

New Age Beliefs and Practices REST10045



This course investigates the modern field of popular beliefs and practices known as ‘new age’ or ‘holistic’ spirituality. We will examine case studies of practices and beliefs, drawing on explanatory insights from social and cultural theorists. The course aims to describe, contextualize and explain key features of new age spirituality with reference to their content and structure and to their distribution in the population at large.

We begin with the problem of demarcating a hyper fluid field of beliefs and practices that crosses traditional boundaries of ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ - and according to some, the ‘serious’ and the ‘trivial’. We begin by examining definitions of ‘new age’ and explaining its inclusion in the comparative study of religion/s. We explore the role of authorities and traditions in the development of a culture of seekership spread via networks, small groups and other ‘glocal’ institutions. We consider evidence for an emerging new age cosmology through a case study of *The Celestine Prophecy*. Using both qualitative and quantitative data we trace the permeation of new age beliefs and practices into everyday life settings, including health, wellbeing and ritual behavior, and consider the impact of market forces and consumption. The course has three overall goals: to explore the theoretical value of studying new age spirituality, to explain its international appeal for practitioners, and to critically assess its social and public significance in modern societies.

Learning outcomes (amongst others)

- to demonstrate ability to identify key terms and their meanings
- to demonstrate good judgement on the relative importance of bibliographical items
- to show critical knowledge of a diffuse field of popular beliefs, practices and values
- to examine the categories ‘new age’ and ‘religion’ in mutual interaction
- to describe key characteristics and institutions in new age spirituality
- to practice simple multi-causal analysis (historical, social, cultural) of new age
- to form an overall critical assessment of the significance of new age spirituality

Prerequisites: Religion in Culture and/or Religion in Society, or by consent of CM.

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Course Lecturers: Dr Steven Sutcliffe (SS) s.sutcliffe@ed.ac.uk
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Class: Thursday 2-4, room 1.07. First hour: lecture. Second hour: seminar.

Teaching and Assessment

Teaching and learning is by lecture, seminar, and oral and written feedback. In-course assessment accounts for 50% of the grade and consists in one 1500 word field/data report on a topic devised by the student (20%) plus one 2000 word essay (30%) from a list of questions. The remaining 50% consists in a two-hour examination requiring three exam essays. Guidelines on the field report can be found in the Appendix at the end of this syllabus and further instruction will be given by the CM collectively and individually.

Deadlines

- field report due by 2pm Monday 27 October
- essay due by 2pm Monday 17 November

The course text is S. Sutcliffe and I. Gilhus (eds, 2013) *New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion* or *NAS* for short. This will be used extensively, including at least one required reading each week. There is a library online version and two copies in NC library reserve but you are advised to purchase your own copy for class reference & discussion.

Additional reading is recommended via author-date entries (eg. Hammer 2006) which refer to bibliography at the end of the syllabus. Most of these items are available online or in NC library reserve. The CM has a collection of primary source literature by new age practitioners which students can explore. Students must make full use of all sources.

Course overview

Week 1: Rethinking 'religion': the challenge of new age spirituality

Week 2: Case study: Reiki healing

Week 3: Seekership and the structure of new age organisation

Week 4: Globalisation and localization of new age beliefs, practices and people

Week 5: A new cosmology? *The Celestine Prophecy* (2006)

Week 6: The Kendal project and the subjectivization thesis

Week 7: New age modes of thinking & feeling: cognitive optimality & emotional culture

Week 8: New age acculturation: Catholic Poland & indigenous Sami

Week 9: Consuming spirituality: market forces and neo-liberal values

Week 10: Public impact: 'spiritual revolution' or 'religious failure'?

Week 11: Course review and revision

Week 1/Thurs 18 September

Rethinking 'religion': the challenge of new age spirituality (SS)

Demarcating 'new age' from neighbouring identities such as 'holistic', 'paranormal', 'Pagan'. Problems in representing new age amongst 'world religions'. New age as popular religious expression, emphasising subjectivity, experience and 'seeking'. Wider theoretical considerations: pluralization, secularization, globalization, consumption.

Seminar reading:

Sutcliffe and Gilhus, 'Introduction: All Mixed Up' (NAS)
Sutcliffe, 'New Age, World Religions and Elementary Forms' (chap 1 in NAS)

Additional reading:

Chryssides 2007; Hammer 2006; Hanegraaff 1996 pp. 94-103; Redden 2011; Frisk 2013 (chap. 3 in NAS); Klippenstein 2005; Hess 1993 chaps. 1 & 2; Hill 2011 chaps. 3 & 9; Beyer 2006.

Week 2/Thurs 25 September

Case study: Reiki healing (SS)

Continuities between new age and folk healing in Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM). Tensions between 'alternative' and 'mainstream' ingredients of new age healing. The impact of new age healing ideas within wider 'well-being' culture. The relationship between new age bodies, healing anatomies and cosmological ideas.

Primary source (watch in class):

Ian Welch, *What is Reiki?* New World Music DVD (2002)

Seminar reading:

McClean, S 2005, "'The Illness is part of the Person": discourses of blame, individual responsibility and individuation at a Centre for spiritual healing in the North of England', *Sociology of Health and Illness* 27/5: 628-648.

Utriainen, 'Doing things with angels: agency, alterity and practices of enchantment' (chap. 15 in NAS)

Additional reading:

Macpherson 2008; Tighe and Butler 2007; Hedges and Beckford 2000; Barcan 2011 pp. 169-184; Barcan 2013; Sointu 2006; Mold 2006; Hamilton 2000; McGuire 1988 chaps. 1, 8, 9; Coward 1989 introduction, chaps. 2, 6, conclusion; Ross 1991 chap 1.

Week 3/Thurs 2 October

Seekership and the structure of new age organization (SS)

New age as a 'cultic milieu' (Campbell). The social identity of the 'seeker' and the *habitus* of 'seekership' in light of sources of authority. Differentiating formative and non-formative religion (Wood) and identifying the structure of 'unorganised religion'.

Seminar reading:

Taves, A. and M. Kinsella, 'Hiding in Plain Sight: the organizational forms of "unorganized religion"' (chap. 5 in NAS)
C. Campbell 1972, 'The Cult, the Cultic milieu and Secularization', in M. Hill (ed) *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* 5, pp. 119-136. Also available in J. Kaplan and H. Lööw (eds 2002), *The cultic milieu: oppositional subcultures in an age of globalization*, Alta Mira Press.

Additional reading:

Possamai 2006, chap. 2; Partridge 2007; Sutcliffe 2003 pp. 200-213; Wood 2007 chap. 2 and pp. 60-75

Week 4/Thurs 9 October

Globalisation and localization of new age beliefs, practices and people (DR)

Patterns in the geographical and sociodemographic distribution of new age spiritualities in relation to globalization, including *glocal* interactions between *local* and *global* levels, and interactions between 'new age' and other religious formations in particular societies.

Seminar reading:

Gilhus, ' "All over the place": the contribution of new age to a spatial model of religion' (chap 2 in NAS)
Frisk, L. 2001, 'Globalization or Westernization? New Age as a Contemporary Transnational Culture', in M. Rothstein (ed 2001), *New Age and Globalization*, pp.31-41.

Additional reading:

Rose 1998, 2001; Possamai 2006 chap 1; Frisk 2007; Zaidman 2007b; Hanegraaff 2001; Jespers (chap 12 in *NAS*); Horie (chap. 6 in *NAS*); Maldonado 2009-11.

Week 5/Thurs 16 October

A new cosmology? *The Celestine Prophecy* (2006) (DR)

Multiple levels of deities, humans and more-than-human beings interacting in a ‘re-enchanted’ and ‘re-animated’ world. New age as a new theodicy operating within a synthetic cosmology; the relationship between social group and theodicy.

Primary source (watch in class):

The Celestine Prophecy (director: Armand Mastroianni, 2006)
<http://www.thecelestineprophecymovie.com/>

See also J. Redfield, *The Celestine Prophecy* (1994)

Seminar reading:

Rothstein, M, ‘Dolphins and other Humans: New age identities in comparative perspective’ (chap. 7 in *NAS*)
‘William Bloom’s portrayal’, from P. Heelas and L. Woodhead (eds), *Religion in Modern Times* (2002)

Additional reading:

Hanegraaff 1996 chap. 7; Campbell 2001; Partridge 2004 Vol. I, chap. 3; Hanegraaff 1996 pp. 262-75, 283-90; Hammer 2001, chap. 7.

Week 6/Thurs 23 October

The Kendal project and the subjectivization thesis (SS)

The permeation of new age beliefs and practices into everyday life. Case study: the Kendal Project in NW England. Overview of empirical findings and analysis of the typology of ‘holistic milieu’ and ‘congregational domain’. The subjectivization thesis.

Seminar reading:

Heelas, P. and L. Woodhead 2005, *The Spiritual Revolution: why religion is giving way to spirituality*, especially ‘Distinguishing Religion and Spirituality’ (pp. 24-32),

‘The Holistic Milieu’ (36-40), ‘The growth of the holistic milieu’ (42-48), ‘Bringing the Sacred to Life’ (Chap. 3, pp. 77-110).
Heelas, P. ‘On transgressing the secular: spiritualities of life, idealism, vitalism’ (chap 4 in *NAS*)

Additional readings:

Voas and Bruce 2007; Sutcliffe 2006; Woodhead 2007; Sointu and Woodhead 2008; Wood 2007

Week 7/Thurs 30 October

New age modes of thinking & feeling: cognitive optimality & emotional culture (DR)

Exploring evidence for a common content and ‘tone’ to new age styles of thinking and feeling in light of Hammer’s argument on the ‘cognitive optimality’ of new age ideas, and Chen’s argument that holistic feelings and emotions are socially constructed.

Seminar reading:

Hammer, O. ‘Cognitively Optimal Religiosity: New age as a case study’ (chap. 13 in *NAS*)
Chen, Shu-Chuan. ‘Theorizing emotions in New Age practices: an analysis of Feeling Rules in Self-Religion’ (chap. 14 in *NAS*)

Additional readings:

Whitehouse 2004, esp. pp.188-195; Hammer 2010; Hochschild 1979; Riis and Woodhead 2010 chap 6, ‘Religious emotion, late modern society and culture’.

Week 8/Thurs 6 November

New age acculturation: Catholic Poland and indigenous Sami (DR)

Evidence from a range of countries suggests the successful acculturation of new age beliefs and practices. But patterns of assimilation in host populations vary, with dominant traditions interacting with new age spirituality in different ways and with varying outcomes. Two contrastive case studies are explored.

Seminar reading:

Hall, D. ‘The holistic milieu in context: between traditional Christianity and folk religiosity’ (chap. 9 in *NAS*)

Fonneland, T. and S. Kraft. 'New Age, Sami shamanism and Indigenous Spirituality' (chap. 8 in *NAS*)

Additional readings:

Ruah-Midbar and Oron 2009-11; Palmisano 2010; Bowman 2000; Kemp 2007

Week 9/Thurs 13 November

Consuming spirituality: market forces and neo-liberal values (SS)

Religion and consumption in comparative perspective: is new age consumption really a special case amongst religion/s? Investigating affinities between new age, consumption, and neo-liberal capitalism. Is new age an 'alternative' or a 'capitalist' expression of religion?

Seminar reading:

Zaidman, N. 2007a, 'The New Age Shop – Church or Marketplace?', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 22/3: 361-74.

Mikaelsson, L. 'New age and the Spirit of Capitalism: Energy as Cognitive Currency' (chap. 10 in *NAS*)

Additional Reading:

Zaidman 2007a; Carrette and King 2005 esp. Introduction and Chap. 4; Dawson 2011; Redden 2002; Bartolini *et al* 2013; Lau 2000, pp. 1-20 and chapter 5; Heelas 2008 chap. 4

Week 10/Thurs 20 November

Public impact: 'spiritual revolution' or 'religious failure'? (SS)

Where does new age fit in the dichotomy between the religious and the secular, and between the 'private' and the 'public'? Does new age provide evidence for or against secularization? Is new age spirituality a new, subtle form of 'public religion' – or yet 'another false dawn for the sacred' (Voas and Bruce)?

Seminar reading:

Aupers, S. and D. Houtman, 'Beyond the Spiritual Supermarket: the social and public significance of New Age spirituality' (chap 11 in *NAS*)

Bruce, S. 2002, 'The Failure of the New Age', chap. 4 in *God is Dead: Secularization in the West*, pp.75-105.

Additional reading

Woodhead 2013; Heelas and Woodhead 2005, chap. 3; Houtman and Aupers 2007; Knoblauch 2010; Bruce 2000; Wood 2009; Sutcliffe 2003, pp. 213-225; Heelas 2008.

Week 11/Thurs 27 November

Course review and revision (SS/DR)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- Bartolini, N *et al* 2013, 'Psychics, crystals, candles and cauldrons: alternative spiritualities and the question of their esoteric economies', *Social & Cultural Geography* 14: 367–388,
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- Bruce, S. 2000, 'The New Age and secularization', chap. 13 in S. Sutcliffe and M. Bowman (eds), *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality*.
- Campbell, C. 2001, 'A New Age theodicy for a new age', in L. Woodhead (ed), *Peter Berger and the Study of Religion*
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- Dawson, A. 2011, 'Consuming the Self: New age spirituality as "mystified consumption"', *Social Compass* 58/3: 309–315
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Appendix: field report

The task is to write a simple investigative account of some aspect of new age culture which you identify as interesting and significant. 'Field report' is to be interpreted very broadly to mean any material you find 'in the wild' which can be connected in some significant way with new age or mind-body-spirit culture – eg. practices or techniques or classes (meditation, healing), groups and networks, centres, talks and lectures, fairs and exhibitions, shops, internet web sites, books and magazines, bookshops, objects and products, health foods and natural health outlets, etc.

The aim of the field report is to describe in a simple, 'hands on' way some aspect of the public profile of new age and to relate this to one or other of the course themes. You should write about something accessible and public, and you should choose something that requires no special investment of time, money or other commitment. If you chose to write about a practice or ritual, you should chose an open group or setting, and be prepared to discuss what you are doing with other people involved. Don't try to write about a closed or private group; this presents complex issues of access and confidentiality.

You must confirm the subject matter of your field report with the CM before you begin when you can discuss any practical issues. If your report involves human subjects, you should respect confidentiality and where appropriate use pseudonyms. This task is not prepared for by specialist anthropological training, so you need to be sensible about what is practical, ethical and achievable for a short written assessment. If your report involves interviewing practitioners or participating in a group activity, you will need to complete a simple ethics clearance form, available from the CM.

Your written report should begin by explaining your choice of subject matter with brief reference to appropriate sources in the course, explaining what you are interested in finding out, and why you have chosen this particular material (c. 15% of the text). The bulk of your report (c. 75%) should contain a descriptive account of what you have seen and found and, if appropriate, with whom you have spoken and/or what you have participated in. You can use photographs or other visual material sparingly if they help the report. Some questions to help you frame your report are: in what sense(s) can your chosen data be connected to 'new age'? How do practitioners interpret what they are doing? What is the background to the practice or materials? Who is involved with it, and why? In a simple conclusion (10%) you should reflect on your methods and findings.

The written presentation of the field report should conform to standard essay requirements, except that you will not be expected to engage in extended discussion of theoretical arguments, nor provide an extensive bibliography or footnotes. The main aim

of the exercise is for you to identify and describe some empirical data that you have selected 'in the wild'.

For simple examples of reports involving human subjects, see Wood, *Possession, Power and the New Age* (2007: 1-2, 121-124; 125-129), Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age* (2003: 13-18, 180-186) and Macpherson, *Women and Reiki* (2008: chapter 4).

Copies of previous reports written on the course will be available to browse.