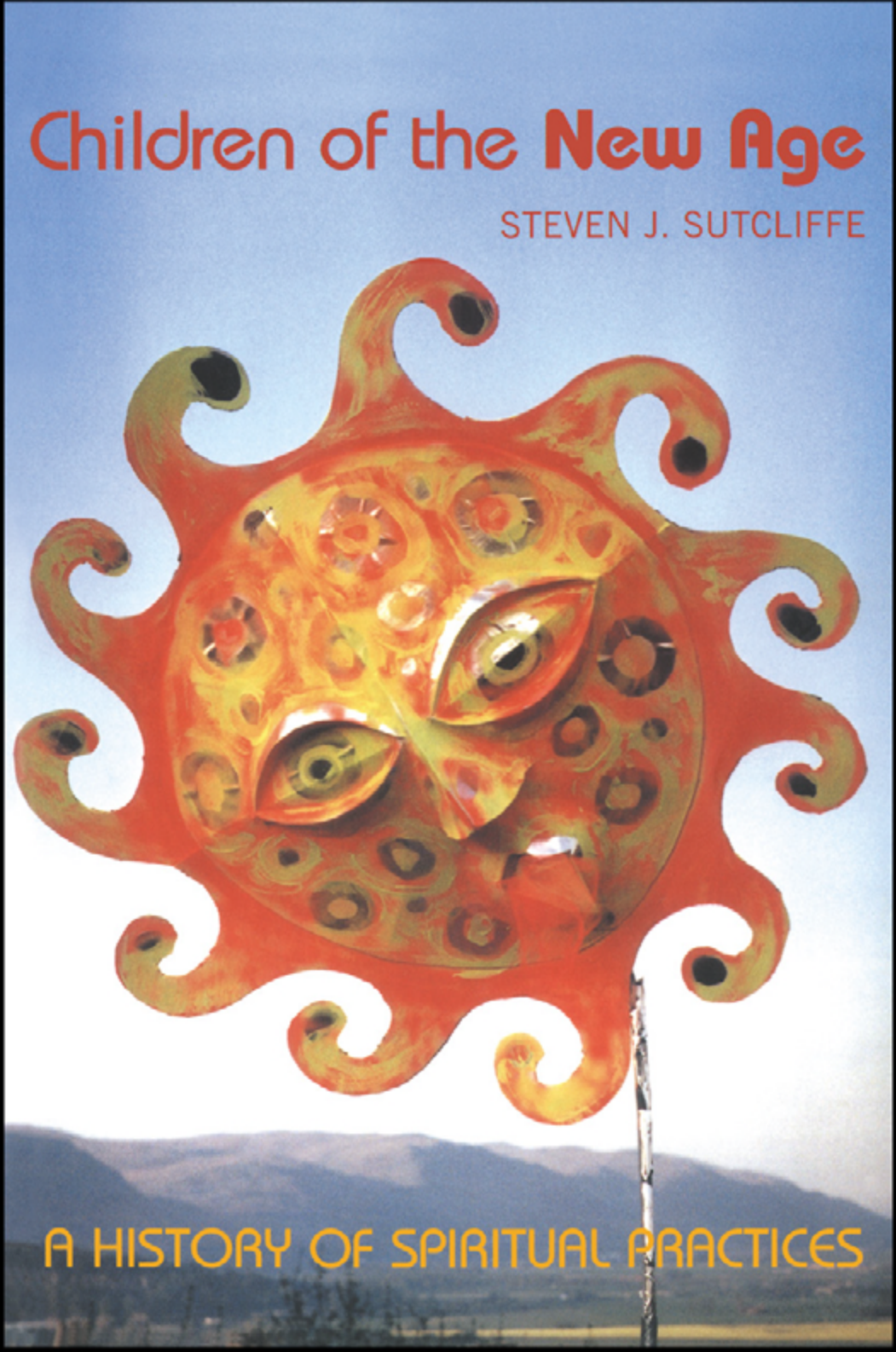
Children of the New Age

STEVEN J. SUTCLIFFE



A HISTORY OF SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

CHILDREN OF THE NEW AGE

'a much-needed and necessary history of New Age phenomena . . . impressive, sensible and insightful. . . . This book will stand out.'
Professor Daniel Wojcik, *University of Oregon*

Elements of New Age culture have emerged from the underground to become a central part of everyday life for many in the West. The demand for organic foods and natural remedies; the growing general interest in spirituality and healing; the peace and anti-road lobbies; and the burgeoning global rave scene are all influenced by the variegated counterculture that New Age represents. But what exactly *is* New Age? How should we define its impact upon contemporary Western culture?

Children of the New Age, a pioneering history of the New Age phenomenon, combines original ethnographic research with rare archival material to give a definitive overview of New Age belief and practice from the 1930s to the present day. It chronicles the development of alternative spirituality from embryonic beginnings to a universal trend: from its inception within enclaves of Rosicrucians, occultists and Alice Bailey's neo-theosophists to its modern-day incursions into mainstream political, musical and artistic cultures. But this is also a distinctly *critical* history. New Age culture, says Steven J. Sutcliffe, is notoriously variegated and hotly contested, exposed to competing strands of revelation and apocalypse. Caught between the hippy explosion and the doomsday scenarios of millennial Christianity and UFO groups, it has been the preserve both of extreme religious ascetics and of humanistic countercultures lauding the Edenic perfection of this-worldly existence. At stake in its history are controversial questions of value, and of its perceived status as a discrete and unified movement. What 'counts' as New Age? To whom does New Age culture belong? Is it now genuinely mainstream, or does its egalitarian, grass-roots, small-group ethos resist easy appropriation and succinct politicisation?

Supported by first-hand accounts of the author's adventures in alternative culture, including firewalking and spiritual healing workshops and life at the Findhorn community, and by archival correspondence and publications recovering the 'lost' history of alternative spirituality during the 1950s and 1960s, this is an incisive and colourful survey of New Age trends and controversies. It calls for a fresh understanding of New Age as an emergent and fragmented folk idiom, complete with its own revealing loyalties and fractures; not a unified 'movement' or 'new religion', but a diffuse cultural force reflecting ever-shifting currents of popular sentiment.

Steven J. Sutcliffe is a Research Fellow in Religious Studies at the University of Stirling. He is co-editor of *Beyond New Age: Explaining Alternative Spirituality* (2000) and author of numerous papers on counterculture and popular religion.

CHILDREN OF THE NEW AGE

A history of spiritual practices

Steven J. Sutcliffe

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FOR OWEN (b. 1994) AND NEIL (b. 1999)

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Finally, the 'Children of the New Age' invoked in my title is the name Sheena Govan (1912–1967) gave to her small group of spiritual seekers in the mid-1950s (according to Glasgow's *Sunday Mail*). This trace of an oral tradition in popular culture serves as an appropriate title for the 'New Age' genealogy proposed here; it also acknowledges the unique contribution of a forgotten architect of 'New Age'.

Steven J. Sutcliffe
Stirling, February 2002

INTRODUCTION

On the genealogy of 'New Age': a field note

> Genealogy does not resemble the evolution of a species and does not map the destiny of a people. On the contrary, to follow the complex course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion; it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations – or conversely, the complete reversals – the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us; it is to discover that truth or being do not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents.
>
> (Foucault 1977: 146)

This book is an historical ethnography of 'New Age' spirituality in Anglo–American culture between the 1930s and the 1990s. My first contact with this polyvalent expression 'New Age' was in the mid-1970s when I bought a second-hand copy of a book by Alice Bailey, grandly entitled *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*. I remember the sombre, plain, midnight-blue jacket – the house style of the Bailey books – and the sheer bulk of the book. Although its 1,283 pages of text defeated me, I was intrigued to find in the endpapers the following invitation:

> Training for new age discipleship is provided by the *Arcane School*. The principles of the Ageless Wisdom are presented through esoteric meditation, study and service as a *way of life*. [Emphasis in original]

Then in 1982, I was hitch-hiking to Southampton one evening to visit a friend when I met an older traveller, heading north. He told me his destination was Findhorn. I was surprised, for I knew Findhorn was at the other end of the British mainland and it seemed late in the day to be starting out so far. But the hitchhiker made light of this, confessing a long-standing attraction to Findhorn. 'We're all searching for something, aren't we?', he said, as we parted.

My own spell 'on the road' was then only just beginning. My friend in Southampton was working with young people in and out of psychiatric institutions, and I naively associated their careers with a psychic rebellion against the *status quo*. I was also immersed in punk rock, which meant I scorned the 'hippy-ish' sentiments – that 'searching for something' – of my fellow-hitchhiker. I thought all *I* was seeking was the quickest lift into Southampton – certainly not the meaning of life. But punk itself can be seen as an expression of a wider 'secular apocalyptic' folk culture, as Wojcik (1997: 121ff.) has convincingly argued, and from this perspective there was more in common between the punk music apocalypse of the late 1970s and certain 'New Age' prophecies of the 1950s and 1960s than either of us could have guessed that afternoon beside the dusty dual carriageway.[1]

In the event I was to spend much of the 1980s seeking out spiritual alternatives to the conservative Anglicanism I'd grown up with on the one hand, and 'the system' in general on the other. I remember savouring the books of the popular writer Colin Wilson (b. 1930), including his new romantic manifesto *The Outsider* (1956) and his digest of 'alternative' religion, *The Occult* (1978 [1971]), my paperback copy of which carries the spectacular blurb 'the ultimate book for those who would walk with the Gods'. I also read *Peace News* and the anarchist bulletin *Freedom*. In 1982 I came to Scotland to work as a volunteer for the Edinburgh Cyrenians, first in their city hostel for homeless and 'at risk' young people, later at a rural small-holding. I became a vegetarian and lived in a co-operative household where a lively 'alternative' culture unfolded, incorporating sexual politics (feminist and anti-sexist men's groups), a wholefoods co-op – and a healthy crop of cannabis plants in the sunny lounge. Between 1983 and 1986, in no particular order, I read popular accounts of Buddhism and Taoism, consulted the *I Ching*, learnt to read Tarot cards at the Salisbury Centre, and had my astrological birthchart prepared and interpreted (Sun in Aries, Moon in Libra, Leo rising, as it happens). I practised Zen meditation and struggled with T'ai Chi Chuan. I visited the Samye Ling Tibetan Buddhist Centre in Dumfriesshire and hovered on the brink of formally converting to Buddhism. I also found time to spend periods on the dole and to work as a busker and community musician. One regular musician friend was a TM practitioner and Gurdjieff reader, another belonged to the School of Economic Science. In 1986 I became informally apprenticed to a craft shoemaker who followed Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy and spent a couple of years making shoes in the south-west of Scotland. Later still, back in Edinburgh, I joined groups in Gestalt therapy and assertiveness training, and helped to organise several men's gatherings. In short, throughout the 1980s I rode the carousel of emergent spiritualities. I sought with a vengeance.

And yet 'New Age' – as slogan, emblem, formal ideology – was scarcely an item in this eclectic mix. I encountered the expression, if at all, largely in connection with the Findhorn community, and this despite the fact that many of my pursuits at this time – communal and co-operative living, reading

'mystical' texts, practising meditation, using occult divination and personal growth techniques – are widely said to be signs of belonging to a 'New Age movement'. But I met no one in Edinburgh in the 1980s who prophesied a New Age, who described themselves as a 'New Ager', or who identified with a 'New Age movement'. Certainly a diffuse collectivity of individuals, networks, societies and small groups existed that amounted to a loose culture of 'alternative' spirituality. But when in the mid-1990s I found myself researching 'New Age' in an academic role, I was puzzled to find the experts directing me back to what were, to me, familiar haunts and practices – except that now they had been definitively repackaged. Confusion increased when I began to reconstruct a genealogy of the field and discovered a lost history of 'New Age' as an apocalyptic emblem in the 1950s and 1960s. In fact 'New Age' had been employed in this way from at least the late 1930s/early 1940s in a tradition of functional spirituality irrigated equally by 'alternative' and 'popular' discourses. Practitioners drew on occult, Eastern and neo-Christian practices and motifs, developed in a lay and amateurist culture, in order to prepare themselves for an imminent 'New Age'. This would be a new world order that would be inherited by the chosen few who had survived the predicted social and economic collapse or – after 1945 – possible nuclear holocaust (versions varied).

This particular history of alternative spiritual practice has nowadays been almost entirely obscured by a preference on the part of commentators to conflate 'New Age' with the post-1970s idiom of 'mind, body and spirit'. The latter, although certainly connected with earlier manifestations, is – as I will show – substantively a very different kettle of fish from the apocalyptic millennialism of the mid-century Anglo–American subcultures. So how could such radically different versions of 'New Age' arise? The first 'New Age' currents – pre-1970s – tended to be ascetic, puritanical and other-worldly; the second – post-1970s – were emotionally expressive, hedonistic and firmly this-worldly. What kind of a 'movement' could so radically change its stripes? The genealogy of 'New Age' made it clear that some elementary empirical questions remained unanswered.

Apart from giving a taste of some of the basic problems tackled in this book, the point of this reflexive 'field note' is neither to celebrate my affiliations to 'New Age' – whatever this turns out to be – nor to deny them. Rather it is simply to indicate my own historical engagement with the field so that the reader knows that my approach is informed by 'emic' as well as 'etic' knowlege – a crucial distinction I elaborate in Chapter 1. Ross (1992: 554) is surely correct when he remarks:

> I don't believe that anyone undertakes any kind of cultural study – chooses an object for such a study – that one is not personally invested in. All such research is deeply autobiographical – how could it not be?

Yet having acknowledged this, care is required. Reflexivity arising from one's embodied presence – one's personal 'stake' – in a field can be overplayed. The subjectivity of the participant–author in a book which, like this one, incorporates fieldwork observation and participation as well as primary source analysis, should not be allowed to overshadow the total picture.[2] By acknowledging my earlier career as a 'seeker' in and on the fringes of 'New Age', then, I recognise the methodological requirement for scholars to position themselves within their narratives – without, however, taking them over.

Related to this point is my interest in working with a reflexive model of Religious Studies as critical research done 'at home', on 'ourselves', in line with critiques in anthropology of the traditional disciplinary preoccupation with studying 'exotic others elsewhere' (Davies 1999: 32–8). By researching familiar territory – my own 'backyard' biographically, culturally and geographically – this book contributes modestly, I hope, to the wider project of placing important aspects of Anglo–American culture in proper historical and anthropological context. The historical evidence assembled in this book is vital, for it both severely undermines the unity and homogeneity of what has been passed off as the 'New Age movement' at the same time as it recovers a real social milieu – or, better, an overlapping series of milieus – connected (here explicitly, there obliquely) with the emblem. But to claim that 'New Age' is a term operationalised and interpreted within a series of social collectivities is a far cry from identifying a *movement* or even a coherent complex of ideas or *Weltanschauung*. What we find – to cite Foucault again – is more like an 'exteriority of accidents': a bricolage of more or less interchangeable practices and values given focus by an ambiguous eschatological emblem. Nevertheless I do not propose a relativist account of 'New Age'. I want to argue against Drane's (1991: 18–19) claim that 'the amazing diversity of the ingredients that go into the New Age mixture will always ensure that any definition we come up with can, with perfectly good reason, be challenged by someone else whose experience of it has been quite different', on the grounds that some definitions, reconstructions and genealogies are simply more plausible than others. This book attempts to supply them. So I offer a critical realist analysis of 'New Age', by which I mean merely that I assume the existence of a social world and our ability, through reflexive methodology and critical self-consciousness, to gain useful, replicable knowledge of it (cf. Davies 1999: 17–25).

Before I sketch the book's argument, let me clarify its methodological base. This is eclectic and interdisciplinary, as befits its hybrid subject, and generally conforms to Martin's (1990: 116) call for histories of religion to be 'conceived in an ethnographic grain'. The book aims to reconstruct the lost history of 'New Age', incorporating Foucauldian genealogy, reflexive ethnography and an anthropological approach to popular reading practices. It aims to reconfigure 'New Age' studies from the ground up, thereby closing down some stale avenues for good and opening up a new set of problematics for future work. To accomplish this I move regularly between a broad lens and close, detailed study.

I attempt a number of specific operations: I deconstruct the received wisdom of a 'New Age Movement'; I reconstruct a viable genealogy of 'New Age'; I recover lost histories and ethnographies of popular practice and spiritual biography; and I reconfigure 'New Age' as a modern domain of popular religious discourse and practice. This strategy effectively removes 'New Age' from the field of 'movement' studies (new social movements, new religious movements) altogether and reconceives it as a harbinger of the shift in contemporary religion to small group practice and a discourse of 'spirituality'.

A few words are required on this discourse. There is now a wide range of spiritualities on offer in Anglo–American culture, and it can be argued that their often sympathetic interaction with emergent cultural values problematises 'alternative' as their most accurate descriptor. Some spiritual styles remain dissident or countercultural; many are evidently *an* alternative in the sense that they are distinctive, even quirky, options but nevertheless are now generally regarded as 'variant' rather than 'deviant'; others have fully entered popular culture and are diffused in advertising, television, the world-wide web, paperbacks and magazines. Nevertheless I do use 'alternative spirituality' as a convenient tag for the extensive historical field from which 'New Age' emerged. This should also make clear that the book in no way *conflates* 'alternative spirituality' and 'New Age'. Quite the opposite: I argue that 'New Age' is merely a particular genealogy within a far broader field.

Case studies, largely though not entirely from the British mainland, carry the narrative and substantiate an argument that might equally well have been sourced primarily in North America, North/Western Europe or Australasia. However, certain key networks and groups are, as we shall see, unique to the UK. In Chapter 1 I set the scene, set out my methodology, establish the book's arguments, and review the existing field of 'New Age' studies. Chapter 2 gives a broad historical survey of currents of alternative spirituality in the 1920s and 1930s before focusing on Alice Bailey's post-Theosophical ideology of a 'New Age' as a primary discursive source for post-war activists, often mentioned by commentators but never properly unpacked. Chapters 3 and 4 provide a detailed, contextualised narrative history of the acts and communications of key agents in British 'New Age' networks in the 1950s and 1960s. I focus in particular on the pre-history and germination of the Findhorn community, probably the best-known 'New Age' centre in the world, but I also trace and substantiate international connections to the US and New Zealand. Chapter 5 is in effect the lynchpin of the book, arguing that a popular hermeneutical shift in the meaning of 'New Age' took place at the turn of the 1970s, in which 'New Age' as apocalyptic *emblem* of the near future gave way to 'New Age' as humanistic *idiom* of self-realisation in the here-and-now. Chapters 6 to 8 then document this more recent, idiomatic 'New Age' in the form of ethnographies of my own involvement as a participant–observer in the mid-to-late 1990s in certain prominent Scottish sites and activities implicated in the earlier genealogy of 'New Age'. These include an Alice Bailey meditation group, the

Findhorn colony, and various workshops and fairs in holistic health networks. Chapter 9 reviews the evidence of previous chapters and argues for a shift in focus away from fantasies of a 'New Age Movement' and towards contextualised accounts and analyses of 'seeking', the emergent discourse on a reflexive lay 'spirituality', and the nature and function of the small, flexible cultural institutions that emerge once the 'New Age' dust has settled. Throughout I use inverted commas around the expression:[3] this is not a fad but a necessary device to keep my problematisation of this category constantly in the reader's gaze and hence to defer that mystification which is the inevitable result of slippage from taxon to essence.

Part 1

EMBLEM

1

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF 'NEW AGE'

> It is . . . not the religion of the professionals, religion in its doctrinal purity, that I have sought to recover, but rather concrete religious phenomena with all the impurities of a specific social context.
>
> (Obelkevich 1976: vii).

> Different kinds of practice and discourse are intrinsic to the field in which religious representations (like any representation) acquire their identity and their truthfulness. From this it does not follow that the meanings of religious practices and utterances are to be sought in social phenomena, but only that their possibility and their authoritative status are to be explained as products of historically distinctive disciplines and forces. The anthropological student of *particular* religions should therefore begin from this point, in a sense unpacking the comprehensive concept which he or she translates as 'religion' into heterogenous elements according to its historical character.
>
> (Asad 1993: 53–4)

This book proposes a thorough deconstruction and reconfiguration of 'New Age' in which both the label itself and the phenomena associated with it are subjected to critical scrutiny or a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' in the sense identified (if not endorsed by) Ricoeur (1970: 32–3). My general argument runs as follows. First, I unpack the concepts 'New Age Movement' and 'The New Age'. That is, I take issue with the hegemonic view that 'New Age' is a 'movement' of some kind or even a homogeneous entity at all. Such formulations essentialise a set of mixed, meandering, even divergent social processes more akin in presentation to Deleuze and Guattari's (1988: 3ff.) proliferating 'rhizome' than to a unified organic entity. I also question the covert metaphysics informing the reifying expression 'The New Age', which effectively periodises manifestations by assigning them to a homogeneous cultural epoch or astrological era. Both terms are unsatisfactory: 'New Age' as a 'movement' is, as I will show, a false etic category and a formulation such

as 'The New Age' simply reproduces an emic agenda.[1] In fact, 'New Age' represents at its narrowest a specific millennialistic emblem, and at its most diffuse – at its most symbolically overdetermined – a loose idiom of humanistic potential and psychotherapeutic change that could be, and has been, called anything from 'human potential' to 'mind body spirit', from 'holistic' to 'spiritual growth'. Asad's call to recover the 'heterogenous elements' of particular religious formations is apt here, for little else in the history of modern religion turns out on close inspection to be as variegated and diffuse in character as 'New Age'.

To deconstruct 'New Age' in this way is also to engage with the long-standing debate in Religious Studies on the analytical purchase of broad categories such as 'world religion', 'religion' and 'religions', even particular constructs such as 'Hinduism' (Baird 1971, Fitzgerald 2000). Such debates have called the universalism of this vocabulary of religions into question, underscoring the specific historical circumstances of its genesis and development. 'New Age' is no exception here; indeed, it exemplifies an enduring mystification in category formation in Religious Studies.

Approaching the subject through a hermeneutic of suspicion also raises the question of whose interests are served in classifying as 'New Age' the Fortean diversity of phenomena typically associated with the term.[2] Through taxonomic sleight-of-hand the phenomena have been accorded a homogeneity and concrete presence that the historical record simply does not permit. But this does allow 'New Age' to be set up like a stooge to be knocked down by a variety of vested interests. For example, it has been demonised by conservative evangelical Christians, particularly in the US, as is evident in the very titles of Constance Cumbey's *The Hidden Dangers of the Rainbow: The New Age Movement and Our Coming Age of Barbarism* (1983) and Texe Marrs' *Dark Secrets of the New Age* (1987).[3] In other constituencies, 'New Age' is sniggered at as 'touchy–feely' spiritual consumerism. Parties with axes to grind here include rationalist sceptics (Basil 1988) and paternalist social scientists (Bruce 1998), for whom 'New Age' is a codeword for a shallow, self-indulgent, even – one senses – *plebeian* and *vulgar* spirituality that should not be given scholarly oxygen. This unlikely confluence of critics shows that 'New Age' has triggered curiously exaggerated and intemperate reactions in very different social power bases. This only reinforces an important but largely occluded function of 'New Age' studies: to connect data about alternative spirituality and religious innovation to comparative studies in the sociology of knowledge and anthropology of culture, rather than remaining a pocket of colourful anecdotalism tagged on to the end of Religious Studies.

Deconstructing 'New Age' has a second major revisionist function: it contributes to the wider process of recovering and reassessing 'lost' expressions of religion, for 'New Age' flourished as a major current within a much broader field of popular religious practice. When William Bloom, an influential activist in 1980s and 1990s Britain, describes 'New Age' as

> the visible tip of the iceberg of a mass movement in which humanity is reasserting its right to explore spirituality in total freedom.
>
> (Bloom [ed.] 1991: xvi)

we can identify some typical concerns of religion in a popular mode: grassroots activism, strategies for everyday living, ideals of spiritual autonomy and egalitarianism, and – not least – an ideology of direct, unmediated access to 'experiences'. Nevertheless, I shall be arguing throughout this book that the cultural arena within which such voices are raised has no overarching purpose, no compelling agenda, beyond that of expressing whatever 'spiritual' values are deemed appropriate for the moment and – through a radical tolerance – upholding the rights of others to do the same. That is, what debate there has been among practitioners on the meaning of 'New Age' has most often amounted simply to a nexus of conversations, occasionally arguments, within a decentred and theoretically unbounded matrix of viewpoints and pressure groups, here locally-focused, there widely-dispersed, but almost always mutually tolerant and hence diffusive rather than regulative. Rather than constituting a social movement or a new religious movement, then, 'New Age' was originally an apocalyptic emblem whose encoded semantics were sufficiently rich and multiform for a later generation to take it over as a codeword for currents in post-1960s popular religion.

And this is the third point in my argument: 'New Age' is not a distinctive empirical formation but a (now rather stale) codeword for the heterogeneity of alternative spirituality, best classified as a sub-type of 'popular religion'. Here are two simple definitions of 'popular religion'. The first is from Thomas (1995: 387):

> If 'official' religion [is] defined as religion founded on authoritative documents and propagated by religious specialists, priests or hierarchy, then the term 'popular' can apply to any layperson, whether peasant or ruling-class, who adopts beliefs and practices which may be at odds with the religious specialists' views.

A clear illustration of this can be found in the rhetoric of David Icke, a former footballer, broadcaster and Green Party spokesman, now a prominent contemporary advocate of 'New Age'. In his early memoir-*cum*-manifesto *The Truth Vibrations* he writes:

> The new spirituality involves a one-to-one relationship with the Godhead and the higher intelligences. We will no longer believe that all our sins can be forgiven by a priest appointed by the church hierarchy. Why do we need a human to arbitrate between ourselves and God when we have our own link?
>
> (Icke 1991: 127)

Icke's is an unusually combative declaration of anti-clericalism and anti-institutionalism. But of course the problem with this definition of popular religion is that it reproduces a crude dichotomy between 'official' and 'popular', which – although clearly attractive to Icke, for example – may not always, or even typically, obtain in the field. This is particularly the case in 'New Age', where to the extent that Thomas's 'specialists, priests, or hierarchy' can be found at all, they exist in secondary institutions with relatively high-turnover user groups. Although a strong strain of neo-Christian piety and mysticism has flavoured the arena, the stance is less one of being 'at odds' with Christianity than with the hegemony of 'institutional religion'. At the same time such disdain for 'tradition' does not prevent practitioners from co-opting historical formations deemed fit and useful for everyday spirituality, including popularising mystics of the Christian churches as spiritual rebels. Hence a second working definition of popular religion teases out some important social psychological dimensions underpinning 'New Age's disdain for institutional religion:

> Popular religion is the quest for (a) *more simple*, (b) *more direct*, and (c) *more profitable relationships with the divine*.
>
> (Maldonado 1986: 6; emphasis in original)

The field is replete with evidence of appeals to less complex, less mediated and more rewarding ideas and practices. The aforementioned William Bloom urges readers to 'do something, anything, to deepen your relationship with the sacred' (Bloom 1993b: 18, 19). Gill Edwards, one of a plethora of independent workshop leaders in 1990s Britain, writes in *Stepping Into The Magic*: 'It is time for *everyone* to become a shaman, a metaphysician, a dream-weaver, a walker-between-worlds – each in our unique way' (Edwards 1993: 192).

This brings me to my fourth and final point, one that is in fact applicable to all academic study of religion. Obelkevich's conceptualisation of his subject as 'concrete religious phenomena with all the impurities of a specific social context' precisely describes my own view of religion as a cultural institution among others. The special interest of 'New Age' manifestations is that, by dint of their fluidity, ephemerality and heteroglossia, they compel us to reassess the implicit boundary maintained by most scholars between 'culture' and 'religion'. I would argue that this differentiation functions to safeguard the agential purity of the latter from the contaminating contingency of the former. 'New Age', however, is contaminated – that is, hybrid and syncretic – culture *par excellence*, and proper comprehension and extension of this insight dissolves the scholastic illusion of 'world religions' and their sub-types. In the dizzying field of cultural hybridity that opens out before us once the 'New Age' umbrella is collapsed, we can glimpse the truth of Deleuze and Gauttari's (1988: 7) application of the rhizome to linguistics 'there is no language in itself . . . only a throng of dialects, patois, slangs, and specialised languages'. In Religious Studies this amounts to

Martin's (2000: 282) reconceptualisation of religion as 'the ubiquity of locally contingent and syncretistic formations', which is to say that 'local variation *is all there is!*'

Fieldwork, history, text: methodology in the study of 'New Age'

> Any theory of religion must be able to deal adequately not only with structure but with change and must include within its stipulations historical as well as contemporary data.
>
> (Martin 1990: 112)

> The qualitative researcher is not unlike the detective in the classic murder mystery. Starting with a few clues, the detective questions persons connected with the case, develops hunches, questions further on the basis of those hunches, begins to see a picture of 'what happened' start to emerge, looks for evidence pro and con, elaborating or modifying that picture – until finally the unknown is known. The murderer is caught; what was once a mystery is now understandable.
>
> (Wiseman 1979: 113)

Since I am concerned in part with the methodological shortcomings of the field, a brief review of my own methods follows in the interests of transparency and reflexivity. To begin with I employed ethnographic fieldwork and textual analysis, with Denzin's (1970: 307–10) well-known principle of 'methodological triangulation' in mind – meaning the generation of multiple measures or profiles of one and the same phenomenon. This is particularly germane to the study of religion, which – *pace* the efforts of anthropologists and ethnographers – still tends to be dominated by analyses based largely on texts. That this is still largely the case in 'New Age' studies is suggested by Heelas's admission (1996: 7) that 'academics . . . simply do not know much, if anything, of the thousands of different things that are going on'. One aim of the present study is to map historically and ethnographically the sheer variety of people's popular practices and interpretations, which scholars can find when they start to look for religion in its proper habitat.

I conducted the bulk of my fieldwork in Scotland. Given my rationale for a multidisciplinary approach to the subject it seemed realistic to tackle an accessible arena. In the end, most of the fieldwork was done within a few hours of where I live in central Scotland, some of it in 'old haunts' mentioned in the introduction. Doing ethnography 'at home' in a compact European country (population *c.* 5 million) that is also a keenly theorised cultural–political community (Paterson 1998, Sutcliffe 2002) certainly encouraged serendipitous connections between people and places that kept warm my autobiographical stake in the field. For example, while browsing for primary sources in an

Edinburgh second-hand bookshop I discovered that the proprietor was a nephew of Peter Caddy, co-founder of the Findhorn community and one-time husband of Sheena Govan, the charismatic teacher of the proto-Findhorn group in 1950s London. Later I found that, at the time of her death, Govan herself had been lodging in the same village in south-west Scotland where I myself, a generation later, had lived during my shoemaking career. Not only this, but a certain Alice Bailey had in 1895 first encountered her spiritual 'Master' at an aunt's country estate in the same locality (Bailey 1973: 35). I interpreted these developments as pleasing coincidences, although they were later reinterpreted by one or two informants as Jungian 'synchronicities' which demonstrated that, esoterically, I was 'meant' to write this book. That aside, some details were clearly chance incursions into the area: Sheena Govan had no previous connections with the south-west of Scotland, and Alice Bailey came from a very wealthy Manchester family and could presumably just as easily have met her 'Master' at another country seat. Similarly, the colony that became the Findhorn Foundation community might have sprung up in the Trossachs if the staff group of Peter and Eileen Caddy and Dorothy Maclean had been laid off there, instead of in the north-east of Scotland. Indeed, but for Sheena Govan's family connections in Scotland, the proto-Findhorn group would have had no reason to move to Scotland at all. And yet, as I will show, Sheena Govan is a key figure in the genealogy of 'New Age', Bailey its chief theorist and the Findhorn colony an international site of 'New Age' practice. The contingent turns out to be essential.

There is an additional reason for restricting the ethnographies to Scotland. The distinctiveness of Scotland within the UK, demonstrated on educational, legal and ecclesiastical grounds since 1707, presents an opportunity to remark in passing upon the differing acculturative potential of 'New Age' in a society that still retains a Presbyterian cultural resistance to Anglo–American popular culture (Highet 1972, Brown 1997). The demographic profile of Scotland's prime 'New Age' site, the Findhorn colony, demonstrates this by default: founded by English and Canadian nationals, Findhorn has been dominated by American, German and English people, with Scots scarcely represented at all. But notwithstanding the residual cultural resistance of Presbyterianism, the contemporary profile of 'New Age' in Scotland appears to be coming into line with other countries in the grip of globalising and postmodernising forces: the rest of mainland Britain, Western Europe, North America and Australasia. Hence at the same moment that Highet (1972) was arguing for the distinctiveness of Presbyterian culture, the directory *Alternative Scotland* (Wright and Worsley 1975: 114) reported 'a great upsurge of non-Christian religion' and 'an increasing number of groups simply interested in borrowing from any religion or none for the purpose of developing the potential of the individual'. By the 1990s the Church of Scotland (1993: 44) was reporting 'active promotion of New Age ideas and practices in Scotland' with Drane (1993: 57) now claiming that 'most unchurched people in Scotland today are more likely to construct

their worldview from aspects of the New Age outlook than from elements of mainstream Christianity'. And a founder-proprietor of the successful 'Body and Soul' bookshop in Edinburgh told me in January 2000 that the 'New Age' idiom was now diffused through the general culture and was actually 'more widely accepted' in Scotland than in England, where he thought it had become a middle-class preserve.

Overall the Scottish experience serves to emphasise the ability of 'New Age' to override certain indices of social and cultural difference through trafficking in a common currency, a point reinforced by Hanegraaff's (1996: 13) observation on 'New Age' discourse in The Netherlands and Germany as 'an English–American affair by any standards'. The Scottish ethnographies presented in Chapters 6 to 8 can thus be read as a particular – a Scottish – case study in the dissemination of an Anglo–Americanised praxis. That is, their Scottish markings represent a vernacularisation of a common stock predominantly moulded by Anglo–American popular cultural values. These in turn reproduce a model of 'spirituality' in which reflexive and interactive agents work within a web of egalitarian social relationships, drawing upon a cluster of populistic beliefs and practices.[4]

The emics and etics of New Age

> All notions of replicability and testability fly up the chimney when the world as seen by the observed is capriciously muddled with the world as seen by the observer.
>
> (Harris 1969: 33)

> The final product, it seems to me, should reflect a kind of biculturalism in which the ethnographer understands cultural phenomena in both emic (native) and etic (outsider) ways.
>
> (Wagner 1997: 90)

Earlier I referred to the 'emics and etics' of 'New Age'. This terminology refers to the epistemic frame of the interpretations we hear in any particular account of cultural events. The neologisms 'emic' and 'etic' were first used in print in the 1950s by a linguist, Kenneth Pike, who dropped the prefix from the conceptual pair 'phonemic/phonetic' to develop a more parsimonious, higher-order terminology derived from linguistics but applicable to culture in general (Headland 1990: 15). According to Pike 'an emic unit' is 'a physical or mental item or system treated by insiders as relevant to their system of behaviour and as the same emic unit in spite of etic variability' (Pike 1990: 28). An etic unit, on the other hand, is an 'outside disciplinary system' (ibid.) formulated for the purposes of scanning and then de-coding an unfamiliar emic system (ibid.: 34). In Pike's view, 'etics' – or cross–cultural 'science' – is the means to emic – indigenous – ends.

In the 1960s the anthropologist Marvin Harris began to theorise the emic/etic distinction in a way that challenged Pike's prioritisation of 'emics' (Harris 1990: 48–50). Harris accepted Pike's basic understanding of the emic unit but introduced a strong etic agenda: namely, 'the task of building a diachronic, synchronic, comparative, and global science of society and culture' (ibid.: 49). For Harris, etics are something more than emics writ large; indeed, if etics can be shown to be merely artificially extended 'local' categories, they fail the test and remain merely emic. In Harris's view etics provide the basic epistemology of academic knowledge: they are literally that which 'makes the social sciences possible' (ibid.). They are 'accounts, descriptions, and analyses expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the community of scientific observers' (Lett 1990: 131).

Clearly the emics and etics of culture go to the heart of contemporary debates on the flaws in the so-called 'Enlightenment project' of generating universal categories and explanations. For my purposes, it is the cognitive, and specifically epistemic, dimension of emics/etics that is particularly stimulating: as Lett (1990: 132) notes, 'it is our *understanding* of the phenomena, not the phenomena themselves, that is either emic or etic'. Emics and etics are not a fixed dichotomy of representation but dynamic and symbiotic frames of discourse: emics can transform into etics and back again. The important point is making the epistemic shift a conscious, predictive and transparent act, which underscores the active or operative nature of the distinction between emics and etics. That is, while etics cannot but be emics at their point of origin, etic viability lies precisely in the ability to function as cross-cultural explanatory units. In claiming to have achieved this, etics lay themselves open to testing as 'fakes', and indeed may be exposed as such. In this sense, an etic formulation is falsifiable whereas emics simply are not. Purported etic formulations such as 'The New Age' or 'New Age Movement' are a case in point: as we shall see, they are fakes.

Hence I would agree with Wagner's 'biculturalism', quoted at the head of this section: that is, an appropriate academic agenda for an intercultural, polycentric world is to obtain and 'broker' *both* kinds of knowledge – emic and etic, 'insider' and 'outsider'. This strategy is particularly applicable to the task of reconstructing the subjectivities of religious discourses on the one hand, and locating these in historical and cultural context on the other, such as I attempt to do here with 'New Age'. However we juggle the precise weighting of emics and etics in the final reckoning, what is crucial is to preserve the creative epistemic tension between them. This functions to preserve alterity or 'otherness' in social life because it builds in cognitive difference. This in turn exposes the 'moccasin-walking' model of 'empathetic' Religious Studies as a hollow, even mystified, metaphor: we can never 'get into someone else's shoes' in any useful academic sense. By explicitly and transparently differentiating between emic and etic 'voices', then, we can avoid this 'capricious muddle' of categories and explanations.

This brief excursus into emics and etics benefits 'New Age' studies twofold. First, it allows a real emic history of the 'New Age' emblem to be envisaged and recovered, something impossible before, because the (false etic) discourse on a 'New Age Movement' erased traces of difference. Second, the genealogical approach I use also throws light on the wider field of alternative spirituality in which 'New Age' has been deployed (Sutcliffe and Bowman 2000). Neither of these benefits is available in extant portrayals of the field, which overwhelmingly homogenise 'New Age' by collapsing emic and etic differentials, as we see in a brief review of the secondary literature to follow. In short, throughout the book I counterpoise emic and etic categories to generate a dynamic, reflexive and transparent account of 'New Age' and its location in a broader field of alternative spiritual practice.

Fieldwork: roles and ethics

Fieldwork practice invariably shades off into a grey zone in which the line between the 'informed' and 'uninformed' consent of practitioners becomes blurred (Richardson 1991: 64). As Fine (1993: 268) bluntly asserts, 'the world is secured on secrets'.[5] Taking into account these realistic constraints on a theoretically 'pure' fieldwork, I nevertheless almost always worked openly rather than covertly: that is, telling participants who I was, what I was doing, and – if I knew at the time – why. Usually I mentioned my own thoughts and feelings on the practice or issue at hand. But sometimes I was vague about my motives and opinions since – as Fine (1993: 274) shrewdly puts it – 'not only are we unsure of the effects of explaining our plans but often we do not know what we want until well into the research project'. An open or 'overt' approach allows for a degree of negotiation, accommodation and – if necessary – disillusion on all sides. Consequently the difference between emic and etic perspectives that a covert approach would collapse through concealment is stimulated in overt work:

> There can be no question of total commitment, 'surrender' or 'becoming'. There must always remain some part held back, some social and intellectual 'distance'. For it is in the 'space' created by this distance that the analytic work gets done,
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> (Hammersley and Atkinson 1992: 102)

We can now grasp emics/etics as a cognitive correlate to the fieldworker's embodied marginality. Instead of the alterity of researcher and researched – and of emics and etics – being a problem, it becomes a boon, a positive tool for comparative knowledge and theory. Nevertheless, the indeterminate nature of the role of participant–observer, the dynamic relationship between emics and etics, and the fluid and deregulated arena of practice that constitutes the 'New Age' field created an ambiguous experience of fieldwork, since my presentation