

NOT THE NEW AGE: PERENNISM AND SPIRITUAL KNOWLEDGES

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*People who would commonly be called New Agers refuse this appellation; they even disagree with any label. The aim of this article is to give a voice to these people by working on a common thread. This thread is found across 35 so-called New Agers and gives support to a heuristic concept which I call perennism and which I define as a syncretic and tolerant spirituality which interprets the world as **Monistic** and whose actors are attempting to develop their **Human Potential Ethic** by seeking **Spiritual Knowledge**, mainly that of the Self. While researching for this conceptualisation, it will also be argued that the 'New Age' phenomenon is an innovative form of esotericism, at least in its every day life practice, and is thus a new genre of spirituality.*

During 1996-1997, I interviewed 35 Melburnians who would "commonly" be described as New Agers. The participants were selected through 'network sampling', that is I was selecting my participants while networking in the milieu. They were involved in many spiritual practices, however each of them tended to specialise in one specific type of activity, such as astrology, automatic writing, Buddhism, channelling, crystals manipulation, feminist spirituality, meditation, naturopathy, numerology, palmistry, Reiki, spiritualism, Tantrism, tarot, or urban shamanism. This list, actually, understates the diversity of practice.

At the beginning of each interview, I asked the participants how they followed their particular spiritual path (or spiritual journey). Other questions were:

What are the resources you have employed or employ to follow this path? What groups are you going to? What are you studying? What books are you reading?

What techniques or meditations are you using? ... (If there have been some changes of methods in the life trajectory: Why?)

Why did you choose these resources and not others? Why do you think that these could help you better than other techniques?

Where do you think this path will lead you?

If you were to advise someone who wants to set out on a spiritual path, what would you say?

What is your opinion about the New Age?

Seventy-one percent of the participants negatively criticised New Age, and

nine percent, even if positive towards it, did not consider themselves as New Agers. One negative comment was:

So I guess I'm a bit of a, you know I'm not your typical New Age, totally immersed in it sort of person [...]. I mean my personal feeling is that I like to keep my feet on the ground a bit [...].

Not only does the term 'New Age' create problems when used in the field (Lewis, 1992) but it also lacks a clear denotation in the academic literature and among the likes of the New Age spokespersons listed by York (1995)¹, e.g. Gayce, MacLane.

However, even if the term New Age could be claimed to be dead (Lewis, 1992), the phenomenon it signifies is very much alive. Unfortunately, the 35 people interviewed do not assemble themselves under an umbrella term and are not helpful in giving a more appropriate term than 'New Age'. In this article, I thus search for a conceptualisation that is the closest representation of those involved in this spirituality. First, a cursory critical review of the panorama of the different sociological conceptualisations is undertaken. Secondly, I consider the implications involved in the import of New Ager's self-representations into the social sciences. This paper argues that neither etic – that is objectivist, or from the point of view of the researcher - nor emic – that is subjectivist, or from the point of view of the participant - conceptualisations alone are of much use in developing the sociological investigation of New Age. It therefore proposes to combine those two approaches – that is a synoptic approach (Hanford, 1975) - to produce a heuristic thread which can reflect self-representations of the so-called New Agers I interviewed.

Later in this article, while constructing this conceptualisation, it will be argued that this spirituality under investigation is a new phenomenon, even if some of its practices such as reading the Tarot cards and astrology are quite old.

An etic approach or an exploration of the researchers' points of view

In sociology, etic categories used to describe New Age and other kinds of spirituality already exist. Following is a brief review:

Using the category of "cults" as an etic concept is problematic (Dawson, 1997) and has a strong pejorative connotations (Dillon And Richardson, 1994; Richardson, 1993; Pfeifer, 1992). For Robbins and Bromley (1993),

[a] way to avoid those negative connotations would be to use the term 'New Religious Movement', a concept which was partly shaped by the recent controversy over 'cults' [...].

But, as these authors observe, each term of this tripartite construction ('new',

'religious' and 'movement') embodies certain ambiguities 'which create uncertainties as to the scope and boundary of the construct'.

In France, Champion (1995) arrives at a more satisfactory descriptive classification for this New Age spirituality. She defines "mystico-esoteric nebulae" as consisting of

the heterogenous ensemble of new groups, waves, networks, of a mystical and esotericist type, which have been affirmed since the 1970s. Those networks can be attached to some religions: eastern religions (Hinduism, Buddhism), or more exotic religions (notably shamanism). They can reactivate diverse esotericist practices, or correspond to new psychoreligious syncretism as "transpersonal psychology".²

More recently, Michael York (1995) focusing on structural form, has developed the conceptualisation of "SPIN (Segmented Polycentric Integrated Network)" to describe the segmentation and the boundary-indetermination associated with this spirituality.

These characterisations focus on the structural aspect of New Age and do not fit with the intention of this article which is to develop a conceptualisation that is inscribed in the local 'reality' of those involved in this spirituality. I thus follow in the next section Weber's point of view that the key to explaining human conduct lays in adopting the actor's point of view (Campbell, 1998).

Before moving to the next section, it is important to note that Heelas (1996) and Hill (1993) have also researched a conceptualisation of New Age, which does not focus on a structural characterisation and which is not based on a qualitative research, but this will only be addressed at the end of this article for comparative purposes.

An emic approach or an exploration of the participants' points of view

The spirituality found within my 35 respondents is not strictly confined to religious communities or churches; it is dispersed through many networks (Possamaï, 2000a; 2000b). There are neither ecclesiastics nor demarcated doxies and rituals, and as Brown (in Lewis, 1992: 87) argues, "the practitioners of New Age religion are more interested in experience than in doctrine, and belief systems are often amalgams of disparate doctrines based on understanding realised through experience". Their shared view includes thinking mainly by affinity and refusing conventional systematic deduction logic. As Green (1992: 107) writes: "[i]nsofar as it becomes theory, or system, it ceases to be New Age".

Another overlapping problem is the extreme individualism of these spiritual actors. In their interviews, practitioners offer indeterminacy rather than determinism, diversity rather than unity, difference rather than synthesis, complexity rather than

simplification.³ Their experiences are so specific and various that using their vocabulary will be like writing a phone book so that the aim of useful conceptualisation recedes as the self-representations multiply. In this context, striving to be as transparent as possible to facilitate the understanding of this spirituality for outsiders becomes problematic. As one of my respondents declared:

The labels that we [spiritual actors] use tend to be unfortunately widespread and because they're being used by so many people they have many different resonances in people's minds.

The different discourses of these actors read like a post-modern intertextuality in which the reader wanders in imagination and interpretations, thus making the task of being emic too complex and not useful for the purpose of this article.

Taking this into consideration, and as a first step towards a conceptualisation which still reflects my respondents' self-representations, I propose to construct, with the adjunct of a body of literature on perennial philosophy, an ideal-type of spirituality which appears to help discern thematic unity in the plethora of emic representations of my participants.

Philosophia perennis: or a symbiosis of the ethic and emic approaches

Aldous Huxley (1994) believes that there is a transcendent unity of religions which he calls 'perennial philosophy'. He describes its essential character as

- 1 - the metaphysics that recognises a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds;
- 2 - the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; and
- 3 - the ethic that places Man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being.

It is not the task of sociology to elaborate on these three characteristics or to test them as truth claims; but they do have the makings of an ideal type which will be of use in the quest for adequate conceptualisation of the spirituality here under investigation. So each of the three characteristics has been condensed in three short expressions which correspond intuitively to themes in my informants' testimonies.

Departing from Huxley, I now propose as defining characteristics of the spirituality I am investigating:

- 1 - Monism.
- 2 - The Human Potential Ethic.
- 3 - Spiritual Knowledge (or Gnosis).

This triad will now be analysed.

1. Monism

There are several subthemes constituting the metaphysics of perennial philosophy such as holism, wholism (Melton, 1990: xx), holarchy (Smith, 1989: 52), panentheism (Peters, 1991: 123), acosmic pantheism and cosmic unity (Peters, 1991: 62).

This metaphysics

is variously termed **Intelligible Reality** (Plato), or the **divine Mind** (Plotinus), or the **Buddha Mind** (Zen), or **Cosmic Consciousness** (R.M. Bucke), or the **Logos** (St. John), or the **Omega-point** (Teilhard), or **Mind-at-large** (Huxley), or the **Collective Unconscious** (Jung). (Coleman, 1994: 49)

One fundamental notion seems common to all of these variations of Huxley's metaphysics and the various modes of expressing it: this is **monism**. The word comes from the Greek *monos* meaning *single* and signifies a theory or system of thought which recognises a single ultimate principle, being, force, etc. underlying all reality.

Before giving the results of my participants' belief in monism, it is worth noting that during the fieldwork, there were not direct questions on monism (or on any of the two other terms that are going to be addressed), and the analysis of my participants' beliefs were studied after the discovery of Huxley's Perennial Philosophy.

After the 35 interviews were analysed – for a more detailed account of this analysis, see Possamai (1998) - it was discovered that ninety one percent of my informants share the idea of what I call monism. However, this idea is expressed differently; varied terms such as 'connectedness', 'energy', 'contingence of everything', and 'embeddedness', were used.

2. The Human Potential Ethic

The psychology underlined by Huxley finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality, and this is performed by an inner adventure. People can find a divine spark within themselves and to find and ignite it, the spiritual worker only needs to be spiritually trained; this leads to the realisation of human potential.

This inner adventure is not necessarily that of searching to become a god, or more than human, but it can be understood as the realisation of a higher self. By understanding one's body/mind/soul, by operating on the self through meditation, preventive healing, or other praxes, it is possible to feel better, happier, or higher.

As an indication of belief in and focus on the attainment of the Human Potential Ethic, the respondents used expressions like 'intuition', 'balance', 'development', and 'healing'.

Ninety-seven percent of my informants gave me the indication of a belief in this ethic. However, their accounts reveal a spectrum. At one extreme, potential is

sought through balance, or a healing process, and on the other, it is through development of psychic abilities or engaging a process of complete transcendence of the former self. Inspired by Campbell (1978) and his analysis of cults, this spectrum could be clarified by defining one side as the quest for an instrumental development and on the other side, as a search for illuminational development. By illumination, I refer to a quest for a direct inner personal experience of the divine within, or for a greater individual potential - e.g. use of meditation to reach a higher stage of being. In this sense, the search for the Human Potential Ethic is an end in itself. On the other hand, instrumental development refers to some techniques an individual uses to better himself or herself - e.g. use of crystals for healing -, and to become more effective and efficient in worldly pursuits. In this sense, the instrumental search for the Human Potential Ethic is a means to external ends.

3. Spiritual Knowledge

Spiritual Knowledge – or Gnosis; however this term is so overloaded (Faivre and Hanegraaff, 1998) that it will be avoided - connotes knowing the ultimate reality or the secret of everything. And when the secret of everything is discovered, the inner adventurer will fulfil its Human Potential Ethic. Peters (1991: 81) quotes Jonas to emphasise this transformational effect of the discovery of the secret:

Gnosis [i.e. Spiritual Knowledge] “is not just theoretical information”, writes Hans Jonas, “but is itself, as a modification of the human condition, charged with performing a function in the bringing about salvation. [...] The ultimate ‘object’ of gnosis is God: its event in the soul transforms the knower himself by making him a partaker in the divine experience.

Ninety four percent of my informants gave some indication (in the context of their interviews) of what I call Spiritual Knowledge.

As for the Human Potential Ethic, there seems to be two kinds of knowledge, one based on the self and another one on an external source. The next section will try to make sense of this dichotomy. Through this exploration, I will argue that what is commonly called ‘New Age’ is an innovative form of spirituality. However, before going through this argument, it is first important to clarify the spiritual Knowledge element found in my interviews for this will serve as an Ariadne’s thread in this section. The case of Marilyn leads us to the thread.

The case of Marilyn or a closer exploration of spiritual knowledges

Marilyn was 75 years old when I interviewed her in 1997. We talked for a whole afternoon and her life story in alternative spiritualities is rich in anecdotes. However, I will only present Marilyn according to the meaning she can give to this

difference between these two spiritual knowledges found above.

At the age of 11, I was initiated into spiritualism, which is talking with people who are dead, so called dead.

Her mother was deeply involved in spiritualism and also in the Theosophical Society and in Anthroposophy.

Then when I was in my late 19's or 20's, so during the war, this was in England, [...] I followed her into [those groups] because I was interested, and she talked about it a lot. [...] I went to meetings and lectures and things and was part of it [...]. In those days things were said in very long-winded ways. Time has speeded up you see and we learn things much more quickly. We have to say things more quickly. I do a workshop now in about 5 hours, it used to take the whole weekend. And I get exactly the same stuff over, but they don't need all the kaffuffle. They don't need all the explanations. They have the nitty gritty and you get straight in there, you do it and you've got it. It's all speeded up.

Up to this point, it is clear in Marilyn's interview that she describes the spirituality of the past as a quest for knowledge, what she associates as '*kafuffle*'. Later in the interview, she described what she understood to be the meditation work and continued to undermine this notion of knowledge. She declared:

[In those times] You did do meditation I suppose, but it was a strange sort of meditation, [...] it was mainly knowledge then. But since the 60's, with the music, the Beatles and all of it, and the flower power and all of that stuff, they started living it really. [...] So it all got stirred, mixed in a pot. It was good. It burst those rational shoulds and shouldn't's of the church, and got to do what you're told [...]. And so yes it was knowledge. But since then it's been more I think, there is more experiential stuff around.

She thus favours a spiritual approach based on experience (nowadays) rather than on knowledge (in the past). How do we make sense of Marilyn's distinction between knowledge and experience? When I asked Marilyn for advice on how to follow a spiritual path, she answered:

Well it's one thing to get the ratio of knowledge versus experience into some sort of balance. Don't go just for knowledge. To do things that help you become aware of who you are, as a soul, as a being.

This last sentence makes it clear that what Marilyn refers to as knowledge is a more 'external' knowledge, such as theories and/or macrohistories presented in groups such as the Theosophical Society, Spiritualism, and the Anthroposophical Society (See Trompf, 1998); and the experience refers to self-knowledge, i.e. an experience that helps '*you become aware of who you are*'.

Another of my informants, Steve, has been involved in many initiatory

organisations, and he also criticises strongly the idea of what he calls ‘universal knowledge’:

It’s not uncommon for a third degree witch (which is the highest thing in most witchcraft systems), to say that she can solve all your problems because she has access to universal knowledge. Absurdities like this are common.

He continues this idea by connecting it with the ephemerality of some groups:

People are in one group and they go to another group, another group, another group, another group. It’s very very very common. And there’s lots of groups around too and everyone’s claiming hidden knowledge and all this sort of rubbish.

For the purpose of this article, I will refer to Steve’s ‘universal knowledge’ and Marilyn’s ‘knowledge’ as Macro Knowledge, that is a universal knowledge gained from sources external to the self, and to Marilyn’s ‘experience’ as Knowledge of the Self, that is a knowledge gained in individual experience mainly.

The scope of this article does not allow for the complex task of defining theoretically the boundaries between ‘external’ or macro knowledge – that is doctrine, etc. - versus ‘internal’ or of the self knowledge – that is intuitive, etc. However, it is the purpose of this article to sociologically analyse why my informants draw a difference in their interviews. Just over half of my interviewees (57%) favours Knowledge of the Self only against 11% of people exclusively interested in Macro Knowledge. Twenty percent of them did speak about them in equal terms, nine percent believed in spiritual knowledge but did not offer any information on its sub-types, and six percent did not give any indication on spiritual knowledge at all. Because of these results, the aim of this section is to understand these different orientations to Macro Knowledge and Knowledge of the Self in my sample.

When René Guénon (1958: 81) argues that ‘the Knower, Known and Knowledge are truly one only’ – that is macro and self knowledges are one, as expressed by 20% of my respondents - he makes mainly a metaphysical claim. What interests me as a sociologist is the way macro and self knowledges are perceived and pursued in everyday life by my interviewees. As an example, members of the Theosophical Society, at least in the last century, were studying first the theory and macrohistory of Blavatsky’s writings to only gain afterwards the knowledge of the self. Today, as found in my fieldwork, the emphasis – that is 57% of my respondents - is mainly on learning the knowledge of the self while the macro knowledge is minimally addressed - that is for 11% of my interviewees. This section will investigate the sociological shift in this taste for knowledge.

I cannot argue from my small synchronic sample that the majority preference for the knowledge of the self indicates a significant development in alternative spiritualities over time. However, I have found in the literature two indications of just

this transformation. Champion (1995) shows that indeed a shift of this kind occurred and that in the family of alternative spiritualities - or what will later be referred as esotericism - now, there is more focus on experiential techniques, that is techniques that focus on a direct knowledge of the self rather than on a taught knowledge. She dates the change in focus from the 1960s. Also, Heelas (1996: 242) perceives that there has been a shift in the historical development of the 'New Age' from an emphasis on writing and reading to practising spiritual disciplines. He notices that Gurdjieff was the person - out of all the 'New Age' precursors - who has done the most to emphasise transformational techniques conducted by the individual at work on the self. Indeed, for Gurdjieff (1984: 29), there is only self-initiation. However, if he was born c. 1877 and died in 1949, his ideas only began to spread from the 1950s onwards through the publication of his writings and the testimonies of his pupils (Salzmann, 1987: 139-140).

The abstract dichotomy of modernity/postmodernity could also make sense of this shift – that is to explain why those engaged in spiritual quests should increasingly favour Knowledge of the Self over Macro Knowledge. Here are two significant researches:

The loss of attraction for forms of universal Reason, which can lead to a macro form of knowledge, can be found in Roseneau (1992: 127-133). She shows us how, in the later twentieth century, critiques of modern reason and macro knowledge(s), often seen as linked under the rubric of postmodernity, have diffused through Western society. Included in these critiques is a questioning of universalist thinking and a rejection of what was understood as totalitarian and oppressive tendency of instrumental reason - supporting macro knowledge.

Still in this field of study, Lipovetsky (1993) offers an understanding of the growth of preference for the knowledge of the self. He refers to a second revolution of individualism that occurred in late modernity - what others would call postmodernity⁴ - and which is characterised by narcissism. In this revolution, knowledge is still important, but it is that of oneself (Lipovetsky, 1993: 91). Those caught up in these changes mainly focus their attention on themselves and do not invest themselves in 'macro identities' as much as in the past. They focus on constructing their own identity, their own personality, and on generating their own knowledge.

On the basis of my fieldwork and of these accounts, it can be argued that a shift towards the self happened in what is called postmodernity or late modernity. This focus on the self has, of course, been present before, but mainly in philosophies. What is significant is that this focus on the self seems to have significantly become part of people's everyday life since the 1970s (Lipovetsky, 1993) and could have changed people's approaches to alternative spiritualities, or what is also referred to as esotericism; this is presented below.

1. Esotericism Unveiled and Esotericism Simplified⁵

Tiryakian (1974: 265) claims that

[...] a crucial aspect of esoteric knowledge is that it is a secret knowledge of the reality of things, of hidden truths, handed down, frequently orally and not at all at once, to a relatively small number of persons who are typically ritually initiated by those already holding this knowledge.

And as Riffard (1990) confirms: 'who says esotericism says discipline of the arcana. The criterion of esotericism mainly taken into account, the most visible characteristic, the affirmation the most often renewed among the esotericists, indeed, is the cult of the secret'.

Even if the term esotericism is a multi-dimensional term and is hard to grasp (Faivre, 1998; Hanegraaff, 1998), in my argument I want to focus on the secrecy dimension of esotericism, even if according to Faivre (1994), there is a danger of reductionism if following that path. However, the notion of secret can have different understandings as it is found in Simmel (1991); these are 1- secret as a form of protection (64), 2- secret as giving a sense of power for the one maintaining it (93) and 3- as a sociological finality in itself (79), that is a doctrine will be kept secret for people who want to find it, mainly to force them to gain the experience of this knowledge. This article takes into account that the choice of definition of esotericism might determine the results of the analysis below, but unfortunately, the scope of this paper does not allow further discussion.

There is no need to explore the complexity, the origin and history of esotericism.⁶ What is significant for this article is the moment when esotericism became caught up in the modernisation process – say from the 1850s onwards. During that period, the idea and practices of secrecy as presented above progressively decayed in some innovative esoteric groups; and this, as I will claim below, might itself have in the long term contributed to the shift of preference from Macro Knowledge to Knowledge of the Self. Esotericists, from groups such as Spiritualism, the Theosophical Society, Modern Occultism and Guénonism, by the nineteenth century wanted to deliver their 'knowledge' in a clear language to the general public and promote democracy in their groups. They wanted transparency as opposed to secrecy. In this, Riffard (1990) sees a vulgarisation of esotericism, and calls this phase 'Esotericism Unveiled'.

But through the years, and more specifically during so-called postmodernity – say from the 1970s onwards - we can posit that this process changed from this idea of sharing the doctrines into that of over/simplifying them. As an example, I compare the book by the 19th century Occultist Papus (1994), *The Tarot of the Bohemians*, which even if it supposedly answers the secret of Tarot Cards, underscores macro knowledge - e.g. cabbala - and, is difficult to understand for the non-initiated; whereas a kind of do-your-Tarot-cards-reading-yourself-in-five-minutes book is faster to grasp by focussing on easy and quick information about the cards, and without entering into any theoretical underpinnings - c/f. a Knowledge of the Self.

If the tendency in the 'Esotericism Unveiled' phase was to reveal the secrets and to present purported macro knowledge(s): the tendency in what Riffard (1990) calls 'Esotericism Simplified' is to simplify what was already revealed a century ago and encourage the practitioner to develop his or her knowledge. It is necessary to point out that even if this is a major tendency, there are spiritual practitioners who engage in a very profound spiritual research - or in search of macro principles. However, what is emphasised is that the simplification of esotericism has given the opportunity for everyone to have access to this, sometimes commercially prepared, knowledge.

Esoteric knowledge is no longer secret. Even if there still exist initiatory societies with diverse rites of initiation, those rites are also found in the literature. For Trevelyan (1984, 30) there is no more need to access what he calls the 'secret wisdom' in groups, because the access for individuals is now facilitated. Schlegel (1995, 110) writes about the French esotericist, Raymond Abellio, who declared that our time would be synonymous with the end of esotericism. Every spiritual technique - e.g. astrology and numerology - is now easy to find and to learn and there is no need to belong to any secret group. Secrecy being the key element of 'traditional' esotericism - according to the definition adopted above - it can be argued that since modernity, secrecy has been opened up, and is now on the shelves of New Age bookshops and, even on the Internet.

As Bauman (1997: 180) notices, transcendence was once the privilege of an aristocracy of culture such as saints, hermits, mystics, ascetic monks or dervishes. Now, this transcendence is in every individual's reach and this could explain my participants' favour for Knowledge of the Self over Macro Knowledge.

This taste for Knowledge of the Self seems to reflect a new tendency in esotericism, and it is a paradox to notice that the 'vulgarisation' of Macro Knowledge may have caused not a wider interest in Macro Knowledge, but in the longer term, Knowledge of the Self. We may even wonder if Macro Knowledge was mainly valorised because it was kept secret; perhaps, what endures is the mystery, not the explanation.

Through this analysis between Macro Knowledge and Knowledge of the Self, and because of this focus on the Knowledge of the Self rather than on Macro Knowledge as in - supposedly - previous spiritualities, it is thus possible to argue that the spirituality commonly called 'New Age', is, on the level of its everyday life practices, an innovative form of esotericism.

Conclusion

I propose that perennism, outlined above as perennial philosophy, may serve as an ideal type conceptualisation of the spirituality variously referred to as New Age or mystical-esoteric nebulae. I have chosen 'perennism' (based on the Latin root) rather than 'perennialism' (based on the English word) because 'perennialism' is

often used as a synonym for perennial philosophy in Anglo-Saxon culture(s) (see Faivre, 1994; Heelas, 1996). Coleman (1994) - an insider writer - uses perennial philosophy to describe New Age. York (1995: 46) mentions an insider, Tarcher, who compares the core of New Age thought with Huxley's Perennial Philosophy. Ted Peters (1991: 56) also draws some parallels between the two. I take these convergences as some measure of validation of my own description of perennism and analysis of it as an ideal typification of the spiritualities commonly, but as we have seen unhelpfully, labelled New Age.

In the light of my small sample, 'Perennism' appears to be a more empirically informed and theoretically derived concept than 'New Age'. Consequently, it would be tempting to say that sociologists of religion would do well to adopt the new term 'Perennism' in preference to the hermeneutically deficient term 'New Age'. I suggest that the notions of monism, the Human Potential Ethic and the knowledge of the self, serve as significant interrelated elements that specify a fundamental paradigm of the extraordinary array of contemporary spiritual actors I interviewed in 1996-1997.

The triune definition of perennism I have been heading towards may now be stated in the following terms:

Perennism is a spirituality which interprets the world as **Monistic** and whose actors are attempting to develop their **Human Potential Ethic** by seeking **Spiritual Knowledge**, mainly that of the Self.

Now that this definition is laid down, it is worth comparing it with Heelas and Hill's works, and see if it is possible to refine the heuristic conceptualisation inspired by my informants.

Heelas (1996) characterises 'New Age' as a 'self-religiosity'; however, this element is only the 'Human Potential Ethic' part of the triad discovered above and is, according to my approach, unidimensional of the vast 'New Age' panorama. Furthermore, the notion of self-religiosity could refer to Christian mysticism and even, to a certain extent, to the Overman philosophy of Nietzsche. Chryssides (1999, 278) also claims that the term 'Self Religion' is not without its problems.

Another point is the prediction of the relevance of 'New Age' Spiritualities in Western Societies by Hill (1993). He summarises Westley (1978) and Campbell's (1978) works and suggests the following detailed inventory as a way of typifying the characteristic features of 'New Age' Spiritualities: 1) individualism, 2) idealisation of human personality, 3) tolerance, 4) syncretism, 5) monism, and 6) empowerment of individuals. From this, Hill argues that 'New Age' is not new because of the recurrence of these 6 elements in earlier alternative spiritualities. I have argued the contrary above with the help of a unique - or a seventh for Hill - element specific of 'New Age', that is knowledge of the self. This specific type of knowledge, even if not new among esoteric philosophies, is new in the everyday life practice of my participants. His points on 'individualism', 'idealisation of human personality' and 'empowerment of individuals' are merged into the 'human potential ethic's component

of perennism. However, Hill's point on 'tolerance' and 'syncretism' are not included in my definition of perennism, and, in the light of my informants, should be incorporated. Perennism thus becomes a syncretic and tolerant spirituality.

Notes

1. York (1995: 48-88) has analysed the spokespersons of NAS in a descriptive way and discusses the fact that some of these people tend to eschew the designation 'New Age' (49). It is not my intention to summarise the works by Ram Dass, Edgar Gayce, Ruth Montgomery, Shirley MacLaine, etc; for such an analysis, see York.
2. My translation.
3. Paraphrased from Rosenau (1992).
4. For Lipovetsky, the first revolution of individualism happened with modernity, but this individualism was mainly restricted to the economic sphere and to some avant-gardes movements.
5. Term used by Riffard (1990).
6. See Hanegraaff (1998) and his analysis of the different perspectives in this field of study.

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