Jung and the New Age: A Study in Contrasts

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Jung’s name has been associated with the New Age for about three decades, but now his alleged “influence” on this movement is being formally proposed and articulated. In New Age Spirituality, Duncan Ferguson argues that Jung has played a major role in the development of this popular spirituality, and more recently in The New Age Movement sociologist Paul Heelas claims that Jung is one of “three key figures” (the others being Blavatsky and Gurdjieff) who is responsible for the existence of the movement. In similar vein, Nevill Drury maintains that “Jung’s impact on New Age thinking has been enormous, greater, perhaps, than many people realise.” Everywhere the claim is being made that the New Age movement is a product of Jungian interest, and today spiritually oriented therapists from a diverse range of fields all claim to be Jungian, or refer to Jung as their spiritual ancestor, scientific authority, inspiration, or source. The task of this paper is to critically evaluate how “Jungian” the New Age is, and to explore the similarities and differences between New Age spirituality and Jungian metapsychology.

Jung clearly has several points in common with the New Age. Both Jung and the New Age agree that spiritual meaning is no longer synonymous with, and can no longer be contained by, the religious establishments and institutions of Western culture. Both are interested in exploring non-Christian, pre-Christian, or post-Christian sources of spiritual meaning; both are interested in gnosticism, alchemy, and Eastern contemplative traditions. Jung and the New Age look forward to the future with a degree of optimism, seeing a “spirit” that works through history heralding a future goal or ideal that has yet to be realised. Jungian psychology investigates individual case-histories and significant or popular cultural productions (such as the Ufo sightings) for what these phenomena are “pointing to” or “suggesting”. Unlike the institutional Church, which typically looks back to the past and to a charismatic founder for its spiritual standards and moral teachings, Jung and the New Age
look forward to a future vision that, perhaps paradoxically, teaches us how to live in the present. The present lives in anticipation of a “better” future, and for Jung the future ideal can be summed up in the word “wholeness”, an ideal that he frequently contrasts with the Christian ethic of “perfection”.

The New Age, too, likes to privilege “wholeness” above “perfection”, just as it emphasises the immanent God above a transcendental God. It sometimes seems that New Age spirituality is simply Jungian psychology writ large, taking Jung’s model to the outer world and dispensing his wisdom to the multitudes in need of spiritual direction. But of course what the New Age seems to be doing, and what it actually does, are very different things. The New Age is not a coherent religious philosophy and often appears to be driven more by commercial interests and market forces than by any particular philosophical position. It is broadly Jungian in its emphasis on the spiritual authority of individual experience (which Jung borrowed from Protestantism), on the need for religious and cultural transformation (which Jung derived from German Romanticism), and on the importance of unorthodox ways of achieving unity with the Creator (which Jung borrowed from Gnosticism, Hermeticism, and Alchemy). However the New Age is non-Jungian or even anti-Jungian in a number of important respects, and these will be considered here.

The value of the New Age is not in how well or how badly it manages to translate the Jungian model of reality to the public domain, but in how it challenges Western religious orthodoxy to arrive at new and culturally relevant interpretations of the human spirit. The New Age is a “cry of the heart” from the masses, a cry to make spirituality relevant to our times and emotionally related to individual human experience. It is a popular movement which reverses many of the attitudes, trends, and views that are found in traditional Western religion, especially views on the body, sexuality, nature, and desire. The New Age appears to reject mainstream secular culture, but in many ways it simply repeats the patterns and preferences of our materialistic and consumerist society. It is a movement which follows and extends an archetypal process which is based on the “feminine principle”, is compensatory to the patriarchal West, and has links with Romanticism, Gnosticism, Paganism, Naturalism, Nudism, and Occultism.
The New Age is perhaps “Jungian” by default. If it appears Jungian it is not because it has used Jung, but because it draws its life from a particularly strong archetypal current that we might associate with Jung because he clearly mapped this psychospiritual territory. Jung was especially interested in the archetypal processes that were “compensatory” to the patriarchal West, so this brings him even closer to the interests of the New Age. However, Jung did not naively celebrate or idealise these compensatory currents in the Western psyche. He identified these currents and named them, but his response to them was always critical, detached, and ambivalent. Jung continually sought to integrate warring opposites and contradictory elements (such as Paganism and Christianity) into a larger whole, and he almost never championed one set of archetypal claims at the expense of another. Although Jung prophetically saw that “feminine” and “pagan” contents were on the rise in the Western psyche, he never advocated abandoning ourselves to these contents; on the contrary, he felt that the task of individuation involved resisting these collective forces and developing a critical response to them. Any collective movement which identifies with an archetypal process is, virtually by definition, not going to accord with Jungian taste, which is based on the ethics and aesthetics of individuation. Jung’s attack on what he called “identification with the collective psyche” is conveniently and deliberately ignored by all those New Age therapists, consultants, advocates, and shamans who like to freely celebrate and even “worship” the newly constellated archetypal contents. The pagan longings, gnostic impulses, and unorthodox spiritual strivings that have been repressed for hundreds of years in the West have been released after the collapse of Christendom’s authority, and now, without any inhibition at all, we find these contents paraded before us.

From God to Gaia: spiritual reenchantment in Western culture

a. Prevailing attitude in Western secular culture: the ancient Gods are long dead, and, more recently, our Jewish-Christian God the Father has also died. There is no metaphysical or spiritual life, and the world has been emptied of religious meaning. Belief in the spiritual has been eradicated by secular education, and religion today is merely the province of the uneducated, the poor, or the superstitious. The modern, progressive search is for social and
personal liberation, and among the first things to be thrown out as we march toward freedom are subjugation to religious authority and obeisance to the sacred.

b. Prevailing attitude in Western religious culture: traditional patriarchal religion is losing authority as the world grows more pagan, and as society becomes more permissive in its attitude toward desire, sexuality, and temporal satisfactions. As the Western superego weakens, allowing the more “natural” impulses to govern social life, the Church often considers that it has to strengthen its resolve and bolster the claims of the transcendental life. Hence the churches often appear beleaguered and reactionary, locked in a defensive situation and holding back the tides of change.

c. New Age attitude: is to move with the flow of the times, to admit the realm of desire and longing, to encourage the pagan movement of society, but to add to this movement a sacred or spiritual dimension. The New Age basically awards “spiritual blessing” to trends and attitudes that are already existent in Western culture: consumerism, hedonism, materialism, and narcissism. The New Age does not offer a critique of society, but simply mythologises and mystifies the things that already preoccupy us. So, in a Western society drenched in sex and obsessed with the body, the New Age proposes “sacred sex” and argues that the body is “the temple of the soul”. In a society governed by material desires and instant gratification, the New Age proposes a vitalistic belief in “green energy”, sees richness as a symbol of “spiritual wealth” (in a reversal of Christian morality), and regards “deep relaxation” as a holy pursuit (reversing the Christian sanctification of work and toil). The New Age, like the secular mainstream, thumbs its nose at the authority of the Church, sees Puritanism as dreary and dull, and is not much interested in resurrecting our recently deceased God the Father.

The New Age is especially interested in the pagan deities of ancient times, the spirits of shamanistic cultures, and the divine figures of Eastern religions. Although diverse and polytheistic in its tastes, the dominant deity of the New Age is probably the Earth Goddess or the Mother Goddess, whether imaged as Gaia, Demeter, Cybele, Aphrodite, Astarte, or numerous other similar figures in various cultural and historical contexts. The New Age is profoundly unhistorical, universalist, and essentialist in its philosophical focus. Its slogan
seems to be “any God(dess) will do”, so long as it is not the God we have suffered with for the last two thousand years of official religion. In ancient mythologies, the Earth Goddess never appears by herself, but is always featured with her consort, son-lover, or priest, and the same is true for her most recent appearance in the New Age. The Goddess’s consort usually symbolises her own fecundity and fertility, and so his phallic capacities are generally emphasised, as in such figures as Pan, Dionysus, Adonis, Tammuz, and especially Priapus. In the New Age, the son-lover or priest of the Earth Goddess is often celebrated in a composite figure who is sometimes called the “Green Man”. The Green Man symbolises the fecundity of the earth, the seasonal cycle of growth-death-rebirth, and the “unity” of all things natural and organic. If Christ is mentioned in the New Age, he is usually engaged only in his form as the Great Mother’s Son, as the dying and resurrecting year-god who is ritually mourned by his Mother and by the Holy Women at the foot of the cross. The New Age, that is to say, might adapt the Roman Catholic portrait of Christ to its own purposes, but it has no time at all for the Protestant and patriarchal Christ.

The New Age emphasises the redemptive and urgent mission of its religious vision. It aims to bring new enchantment and mystery into a world that has grown tired, depressed, and disenchanted. It seeks to rekindle the life of the spirit in a world that has become overly rational, cynical, disillusioned. It seeks to reawaken body awareness in a culture that has become too caught up in the head. Above all, the New Age has an ecological and world-saving imperative: to recover respect for earth, matter (which derives from the Latin “mater”, meaning “mother”), physicality, and the biological environment in a time where patriarchal progress has perpetrated enormous damage (some of it irreversible) upon the biophysical web of life. The catch-cry is that only the Mother Goddess and her Green Man can save us from the plight of the patriarchal West. This new myth is found not only in ecophilosophy and ecospirituality, in deep ecology and ecological theology, but also in popular movies such as “Fern Gully”, in eco-cartoon and warrior shows such as “Captain Planet”, ecological pamphlets, activist literatures, and popular fictions. New Age ecological values and mythologies are also found in the public education system, environmental studies programmes, green politics, the media, and entertainment. We are witnessing the rise of a
powerful and archaic mythologem, a testimony to the fact that “myths” never die, and that in secular and “de-mysticised” cultures like ours myths not only survive but thrive - they are all the more powerful for not being regarded as “mythical”.

d. Jungian response: since Jung died in 1961, some years before the New Age had gained international momentum, and before the ecological movement had been established (in Jung’s day it was referred to as “conservation”, and usually the province of the politically conservative), Jung could not be expected to comment directly upon these social phenomena. However, he had foreseen the rise of paganism in the Western psyche, and he had in fact already identified this resurgent paganism as the archetypal source for twentieth-century fascism and national socialism.

On religious matters, Jung was both Christian and New Age. He could see that the old, pre-Christian Gods and Goddesses were still alive, and often discovered in the psyche as the core nuclei of complexes and psychoneuroses. Jung was interested in the pre-Christian, the non-Christian, and the post-Christian, but unlike the New Age he was not anti-Christian. He did not suffer from anti-Christian prejudice, nor did he feel obliged, like James Hillman after him, to sing the praises of ancient Greece while denouncing the Jewish-Christian heritage. Jung was committed to the task of restoring the Christian God to cultural dignity and to human understanding. Jung could see that the one-sidedness of patriarchal religion and culture would necessarily constellate the awakening of compensatory matriarchal and feminine archetypal figures, but his response to these figures was ambivalent. On the one hand, we must encourage the archetypal feminine to present itself after centuries of neglect and repression, on the other hand, we can ill afford to allow the feminine to take “possession” of consciousness; it must be integrated and not allowed to dominate in a new, equally extreme and hence equally undesirable, one-sidedness.

Jung had a positive mother complex, and this inclined him to many of the matriarchal arts and sciences that had been “banned” by the patriarchy, but which were already becoming available to the public in Jung’s own day. Jung’s interest in astrology and divination is well known, and he virtually single-handedly recovered the ancient art of alchemy to modern scientific and psychological scrutiny. Jung was also ecological and romantically attached to
landscape, earth, trees, long before these attitudes became celebrated and entrenched in popular ecology. Perhaps more than Jung himself, his major follower Erich Neumann was steeped in the awareness that the archetypal feminine was about to displace and challenge the archetypal foundations of patriarchy, as we can see especially in his *The Great Mother* and *The Archetypal World of Henry Moore*. More recently, Jungian analyst Edward Whitmont has devoted an entire volume, *Return of the Goddess*, to the phenomenon of the awakening of the archetypal feminine and her phallic son-lover in the context of modernity and postmodernity.

Jung would agree with the New Age that if a major change in cultural attitude is to be effected, including a dramatic change of heart about man’s relationship to the environment and the physical world, then archetypal support will have to be called upon to enable humanity to “feel differently” about the world. Social changes that operate purely from the rational level, such as a call to awaken moral conscience about the world, or a call to intensify ethical responsibility about the environment, will not be effective, because man’s deeper emotions have not been activated or aroused. Jung was not a social positivist, did not believe in the fantasy that society is inevitably getting “better”, but he was convinced of the power of myth and its ability to mobilise human actions and galvanise collective response. If a spiritual transformation can be sought, and a new perspective be developed that comes from reviving the ancient view that the earth is our “ancestral mother” or spiritual source, then so much the better for the future of the earth. I am sure Jung would feel that mythologisation would have to accompany revolution, and that returning Gaia, Demeter, or Aphrodite to living mythic status is a small price to pay for the survival of the world itself, its biodiversity, and its inhabitants.

As mentioned, Jung would be critical if he felt that a new cult of Gaia, or the so-called Gaia Hypothesis, would come at the expense of God the Father, the masculine principle, and the animus. What would be the point, he would ask, of two thousand years or more of differentiation of the archetypal masculine, if we are prepared to throw it all out in a panic response to the plight of the world? Why must we head for a cultural *enantiodromia* (a running from one opposite extreme to another), when we have the opportunity to consider
both sides of the archetypal spectrum? Why settle for a new one-sidedness when our deepest imperative, both to ourselves and to our culture, is to a struggle towards wholeness and unity? By all means bring on Gaia and bring back Demeter, but let us engage these archaic personalities in a meaningful dialogue with Christian spirituality and Western religion. While we are at it, let us also work toward a recovery of the lost feminine dimension within the Jewish-Christian God as well (as Sophia, Lillith, Mary, Wisdom, and Holy Spirit). But in tossing out our cultural bath-water, Jung would warn that throwing out the Baby Jesus as well would lead to full-blown repression of the masculine spirit, and to dangerous repercussions and consequences from the neglected or banished realm of the masculine.

From Suffering to Bliss: the new addiction to peak experiences

a. Prevailing attitude in Western religious and philosophic traditions: that humanity is essentially tragic and life is synonymous with suffering. There is a pervasive pessimism about human value and potential, which has arisen from the doctrine of original sin, the notion of humanity’s fallenness and innate tendency toward self-serving egotism. Christian spirituality achieves its goal not by increasing the stature of the self, but by displacing the self altogether in favour of humility, emptying, and a kind of negative fulfilment, whereby the divine increases its fullness in direct proportion to the reduction of ego. In Western humanism, too, the self is felt to be inherently limited and flawed, and any attempt to overcome human limitation inevitably meets with satanic arrogance and moral inflation. Human striving is vain unless it is illuminated by the light of the Holy Spirit, who is our “Comforter” in the midst of suffering. Wisdom and spiritual direction does not reduce our suffering, but it makes it endurable and gives it higher meaning. The symbol for humanity’s lot in the Western tradition is Christ on the cross.

b. New Age attitude: that Western culture is too morbid and downbeat, and we need to change the script that we have about ourselves. The New Age replaces the Western sense of tragedy with an intense optimism about individual and social transformation. “A ‘new’ age is possible; human potential is limitless; its dynamics are beckoning and available. Emphasis on sin and evil, on redemption and conversion must yield to a world of ‘original
blessings’ in a good creation.” Man need no longer crucify himself in the image of Christ; he can get off the cross, and celebrate his corporeal, fleshly existence and his capacity for entering into transformative dialogue with the divine.

The New Age man searches for highs, peak experiences, altered states of consciousness, and avoids lows, depressions and bleak pessimism. He looks for spirituality, for which read “devices and techniques that will connect me with the divine”, and he often avoids or rejects established religions, for which read “those dogmatic structures that limit my individual freedom, inhibit spiritual expression, and diminish personal expectations of glory”. Spirituality promises highs, but religion threatens with its emphasis on moral restrictions, social conscience, and ethical obligations. The New Age man wants the Goal (unity with the divine) without the Way (the discipline, ethics, and self-effacement that make such unity possible). He wants blissful union without the suffering of the cross, spiritual rebirth without having to first endure spiritual death. He is “hooked” on the sacred, addicted to spiritual techniques and practices, and his credo is: “Follow your bliss” (Joseph Campbell).

c. A Jungian response would be to doubt the authenticity of this so-called “spirituality” if it is merely designed to provide instant gratification for the ego. Jung would be suspicious of the marked separation of “spirituality” from “religion”, if it is designed simply to separate “highs” from “lows”, or light from shadow. Jung would see any unbounded optimism as a defence against darkness, especially given the tragic character of the twentieth century, and would support the Christian West in its emphasis on unavoidable suffering. According to Jung, suffering can never be escaped, but must be embraced and accepted as part of the human condition.

A major difference between Jung and the New Age concerns their discovery or “location” of the sacred. Despite the New Age rhetoric about the “immanence” of the divine and the “worldliness” of its spiritual vision, the New Age appears to be caught up in a typically Western transcendentalist interpretation of the spirit. The New Age tends to find its spiritual experiences “away” from life and “beyond” the ground of ordinary experience. It is attracted to the bizarre and the exotic, to the extramundane and the shamanistic. A spiritual experience is a flight away from the real, and hence the importance of the word “high” to
describe this popular spirituality. The New Age is not redemptive or transformative, and in this sense Christianity is a far more radical philosophy insofar as it attempts to engage and redeem the elements of this reality. Could it be that the New Age has inherited the otherworldliness of historical Gnosticism, with its impatience with the real and its metaphysical focus on a distant cosmos?

By contrast, Jung discovers spirituality in and through our human pathologies, not by transcending them. Jung maintains that for modern humanity “the Gods have become diseases”, and we meet our rejected and repressed sacredness at the centre of diseases, at the core of psychoneuroses, and in the midst of mental anguish. If modern man does not consciously sacrifice to the Gods, he finds himself unconsciously sacrificed to the many pathologies and diseases that assail him, forcing a kind of literal or destructive displacement of the ego in favour of archetypal realities. Any collective movement that finds psychopathology morbid, dark, or unworthy of interest, is actually missing the spiritual opportunity of the time and does not deserve the name of “spirituality”. The New Age, from this Jungian position, works tirelessly to avoid any real encounter with the true sacred, preferring instead to follow some abstract, and entirely conventional, ego-ideal about what the sacred is like.

Jung would recognise in the New Age a fundamental confusion between the ego (personal self) and the soul (or the Self in the Buddhist sense). In true religious practice, it is the soul that finds release and liberation, for that is the immortal part of the person. Paradoxically, the salvation of the soul is at the same time a mortification of the ego, hence the formulation: “whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it” (Matthew 16:25). In the past, the necessary mortification of the ego has been confused with the mortification of the body, sexuality, and the feminine, and this arose largely from the split in the Western psyche between spirit and matter. But today, with our greater psychological knowledge, we get closer to the Christian mystery by seeing that it is the personal self, the ego, which must be displaced so that salvation might take place. In the New Age, there is no real separation between the personal self and the transpersonal soul, so the first stage in true religious awareness is not achieved; or rather, a religious process is conducted and at every point of
this journey the spiritual life is contaminated with the desires and longings of the ego. In this way the spiritual journey is corrupted, and degenerates into an ego trip. As the soul is released from its bondage and is lifted into heaven, the ego wants to travel along with it, and the ecstasy of the spirit’s release is an ecstasy that the ego wants for itself.

In similar manner, the hungry New Age ego espies the grandeur and power of God, and it identifies with that power, viewing God as some “untapped supernatural resource” which can be utilised for the “expansion of human potential”. This is a wild and boundless Promethean fantasy, and the New Age actually believes in its heart of hearts that man can become God. As Shirley MacLaine, one of its popular exponents, proclaims: “I am God, I am God, I am God.” With its early roots in the humanistic psychology movement, this weds the optimism of Maslow and Rogers with the wildly esoteric rantings of Blavatsky and Gurdjieff. In most of the popular literature, the New Age boasts about breaking conventional boundaries, realising hidden potential, and aspiring to divine heights.

Jung would probably classify this as psychotic spirituality, a spirituality in which the ego has been grotesquely inflated to divine proportions. The servile role of the ego has not been understood, and there is deep psychological and theological confusion about the meaning of life and the role of humanity in serving the divine. The New Age man blasts his way into the spiritual realm, expecting to find bliss, but because he is so narcissistically wedded to the ego his experiences always meet with disappointment. The ego cannot be sanctified by the divine, but can only be sacrificed to the divine; this painful sacrifice has to occur unconsciously and involuntarily. Intellectually, the New Age man espouses a dreamy, heavenly philosophy, but in actual fact he is full of complaints and bitterness, because nothing appears to go right, other people appear bent on undermining or ruining him, and even his spiritual practice is criticised for being inadequate. The “loss of self” that should be occurring consciously falls into the unconscious, and, like anything unconscious, is projected outward upon others and the world.

However, not only the loss of ego takes place unconsciously, but the necessary development and building up of the ego occurs unconsciously as well. This is a different, but related, side to the tragic and undifferentiated fusion of ego and soul. The ego needs to
separate from the soul in order to discover its own identity and life. The ego must actively embrace its own separateness and even risk “alienation” from the soul to come to itself. As Jung made clear, ego development is archetypally sanctioned, and any attempt to stifle this development must result in disaster. When asked about their spiritual practice, or why their lifestyle is so different from ordinary people, New Agers will often declare that they have “stomped on”, “trodden on”, or “dropped” the ordinary ego. What they mean by this is that the usual things associated with human development have been abandoned in favour of a lifestyle that is more pointedly related to the reality of the soul. However, the ego has not been “dropped”, and by definition cannot be dropped; it has merely been fused with the life of the soul. This is the psychological background for the notorious problem of rampant egotism, emotionality, splits, and competitiveness that plague New Age groups, cults, sects, ashrams, clubs, societies and communes. Although all these groups work toward transcendence of ego in favour of soul, they are often destroyed by a secret, dark, and malignant egotism, which eats away at the high ideals and eventually causes the whole edifice to collapse, often with devastating consequences to society and to all concerned.

The basic drives of the ego, especially the power drive and its push for identity and esteem, cannot be got rid of by an intellectual attitude which espouses focus on “higher” things. Although the conscious emphasis is on “openness” to the divine, merging with a higher will, and negative capability, the power drive of the ego makes itself felt in the fixity and dogmatism with which these “expansive” goals are pursued. The devotees declare that they are “nothing” before the divine, or worthless before the charismatic teacher, but in the background there is fierce jockeying for privilege and special places, for power and influence within the group. Nor can the sexual drive be willed away by an incense-smelling devotion to ethereal and heavenly concerns. What is neglected or rejected comes back to visit us, and it usually comes back with considerable vengeance, so that the local New Age ashram can end up as a den of iniquity, busted by the police and featured on page three of the local newspaper. Although espousing the pathways of Eastern bliss and enlightenment, the tragic West finds its revenge in engulfing such naive groups in negativity and the return of the repressed.
Jung would agree with the New Age that the Christian West has become overly wedded to a downbeat and constitutional pessimism, a pessimism that scares many away from Christian practice. The transformative possibilities of self-development and individuation give rise to a certain degree of optimism, and a positive spirit that lifts us out of despair and misery. He would also agree that there is a greater need for self-knowledge in Western religion, and that we find too much “blind faith” in Christianity, with too many people adopting beliefs and doctrines without testing these precepts against experience. We need spiritual exercises, contemplations, devices, wisoms: the call from the pulpit to “believe” is not enough. Jung condones much of the New Age spiritual apparatus; its emphasis on diversity and pluralism, on pre-Christian and post-Christian wisdoms, on meditation, introspection, and direct personal experience. However, unless the right attitude has been adopted, the apparatus and self-help technologies are worse than useless; they are positively dangerous. The New Age man would be better off closing his box of tricks, shutting down the suburban ashram, and going back to church to learn the lessons of humility and modesty. There can be no genuine spiritual transformation at all unless the ego and the soul are separated and firmly differentiated.

The ego and the soul have both to be lived, expressed, celebrated, and enjoyed. We must live two lives simultaneously, and especially for all Westerners, as Jung warned, the life of the ego cannot be surreptitiously forgotten beneath the claims and passions of altered states of consciousness. Western man’s ego has been differentiated over many centuries, and no spiritual seminar or meditation course will get rid of it successfully. The ego, our personal self, our mortality, our separateness from God, is the instrument of our suffering, but if this instrument is exploded in order to transcend suffering, we end up in more pain than ever before. Humbly, our suffering and incompleteness have to be accepted, and only then is some transcendence possible.

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4 Jung, *Psychological Types* (1921), CW 6, para.150.
5 Jung, “Wotan” (1936) and “After the Catastrophe” (1945), in CW 10, para.371f.