

Article

New Age Healing: Origins, Definitions, and Implications for Religion and Medicine

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Abstract: This paper discusses the concept of New Age healing. Its emergence into popular culture in the 1980s can be traced to burgeoning interest in human potential and holistic health in the 1960s and 1970s. These phenomena in turn, were rooted in the appearance of Theosophy, New Thought, and spiritualism in the 19th Century. Rather than a social movement, or even a singular phenomenon, the New Age is characterized as a hodgepodge of several elements with a characteristic inclination to borrow beliefs and practices from the other traditions and systems of belief and practice. These include mysticism, esoteric metaphysics, the occult, and self-actualization regimens. The rise of New Age healing has sparked converging conservative religious, secular-rationalist, and biomedical critiques of the phenomenon. Since the 1990s, the New Age label has mostly disappeared from popular usage, but associated beliefs and practices have been successful in seeding themselves into contemporary Western medicine and mainline religion, with implications for their intersection.

Keywords: New Age; healing; medicine; religion; esoteric; holism



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1. Introduction

Beginning in the 1970s, the phrase “New Age” entered the popular lexicon and grew to capture the attention of some segments of the U.S. population (Melton et al. 1991). The followers of holistic medicine, natural living, vegetarianism, Eastern spiritual traditions, consciousness expansion, green politics, and a variety of unusual interests (e.g., channeling, astral projection, past-life regression, and ufology) appropriated this phrase in order to cast a wide net over their activities. Many people from more conservative or traditional faith backgrounds took notice and identified in these disparate currents a potential adversary (Levin and Coreil 1986). Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, frequent reference was made to a “New Age movement” by participants in order to heighten the visibility and diffusion of their activities, as well as for purposes of promotion, and by critics perhaps for similar reasons. The New Age phenomenon has also been referred to as a social movement by academic scholars in various fields (Holloway 2000; O’Neil 2001; Chryssides 2007; Hanegraaff 2007).

This characterization of a small countercultural phenomenon as a full-fledged social movement has precedent in related areas. In the 1970s, the proponents of patient empowerment and the deprofessionalization of medicine heralded a “self-care movement” (Schiller and Levin 1983). In the 1980s, the advocates of the biopsychosocial model and whole-person care asserted that a burgeoning “holistic health movement” was poised to supplant Western biomedicine (Vanderpool 1984). While it is not apparent that either self-care or holistic health ever met the sociological criteria for status as a social movement—that is, a common ideology, purpose, organization, and active strategy (Schiller and Levin 1983)—many New Age proponents waited expectantly for the kinds of widespread societal changes that are engendered by authentic social movements, such as the U.S. labor movement of the 1930s and the U.S. civil rights movement of the 1960s. These changes were anticipated, and heralded, no more strongly than in medicine.

In his critical analysis, “The Holistic Hodgepodge”, Vanderpool (1984) noted that, not only was holistic health not a social movement, but it was also not really a single entity at all. What the supporters termed as “holistic health” was rather an uneasy conglomeration of biopsychosocial diagnosis and therapy, whole-person medical care, high-level healthiness or wellness, and unconventional and esoteric diagnosis and healing. The fact that these separate strands were viewed as a uniform movement is attributable to their sharing of a common rhetoric, which “functions as a creed that disguises diversity” (p. 774).

Many of the principles, beliefs, and practices characterizing self-care and holistic health in the 1970s and 1980s have been among the same evidence that has been cited as signaling the rise of a New Age movement. This may be due to the centrality of health-related concepts to the paradigms and idioms that are embraced in New Age discourse. Much of what is said to represent “New Age healing”, a term that was first introduced into the medical literature in the 1980s (Levin and Coreil 1986), bears a striking resemblance to the ideas and practices that are endorsed by the advocates of medical self-care and holistic health (English-Lueck 1990). In some places, the terms “holistic health” and “New Age” are even used interchangeably (Baer 2003; O’Connor 1995), or the latter is designated as a subtype of or proxy for “alternative medicine” (Wardwell 1994; Kaptchuk and Eisenberg 2001). Accordingly, a primary expression of New Age ideas—perhaps the primary expression—has been in the realms of healing and medicine. Without New Age healing, the contemporary New Age phenomenon may not have registered on the wider public radar.

Not surprisingly, the fragmentation and diversity underlying the activities and beliefs of individuals who are self-identified with holistic health are also apparent among the followers of New Age healing pursuits. In light of the primacy of the spiritual and religious overtones to New Age rhetoric, especially drawing on mystical and esoteric concepts, New Age healing seems to describe an even more diverse collection of phenomena than holistic health. The strong reactions that this concept still provokes in both the supporters and the critics three decades past its peak—especially within the medical and religious sectors—identifies the New Age as a unique lightning rod for both messianic hopes and apocalyptic vilification.

What is absent in the discourse on New Age healing, pro or con, has been a critical examination of precisely what this ostensibly singular phenomenon stands for, and how New Age healing differs—or does not differ—from the apparently related holistic-alternative-complementary-integrative approach to medicine. This paper seeks to address these issues, with special reference to their religious and medical implications. It is suggested that most of what characterizes New Age healing is “not new and not necessarily specific to the New Age” (Rose 2001, p. 70). The phrase “New Age”, for one, made its most influential early appearance in Alice Bailey’s *Esoteric Healing* (Bailey 1953), which was strongly influenced by the ideas permeating the writing of Helena Blavatsky almost a century earlier (Blavatsky [1888] 1970; Blavatsky [1877] 1972). Additionally, the Masonic magazine entitled *The New Age* predated by three quarters of a century the popular New Age magazine of similar name, *New Age Journal*, which was founded in 1974, and was later rebranded as *Body & Soul*, and more recently as *Whole Living*. Spielvogel (n.d.) and Spangler (n.d.), among others, have noted that history records many trumpeted “new ages” in ages past. New Age healing, moreover, is not as unique or *sui generis* as it is often presumed, but rather more the medical expression of concepts circulating among esoteric religious traditions and new religious movements. In a sense, New Age healing bears a similar relationship to these religious and spiritual traditions that *Āyurveda* does to *Sāṅkhya*, *Zhōng-yī* (traditional Chinese medicine) does to Taoism and Confucianism, and *Unani* does to Islam.

In unpacking these issues, this paper seeks to accomplish three things. First, the emergent New Age and associated New Age healing of the 1970s and 1980s will be shown to be as much of a hodgepodge as holistic health. A hodgepodge is defined as an admixture of dissimilar elements that are thrown together into an uneasy whole. The New Age was so characterized in an interesting empirical study (Steyn 1994) as “a vast array of different

groups, beliefs and services which, on the surface, do not seem to have much in common . . . but is a remarkably fluid phenomenon that confounds all attempts to capture it in fixed constructs” (p. 84). The author has outlined a confluence of the following distinct ideological threads and components: an interest in alternative Western religious traditions, Eastern philosophy, humanistic and transpersonal psychology, and the new physics; belief in a holistic cosmology, in panentheism, in channeled messages from discarnate entities, and in the ideas that we create our own reality, that everything is in a process of dynamic evolution, that there is a core inner wisdom, and that authority resides in direct intuitive experience; and, personal traits, such as the acceptance of individual responsibility, a fascination with the unconventional, an optimistic attitude, an emphasis on the feminine principle, and an interest in transformation, healing, and ecology (Steyn 1994).

Out of this mix, the following four mostly separate elements constituting “New Age” will be differentiated, with significance for healing, therapy, and well-being: mysticism, esoteric metaphysics, the occult, and self-actualization. Despite there being some overlap, conceptually, as well as the presence of individuals or groups whose beliefs or activities manifest more than one of these four elements—for example, Tiryakian (1972) notes that the esoteric provides the “religio-philosophic belief systems” that underlie the occult—one may observe historical, phenomenological, and sociological distinctives. Only what has been characterized as self-actualization, and not all expressions of such, is a more contemporary development. Many techniques that have been popularized since the 1970s (e.g., channeling, rune-casting, and crystal healing) are quite ancient; only the context is new. As Woodhouse (1996) noted, “[M]any New Age ideas and practices have emerged in substantially revised form from their historical roots” (p. 69). Perhaps the sole shared feature is a connection to the now defunct *New Leaf Catalog*, which was the New Age counterpart to the former hard copy version of *Books in Print*, yet, even there, one was more likely to find books on co-dependency, wellness, and spirituality than on the occult.

Second, the conservative religious critique of the New Age and New Age healing will be discussed. The criticisms and analyses originating from within Christianity and Judaism have often misread the underlying motives and intent of New Age phenomena. This includes strident warnings about certain elements of New Age belief and practice that are perceived as Satanic. The increasingly conservative political self-identification of evangelicals (Kidd 2019), for one, has perhaps left them easily triggered by individuals who are likely to endorse New Age beliefs and practices that are related to healing. It is fascinating to note that some aspects of the conservative religious critique of New Age healing are consonant with the reservations and warnings of experienced mystics, initiates, and adepts, as well as with the rationalist critique of New Age activities and religion in general.

Third, the implications of the New Age for the interface of religion and medicine will be explored. Much of the respective religious, medical, and secularist antipathy to alternative, complementary, and integrative medicine is rooted in the perceptions that these medical therapies are fundamentally grounded in New Age worldviews, which are read as spiritual counterfeits and are inherently dangerous, as quackery, or as an irrational belief. The higher profile of therapeutic alternatives since the establishment in 1993 of the Office of Alternative Medicine (now known as the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health) at the U.S. National Institutes of Health is seen by some religious conservatives as part of a “hidden agenda” (Sneed and Sneed 1991) by the U.S. government to promote the occult, including covertly through the agency of medical institutions and practitioners. This, and other religious and medical implications of New Age healing, will be examined in light of the shared dynamics and features of religion and medicine (Vanderpool and Levin 1990).

2. What Is “New Age”?

The provenance of the New Age concept appears to be rooted in the Western esoteric tradition (Lucas 2011) and several 19th-Century religious movements (Alexander 1992).

These include Theosophy (Hammer 2013), itself emerging from Hindu and esoteric Buddhist sources, and New Thought, its own precursors including Mesmerism (Albanese 1992), which from early on focused on healing (Hickey 2019). Another contemporaneous influence was spiritualism (Melton 1992). A century later, these intertwined threads evolved into the Human Potential Movement, which was also “a many-branched, diverse phenomenon” (Alexander 1992, p. 421) whose offshoots included transpersonal psychology. Significantly for the emergence of New Age healing, each of these traditions—both individually and in their synergisms—invoke the concept of a salutogenic (healing) life force (Levin 2008). Melton (1992) best described the New Age as a “new revivalist religious impulse directed toward the esoteric/metaphysical/Eastern groups and to the mystical strain in all religions” (p. 18). A more detailed genealogy of the concept can be found in *Mind Cure* (Hickey 2019), and its downstream linkages to contemporary medicine and healing practices are described in *Religion and Medicine* (Levin 2020).

A perplexing feature of the discourse on the New Age and New Age healing is the lack of a consensus definition that is not overly “vague” (York 1995, p. 22), besides Melton’s categorical description, as shown above. It has been called “an amorphous field of study—theoretically, methodologically, and empirically” (Frisk et al. 2016, p. 469), such that “[s]cholars disagree on what to call ‘it’ and how to demarcate its content and boundaries” (p. 469). Others have agreed that “‘New Age’ is among the most disputed categories in the study of religion in terms of agreeing [on] content and boundaries” (Sutcliffe and Gilhus 2013, p. 1). In *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, Hanegraaff (1996) is blunt, as follows: “In spite of the popularity of the term, its actual content remains extremely vague” (p. 1). Elsewhere, he has described it as “not so much a religion as a buzzword” (Hanegraaff 2002, p. 287). Moreover, whatever the New Age is or is not, it is not monolithic, but instead appears to be “divided by internal discursive boundaries” (Hess 1995, p. 145) promoting thinking that is, at times, “quasireligious” (Denzler 2001, p. 67) and that, in certain places, is consonant with the wildest conspiracy theories about things such as alien abductions, reptilians, and the end of the world (Robertson 2016). For all of the contention surrounding the meaning and provenance of “New Age”, and its applications to healing, there have been few efforts to offer any conceptual clarity from scholars (Rose 2005; Urban 2015) or New Age proponents (Nagioff 2022), which is perhaps unsurprising given its multifaceted dimensions and expressions. What is surprising is the acknowledgment, and even the celebration, of this amorphousness among New Age thinkers.

For example, David Spangler (1997), a father of contemporary New Age thinking, noted the following:

“... the term ‘New Age’ is used to encompass a multitude of activities and beliefs, not all of them consistent with or even supportive of each other. No wonder many people are confused about just what it is” (p. 72).

Spangler stated that the New Age is also a “metaphor” (p. 72), “a place of the imagination”, and “an idea that is timeless” (p. 72). He further noted that “I dislike the term ‘New Ager,’ but I am proud to be associated with the New Age” (p. 136).

With even the proponents of New Age ideas being so unclear as to what it comprises or stands for, and some scholars questioning whether a term that is so “nebulous” is even meaningful at all (Chryssides 2007, p. 21), deriving a taxonomy of influences or components of the New Age concept and of New Age healing is daunting. However, it is an important task for social scientists of religion and sociomedical researchers for several reasons.

First, strident discourse on the topic, both pro and con, decades ago crossed over into popular culture—from mostly sympathetic portrayals in, for example, *New Age Journal* (Lesser 1997) and *The Quest* (White 1989), magazine of the Theosophical Society, to somewhat more critical accounts in conservative political periodicals, such as *National Review* (Wauck 1990) and *The Economist* (1997), to merciless lambasting in conspiracy magazines, such as *Critique* (Babbs 1990). Influential people become very exercised, still, by the phrase “New Age”.

Second, many of the beliefs and practices that were once so neatly labeled as New Age have become ubiquitous over the past generation and may constitute a type of “invisible religion” (Machalek and Martin 1976). The concepts that were at one time considered to be strange are now invoked in medical care (mind–body medicine) and from the pulpit (ecospirituality). This phenomenon would benefit from documentation by religious scholars.

Third, the prominence of New Age concepts in the emerging culture of alternative medicine in the 1990s has sparked resistance from conservative religious quarters (Ellison et al. 2012), and merits careful scrutiny. What once may have been of interest to a few academic social scientists of religion has, since the 2000s, become integrated into the work of clinicians and academic biomedical researchers (Larson 2006). A commentary in a journal of the American Hospital Association made the point, succinctly, that “[c]omplementary and alternative medicine (CAM) isn’t just for the ‘New Age’ set anymore—increasingly, patients are voting with their feet” (Larson 2006, online abstract). The concepts that once may have seemed to be unconventional at best, or as unscientific at worst, are now, with empirical validation, becoming more accepted within Western medicine.

In order to address these issues, various components making up the New Age concept are unpacked, based on a reading of decades of primary and secondary source materials. What follows differentiates several overlapping elements that, together, seem to account for the panoply of New Age beliefs and practices. These are being termed as mysticism, esoteric metaphysics, the occult, and self-actualization. No assertion is being made that these are discrete ontological categories; there is a considerable overlap among them under various definitions. They are being used here simply for heuristic purposes, to emphasize the multifaceted and heterogeneous—and perhaps elusive—nature of New Age and New Age healing. Moreover, it is not being claimed that everything that goes by, or went by, the name New Age contains or expresses each of these elements. Far from it. This is an important point, as the identification of occult and—among some religious critics—even Satanic features of certain activities that are self-labeled as New Age may be read as offensive, as hyperbolic, or as unnecessarily judgmental, religiously speaking. No such intention is meant by this—it is simply an observation that the New Age concept is not monotonic, but rather is diverse and, in some usages, evokes themes that may be triggering both to the supporters of traditional religions and Western medicine and to those New Age enthusiasts who are drawn to the mystical, esoteric, or self-actualizing elements but would be put off by what they may interpret as darker themes.

2.1. *Mysticism*

Mysticism has been defined by religious scholars in various ways, such as “the direct apprehension of the divine or the numinous in an unmediated awareness” (McKim 1996, p. 181). This implies “a personal, experiential . . . knowledge of God by means of a direct, nonabstract or loving encounter of union with God” (Grenz et al. 1999, p. 81). Ninian Smart identified mysticism with the experiential dimension of spirituality and an expression of the “contemplative strand” of religion (Smart 1996, p. 296), which is a marker of what Eliade and others have described as the eternal or perennial quest, i.e., a means to seek the “recovery of the sacred” (Altizer 1962). Mysticism is generally described as an inner, subjective core within established religions that is focused on the attainment of unitive experiences. The major exoteric faiths, it has been suggested, also have their hidden mysteries and their secretive arcane or esoteric teachings. Judaism has its Kabbalah, Islam has its Sufism, Buddhism has its Tibetan heritage, Hinduism has its Swami orders, Roman Catholicism has its contemplative orders, and so on. Among Protestant Christians, at least in North America, something akin to a mystical tradition is more challenging to identify, with the exception, perhaps, of the charismatic movement, although it is not clear that this fits precisely what scholars term as mysticism. Yet, paradoxically, a charismatic ministry, such as the Christian Broadcasting Network, promotes supernatural healing through the agency of the Holy Spirit in accordance with scripture (I Corinthians 12:9), while simultaneously denouncing holistic healers and alternative medical practitioners

for invoking forces contrary to the theories of Western biomedicine. This conflict is not a characteristic of Christianity in general, as Orthodox and Catholic Christians, in contrast, have long-standing and visible traditions of mysticism (e.g., monasticism, the desert fathers, and the Russian and Spanish mystics). In light of the current materialist zeitgeist, perhaps, Needleman (1980) referred to this contemplative tradition as “lost Christianity”.

A motivating force for the emergence and persistence of New Age involvement in the U.S. was the upsurge of interest in these mystical traditions beginning in the 1960s, with the origins of the Human Potential Movement. Many Catholics, Jews, and Protestants disaffected from the religion of their upbringing and in search of a more experiential spirituality returned to the perceived mystical core of their respective faiths. The parameters separating exoteric religions may be blurred, or less obvious, at the esoteric level, therefore few formal boundaries seem to discourage, say, adventuresome Jews or Christians from experiencing silent weekend retreats at yoga *ashrams* or at Buddhist monasteries. This may attest to a belief that, while the outer expressions of these religions differ dramatically, their inner or core aspects converge along a common path or “perennial philosophy”. Sympathetic scholars and advocates (and there is no unanimity on this point) have referred to this common inner path as the “primordial tradition” (Benoist [1963] 1988), “secret wisdom” (Conway 1985), “forgotten truth” (Smith 1976), “ancient theology” (Godwin 1979, p. 18), and “ageless wisdom” (Bailey 1953). While individual seekers may experience mystically oriented pursuits, this does not preclude a parallel involvement in mainstream religion.

The conservative religious critique of mysticism has focused on the perceived dilettantism of New Age seekers, whose approach to spiritual experiences may appear “unmoored” (Marty 1998, p. xi), and perhaps even harmful. Transcendental meditation, for example, or a weekend seminar on Reiki healing, it is asserted, may be a prelude to untutored experimentation with powerful subtle energies or contact with discarnate entities, activities that, mystics themselves might caution, may open oneself up to powerful spiritual forces that one may not be able to control. For spiritual seekers—such as adventurous Catholics, Jews, Protestants, or the products of secular childhood households—these experiences may become a substitute for institutional religion. The individual journey from one “growth experience” to another is, in a sense, the modern equivalent of the spiritual quest for the Path, Grail, or *Tao*, but possibly without the benefit of structure, context, community, and expert guidance. Compare this to the historical tradition of mysticism in the West, which has been described by Molnar (1987) as follows:

“Christian mystics (and the Hebrew and Moslem as well) first become learned in their faith: books, tradition, and the teaching of the church become part of their life before the desire seizes them for a more intimate encounter with God. And this God is known; his features have been enlightened through revelation and Scripture . . . Christian mystics always return from their approach to God—in fact, this is what God prescribes—so that strengthened with his divine presence, but never by even a temporary fusion, they may now fulfill their task of encouraging their fellows in their own intimate relationship with God” (p. 153).

Within traditional Judaism, for example, Kabbalistic study is discouraged, except for men who are well-grounded in their faith and who also have passed the age of 40 and have already fulfilled their familial duty to marry and produce children. Only then is the religious foundation believed to be established sufficiently to support such an undertaking, and the powerful energies driving conjugality and procreation brought under control. At no time are these mystics expected to withdraw from their community of fellowship, but rather to contribute to its spiritual development through the benefit of their sage wisdom (Weiner 1969). Likewise within Hinduism, where the mystic may eventually withdraw from organized life, this is not to occur until after the *gṛhastha* or householder phase of life is completed (Zimmer 1951), and not until after lengthy contemplation in the forest. As the *Code of Manu* states, “When a householder sees his (skin) wrinkled, and (his hair) white,

and the sons of his sons, then he may resort to the forest” (Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957, p. 181).

2.2. Esoteric Metaphysics

This element of the New Age mix refers to teachings that are associated with mystery schools, secret societies, and initiatory orders. These include established brotherhoods, such as Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, and the Knights Templar, as well as philosophical schools that are associated with the Pythagorean and Hermetic traditions, and modern paths, such as Theosophy and Anthroposophy. These also include a wide range of institutions and groups throughout history, from the guardians of the various ancient mystery religions of Osiris and Eleusis and others (Angus [1926] 1975; Leadbeater [1926] 1986) to numerous groups of the present day.

While the arcane teachings of these groups are often protected by oaths, there appears to be a core of material that is common to esoteric orders. In light of the observation of a core philosophy underlying many of the world’s exoteric faiths, perhaps it would not be surprising to find that “the secret teachings of all ages” (Hall [1928] 1977) coalesce around similar themes. A consensus summary of these highlights of esoteric cosmology, metaphysics, and human pathophysiology includes the following: the extraterrestrial “seeding” of man on Earth, the presence of higher dimensions, the existence of elemental spirits, the interpenetration of subtle human bodies, the mapped systems of *nāḍīs* or meridians and major and minor *chakras*, the flow of a vital life force (*prāṇa*, orgone, *qi*, etc.), reincarnation and *karma*, the existence of avatars and ascended masters, and miscellaneous other notions concerning a god, physical life, and the creation of the universe, Earth, humankind, and modern civilization. Much of this commonality across esoteric traditions concerns features of the human energy body and theories about disease etiology and therapeutics (Levin 2008, 2021a, 2021b).

These phenomena, whether or not they are validated by Western scientists, have become elements of a *lingua franca* facilitating communication among old-school Theosophists, yogis, Kabbalists, neopagans, mystery-school initiates, spiritual adepts, and those modern-day New-Agers who are involved in one or another human-potential activity or philosophy. The impact of Blavatsky [1888]’s (Blavatsky [1888] 1970) *The Secret Doctrine* on the canonization of these concepts was especially influential for significant organizations, far and wide, from the Thule and Vril societies of the Nazi elite (Ravenscroft 1973; Sklar 1977; Howard 1989) to the patron saints of the mid-century movement promoting awakened consciousness and self-actualization, such as Krishnamurti (1996). Blavatsky’s detailed accounts of cosmogenesis and anthropogenesis may be tacitly accepted among New Age seekers, whether or not they have read *The Secret Doctrine* or have been exposed to Theosophy.

2.3. The Occult

In the present context, the term “occult”, which denotes that which is hidden or concealed, refers to secret traditions or crafts of ritual work that seek to understand, invoke, and/or control the forces of nature and of the subtle planes. These diverse traditions involve, but are not limited to, practitioners of ritual magick and members of neopagan and Earth religions of various schools. According to Truzzi (1974), “[O]ccultism is broadly multi-dimensional and does not necessarily include magical elements nor need its concerns center about the supernatural . . . The major concern of occultists is simply with the unknown, especially knowledge of that unknown to science” (p. 628). It is those “elaborated belief systems” (p. 631) of magick and ritual—whether they are a focus of scientific exploration, spiritual practice, personal development, or healing—that are the closest things to a *sine qua non* that can be identified for the occult.

As described by Malinowski (1948), religion involves the submission to and the worship of divine forces, whereas magick seeks to appropriate their power. Historically, the more orthodox religious believers have viewed these traditions as actively working to undermine mainstream beliefs and institutions, and thus are potentially wicked. It bears

noting that the polytheism of neopagan worldviews and ritual practices of wiccans, druids, and goddess-worshippers only tangentially converge with the beliefs and activities of devil-worshippers, who continue to maintain Christian terminology and symbolism and define themselves in contradistinction to Christianity (Adler 1979). According to Adler (1979), the spurious connection between the crafts and Satanism was apparently encouraged by leaders of the Inquisition in order to further their own religious and political hegemony.

The tools of occult practice, especially divination and ritual work, have been utilized by those New Age seekers who wish to graduate from meditation and self-help psychologies to something that promises more tangible results in the material world. Experienced occultists warn that a temptation confronting participants who are uninitiated in occult orders is that initial successes in self-application may give way to efforts to affect others, first for good, through distant healing techniques, and then for nefarious purposes, through applications of ritual magick. The danger, as experienced occultists and initiatory orders warn, is that powerful forces—whether tangible or emotional—may be unleashed, which are well beyond the control of novices. *Kuṇḍalinī* accidents, psychic attack, illnesses or physical disturbances, demonic possession, or psychosis may conceivably result from activities that began in innocence through practices such as channeling or candle magick (Pond 1991).

These hypothetical dangers are mentioned to underscore the importance that occultists place on spiritual and psychological grounding and preparation, which is something that is not necessarily present among earnest laypeople who are seeking healing through New Age means. Throughout history, occult fraternities, such as the Golden Dawn (Regardie 1985), have emphasized a graded approach to the mysteries. First, the practitioner must become learned in the exoteric traditions and in the philosophy and metaphysics, entailing years of intense guided study. Second, the neophyte must pass through a concurrent series of initiations, throughout which period he or she will travel a path of meditation and purification. Only then, guided by a personal master adept, is the candidate deemed prepared to become a vessel for and to direct numinous forces. As described by Dion Fortune (1987), this rigorous process is protected by secret vows, is governed by ethical precepts, and calls for no less than the spiritual death and rebirth of the candidate. One can only imagine what old-school occultists would think of popular New Age book titles such as *Tarot in Ten Minutes*, *Numerology Made Easy*, and *Channeling Handbook*.

2.4. Self-Actualization

This category comprises the often-derided miscellany of beliefs and activities that are still most popularly identified with the New Age (Pithers 2021), which are primarily utilized in seeking “healing”, however that may be defined (Levin 2017). These include the therapeutic use of quartz crystals and gems, the channeling of discarnate entities, modern approaches to divination, newly developed or retooled means of psychological enhancement, an interest in ancient or extraterrestrial civilizations, the rediscovery and simplification (or trivialization) of Native American rituals, concerns about the environment and climate, and numerous techniques and philosophies for healing emotions, relationships, the mind, and the body, either physical or subtle. These disparate beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors are considered here under the category of self-actualization because of their adoption for purposes of psychological or spiritual growth, consciousness expansion, healing, psychic development, greater wisdom or insight, and so on. Some of these could indeed be classified instead under “esoteric metaphysics” (as described above), but the difference here is that these typically exhibit a more instrumental function—for some people these may be more about character development and moral refinement than about instruction in the arcane mysteries. This component of the New Age tapestry draws on elements of other components (mysticism, esoteric metaphysics, and the occult) that are mixed and matched in different ways across groups and individuals. When most laypeople use the phrase “New Age” still today, it is probably this component that they have in mind—people working to self-actualize through one unusual practice or another, and

perhaps folding in teachings or rituals that are promoted by one-time New Age celebrities, such as Shirley MacLaine, JZ Knight, Marianne Williamson, or Tony Robbins. It is this expression of New Age practice that has especially alarmed conservative religious critics (Ankerberg and Weldon 1996).

Along with psychological and spiritual growth, a principal emphasis of New Age self-actualization has been on the functioning of the body and on health and healing. The concept of healing has been broadened through the propensity of many self-actualizers in order to engage in the “medicalization of everyday life” (Crawford 1980). Health, medicine, and disease constitute a metaphor that is used to characterize not just one’s physical status but also emotional well-being, memories and attitudes, interpersonal relationships, family functioning, formal and informal communities, political systems, the state of the natural environment, and various other global and cosmic matters (Levin 2017). Interestingly, this medicalization has arisen parallel to the observed secularization of Western social institutions. Sorokin (1941, 1957) insightfully documented how, throughout history, respective cycles of sensate and ideational culture alternately wax and wane. Both the preoccupation with physical functioning and the urge to interpret and construct reality in biomedical terms thus may reflect the dominance of a sensate materialist cultural ethos.

This sensate foundation to New Age healing and the quest for self-actualization and personal empowerment present a seeming paradox. While the medicalization of discourse on non-medical themes points to a tacit acceptance of a medical metaphor, the quest itself—for growth and healing—is decidedly spiritual. McGuire (1993) has observed that “to many contemporary Americans, health and healing appear to be salient metaphors for salvation and holiness” (p. 144). A cluster analysis of descriptive information about a sample of health-related groups, schools, or teachings that are self-identified as New Age revealed that they were organized around the following three discrete themes: “mental or physical self-betterment”, “esoteric teachings”, and “contemplative practice” (Levin and Coreil 1986). The latter two categories of New Age healing seem to reference the respective esoteric–metaphysical and mystical components of the New Age, which were discussed earlier. The quest for self-actualization and healing appears paramount; the engagement of the philosophy, the practices, and the tools of mysticism, esoteric metaphysics, and the occult are secondary. They are means to an end.

This scenario might shed some light on the adoption of arcane spiritual pursuits by self-actualizing New-Agers. Powerful techniques or exercises may be borrowed, explored, and then, if results are not forthcoming, may be traded in for new experiences. To experienced mystics and initiates, this approach may smack of superficiality and impatience, suggesting that some New Age seekers are not yet ready to become true candidates for the study of the mysteries. To conservative and orthodox religious believers, the apparent rejection of traditional faiths and the gravitation to occult practices might be the most disturbing. It is not clear, though, that the sinister motives that are sometimes attributed by conservative religious critics to those who identify themselves with the New Age are necessarily deserved. Possibly, these self-actualizers may not be aware of the history, the substance, or the implications of their new pursuits, or of the caveats, qualifications, reservations, warnings, or prohibitions that may originate with the masters of the ancient traditions which have been updated for New Age audiences.

3. Religious Responses to New Age Healing

In the first published study of New Age healing (Levin and Coreil 1986), examples were given of the concerns about the New Age that had been expressed by conservative Christians, as follows:

“For example, an article in a Fundamentalist newspaper in the South linked ‘the New Age Movement’ to Nazism, humanism, the Anti-Christ, and other evils, and warned of ominous signs that ‘Satan is using the movement’ to usher in a ‘new age of reason.’ More recently, there was a lengthy report about the new age on the Christian television show, ‘The 700 Club.’ While the segment

was largely misleading (e.g., a book by Objectivist philosopher and Ayn Rand disciple Nathaniel Branden set on a table next to astrological tracts was given as an example of new age literature!), host Pat Robertson echoed the notion that the new age was part and parcel of a grand conspiracy encompassing humanism, the devil, witchcraft and communism. He went on to intimate that ‘new age healing’ was more or less oxymoronic” (pp. 895–96).

Concerns also have been expressed about New Age healing practices among Orthodox Jews, who are warned not to mix Jewish beliefs and rituals with non-Jewish concepts or practices. The proof text is usually the admonition against “strange fire” (*eish zarah*) in the story about the deaths of Aharon’s sons, Nadav and Abihu (Leviticus 10:1). While there may be a greater openness to such healing practices among observant Jews than among pious Christians, especially if such practices are framed in a Jewish context, there are nonetheless limits that must be honored. Among Jews, attitudes toward New Age practices run the gamut from enthusiastic acceptance among the less observant (Schultz 2019), to the adoption of practices such as divination and use of folk healing remedies among the *frum* (religious) (Isaacs 1998), to rabbinic rulings forbidding these practices as possibly “*ma’aseh satan*” (works of Satan) (Leiter 2018), to careful and nuanced rabbinic discussions of where the boundaries lie with respect to *halachah* (Jewish law).

An example of the latter discussion can be found in *Alternative Medicine in Halachah* (Szmerla 2020), in which the author, who is a *charedi* Orthodox rabbi, details the presence or absence of *halachic* support for numerous alternative therapies that are often labelled as New Age. His expressed goal was to clarify their status under Jewish law according to *t’shuvo* (*responsa*) from various authoritative *poskim* (rabbinic decisors). Some such therapies are acceptable, within specified limits, including Reiki, acupuncture, applied kinesiology, dowsing, homeopathy, the use of gemstones, hypnotherapy, and *haṭha* yoga. Others are forbidden, such as *feng shui*, *rāja* yoga, and shamanic healing. The latter, according to the author, is off-limits due to it being a form of *kishuf* (sorcery), “which is strictly prohibited and punishable by death” (p. 140). It is noteworthy that this admonition is found in a book endorsing many New Age healing practices. Even fundamentalist Christian critics of New Age healing are not as explicit in condemning such therapies.

This labeling of New Age beliefs and practices as Satanic has been a significant feature of the conservative religious critique of New Age healing. Initially arising in the 1980s (Marrs 1987), during the Satanic ritual abuse scare, the attribution is still being made at present (Bancarz and Peck 2018). The belief in the widespread existence of a Satanic underground was fueled by accounts of groups and individuals purportedly practicing ritual magick, the Black Mass, and the witches Sabbath (Jenkins 2008), among other so-called black arts. Despite the evidence that the more sensationalist claims of the “Satanic panic” were largely debunked by the 1990s, a belief in their reality persists among some psychotherapists still today (Lewis 2016), while they are dismissed as “false memories” by others (Ofshe and Watters 1993). In some conservative religious circles, this also signifies, by default, every other component of the New Age that is outlined in this paper, especially the occult, and in particular those modalities promising physical or psychological healing. Others, including evangelical Christians, are less likely to make such a blanket attribution (Burrows 1986), and are more discerning about throwing around references to the devil.

Academic religious scholars consider phenomena such as the late Anton LaVey’s Church of Satan and *The Satanic Bible* as the work of mostly benign popularizers (Lewis 2001), but some occultists take Satanism much more seriously and make its divergence explicit from strict neopaganism and from the occult/magickal traditions (Adler 1979). They would likely take great pains to emphasize that occult or esoteric concepts addressing healing have little or no connection to the ideas and practices of self-professed Satanists or to the wild claims of conspiracy theorists (Cooper 1991, 1993).

At the height of the panic, contemporary scholarly perspectives took a more agnostic approach to the physical reality of Satanic abuse, while emphasizing the similarities of reports to those of post-traumatic stress disorder (Powers 1991). Such reports were seen as a

coping mechanism resulting from systematized amnesia in fantasy-prone individuals who suffered abuse as children, as opposed to torture by Satanists. The question of the reality of such accounts was viewed as secondary to the therapeutic charge to help patients to adjust and heal. The scholarly evangelical commentary on this subject has been heterogeneous, but since the 1990s has been more aligned with variations of the latter perspective than with belief in the physical reality of Satanic abuse (Rogers 1992). For New Age seekers who are primarily in search of physical or psychological healing, endorsing “Satanic” ideations likely has little or no place in their spiritual journey. However, such ideas may be attractive to socially marginal individuals who are disinterested in formal religion and have been failed by other, more benign expressions of New Age involvement (Moody 1974). Notwithstanding, the continued identification of “New Age” with “Satanic” remains a feature of the religious critique of many of the practices, healing-related or otherwise, that are described in this paper.

In 1989, the Santa Barbara Centre for Humanistic Studies published a bibliography of conservative Christian literature on the New Age (Lewis 1989). The nearly 60 books that were reviewed ranged from serious, scripturally grounded critiques of particular occult practices and beliefs to less scholarly works “simply lumping together anything that departs from a rather strict interpretation of Christianity” (p. 2) and labeling it as demonic (Lewis 1989). For example, in *New Age Medicine* (Reisser et al. 1987), the authors warned that “the energies involved may be demonic in origin, and thus pose a threat rather than a benefit to health” (p. 148). Many of these books attempted to link an even wider array of phenomena and developments than Dr. Robertson provided in the quotation above. Religious cults, Nazism, ecumenism, holistic health centers, Montessori schools, zero population growth, Luciferian initiations, humanism, the United Nations, the antichrist, meditation, serial killers, psychic healing, non-allopathic medicine, environmentalism, the movies “E.T.” and “Star Wars”, New Thought, human sacrifice, feminism, the Illuminati, liberal Christianity, Shirley MacLaine, *Dungeons and Dragons*, positive thinking, paganism, and channeling all are treated as tentacles of a singular, consciously united world movement that is governed in a paramilitary fashion by Satan and packaged to an unsuspecting public as “the New Age”. This wide-net approach risks no small amount of irony; one prominent work in this genre (Cumbey 1983) included Dr. Robertson as an agent of the New Age.

While this characterization of the New Age is surely overstated—and not universally held even among fundamentalist Christians (Tamney and Johnson 1988)—it did not emerge out of whole cloth. While not all are connected in a consciously Satanic plot or conspiracy, these phenomena may be linked in this critique because some elements are linked in the rhetoric of New Age writers and thus in the perspectives of seekers who view these phenomena as part of their spiritual or healing quest. Yet, while certain New Age activities may not be markers of evil or possession—positive thinking, for one, has been endorsed in some Protestant circles since the 1950s (Peale 1952)—it is not difficult to see how the excision of beliefs and practices from their historical, philosophical, and theological contexts may lead critics to perceive such pursuits as superficial or, at the least, not beneficial. In this, conservative Christians and Orthodox Jews may be surprised to find that noted mystics, esoteric initiates, and spiritual adepts would agree (Fortune 1987). According to Eliade (1976), “the most important and significant contemporary representative of esotericism, namely, René Guénon, strongly oppose[d] so-called occult practices” (pp. 48–49).

If indeed the world’s major faith traditions have their respective esoteric sides, as discussed earlier, then this critique of the stereotypical mix-and-match approach to New Age spirituality may be understandable from the perspectives of both religious apologists and esoteric scholars. St. Francis, for one, as well as the medieval Jewish mystics, practiced forms of meditation, but it is unlikely that their *mantram* was the name of a Hindu deity or that their practice was a springboard to channeling St. Germain or alien entities from the Pleiades. This statement is not meant to be flippant, but to underscore that the existing critique of these pursuits may have a point. Grounding in a faith tradition, according to this perspective, is believed to shelter the novice quester from the temptations of popular

culture, pop psychology, and transient fashions and revelations posing as spirituality. The religious and esoteric critiques of New Age ideas and of New Age healing practices may be coming from a shared place of genuine concern that perceives such involvement as possibly harmful dabbling among individuals who may not be spiritually grounded or psychologically centered enough to navigate this territory safely.

The enduring wariness of evangelical and fundamentalist Christians toward the New Age, in general, carries over into an increasing concern over the mainstreaming of alternative medical therapies. The occult and anti-Christian perspective or worldview that is believed to underlie New Age activities has been perceived by some conservative Christian health professionals and commentators to define or influence the practice of New Age medical therapies. One writer suggested that the healing effects that are observed as a result of certain New Age energy healing modalities “is really the action of personal, demonic spirits” (Burkholder 2003, p. 104). Taking things a step further, one noted book (Sneed and Sneed 1991) cautioned the following:

“If the New Age world view of alternative medicine becomes intermingled with the medical community and takes root there, it gets harder and harder to weed out. It becomes more accepted. People stop questioning it. The insurance companies pay for it. Medicine quits arguing, and picks up the Table In the end, you and I are the ones who may ultimately be asked to support this non-Christian world view”. (p. 227).

Ironically, this conservative Christian critique of a purportedly New-Age-influenced alternative medical establishment mirrors the critique of complementary and integrative medicine by secular-humanist skeptics, such as those who are affiliated with the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), which is an organization that is known for espousing an anti-Christian, rationalist philosophy. In the 1990s, a representative catalog of Prometheus Books (1995), which was the leading publisher of skeptical writing at the time, included several titles seeking to debunk alternative therapies using language that could have come from books in the occult/New Age section of a Christian bookstore, for example: “all too often, alternative therapists offer *nothing but* magic”, “the common denominator is a rejection of the scientific approach of modern medicine in favor of a belief in paranormal forces”, “the myths and madness perpetrated by fringe practitioners”, and “unscientific ‘healing cults’ are getting their dogma written into state law” (pp. 13, 34–35). This distributor also carried books whose précis characterize Christian belief with phrases such as “the Gospels are . . . the supreme fictions of our culture” (p. 11) and “Jesus doesn’t live up to his Good Shepherd reputation” (p. 26).

Another example of strange bedfellows are the biomedical critiques of New Age healing that use language that is indistinguishable from both paranormal skeptics and religious fundamentalists. One article, which was published in *Academic Medicine*, lamented that “otherwise intelligent patients” pay for products or therapies that are “known to be useless or dangerous” (Beyerstein 2001, p. 230). Among the explanations are patients’ and practitioners’ “anti-scientific attitudes meshed with New Age mysticism” (p. 231) as well as a list of “psychological reasons” (pp. 233–34). Those physicians supporting the use of, or research on, such therapies are dismissed as “medical gurus” espousing a “magical world-view” (p. 231). Another critique was even more blunt, suggesting that when it comes to scientific medicine, “There is no new age” (Sharpe 2001, p. 410). What passes for such therapies is all “Nonsense!”, “ridiculous”, and is best characterized by the encompassing terms of “Quacks and Quackery” (p. 231). Clinical psychologists have weighed in as well, characterizing New Age psychotherapeutic approaches, simply, as “fads, foibles, and fashions” (Singer and Nievod 2003, p. 200).

To summarize, the potential insinuation of New Age ideas into the quest for healing and into medical practice has been a mutual cause for concern among respective (and, ironically, adversarial) religious and scientific orthodoxies, due perhaps to the perceived unorthodoxy and threat of New Age ideas in terms of their spiritual and/or medical underpinnings. The disparagement of New Age and other forms of “countercultural

spirituality” by conservative Christians and secular rationalists has reinforced the cloistering of “an alternative spiritual network [that] has flourished apart from the sanctions of these other institutions” (Bloch 1998, pp. 289–90). Add in the critique from *charedi* Jews and mainstream academic physicians, and New Age healing still has a formidable set of opponents. With the stepped-up mainstreaming of holistically oriented therapies, however, New-Age-influenced beliefs and practices are “externalizing”—to use a term popular among esotericists—and its impact is being felt at the interface of religion and medicine.

4. Implications for Religion and Medicine

So, whither New Age healing? Is it waxing or waning? Has it mostly vanished, or is it still present? There are probably reasonable arguments to be made for both of these positions. In the present author’s opinion, the likely answer is neither and both. New Age healing, under that label, is no longer a formal sector, so to speak, if indeed it ever was, nor is the phrase “New Age” much in use anymore. On the other hand, the ideas, the principles, and the concepts that are associated with the New Age and New Age healing have embedded themselves into the mainstream and by now seem to be ubiquitous. They are found not just in complementary and integrative medicine, but in medicine generally, as well as in the theologies and social teachings of mainline religions. These therapies have been identified as “a challenge to [both] mainstream medicine and traditional Christianity” (Callahan [1999] 2012, p. 57).

The fact that New Age beliefs and practices focus on healing and are spiritually contextualized is not surprising in light of the convergence of New Age concepts and principles with those of holistic and alternative therapies; the reliance on New Age ideas by many seekers as a substitute for institutional religion as a source of order and meaning; and the shared dynamics and functions of religion and medicine in providing this order and meaning (Vanderpool and Levin 1990). Specifically, both religion and medicine (a) *postulate* fundamental principles about human life (i.e., express worldviews), (b) *prescribe and proscribe* actions taken with respect to human life (i.e., profess codes of morality and/or ethics), (c) *establish* institutions and roles (e.g., formal organizations and professional or paraprofessional statuses), (d) *alleviate* the pain of human existence (e.g., through healing), (e) *manage* aspects of human life (e.g., through official or divine authority), and (f) *enhance* the human condition (e.g., through defining a quality life and promoting well-being) (Vanderpool and Levin 1990). To the extent to which the components or threads that are identified in this paper comprise generalizable common elements (e.g., an esoteric cosmology, an acceptance of a perennial philosophy, and a holistic view of body–mind–spirit connections), the New Age concept accomplishes these functions in both the religious and medical domains.

First, New Age writing is characteristically humanistic. This is not invariably secular-humanism, as presumed by conservative religious critics (Wigton 2008), but rather a nonsecular but “spiritual” orientation, such as that found in transpersonal psychology (Shapiro 1994). This spiritually based, transpersonal worldview underlies and informs respective postulates and viewpoints regarding the relationship between God and humankind (e.g., a spirituality grounded in mysticism and Eastern philosophies); the nature of the universe, in terms of physical laws (e.g., nonlocality and other features of the “new physics”); and, the theory and practice of healing (e.g., holistic conceptions of the body, the presence of mind–body interactions, existence of consciousness and/or a bioenergy or life force) (Dossey 1989).

Second, these operant viewpoints, with respect to religion, science, and medicine, inform New Age prescriptions and proscriptions regarding human life, in both vertical and horizontal or “sociological” (Wach 1944) contexts. The ethical obligations of individuals in a community are a key feature of New Age “moral theology” as commonly expressed in New Age writing on the functions and purpose of spiritual growth and development and on the obligations of humans to work for and promote the healing and well-being of individual bodies and minds, as well as in communities, nations, and ecosystems. The well-known

World Health Organization's (1982) definition of health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (p. 1), in its presumption of health as an ultimate value and collective phenomenon that is expressed throughout a multi-leveled human experience and is promoted as a component of the cause of social justice is a popular expression of a characteristically New Age ethic. Whether this ethic truly informs praxis for most self-identified New-Agers is not determinate. The focus on self-growth would seem at odds with an expressed value that is placed on other-regarding behaviors, except that the former may be viewed as a means to arouse the latter.

Third, social institutions have been established or repurposed in support of this ethic by New Age proponents. Religious establishments include many new religious movements, denominations, sects, communes, and spiritual miscellany that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s (Melton 1978). Medical establishments include a plethora of still flourishing alternative practices, therapeutic systems, professional and scientific associations, paraprofessional roles (e.g., Reiki healer, iridologist, and reflexologist), health spas and retreats, and alternative medicine research programs, whether or not they explicitly invoke the term New Age. Not all alternative or holistic medical establishments in the U.S. are New Age in orientation; some are explicitly Christian (Sneed and Sneed 1991) or religiously orthodox in adherence to non-Western faiths (Rama 1999) or are religiously noncommittal. Several studies have identified within New Age groups a considerable overlap between those practices that are described as religious or as health-directed (Levin and Coreil 1986; English-Lueck 1990; McGuire 1993) among groups whose implicit worldview is decidedly non-Christian. It is often hard to differentiate between New Age spiritual groups that are established to promote healing and well-being and New Age health practices seeking to facilitate spiritual growth and self-actualization.

Fourth, because healing and spiritual growth are interconnected in New Age writing, a therapeutic emphasis is characteristic of participation in New Age activities. This is not unique to New Age groups and philosophies; the indivisibility of cultic ritual and ritual healing is a common feature in the histories of established churches, spiritualist and spiritist sects, and shamanistic traditions (Macklin 1974). The alleviation of distress—physically, emotionally, or spiritually—is a central theme in New Age writing and motivates both healers and seekers of healing. It has been suggested by Fuller (1989) that healing may even serve as a rite of initiation into the sacred realm from which contemporary American culture—both secularized and desacralized—is so divorced. He suggests that "[s]o prominent are the religious overtones of the healing movements that it is tempting to think that they function only secondarily as purveyors of therapeutic techniques; their primary function, in this view, is to enable individuals to achieve what William James called a 'firsthand' religious faith" (p. 120). The consequences may be to further marginalize the healer or healee, as "[i]nitiation into unorthodox healing systems tends to transform individuals' lives in ways not sanctioned by either conventional science or conventional theology" (p. 121). However, for New Age seekers who are in search of self-actualization, this may be an acceptable price for redressing the ritual void that separates American culture from its source of healing and power (Somé 1993).

Fifth, New Age beliefs and the participation in New Age activities manage aspects of life, sanctioning behaviors and attitudes and serving a gatekeeping function for important life stages and events, especially death. This function was identifiable in the 1990s with the emergent "graying of the new age movement" (Weiss 1996–1997). The transition between this world and the world to come, in terms of individual lives (death, afterlife, and reincarnation) and global transformation (the millennium, Earth changes, and the end of the Mayan calendar), represents a major emphasis of New Age writing on personal development, spirituality, health, political economy, the environment, and prophecy. Early efforts to develop indices of New Age beliefs (Donahue 1993) and mystical experiences (Levin 1993) revealed that a belief in reincarnation and spiritualism (communicating with the dead), as well as the practice of spiritualism, may be integral components of a general

New Age orientation and lifestyle. In this worldview, healing and spiritual growth—intertwined and undifferentiated—are seen as being governed by natural laws which may invoke or postulate mechanisms that are not currently recognized by Western science. For example, Weil (1988) set forth ten principles in which health is defined as “a dynamic and harmonious equilibrium of all the elements and forces making up and surrounding a human being” (p. 52), energies “can be transmuted into real physical effects through nervous and hormonal alchemy” (p. 55), and healing “may be a nonmaterial energy rooted in the ultimate mysteries” (p. 61). These and other salient New Age themes—the interconnectedness of all living things, the existence of a life force or bioenergy, the Earth as a living organism (i.e., the Gaia hypothesis), our responsibility for our actions (e.g., through *karma*), God and/or “Christ Consciousness” as innate or indwelling features of human life—encourage and buttress individual and collective efforts at both personal change through social transformation and social change through self-actualization (Levin and Coreil 1986).

Sixth, through postulating a worldview, prescribing and proscribing actions, establishing institutions, alleviating suffering, and managing aspects of life, New Age involvement enhances the lives of the believers and participants. This is achieved through defining the quality of life and promoting general well-being. Here again the religious and medical spheres intersect or overlap, with health and well-being being defined in spiritual terms and the mature faith being described through healing metaphors, a distinction which is reminiscent of William James’ contrast of the “healthy-minded soul” and the “sick soul” (James 1902). A study of holistic M.D.s found that “some physicians turned to holistic medicine after positive personal involvement” with New Age practices and mystical experiences, such as through Zen Buddhism, Erhard Seminars Training, Religious Science, Transcendental Meditation, psychic healing, parapsychology, and visiting Esalen (Goldstein et al. 1985). Complementing this are the accounts of people whose experiences of physical healing have been so radically transformative, profound, and unexpected (to themselves and their physicians) that they began questioning tacit assumptions in other domains of life and exploring more mystical or esoteric realms of spirituality (Barasch 1993; Hirshberg and Barasch 1995).

In a sense, the concept of New Age healing, which is vaguely defined and articulated by its supporters and critics, has been both too broadly and too narrowly conceived. The misconception of “New Age” as a singular phenomenon, and thus an all-accessible grab bag of teachings and experiences, is not just of theoretical interest, but may have implications for spiritual seekers who intentionally or unknowingly draw on New Age beliefs and practices for purposes of healing. As noted earlier, many experienced mystics, initiates, and adepts share with religious and medical critics a concern over the enthusiasm of seekers for types of activities or experiences that may be implicitly risky—both spiritually or medically—or unsuitable for neophytes.

For medicine, in particular the clinical encounter, individuals who make use of New Age modalities present special challenges. As has been noted, while physicians by now have learned to inquire about patients’ use of alternative or complementary therapies, and patients have become more comfortable with reporting such use, New Age and other more esoteric practices may still be mostly hidden. Reasons may include embarrassment, fear of incurring the wrath of one’s doctor, a belief that the doctor does not need to know, or, among initiates, a desire to keep such things hidden. Due to the possibility of harmful interactions between such practices and mainstream therapies (Elmer et al. 2007), it really is in the best interest of patients to report their use, even if a particular doctor may not be familiar with the therapy or may be inclined to dismiss all such therapies as being useless. As has been noted, however, these types of therapies or practices may be “much more ‘alternative’ than even alternative medicine. It is not easy to offer recommendations to clinicians as to how to proceed when the content of such approaches is so unusual and the prevalence of utilization and profile of utilizers have not yet been precisely identified” (Levin 2008, p. 110). The continued utilization of New Age healing thus, for all its other

interesting implications, including for religious scholars, remains an ongoing source of ideological conflict with Western medicine that does not appear close to abating, unless or until use of these practices declines, which does not seem likely anytime soon. As mentioned earlier, certain New Age ideas have managed to insinuate themselves into mainstream medicine (Hickner 2015) similarly to their insinuation into mainline religion.

5. Conclusions

New Age healing is a concept that has been in circulation since the mid-1980s. Its origins are of more recent vintage than that of “New Age” more generally, which dates to a confluence of 19th-Century Theosophy, New Thought, and spiritualism by way of the Human Potential Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Despite an absence of any consensus definition, what is generally termed New Age healing seems to have characteristics or features borrowing from mysticism, esoteric metaphysics, the occult, and self-actualization. Although the phrase is less in use today, there remains vigorous pushback against beliefs, practices, and forms of therapy with New Age elements, whether self-identified as New Age healing or labelled as such by individuals seeking to disparage a respective therapeutic modality. Critique and resistance have come from conservative religious partisans, both Christian and Jewish; secular skeptical organizations; and academic physicians, on ironically similar grounds, namely that such practices may be foolish, risky, and/or heretical. The persistence of New Age healing has implications for both religion and medicine.

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