frontiers of our psychological rather than our geographical limits....

Given what we are learning about the nature of profound change, transformation of the human species seems less and less improbable.³⁵

Punctuated equilibrium has provided New Agers with a positive context within which to interpret the negative realities of the world scene — a new world may be in the throes of birth.

Futurist and 1984 candidate for the Vice-Presidency Barbara Marx Hubbard exudes confidence:

Crises always precede transformation. Before every great change in planetary evolution, problems emerge which appear insolvable — problems like limits to growth, stagnation, impending catastrophes, and disintegration. These crises appear to involve gigantic mistakes, but from a higher perspective the problems are "evolutionary drivers" which trigger innovation and transformation, as well as bringing out new potentials in us which introduce absolute newness into the world.

We are at the dawn of a period of "conscious evolution," when humanity first becomes aware of the process of Creation and begins to participate deliberately in the design of our world....³⁶

Conscious Evolution

The idea of "conscious evolution" is not peculiar to Hubbard, but is a central component of the emerging ideology. David Spangler, New Age teacher and spiritual leader, calls it "a new cultural myth."³⁷ Sri Aurobindo (d. 1950), an Indian philosopher-mystic who has inspired many New Age thinkers, said that "man occupies the crest of the evolutionary wave. With him occurs the passage from an unconscious to a conscious evolution."³⁸

Barry McWaters, psychologist and founder of the Institute for the Study of Conscious Evolution, attempts a definition:

"Conscious evolution" is that latter phase in evolutionary process wherein the developing entity becomes conscious of itself, aware of the process in which it is involved and begins voluntarily to participate in the work of evolution. This can happen in a number of dimensions, in a number of ways, and in fact has been happening for a long while both in individuals and small groups. We are now approaching that moment in evolutionary history when Humanity as oneself-conscious entity will assume this role.

In preparation for this unified function much work is required. And, in fact, many individuals and groups are working diligently. There is an *Aquarian Conspiracy*.³⁹

McWaters' concluding statements make the ideological significance of conscious evolution evident. It provides a context and impetus for social and political action. Roger Walsh notes that conscious evolution

...can be seen as a call to each and every one of us, both individually and collectively, to become and contribute as much as we can. This perspective gives us both a vision of the future and a motive for working toward it.⁴⁰

Specifically, what is the "vision of the future" that New Agers are "working toward"? Where do they believe evolution is taking us? The answer to these questions has both practical and mythical elements.

"Gaia": The World as Being

In practical terms, the New Age vision, as Donald Keys demonstrates, can be stated quite succinctly: “Humanity is on the verge of something entirely new, a further evolutionary step unlike any other: the emergence of the first global civilization.”⁴¹

There is much that can be said about both the form (spiritual, social, political, and economic) that New Agers see this world community taking, and what they are particularly doing to help bring it about. But these will be the subjects of later installments in this series. Here we are concerned with the more abstract — the imagery that embodies the hopes of New Agers and inspires their commitment.

The U.N.’s Robert Muller invoked such imagery in an interview with Jessica Lipnack and Jeffrey Stamps, the authors of *Networking*:

In essence, his message is this: Humanity is evolving toward a coherent global form best described by the metaphor of a human brain; each person, young or old, able-bodied or handicapped, is an important neuron in the emerging planetary brain that is constituted by the myriad “networkings” among people.⁴²

To most New Agers, however, the emerging “global brain” is more than a metaphor. Marilyn Ferguson asks, “Might not the current translation of our entire lives into the spiritual form of information make of the entire globe, and of the human family, a single consciousness?”⁴³

The notion of humanity evolving into a single consciousness has great appeal to New Agers, who are always dreaming of attaining “higher levels of consciousness” and greater states of “oneness” with all of life. They discovered this conception in the writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (d. 1955). Ferguson informs us that Teilhard, a Jesuit paleontologist and philosopher, was “the individual most often named as a profound influence by the Aquarian Conspirators who responded to a survey.”⁴⁴

In Teilhard’s thought, consciousness is “defined experimentally as the specific effect of organized complexity.”⁴⁵ Since, as he argues, an evolutionary pattern of increasing complexity can be observed in the physical world, it must also be true that “evolution is an ascent towards consciousness.”⁴⁶

Teilhard points to the successive emergence of the barysphere, lithosphere, hydrosphere, atmosphere, and “the living membrane composed of the fauna and flora of the globe, the biosphere.”⁴⁷ He then affirms that with the emergence, in man, of conscious reflection a new “thinking layer” has been added, the “noosphere” (from the Greek *nous*, meaning “mind”).⁴⁸

Arguing that because it contains consciousness “space-time is necessarily of a convergent nature,”⁴⁹ Teilhard envisions a “mega-synthesis” of the noosphere:

We are faced with a harmonised collectivity of consciousness equivalent to a sort of super-consciousness. The idea is that of the earth not only becoming covered by myriads of grains of thought, but becoming enclosed in a single thinking envelope so as to form, functionally, no more than a single vast grain of thought....⁵⁰

Teilhard predicts that this development will be accompanied by “the formation of an organico-social super-complex....the planetization of mankind.”⁵¹

If a global brain is forming, does this mean that the globe itself has or will have a brain? In other words, is it now a conscious being, or will it eventually evolve into one? Many New Agers would affirm one or the other of these possibilities.

Teilhard himself wrote of “the still unnamed Thing which the gradual combination of individuals, peoples and races will bring into existence.”⁵² Today, this “Thing” has been given a name: “Gaia” (or, alternately, “Terra”), after the Earth goddess of ancient Greek and Roman mythology. New Agers have been rapidly assimilating aspects of a number of pagan traditions which worship an “Earth Mother” into their own religious life.

It may seem astoundingly inconsistent for a movement which considers itself too sophisticated for literal belief in the Bible and its heavenly Father to wholeheartedly embrace the mythological concept of an Earth Mother. Be that as it may, in many respects it is consistent with their own underlying belief and value systems for them to do so. First of all, belief in a living, sacred planet is perceived as having immense ecological value; an answer to the exploitation and abuse of the Earth allegedly fostered by Cartesian mechanism and Judaeo-Christian “dominion” theology (based on Gen. 1:28):

The older indigenous societies never descended into a mechanomorphic view of existence. The “Indians” of North and South America, the Polynesians, Australian Aborigines and other native peoples have gained a sense of the livingness of the Earth and

its processes. They express a reverence for the Earth as a source of all material needs and perceive it as a conscious entity whose processes should be respected, be related to and be worked with harmoniously, not violated or exploited....Humanity in extremis now appears to be more open to accepting in a functional way the essential reality and beauty of these awarenesses....The young alumni of the “new consciousness” movement are developing their own experiential relationship to Terra’s life processes.”⁵³

Second, belief that the Integration of humanity with itself and all earth systems would cause something new and greater to emerge is perfectly consistent with the systems view that integrated parts create a whole greater than their sum. “Gaia” would simply be the next step up in a universe of ascending systems. As Capra sees it, “in the stratified order of nature, individual human minds are embedded in the larger minds of social and ecological systems, and these are integrated into the planetary mental system — the mind of Gaia — which in turn must participate in some kind of universal or cosmic mind.”⁵⁴

Finally, the new myth is consistent with New Age spiritual experience, which is the ultimate determiner of their beliefs. Keys notes that

....there is a direct connection between the subjective or inner experience of the individual person and the emergence of myth.... Myths such as Humanity-as-Being, Earth-as-Entity, or Human Community are experienced as self-evident and unquestionable facts in the inner life. A life of active spiritual pursuit provides an ultimate basis to realize the unifying oneness through which all life flows.⁵⁵

(That these concepts are “experienced as self-evident and unquestionable facts” suggests that they are more than *just* myths to New Agers.)

Because the new myth embodies the holistic paradigm, is exquisitely compatible with mysticism, implants an optimism that seemingly thrives in crisis, and inspires social activism, it is becoming an effective focus for New Age ideology. McWaters makes this clear in the following appeal:

Clearly, a need from within calls for our attention at this moment in evolutionary time. The call is to serve the well-being of the living planet Earth, Gaia....The call is to enter into a holistic consciousness from which all peoples, all forms of life, all manner of universal manifestation are seen as interdependent aspects of one truth.⁵⁶

Whether the new myth offers a reliable basis for human hope — a true passage to planetary salvation — is another matter, to be taken up in Part Four.

NOTES

1 Quoted Marilyn Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, 1980), p. 39.

2 Kristin Murphy, “United Nations’ Robert Muller....A Vision of Global Spirituality,” *The Movement Newspaper*, Sept. 1983, p. 10.

3 Robert Lilienfeld, *The Rise of Systems Theory – An Ideological Analysis* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1978), p. 264.

4 The systems movement encompasses a number of disciplines and schools of thought, including Ludwig Von Bertalanffy’s General Systems Theory (GST), cybernetics, information theory, game theory, operations research, and computerized simulation techniques. These disciplines are being linked by a growing common acceptance of Von Bertalanffy’s GST (to be discussed later in this article). *This does not mean*, however, that everyone involved in the above disciplines embraces the new ideology.

5 The movement toward “planetization” will be examined in-depth later in this series.

6 Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1982), p.22.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

8 Ferguson, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 26-28.

10 New Agers usually fail to recognize that they contradict this belief by their underlying allegiance to monism as an absolute truth.

11 Roger Walsh, M.D., *Staying Alive* (Boulder, CO: New Science Library, 1984), p. 69.

12 Capra, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

14 Walsh, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

15 Capra, *op. cit.*, p. 77-78.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 266-67.

17 Von Bertalanffy contended that this new-found mathematical precision would lend the behavioral and social sciences a new exactitude and scientific respectability.

- 18 Capra, "The Turning Point – A New Vision of Reality," *New Age*, Feb. 1982, p. 30.
- 19 Ludwig Von Bertalanffy, *Perspective on General Systems Theory* (New York: George Braziller, 1975), p. 136.
- 20 Mark Davidson, *Uncommon Sense* (Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, 1983), p. 84.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 84.
- 22 Ferguson, *op. cit.*, p. 383.
- 23 Capra, *Turning Point*, p. 302.
- 24 Through such semantical legerdemain Capra (and Von Bertalanffy before him) attempts to "transcend" the age-old dispute between mechanism and vitalism (i.e., the belief that organisms are animated by nonscientific force) and come out on the side of *both* materialistic biology *and* pantheistic occultism: "The systems view agrees with the conventional scientific view that consciousness is a manifestation of complex material patterns. To be more precise, it is a manifestation of living systems of a certain complexity. On the other hand, the biological structures of these systems are expressions of underlying processes that represent the system's self-organization, and hence its mind. In this sense material structures are no longer considered the primary reality. Extending this way of thinking to the universe as a whole, it is not too far-fetched to assume that all its structures – from subatomic particles to galaxies and from bacteria to human beings – are manifestations of the universe's self-organizing dynamics, which we have identified with the cosmic mind. But this is almost the mystical view, the only difference being that mystics emphasize the direct experience of cosmic consciousness that goes beyond the scientific approach. Still, the two approaches seem to be quite compatible. The systems view of nature at last seems to provide a meaningful scientific framework for approaching the age-old questions of the nature of life, mind, consciousness, and matter" (Capra, *The Turning Point*, pp. 297-98).
- 25 The theme of Smuts' book is that "the fundamental activity underlying and coordinating all others" in the universe is "holism," a movement toward synthesis, or the creation of ever-deepening wholes (*Holism and Evolution* [New York: The MacMillan Company, 1926] p. 317). A "whole" in this context is the equivalent of a "system." Von Bertalanffy dismissed Smuts as a "vitalist," but his "organizing force" seems ultimately no less vitalistic than Smuts' "holism."
- 26 Process philosophy inspired process theology, associated with such names as John B. Cobb, Jr., Norman Pittenger, Shubert Ogden, and Nelson Pike. In the words of Norman Geisler, it is "perhaps the major movement in contemporary theology." See Geisler's evaluation of process theology in *Tensions in Contemporary Theology* (Baker Book House).
- 27 Rick Ingrasci, M.D., "Up From Eden – A New Age Interview with Ken Wilber," *New Age*, April 1982, p. 77.
- 28 Donald Keys, *Earth at Omega – Passage to Planetization* (Boston: The Branden Press, 1982), p. iv.
- 29 Peter Russell, *The Global Brain*, quoted in *Brain/Mind Bulletin*, Feb. 14, 1983, p. 1.
- 30 John White, "Channeling, A Short History of a Long Tradition," *Holistic Life Magazine*, Summer 1985, p. 20.
- 31 Keys, *loc. cit.*
- 32 Robert Burrows, "New Age Movement: Self-Deification in a Secular Culture," *SCP Newsletter*, Winter 1984-85, p. 4.
- 33 Jerry Adler with John Carey, "Is Man a Subtle Accident?," *Newsweek*, Nov. 3, 1980, p. 95.
- 34 Ferguson, *op. cit.*, pp. 158-59.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 159.
- 36 Ronald S. Miller, "The Evolutionary Journey – An Interview with Barbara Marx Hubbard," *Science of Man*, Jan. 1983, p. 8.
- 37 Barry McWaters, *Conscious Evolution* (Los Angeles: New Age Press, 1981), p. xii, from the foreword by David Spangler.
- 38 Quoted in Walsh, *op. cit.*, p. 81.
- 39 McWaters, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-28.
- 40 Walsh, *op. cit.*, p. 82.
- 41 Keys, *op. cit.*, p. iii.
- 42 Jessica Lipnack and Jeffrey Stamps, *Networking* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1982), p. 193.
- 43 Ferguson, *op. cit.*, p. 55.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- 45 Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 300.
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 258.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 181.
- 48 *Ibid.*, p. 182.
- 49 *Ibid.*, p. 259.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 251.
- 51 Teilhard de Chardin, *The Future of Man*, quoted in Keys, *op. cit.*, p. 69.
- 52 Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, pp. 250-51.
- 53 Keys, *op. cit.*, p. 70.
- 54 Capra, *The Turning Point*, p. 292.
- 55 Keys, *op. cit.*, p. 71.
- 56 McWaters, *op. cit.*, p. 10.