

THE NEW CONSCIOUSNESS MOVEMENT

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The new consciousness movement is an enormously complex phenomenon. Indeed, the term 'movement' is perhaps inappropriate to describe it, for it is more a ragged series of convergences in research among disciplines as diverse as physics, biology, psychology, sociology and religion, more a profound response, on a wide series of levels, to a deep disillusionment with science and technology. Dialectic tensions, some commentators argue, are shaping a struggle between 'mechanists', those holding to the rigid scientific world view of 'nothing-buttery', and 'mystics', people whom Koestler calls 'peeping toms at the keyhole of eternity'.¹ One of the two leading commentators and polemicists of the movement, William Irwin Thompson, compares what he sees as happening to the Reformation, and others, more pessimistic, compare it to the onset of the Dark Ages. Thompson, an historian who once taught at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, explains why religion is central to the movement: "Americans have to go to the 'New Religions' because our old religions of Catholic, Protestant and Jew can only give us the institutional culture of religion and not the experience of God. . . . if is pointless now to argue over whose fault it was. We now have to accept the fact that we live in a time when the esoteric traditions of Christianity are dead and the esoteric traditions of western science are fast dying, so that the whole light of the civilisation that came out of Christian Europe is flickering toward a new age of darkness".²

Theodore Roszak echoes Thompson's feelings, and adds a powerful criticism of Christianity, common throughout the movement: "Nothing is guaranteed about our trek into the Aquarian frontier, least of all the capacity for regaining our spiritual balance without many trial and hazardous error. . . . In the withering skeptical climate that has prevailed in our intellectual mainstream since the age of reason, even the best clerical minds learned to tailor their commitments to one or the other of the current liberal or humanist fashions: natural religion, romanticism, the social gospel, psychoanalysis, existentialism, Death-of-God. Thanks to this strategy of cunning adaptation and protective colouring, the churches have not only been poorly armed against their antagonistic opposition, but they have surrendered their opposition as an

independent cultural force, and so have nothing to contribute to the exploration of the Aquarian frontier. The last thing it seems our clergy expected to witness was the reemergence of religion in the modern world as an autonomous, culture-redeeming experience of gnosis and prophecy".³

There is very grave danger in aspects of the new consciousness movement. Groups which can be said to be part of the movement, like the Unification Church of Sun Myung Moon, some of the gurus about, and some of the practices of aspects of the movement lead often to domination, authoritarianism, and grave mental, psychic and physical damage from the careless use of consciousness altering drugs, techniques and therapies. Ultimately, however, Roszak and Thompson are optimistic. Roszak is impatient with people who criticize what is happening wholesale, calling on them to make concessions to what he sees as "a very daring experiment in finding a way out of a very lethal and toxic moment in Western culture. . . You have to allow a certain margin for mistakes. . . It's a life-saving process, and we all have much to gain from it".⁴

Five major convergences have been isolated within the movement, in which themes coalesce sufficiently to be grasped succinctly. United States Inter-Varsity Press editor Dr. Jim Sire, while antagonistic to much of the movement, has presented what he sees as the core of thinking in the movement in "*The Universe Next Door*".

The self is the prime reality. Consequently, as we come to realise this, we are on the verge of a cultural and evolutionary shift in human nature. We can see examples of the new man already. Jean Houston, from the Foundation for Mind Research in New York, argues for a psychonaut programme to 'put the first man on earth'. She argues that man is 'taking a quantum leap into a whole new way of being. . .'. She is so optimistic that she says that if we learn to "play upon the vast spectrum of consciousness. . . we would have access to a humanity of such depth and richness as the world has not yet known, so that our great-great grandchildren may look back upon us as Neanderthals, so different will they be".⁵ Similar comments are made by people like Theodore Roszak in his recent "*Unfinished Animal*", John C. Lilly, the famed Dolphin researcher who turned to experimenting with himself, Andrew Weil, drug researcher who worked with Leary before the Millbrook days, and 'New Age' guru David Spengler from Findhorn in Scotland. Sire is critical of the absolute subjectivity of this sort of thinking, saying that "so long as the self is king, so long as seeing is being, the seeing self remains securely locked in his private universe".⁶

There appear to be two major dimensions in the cosmos. There is the visible self, which is accessible through ordinary consciousness, and a

sort of 'mind at large' which is accessible only through altered states of consciousness. This is Sire's 'universe next door', Castaneda's 'separate reality' or Lilly's 'other spaces'. Lilly, for example, in his *'Autobiography of Inner Space'*, *'The Centre of the Cyclone'*⁷ speaks of moving through levels of perception, through spaces within his own consciousness, aided by hallucinogenic drugs, meditation, and sensory deprivation experiments. Two characteristics appear in this 'other reality'. Everything is vividly colourful, as, for example, readers of *'Journey to Ixtlan'* would know. Castaneda saw the 'lines of the world' "fluorescent white lines which crisscrossed everything around me".⁸ The 'supermind'⁹ is peopled with strange beings. Lilly, dosed with 300 mg of LSD, "moved into a space of astonishing brightness, a space filled with golden light, with warmth, and with knowledge. . . . Slowly but surely, the two guides began to come toward me from a vast distance".¹⁰

Sire argues that central to the new consciousness movement is 'cosmic consciousness'. The term may have been coined by Canadian R.M. Bucke at the turn of the century. He said that "the prime characteristic. . . . is of the life and order of the universe. . . an intelligent enlightenment which alone would place the individual on a new plane of existence — would make him almost a member of a new species. . . an indescribable feeling of elation and joyousness. . . a sense of immortality, a consciousness of eternal life".¹¹ The key aspect of this, for Sire, is the point made by Bucke, and echoed by others in the new consciousness movement, that "when the self perceives itself to be at one with the cosmos, it is at one with it. Self-realisation, then, is the realisation that the self and the cosmos are not only of a piece but are the same piece".¹² One important point, though not universal in the new consciousness movement is that many writers stress that cosmic consciousness is above morality. Some imply that unity is above morality; others, including Thompson, stress that morality must remain and be integral to the New Age.¹³

A macabre area of research is thanatology, in which death, to quote Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, a leading worker in this field, 'is the key to the door of life'.¹⁴ Death is seen as another altered state of consciousness, a mere transition to another plane of existence. Coupled with thanatology proper is the study of Out of the Body Experiences (OBE's) pioneered by Robert Monroe. Elements of "new consciousness" we have seen already reappear here, with Kübler-Ross reporting, after interviews with the near-dead, that 'I would describe the other world as looking similar to ours except that the colours are very vibrant'.¹⁵ She also has her own spiritual guide 'over there'. Great parallels are drawn between the 'Tibetan Book of the Dead' and newer work. Indeed, when Aldous Huxley died, his wife gave him LSD and

read from the 'Tibetan Book of the Dead' to ease the passage of his spirit to the other side.¹⁶

For Sire, the most important point is the three distinct attitudes within the new consciousness movement to the metaphysical question of reality. The first is characterised as the 'occult version'. The occult version holds that there is a separate, distinct reality which is entered through altered states of consciousness. Huxley, in his essay *'The Doors of Perception'* describes entering into a Mind at Large where there 'is a posthumous state of the kind described in Sir Oliver Lodge's book *'Raymond'* but there is also a heaven of blissful visionary experience; there is also a hell of the same kind of appalling visionary experience suffered here by schizophrenics and some who take mescaline; and there is also an experience, beyond time, of union with the divine Ground".¹⁷ Lilly has a number of theories on this point: the guides or guardians: "may be representatives of an esoteric hidden school. They may be concepts functioning in my own human biocomputer at the supraspecies level. They may be members of a civilisation a hundred thousand years or so ahead of ours. They may be a tuning in on two networks of communication of a civilisation way beyond ours, which is radiating information throughout the galaxy".¹⁸

The second version is a psychedelic version, expressed above by Lilly as "concepts functioning in my own human biocomputer". Whatever the image, whoever is encountered 'out there', it is all a creation within the mind while in an altered state of consciousness.

The third version, important for Sire because his evangelical background predisposes him to grapple with these areas at a philosophical level, involves what he calls 'conceptual relativism'. In his book *'The Natural Mind'* Andrew Weil argues that 'reality as we experience it is a product of our conceptual models and that we are free to choose among various conceptual models available to us'.¹⁹ LeShan and Capra, among others, in studying modern physics, comment that depending on what equipment is used, an electron appears to be a particle or a wave. Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle is cited by Koestler to reinforce this point. Indeed, Heisenberg himself said that "when we get down to the atomic level, the objective world in space and time no longer exists, and the mathematical symbols of theoretical physics refer merely to possibilities, not to facts".²⁰ Conceptual relativist views, says Sire, ensure that "what one believes to be true, either is true or becomes true in one's mind, within limits to be determined experimentally and experientially. These limits are beliefs to be transcended".²¹

Sire, and other commentators, among them sociologist Edwin M. Schur, criticise the new consciousness movement on three major points.

As we have noted, some writers argue that with higher states of consciousness, and as we unify ourselves with the cosmos, categories of good and evil will disappear. "If human survival means submission to a new elite. . . . then the finer ethical distinctions may be too costly. To survive, men may have to abandon traditional notions of freedom and dignity". In an interesting coincidence, Thompson visited physicist C.F. von Weizacker and Guru Gopi Krishna at the Max Planck Institute for Social Research in the Munich suburb of Starnberg. At Starnberg Jurgen Habermas works. Gopi Krishna and Weizacker have been experimenting with Tantric yoga to create a lofty class of men. Krishna "looks to a 'new lofty' class of scientists with elevated kundalinis to take over the leadership of the world in the wake of a nuclear war. Lesser men may be corrupted by power, but Gopi Krishna feels confident that there can be no problems with men whose brains have been illuminated by kundalini".²²

Sire also criticises the new consciousness movement for returning us to an almost gothic universe, peopled by a pantheon of 'guides', 'guardians', 'devas' and 'spirits' which must be placated with rituals or incantations. He is very strong in his condemnation, and retreats too quickly into the Bible for cover. While demonology opens up a chamber of horrors, and Christians especially condemn spirit-study outright, it is an area which must be approached more carefully than Sire has done. Findhorn, for example, is based about a population of 'earth and plant spirits' called devas.²³ There are three issues which must be confronted squarely when this difficulty arises: are people who claim to have seen devas or wood spirits the victims of mass hallucination, or are they charlatans, or do wood spirits exist? In his fascinating study of *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries*, W.Y. Evans Wentz, who incidentally translated the 'Tibetan Book of the Dead', argues that sightings of fairies are a product of the collective anthropomorphosis of archetypal images deeply lodged in Celtic subconsciousness.²⁴ Sire has the former demons now "sneaking around psychology laboratories".

His final point, though still reflective of the somewhat restricted world view out of which he speaks, is more substantial. The "new consciousness" amounts to a form of epistemological nihilism in which only individual experience is the guide. "Either the self is god and the new consciousness is a readout of the implications of that, or the self is not god and thus is subject to the existence of things other than itself".²⁵

How do we thread our way through this maze? Sire quotes approvingly Samuel McCracken, who says that what we need is a "certain simpleminded set of working assumptions: that there is a reality out there, that we can perceive it, and that no matter how

difficult the perception, the reality is finally an external fact".²⁶ Theodore Roszak calls for 'spiritual intelligence'. "The power to tell the greater from the lesser reality, the sacred paradigm from its copies and secular counterfeits. . . without it, the consciousness circuit will surely become a lethal swamp of paranormal entertainments, facile therapeutic tricks, authoritarian guru trips, demonic subversions". He goes on to draw his 'spiritual intelligence' from the older sources of visionary knowledge which he says lie at the root of mystic and occult schools: "the perennial wisdom, the 'secret doctrine', the 'old gnosis' . . . if the idea of such an original and universal epiphany is a 'myth', then it is one of the *good* myths; in fact, the myth which underlies our very conception of truth as that to which all people voluntarily acquiesce in their common humanity".²⁷

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Footnotes

¹ For material on the 'Mechanists vs Mystics' see Thompson, W.I., interviewed in 'Time,' August 21, 1972, p. 34 ff.; Guinness, O. 'Mechanists vs. Mystics', *Right On V. 7 No. 4, November 1975*, p. 3 ff.

² Thompson, W.I., *op. cit.*, pp. 153-154

³ Roszak, T., *'Unfinished Animal'* London, Faber and Faber, 1975, pp. 44-45

⁴ Roszak, T., quoted in Fry and Long, M., *Beyond the Mechanical Mind* Sydney, A.B.C., 1977 pp. 44-45.

⁵ Masters, R., and Houston, J., interviewed in 'Intellectual Digest', March, 1973. See also 'Saturday Review' February 22, 1975, p. 16 ff.

⁶ Sire, J., *'The Universe Next Door'*. Downer's Grove, I.V.P., 1976 p. 164.

⁷ Lilly, J.C., *'The Centre of the Cyclone: An Autobiography of Inner Space'*, New York, Bantam Books, 1973.

⁸ Castaneda, C., *'Journey to Ixtlan'* New York, Simon and Schuster, 1974, pp. 297-298.

⁹ Rosenfeld, A., 'Mind and Supermind' *Saturday Review Press*, February 22, 1975. This issue is a special one with excellent material on the new consciousness.

¹⁰ Lilly, J.C., *op. cit.* pp. 54-55.

¹¹ Bucke, R.M., quoted in James, W., *'The Varieties of Religious Experience'* New York, Collier/Macmillan, 1976, p. 313.

¹² Sire, J., *op. cit.*, p. 171.

¹³ See Thompson, W.I., *op. cit.*, p. 82 and p. 29.

¹⁴ Kübler-Ross, E., quoted in 'Thanatology: Death and Dying' *Spiritual Counterfeits Project April, 1977*, p. 5.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁶ Huxley, L.A., *This Timeless Moment: A Personal View of Aldous Huxley* New York, Ballentine Books, 1971, pp. 249-251.

¹⁷ Huxley, A., *'The Doors of Perception'* and *'Heaven and Hell'* Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973, p. 112.

¹⁸ Lilly J.C., *op. cit.* pp. 36-37.

¹⁹ Weil, A., *'The Natural Mind'* Boston, Houghton Mufflin, 1972, p. 212.

²⁰ Koestler, A., *'The Roots of Coincidence'* London, Picador, 1972 p. 51; also quotes Heisenberg at p. 51.

²¹ Lilly *op. cit.* p. 9.

²² cf. Thompson, W.I., *op. cit.*, p. 117 ff., and Skinner, B.F., *'Beyond Freedom and Dignity'* Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973 p. 180, ff.

²³ See, for example, *'The Magic of Findhorn'* Fontana/Collins by Peter Hawkins, 1975.

²⁴ Evans-Wentz, W.Y., *"The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries"* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1911.

²⁵ Sire, J., *op. cit.*, p. 202.

²⁶ McCracken, S., 'The Drugs of Habit and The Drugs of Belief' *Commentary* June 1971 pp. 43-51; quoted by Sire at p. 203.

²⁷ Roszak, T., *'Unfinished Animal'*, p. 13.