

Historians as Storytellers: A Critical Examination of New Age Religion's Scholarly Historiography¹

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ABSTRACT: This study makes a bold statement on the problematic nature of historic academic research, and its implications on our understanding of religion and culture. The case study is New Age religion's scholarly historiography. It appears that New Age religion plays a part within narrative imagination, which often contains moral allusions as to the heroes or antiheroes, as well as literary allusions to the causal sources of events or to expected developments. We review the conflicts that arise between utterly differing opinions in some of the field's fundamental issues, and thus evoke several of the challenges historical research on NA faces: when did it debut on the historical stage? Which ideological movements did it draw upon? Who are its unmistakable heralds? Did it already reach the height of its strength, and if so, when? The survey of scholarly studies indicates that the history of New Age is ever-changing. Thus, we argue that though historic discussion may deepen the analysis of a religious phenomenon and its understanding and give it context and meaning—it cannot decipher it. We cannot rely on history in defining a phenomenon, in attempting to comprehend its essence, its power, its importance, and most certainly not its future.

KEYWORDS: history of religion, methodology, narratives, critical study, New Age spirituality, contemporary religions

Astute scientists understand that political and cultural bias must impact their ideas [. . .]. But we usually fail to acknowledge another source of error that might be called literary bias. So much of science proceeds by telling stories [. . .] bound to the rules of canonical legendmaking.

—Gould, *Bully for Brontosaurus*, 251

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1. Exposition: What Role Should Historical Research Play in Understanding Religious or Cultural Phenomena?

It seems the past is *not* fixed, but rather ever-changing. Historiographic studies provide us with ever-changing portrayals of civilizations. When historiography addresses past religions, the historical restoration may be flawed due to a lack of information or the inaccessibility of facts, making scholarly differences and innovations in historical-religious research understandable. However, what about current and accessible phenomena? Often, scholars may agree on the historic source of certain phenomena, or describe a complex phenomenon's various sources. In other instances, particularly regarding research objects that evoke intense emotion and incur public debate—the scholarly debate may be acute.

In this study, I wish to make a bold statement on the problematic nature of historic research, and its implications on our understanding of culture. There's no doubt that the historic discipline provides us with a deep and rich understanding of religious phenomena, but it is our duty to recognize the challenges that lie in the path of historians as they try to understand these phenomena. I argue that in light of those challenges, *a historic narrative cannot presume to explain or define phenomena (and certainly not predict their future)*. In doing so, historians involve their leanings, beliefs, values and hopes, far beyond any analysis the historic discipline may possibly provide them with.

As our case study will show—namely, New Age (hereinafter: NA) religion's² scholarly historiography, *the historic discipline may fail our understanding of the phenomenon*. Though all the facts are correct, a literary talent is still required to combine them into *an argument towards understanding the phenomenon*. NA plays a part within narrative imagination, which often contains moral allusions as to the heroes or antiheroes, as well as literary allusions to the causal sources of events or expected developments. Indeed, moral and literary components affect these studies greatly, as well as research findings.

As aforementioned, my research question addresses the role historic research plays in *defining and understanding* religious or cultural phenomena. For this end, I shall present several examples of research types and argumentation from the historic discipline regarding NA. My goal is not to provide a comprehensive review of NA references in historic studies, nor to exhaust the suggestions provided towards a historic understanding of NA, but rather to present some of the

²The various studies that reference this complex phenomenon use different “prefixes” in describing it—Hanegraaff (1998) writes about “NA religion,” while others write about NA as a movement, a network, a culture, and so on. There is much methodological debate on the matter; too much to elaborate on here. However, they all clearly describe different aspects of the same phenomenon, as their studies refer to one another.

methodological challenges that arise from a critical examination of the research literature³ in this field.

2. A Review of Scholarly Historiographic Narratives of New Age

History is not just a catalogue of events put in the right order like a railway timetable. History is a version of events. Between the events and the historian there is a constant interplay. (Taylor 1993: 37)

In this section, I will review several aspects of the challenges historical research on NA faces, and especially the conflict that arises between utterly differing opinions in some of the field's fundamental issues. Scholars feel that in order to present this phenomenon, or understand its nature, they must clarify various historical questions, such as: when did it debut on the historical stage (or: when did it crystallize and become the phenomenon as it currently is)? Which ideological movements did it draw upon? Who are its unmistakable heralds? Did it already reach the height of its strength, and if so, when? Accordingly, we shall present a few scholarly viewpoints (as mentioned, we will not be exhausting all different views on the matter) arranged around central historic questions which concern NA (naturally, some sections will include information that relates to the other sections as well, as we aim to introduce *cross questions* of the historical discussion on NA).

2.a. New Age as a Trans-Historical Phenomenon

To begin our review, we should point out scholars' attempts to understand NA through a timeless category which identifies it as a contemporary expression of a recurring religious model, or as a current parallel of an earlier religious-cultural phenomenon. In a way, this perception stands in opposition to historic research, as it looks for the similarities between religious phenomena instead of delving into their contextualization at a certain time and place.

Religious studies scholar, Christoph Bochinger (2005: 69), for example, views NA as esotericism, which he defines as more of a structure than a historical phenomenon, characterized by "an independent, nondogmatic approach to religion or spirituality." According to him, the structuralist view helps us avoid a case in which "present developments will be reduced to an effect of historical phenomena." Therefore, understanding NA as a trans-historical structure allows him to determine (ibid.: 69) that "somehow, Theosophy was the New Age of that time." This kind of approach—despite its reservations—is, naturally, problematic from

³As it will later become clear, NA historic research can also be found within research literature that isn't historical per se, such as sociological studies.

a historian point of view, seeing as “ideological ideal types such as ‘the occult’ [. . . also] *have a history*” (Hanegraaff 1998: 374).

Another example is taken from a historical study that revolved around a phenomenon unrelated to NA. Catherine Tumber (2002), describes the unique concrete historical conditions that contributed to the development of American feminism between 1875–1915, which she views as the *NA of that period*. Therefore, she believes the critical questions she herself raises are relevant to the two historical occurrences of NA, 1970s included.

In order to understand the problematic nature of trans-historic portrayals of NA, we shall use criticism by Steven Sutcliffe (2003a). While he does dispute NA is a category in itself—a matter we cannot go into herein—his arguments are still relevant to the timeless treatment of NA. Sutcliffe raises the innate problem of identifying the “enduring substantive core” of NA despite the outward display of diversity in this category (ibid.: 12), and despite the dramatic changes NA has undergone, as he puts it: from the 1930s to the 1960s, NA leaned towards Asceticism, puritanism, and other-worldliness; from the 1970s onwards, it placed an emphasis on emotional expression and humanistic practices and beliefs characterized by a prominent sense of this-worldliness. Sutcliffe wonders “what kind of singular, homogeneous ‘movement’ could so radically mutate?” and thus wishes to trace the genealogy of the movement, which focuses on the apocalyptic symbol of “New Age” (ibid.: 7). This development is accompanied by the impressions of James Lewis and J. Gordon Melton (1992: xii), who claim the focus of NA is subject to change: Eastern teachings during the 1970s (therefore, their impressions differ from Sutcliffe’s, perhaps because their perspective is American, rather than West-European), channeling higher-beings during the 1980s, and Shamanism and Native-American spiritualities during the 1990s.

In light of NA’s dynamic nature, how could it be portrayed as a trans-historic structure?! Apart from the dangers that a crude essentialistic approach may pose, the problem of this scholarly claim is especially apparent from the above comparative viewpoint, which begs the question: can NA be both contemporary feminism, contemporary esotericism, and even contemporary shamanism all at once?! A timeless description of NA necessitates viewing the phenomenon one-dimensionally and is therefore highly problematic regarding such a diffusing, dynamic, and multi-dimensional phenomenon. Due to this characteristic, we shall later see very many contradictory historical narratives of NA history.

2.b. When Did New Age Start?

“What makes you think I’m New Age? Actually, I’m Old Age!” This reaction is a very common one in NA research, one which I had witnessed firsthand, and which also appears in many studies. Practitioners view themselves as the successors of an ancient movement and feel this warrants emphasis. This argument

is common in traditionalist religious discourse, which often links the religious truth it presents with the dawn of humanity, the days of creation, god's primary message, and so on. However, critical research aims at identifying the contextual—and therefore innovative—aspect of religions: the moment of their birth, their interpretation of the past, and the interests inherent to religious design. Scholars deal with questions of continuity and change in religion and tend to criticize the traditional stance that innocently depicts itself as part of an ongoing tradition, and to identify dimensions of tradition invention (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2012).

Within the field of NA, tradition invention of ancient religious traditions is also prevalent, and is molded in the spirit of NA (Hammer 2001). Hence, it is surprising to find that some researchers reassert the *emic* claim that NA is merely a continuum of ancient times. Such studies, unlike those presented in subsection 2.a., agree that NA appeared on the historical stage at a certain point in time. But at which point? The *Historical Dictionary of New Age Movements* includes a chapter on chronology (York 2004: xixff) which begins with a publication of the *Acupuncture Manual* in China in the third millennium BC, moves on to Taoism in the year 97 BC, skips to the publication of Nostradamus's prophecies in the sixteenth century AD, and later speaks of events that took place in Europe and the United States from the eighteenth century onwards, mostly associated with Western esotericism (mesmerism, Theosophy, the foundation of Asian religious movements in the West, and others). Needless to say, this narrative creates a clear continuity between ancient China and modern Western culture, whilst ignoring many other connections that could have been made, and many other notable events that could have been added. It is possible to leave out plenty of coordinates, of course, but mentioning ancient China as part of NA chronology it begs the question: why China and not many other tradition and incidents?

Robert Elwood (1992), alternately, placed an emphasis on NA's Greco-Roman roots. While he researched NA American spiritual traditions—both Western (Mesmer, Swedenborg, and others) as well as native (native American shamanism), he focused on the Neoplatonic⁴ origins of NA cosmology in Western esotericism's correspondence laws. Elwood also noted the search for ephemeral nature common in NA, which is associated with the gnostic “inward transformation.” Thus, Elwood's narrative revolves around NA's Mediterranean roots—Gnosis and Greek philosophy.

While NA practitioners view ancient Chinese wisdom as equal to that of ancient Greece—to which we may add the Kabbalah and ancient India, among others—critical scholars have already commented (Diem and Lewis 1992; and

⁴Hanegraaff, too (1998: 388), states that “The Influence of Neoplatonism upon the esoteric tradition is so pervasive that it is often not even explicitly mentioned.” And indeed, he puts most of his energy into describing NA's historic roots from the Renaissance period and modernity.

especially Hammer 2001: 52) on the perennialistic-spiritual agenda of such narratives, and their clear problematcalness. A parallel narrative could have been suggested, one that views the Bible as NA's historic source, as some scholars note that it draws from Judeo-Christian traditions. One can speculate why this corpus in particular is missing from most of NA's scholarly portrayals—as they were written by Western scholars who described a Western spiritual phenomenon focused on offering an *alternative* to established religion.

Having mentioned studies which identify the roots of NA as profoundly ancient, it should be noted that possible later historic roots will be discussed in sub-section 2.d. Additionally, I should state that most scholars agree that NA itself—unlike its historic roots—had appeared at some point during the latter half or quarter of the twentieth century. Wouter Hanegraaff (1998: 522) for example, describes how NA had “become conscious of itself, in the later 1970s, as constituting a more or less unified ‘movement.’”

2.c. When Did New Age End?

“Everything that has a beginning has an end”—says the Oracle from the film *The Matrix*. Indeed, much like the scholarly narratives that describe NA's inception, some historians also recognized its end. Interestingly, the pinpointing of its end was a part of a historic narrative that described the movement's momentum as it developed, from its past and into its future. And so, historians have been writing about the past as they look to the future, and occasionally cannot see a future for the movement.

Nowadays, it is clear that the movement continues to exist and thrive. Still, Massimo Introvigne (2001) has already identified a crisis in NA at the turn of the millennium, which has led to its *demise*, and to the appearance of “Next Age.” Similarly, Irving Hexham (1999) believed, at the end of the last millennium, that NA was over, and that Neopaganism has replaced it. Melton (2007: 89ff) also wrote about NA in the past tense. He presented the disappointment displayed by prominent members of the movement as the promised New Age failed to dawn, and their apocalyptic expectations went unanswered. They have declared their loss of faith, and crystal prices plummeted in an attempt to save the massive stock that remained in light of the many perplexed believers of the 1990s. Melton laments the fact that scholars have missed both the moment of this great cultural phenomenon's birth, as well as its demise, but identifies the appearance of a brand-new movement—“post-New Age.” A movement that had shaped a subtle, sophisticated, non-literal Milleniarism: a prospective new world would not appear to us as part of reality as we know it, but will instead materialize—if it hasn't already—in another dimension, unseen to the untrained eye.

Interestingly enough, what Melton recognized as the death of NA is no different from similar descriptions of changes and dynamic processes that took place

throughout NA history in various points in time during the twentieth century, as I have already stated above (in section 2.a., and see also Hanegraaff 1998: 96–97). Moreover, we could argue that Melton (among others) locates different opinions from within NA's vast sphere of teachings and interprets them as testimony of a historic process of change, while it seems that these opinions have—to this day—actually *coexisted*. This example emphasizes the possibility of creating a historic story based on personal selection from the abundance of detail in the annals and manifestations of NA, thereby stressing one particular factor from a later period whilst ignoring its existence in an earlier period is one of the ways in which NA history is “manufactured.”

2.d. New Age's Distinct Historic Roots

The historic roots most prevalent in scholarly descriptions of NA point at (pre-) modern Western esotericism, that is, occultist teachings and practices that operated outside of mainstream religion in central and Western Europe and North America, mainly between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. This is a wide variety of usually unconnected phenomena, beliefs, practices and personages, though they share frames of time and space and exist outside the boundaries of the church. Such historical descriptions gather under one roof Hermeticism; occult sciences such as alchemy and astrology; Tarot card tradition; personages who have achieved unique mystical experiences such as Nostradamus and Swedenborg; non-ecclesiastical orders such as Rosenkreuz, the Freemasons, and the Golden Dawn; the Animal Magnetism treatment method developed by the Austrian physician, Franz Anton Mesmer; the branches of metaphysical movement (especially New Thought and Christian Science) which viewed the Mind as a central force of transformation, healing and redemption; nineteenth-century spiritualist-mediumship; nineteenth-century Romantic Movement, or more accurately, the German tradition of Romantic *Naturphilosophie*; the Theosophical Society that sought out the ancient perennial truth that lies at the base of all religions, as well as anthroposophy; and the list goes on.

Some studies also describe the wide range of Western phenomena that took place roughly around the first half of the twentieth century and played a part in NA history: Indian gurus who spread their teachings throughout the West, Thelema, George Gurdjieff, Jungianism, the *I Am* religious movement, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Wicca, and so on. Notably, prominent NA scholars who deal with NA history actually prefer to ignore this sphere and skip from the nineteenth century to descriptions of NA during the final third of the twentieth century. Hanegraaff, for example, dedicates a third (!) of his book about NA religion to detailing its historical sources, yet his description ends in the nineteenth century. Sutcliffe (2003a: 12) notes that Olav Hammer's study (2003) completes that of Hanegraaff by providing the required historic continuum throughout the twentieth century

up to the emergence of NA. Sutcliffe himself (2003b) offers a genealogy that begins in the 1930s, which mostly reviews alternative-spiritual teachers and groups throughout Western Europe.

These research narratives are provided by central/Western European and North American scholars—Hanegraaff is Dutch, Melton is Californian, Hammer is Swedish, and Sutcliffe is Scottish. Unsurprisingly, their historic narratives of a global spirituality focus on its Western roots—European and North American. While NA has been prosperous in countries in central/Western Europe and North America, it supposedly seems reasonable to suggest that the phenomenon has a local history. However, this hypothesis may raise many reservations, and while none of these reservations tip the scales against it, each deserves the serious attention that is evidently absent from the research literature, and together they cast a big shade over the historical image created by this hypothesis. First, NA also thrives in other areas around the world—such as Eastern Europe, South Africa, Japan, and Oceania, a matter upon which we shall later elaborate in section 2.e. Second, prominent figures in NA exemplify a great deal of interest in a variety of non-Western, non-modern traditions, such as various native traditions, ancient Pagan traditions, South-East Asian religions, Sufism, and others. Those are often described as the foundations of NA, as we shall show in section 2.f. Third, as I have witnessed (over nearly two decades as an NA scholar), most NA activists and figures have never heard or read of what is being described as their own “historic roots.”

Fourth, plenty of NA activity is combined with Christian traditions (Kemp 2001; Bochinger 2005), and/or Jewish traditions (Ruah-Midbar 2012), and yet scholars do not bother addressing Judeo-Christian traditions when they describe NA’s historical roots. Does this attitude stem from the self-perception (emic) of NA practitioners as distinct from the establishment, and from their explicit criticism of Judeo-Christian tradition?! Moreover, Christian Kabbalah’s contribution to the development of Western esotericism is unquestionable, as some studies state outright; why, then, do studies that question NA’s adoption of Asian traditions—for example, in the matter of reincarnation—and claim its “real” roots lie in Western esotericism (see, e.g., Hammer 2003: 455ff) do not directly associate the source of these ideas with the Kabbalah—namely, Jewish tradition?!

This critical discussion continues in the following two sections, in which we shall present historical narratives which pose clear alternatives for identifying the roots of NA in Western esotericism.

2.e. Local New Age Narratives

I have already insinuated at the study’s local context, and even its biographical dimension, when I noted that the identification of NA roots as embedded in Western esotericism is characteristic of scholars from central/Western Europe

and North America. Therefore, it would be reasonable to identify the ethnocentricity of such studies by examining studies that view themselves as local, and thus search for NA's historic narrative within a limited space. Bochsinger (2005: 69), for example, focuses on NA history throughout Germany alone. As a result of this *local* examination, he criticizes the presentation of NA (and esotericism) removed from the religious European context and emphasizes that "mainstream Christianity had and still has a big impact on the development of new religious phenomena and the so-called New Age scene." In the NA genealogy presented by the Scottish Sutcliffe (2003b), he pays a great deal of attention to Western European orders and communes, including the Scottish community of Findhorn. He attributes the utmost importance to both the latter as well as to the theological thought of Alice Bailey, regarding the emergence of NA: "It is likely that without them the 'New Age movement' here could not have been set running" (2003a: 19). Therefore, without this Scottish community, the history of NA cannot be told.

In his study about the rise of New Religious Movements (a field which partially-corresponds with NA) in Israel, Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi (1992) presents the events that allowed them to prosper in the local scene. He described the gradual collapse of the secular identity during the 1970s, especially among *Kibbutz* (a communal form of settlement unique to Israel) youths or leftist movements, following local events such as the Yom-Kippur War (1973) and the rise of the right-wing political party, the *Likkud* (1977). This deterioration of identity, along with that of the Zionist-leftist-secular ideology, had critically injured Israeli ideologies focused on communal salvation (of the state/people of Israel), and its replacement with a private salvation, as the "cults" he describes offer. Needless to say, this narrative leaves no significant role for Western esotericism. As for the Judeo-Christian tradition, one movement Beit-Hallahmi describes is directly connected to Judaism (*Tshuva*—a movement of former-secular Jews who embrace ultra-orthodox identities), while another is directly connected to Christianity (Messianic Jews), and others have no connection to either tradition (Emin, Transcendental Meditation). Beit-Hallahmi views these different religious movements as offering an escape for secularism in crisis, while their conceptual-historic depth is irrelevant to a historic understanding of their rise in Israel.

When Yaakov Ariel (2003) describes the appearance of neo-Hasidism in the US, he stresses the combination between the vibrant hippie scene—characterized by syncretism, Eastern wisdom, music, colorful art and liberated sexuality—and Orthodox Chabad (a Jewish Messianic-Hasidic movement) representatives seeking to spread Judaism among American secular Jews. This hippie scene, mostly absent from Israel, is, naturally, missing from Beit-Hallahmi's description as he identifies the critical turning point as 1973—as the traumatic Yom-Kippur War broke out.

As a continuance of Ariel's description of American neo-Hasidism as an expression of Jewish NA, we shall now examine a narrative by an Israeli scholar,

regarding Israeli neo-Hassidism. Zvi Mark⁵ identifies all movements of contemporary Kabbalah as extensions of Hassidic movements that were nearly eliminated during WWII. As a result, neo-Hassidic revival and innovations make an appearance beginning with the mid-twentieth century. In contrast, another Israeli scholar dealing with contemporary Kabbalah—Jonathan Garb (2009)—identifies it as “twentieth-century Kabbalah,” meaning that its inception preceded Mark’s turning point by several decades. According to Garb, the “twentieth-century Kabbalah” is distinct from other historical Kabbalistic movements, and one of its unique attributes is self-awareness concerning renewal. Unlike Mark, Garb directly addresses NA’s influence in promoting and empowering the innovative Kabbalistic trends.

The scholarly polemic revolving around contemporary Kabbalah is vast, and this is not the appropriate place to delve into it, however, this polemic has a direct impact on the research question of contemporary Kabbalah and its affinity to NA. Therefore, we must point out Boaz Huss’s (2013) daring claim, that Kabbalah is not at all “mysticism,” and that its study makes use of erroneous ideological-theological categories, that originate in mid-nineteenth-century Western Europe and US. The invisible theology that he claims scholars of “mysticism” hold, is identical to that of NA—a perception which sees the similarity between all religions in relation to the experience of encountering the divine. This “heretical” stance of Huss’s contributes to his establishment as a prominent scholar of contemporary Kabbalah, in opposition to views that see it as a distortion of Kabbalistic tradition.

For example, Kabbalah scholar Joseph Dan (2000: 337 onwards) expresses an anxiety in light of NA’s success among educated sectors, as not only does it “defy logic and science [. . .] but ignores them altogether.” Evidently, he is frustrated by the fact that “everyone is free to use any expression as they please, be it ‘black hole’ or ‘Kabbalah,’ without answering for the relation between such expressions and the ‘true’ meaning of neither ‘black hole’ nor ‘Kabbalah.’” Dan is troubled by the “incessant, unrelenting use, anywhere possible and impossible, whilst ignoring extremely discordant absurdities—of the term ‘Kabbalah.’” The reason for this may be that he identifies NA’s “Christian core.” In his opinion, Jung is a prophet of NA who draws on Western esotericism, which, in turn, leans upon Christian Kabbalah.

In connection with Jewish concerns regarding the latent dangers of NA, we may also make mention of a study by Margaret Brearley (1994), which warns us of the underlying antisemitism of NA as it leans heavily upon the theosophical writings of Annie Besant—who headed the Society about a century ago—which

⁵In writing this, I mostly rely upon his spoken words at a night seminar he gave at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, September 29, 2005.

center around a burning hatred of Jewish tradition (as well as the Christian tradition born of it).

I believe the main conclusion concerns identifying the ideological-biographical-ethnocentric bias of historic research in its understanding of NA, which necessitates caution and avoidance of leaning on historical narratives when defining the essence of any religious phenomenon. However, beyond the insinuated value of a historical estimate of NA, this review of local studies teaches us of what has been missing from prominent studies of NA as a global phenomenon—perspectives that present alternative contexts to NA's central historic sources. Do all local studies suffer from a distorted point of view? Perhaps the global research is the one in the wrong? Is there even such a thing as global NA? Is the history of global NA relevant to all manifestation of NA?

2.f. Narratives of a Current within New Age—Part I

Much like the previous section, that focused on the local context of NA—Germany, Israel, the Kabbalah—the examination of the historical narratives of a certain current within the diverse and vibrant sphere of NA would prove interesting. After all, we would not expect a variety of central NA phenomena to have a history of their own, entirely separate from NA history, for then we must question the validity of NA's overall historic narrative in light of the fact that its central components have completely different stories. However, as expected, some central NA phenomena do indeed have histories which are unassociated with any of the historic roots we have reviewed so far.

We shall be examining two main NA phenomena. The first is the vast expanse of Eastern teachings, teachers, movements and practices within NA. Colin Campbell's study (2007) claims the West has undergone a paradigmatic transformation in favor of an "Eastern paradigm,"—the so-called Easternization of the West thesis. The various developments usually attributed to NA and its sphere—ecology upon its spiritual versions (including the Gaia Hypothesis), vegetarianism, awareness workshops, the aspiration for spiritual development, the widespread belief in reincarnation, alternative financial approaches to capitalism, and more—Campbell sees all these as the result of Eastern influences.⁶ In "East," Campbell refers to all movements from the various periods of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and others. Without delving into the different criticisms of Campbell's thesis (see, e.g., Hamilton 2002), it is essential that we note his identification of central components

⁶Elizabeth Puttick's study (2000), which focuses on the Human Potential Movement, also recognized a significant contribution to Eastern Gurus, and particularly Osho. She describes how a variety of Eastern practices and perceptions, through Osho's teachings which fit into a 1960s counter-culture mindset, reach Western psychotherapists, and enter the Western mainstream. From guided meditation to executive workshops, she virtually describes the rise of NA from the 1970s onward.

of NA as Eastern in origin, rather than Western-esoteric. This alternative narrative may shakeup the ethnocentric stance taken up by scholarly discourse, not because it is true, but because it was possible that a British scholar could have recognized the sanctification of nature as fundamentally “Eastern,” rather than as German “*Naturphilosophic*” in origin (as the Dutch Hanegraaff believed)?!

And as long as we are dealing with the sanctification of nature in NA, now is the time to mention another narrative related to the neo-Shamanic movement, which is identified as a very significant component of NA. In a description by Robert Wallis (2003: chapter 1), the movement originated from the experimentations of its Western forerunners from the nineteenth century onwards upon their encounter with Shamanism, and the experiences of Western anthropologists from the 1960s onwards, with the then-new participant observation approach, which led them to undergo Shamanic initiations and imbibe mind-altering substances. He describes three of neo-Shamanism’s central textual sources—such as Mircea Eliade’s comparative-religious scholarly texts; the books of Carlos Castaneda, the charlatan-anthropologist who wrote about Mexican Shamanism; and the urban Shamanism developed by Michael Harner. This description evokes an entirely different history, both from the esoteric narrative as well as the Eastern narrative—as the very idea of the divinity of nature comes from Shamanic doctrines. So, what is the *historic* source of nature worship in NA?! Does it even have a *true* source?! And beyond that—must we decipher the phenomenon’s historic origin in order to understand it?!

As we have witnessed, the chosen scholarly perspective, as well as the scholars’ own biographic-local bias, dictate what historic roots the studies will trace, while at the same time *hiding* a portion of the potential narratives of NA.

2.g. Narratives of a Current within New Age—Part II

Much like in the previous section, this section shall also present two study cases that examine the history of one central movement within NA. However, while the narratives of the East and neo-Shamanism presented ancient conceptual roots, this time our focus shall be movements identified with the second half of the twentieth century. Seeing as these phenomena appeared in close proximity to NA itself, and some may be identical or partially concurrent with it, it would be reasonable to expect an agreed-upon narrative. Additionally, we could likely expect the history of these movements to be tightly-linked with the history of NA itself, therefore, we will present the historiographic portrayal of both examples, as well as their relationship with NA as understood by the various scholars.

Our first example will be a phenomenon usually perceived to be a newcomer to the historic stage—belief in UFOs and aliens. Jung (1987) addressed this phenomenon, due to the innovation he had recognized in this “secular-modern myth.” He could see its parallels with traditional beliefs in angels, but understood

the discursive and cosmological innovations that gave it modern-rational-scientific-“secularized” characteristics. In the *emic* discourse of NA, the reverse happened—instead of recognizing contemporary belief in aliens as a new version of ancient beliefs, ancient myths have been reinterpreted as evidence of a perennial belief in aliens. This, for example, is applied to the tale of Enoch (mentioned in Genesis, and later expanded upon in Apocrypha) who ascends to heavenly realms on his journey alongside celestial beings who reveal to him important information about the universe and humanity. Erich von Däniken (1980) is one of the more renowned spokespeople to have recognized documentations of alien encounters in different religions and archeological findings from all over the ancient world.

How did NA scholars describe the history of the belief in aliens, which has been recognized as part of NA? Hanegraaff (1998: 95–96) identifies the appearance of UFO religions with the 1950s. Following a series of events that began in 1947 (with the Roswell incident, in particular), the first believers gathered in closed groups and awaited a disastrous apocalypse. To Hanegraaff, these groups represent the early restricted appearance of the NA movement he calls “NA *sensu-stricto*.” In contrast, Melton (2007: 83) mentions an earlier religious phenomenon—from the 1930s—which dealt with alien encounters and journeys to other planets to witness advanced civilizations—such as the works of Guy and Edna Ballard, who were the founders of “I AM” Religious Activity, a branch of the Theosophical Society.

According to Christopher Partridge (2003: 7–20), the belief in UFOs didn’t first appear during the twentieth century, but rather stemmed from theosophical religions. He based this conclusion on three conceptual attributes—the aspiration to create universal fraternity, the study of holy texts from all world religions, the study of nature’s mysteries in general, and man’s mysteries in particular. He points out the similarity between portrayals of Theosophical Masters and portrayals of aliens by their believers: a spiritual supremacy achieved throughout numerous incarnations, an ambition to teach humanity and thus bring about a new age of peace, advanced technological knowledge and concerned desire to prevent the destruction of the planet, use of channeling to receive messages from the aliens, descriptions of ancient Atlantis as inhabited by aliens, and so on. However, he also specifies the innovations that took place in post-1947 UFO religions: interest in various planets, rather than Venus alone; mysterious journeys on spaceships, rather than just “astral journeys”; juxtaposing the laws of the Creator abided by the aliens with materialistic laws; advances throughout human history—especially technological ones—take on a spiritual meaning, and more. Additionally, Partridge points out (*ibid.*: 36) the simple, almost-literal transition that took place between branches of Theosophy which refer to “ascended masters” as “descended masters,” so the “supreme” masters were understood to have “ascended” from the earth, only to later return to it.

Later, Partridge (2003: 26ff) recognized another shift in UFO religions' focal points—from dealing with advanced technology (space-technology in particular) that would allow us to contact aliens, to dealing with making contact in itself, that is, the focus shifted from machines to beings. Since the 1970s, there has been a clear increase in abduction reports, and different kinds of “abduction spiritualities” have developed. Partridge (ibid.: 32–36) recognizes most of these spiritualities' connection with NA spirituality, due to similarities in their conceptual characteristics, such as finding the religious authority within the self, associating Eastern teachings with aliens, belief that aliens are interested in transforming human consciousness by fulfilling the human potential, talk of a new era, using aliens in healing, and so on. Meaning that while Hanegraaff already recognizes the groups that formed during the 1950s as *true* NA, Partridge sees a mere *relation* between NA and belief in aliens, and only from the 1970s on. Another difference is that Partridge does not view the alien theme as an innovation of NA per se, but rather as redesigned in the spirit of NA.

This in-depth occupation with UFO religions and abduction spiritualities—one of NA's most prominent phenomena—has once again exemplified the gaps in the historical narratives within scholarly discourse, both in regard to the more limited phenomenon, as well as NA as a whole.

Another example which illustrates the attempt to understand the evolution of NA through—and in relation to—a contemporaneous phenomenon is the examination of hippie culture, the flower children, and, more generally put—1960s counterculture. The close connection between counterculture and NA (Roof 1993) is prevalent within scholarly discourse, as is the acknowledged that they are not identical (e.g., Kemp 2004: 29–34). However, there are vast differences in the attempts to explain the historic connection between these phenomena, as well as in the amount of emphasis placed on the differences in their values and ideologies. This discussion will lead us to a clearer examination of the scholars' biographies, and the conclusions of my study.

Hanegraaff (1998: 10–12) summarizes the differences between counterculture and NA movement, as it consolidated from the 1980s onwards. For the first time, he makes the connection between teenage rebellion, radical-leftist political activity, and psychedelic drug use, while identifying the latter as diverse—age-wise—and as less suitable for political activity, as it uses meditative techniques to alter its consciousness. Hanegraaff makes a similar observation as he compares two trends from similar periods (2003: 252–253), in writing that the *cultic milieu* between the 1950s and 1970s was characterized by occultist metaphysics, an emphasis on community values, altruism and serving mankind, a utopianistic expectation for the appearance of a new age, a lack of personal satisfaction with the mainstream religion/culture, and a search for religious alternatives in groups with “definite doctrines [. . .], clearly defined boundaries [. . .], claims of exclusive truth.” In

contrast, as of the 1980s, Hanegraaff noted how NA participants have acquired a sense of belonging to an invisible international community and a rather eclectic mishmash of ideas, formed groups that possess an inclusive and tolerant nature and do not demand much of their communities, and that the movement took on an individualistic nature, while its members began to “shop” in a commercialized spiritual market which adapts to changing whims and trends by individual demand. Accordingly, expectations for transformation veered from humanity to the individual.

These descriptions evoke acute questions—first: if counterculture and NA are indeed so significantly different, so much so that their differences are evident in their *main* characteristics—can we truly view one as a historic precursor for the other?! And even if counterculture substance and imagery do play a part in NA, do they bear any meaningful cultural influence in light of their dramatic transformation?! Moreover, should we view counterculture studies as a resource for insight on contemporary NA, as if the younger sister’s genes are also evidently clear in her elder?! And, if the answer is yes, how is it that many studies recognize NA history in ancient traditions, which have no reported connection to counterculture?!

Perhaps the reason that Hanegraaff bothers mentioning that some counterculture alums denied any connection to NA “because they feel it has betrayed the ideals of the counterculture,” is his own identification with the disappointment felt at the direction NA took during the 1980s. In his study, as aforementioned, he seldom dealt with NA’s twentieth-century historic roots, and mostly addressed its more ancient ones. Therefore, Hanegraaff (2003: 252) describes the difference between NA *sensu-stricto*, which took place from the 1950s to the 1970s and was characterized by an occultist metaphysics that leaned upon Theosophy and Anthroposophy (European thinkers), and which expressed a communal, altruistic, service-oriented ethics and a milleniaristic expectation of a new age, and between the NA of the 1980s onwards—“a hotch-potch of ideas and speculations without a clear focus or direction” (American style), whose idealism wanes, as they were made to suit the market, until their alternative character was no more.

Hanegraaff declares (1998: 523–524) that it is not the historian’s place to “adjudicate the ultimate validity of contemporary religious beliefs, whether commercialized or not,” but that it nonetheless deals with critiquing the nature of NA. He even quotes a warning by Gershom Scholem, of the danger of turning the individual into his/her own symbolic center, and the resulting loss of mystery, as he adds that this is exactly what has been done by NA. He even warns that a sense of obtaining a perfect knowledge may drain the world of meaning. This outcome, that Hanegraaff reaches as he finished his portrayal of an ongoing historic process, is derived of the images he chose to describe the history of NA, and from his own personal assessment regarding the movement’s present status. As he portrays this process, he admits (*ibid.*: 523) that all those who study the phenomenon cannot

help but wonder “whether the movement is a force for better or worse.” He clarifies by stating that while it is not the religious scholar’s job, “[w]hat he can and should do, however, is indicate what has been lost in the course of the processes [. . .] attempted to preserve the ‘wisdom of the past.’”

We have witnessed, therefore, the clear parallels between Hanegraaff’s portrayal of NA *sensu-stricto* turned NA *sensu-lato*, and his statement that NA developed from within counterculture. We have also seen Hanegraaff’s prominent elaboration on the first context in his description of the conceptual-historic roots, that is—contexts that originate in the nineteenth century. As mentioned, he had also marked some counterculture members’ reservations with NA. Several studies clearly touch upon the biographical-generational question (see below), by mentioning the positive and constructive aspect of counterculture members’ involvement in the creation of NA. According to this historic narrative, the baby boom generation of the late 1940s and the 1950s later became the 1960s youths that protested against the post WWII moral state in the wake of the big political-economic changes, whilst expressing their sexual needs as teenagers and youths. As they grew older, during the 1970s and 1980s, they have changed the movement, and thus NA expresses their settling-down (and perhaps bourgeoisification). Having fought hegemonic culture in their youth, and, once grown, gained key positions in the very society they once opposed—their viewpoints have changed. Thus, when the time came for them to support their own families, they exchanged their “drop-out” viewpoint for innovative approaches towards financial prosperity. This narrative paints a picture of counterculture as an expression of immature childishness, while NA exemplifies how ideals were harnessed into this culture and its daily realities. This, of course, differs to Hanegraaff’s portrayal, as he views NA as an egotistic viewpoint that diverges from its responsible and mature mid-twentieth-century predecessor.⁷

The connection between 1960s counterculture and NA appears, as aforementioned, throughout many studies. Bochner (2005: 66) described the Germans who established NA as 1968 students with a “midlife crisis.” A study by Paul Heelas and Benjamin Seel (2003) presents NA as a cultural product by aging 1960s counterculture alums, and NA as aging with them. A historic-biographic narrative better reflects the scholars’ personal, autobiographical viewpoint. This issue shall be addressed in the conclusion section.

Moreover, discussion surrounding 1960s counterculture clearly emphasizes the questions raised herein. For example, NA has flourished in Israel since the 1990s, and its appearance cannot be linked with 1960s counterculture, as it was hardly the

⁷The question of whether NA practitioners are mature or childish, mentally healthy or delusional narcissists, arises in studies in various ways, such as psychological profiles. See review by Kemp (2004: 108–113).

reality in 1960s Israel. If this phenomenon is, indeed, a generational-biographical one, is it mere coincidence that NA's appearance in Israel was so very similar to its global one, even though the biographies of Israeli NA practitioners are extremely different to that of their Western counterparts?! Similarly, we may wonder how it is that the NA that developed in Germany was the twin of British NA culture when the two cultures nourished from either side of the political-military WWII fence, while scholars pay heed to and recount the war's particular experiences and outcomes?! Additionally, it is unclear how the generational narrative can fit the findings accepted by the scholars, which claims that from the 1980s onwards, NA practitioners do not belong to any significant age-group (and studies state that averages place most of the movement's practitioners in their thirties, see Kemp 2004: 114–121)—ergo, they have no biographic connection to baby boomers.

If baby boomers did indeed establish NA, it would be reasonable to expect more elderly-related issues would be at the heart of the movement nowadays. If other sectors have “taken over” the originally Baby Boomer founded NA (a problematic essentialistic description, in my opinion), and reshaped it in their image—what contribution can the historic-generational narrative make towards understanding NA?! This critical line of questioning is weighed down further by the ideological tone of the historical descriptions concerning the 1960s narrative, evident when NA is presented as “conformity,” “bourgeoisie,” “betrayal,” “disillusionment,” “corruption,” “maturation” or “aging”—rather than as a culture in itself, whose values do not express surrendering other ideals, but setting an independent ideal. The scholars' disappointment (or, sometimes, pride) in light of NA's success in the West are evident in these descriptions. As aforementioned, some of them find comfort in attributing the contemporary movements with profound conceptual roots born at some point during the Renaissance.

2.h. Is New Age New?

The previous section dealt with two conceptual branches that are considered innovative, which has to do with a recurrent question in scholarly discourse: How new is NA (in the words of Elwood 1992)? Surely, if NA is an adoption of Eastern teachings, nothing about it is truly new, but rather the adoption of ancient approaches that simply did not gain traction across the West. We have already discussed the issue of innovation in regard to aliens, as scholars differ in their views on the innovativeness of UFO religions (and abductions)—if this belief is new, then we may point at NA as innovative in at least one meaningful sense. In the above, we have seen that while Hanegraaff already identified 1950s UFO-believers groups as NA, Partridge associates NA with UFO religions only from the 1970s onwards. Thus, personal tastes and evaluative criteria have much to do in determining how innovative a religious phenomenon is.

Should we choose to examine a different issue in order to understand the innovation of NA—we may point out the concept of reincarnation, which, for many scholars, symbolizes the religious revolution in the West, with the dramatic rise of this belief. Campbell (2007), for example, states that the fact that this belief appeared in a historically Christian society is surprising, as it is not an accepted notion among any Christian denomination. To him, this is undisputable proof of the existence of an Eastern influence. One meaningful point Campbell overlooks in his analysis, though, is that the belief in reincarnation in NA is dramatically different to its Eastern counterpart, in that it affirms life in this world, rather than rejects it, as Eastern doctrines do (Waterhouse 1999). Thus, the source of this belief may be Western, after all, and in that case—it is not innovative. We may have just as well assumed that the source of NA's belief in reincarnation is through the distribution of Kabbalistic concepts, aided by esotericism. Hanegraaff (1998: 321–322) even mentioned that in NA, it is commonly thought that Jesus preached for the existence of reincarnation, as the prohibition of this belief was only established during the sixth century AD.

This case, then, once again exemplifies the scholars' personal associations and tastes when analyzing the innovation of religious phenomena. Scholars who study the history of religious concepts make a significant contribution in pointing out the mild differences, similarities, precursors, and phrasings of concepts throughout different periods, but the very question of innovation in NA often drags the discussion into a deeply ideological arena. Dan (2000), as we have seen, does not recognize anything new about NA, with its repetition of concepts from various periods in time, apart from their mergence into an unintelligible mishmash, and New Agers' insistence that a concise and rationale discourse on the matter is unnecessary.

3. Discussion: Should We Abandon Historiography?

[Narcissus] had called out “Is anyone here?” and “*Here*” Echo replied. He [. . .] receives the same words as he speaks. He [. . .] says “Here, let us meet together”. And [. . .] Echo replies “*Together*”, and [. . .] put her arms around his neck, in longing. He runs from her [. . .] “May I die before what's mine is yours.” She answers, only “*What's mine is yours!*”

[. . .] [H]e desires to quench his thirst, [. . .] seized by the vision of his reflected form. He loves a bodiless dream [. . .] He is astonished by himself, and hangs there motionless, with a fixed expression, like a statue. (Ovid 2014)

As we have witnessed, the history of NA is not fixed, but rather everchanging within scholarly discourse. Accordingly, the above discussion has brought up the issue of validity, when it comes to portrayals of NA history, and the extrapolation

of this case study puts into question the status of the methodology used in the historic study of religions.

Religion history is an elemental component of religious studies, and is perceived as the basis—if not as the gist—to comprehending them. The scholarly discourse of NA also displays a historic understanding of the phenomenon that goes *far beyond* merely contributing to its comprehension or shedding light upon any of its aspects—as a starting point towards *explaining this phenomenon, understanding it, defining its very essence*. Hanegraaff (2003: 249–250, my emphases) expresses this approach well:

New Age religion is neither something completely new, nor just a revival—or survival—of something ancient. *It has ancient roots, which need to be taken into account in order to understand the movement that grew from them*; indeed, from one perspective New Age may be seen as merely the contemporary manifestation of the traditional alternative religiosity of the West. But perceived from another perspective, New Age religion is radically new: a manifestation *par excellence* of postmodern consumer society, the members of which use, recycle, combine and adapt existing religious ideas and practices as they see fit. *In order to understand the New Age movement and its role in the modern world, we therefore need to understand its historical foundations as well as its specific modernity.*

There is no question that historic research greatly and significantly contributes to enriching our understanding of religious phenomena. However, after the journey we took throughout the aforementioned examples, I do believe that the problematic nature of using the historic discipline as a defining or explanative tool for NA has been illustrated.

These examples further emphasized scholars' personal bias in shaping historic narrative. Their ideology was clear in their disappointment, amazement, hope, identification, and other emotions they have shown regarding NA and its research literature. Often, it seems NA historiography was actually meant to make claims regarding the present or foreseeable future of NA, not its past.

A discussion which does not begin with the present state of its subject, but rather paints a narrative continuity starting with the past, creates a certain metaphor of an ongoing momentum that travels from the past, through the present and into the future. This image may be physical-mechanical (examining the forces that affect an object in motion) or botanical (describing a seed's growth potential, its distribution, and withering processes), with the scholars placing present-day NA somewhere on a linear timeline that depicts this metaphoric process. These images, in fact, reflect scholars' predisposition according to which an understanding of the present phenomena must rely upon exploring its past sources, so that one can draw a constant line of continuity that extends from the past into the present, and even guess (or hope for) its presumed future. Accordingly, as we have seen,

different scholars expect NA to break out, to change, to show signs of assimilation, decay, or disintegration. Such images, that shape NA's historic narrative, take on a mythical quality. This scholarly "myth" allows for a summation of the vast and highly-detailed historic descriptions by emphasizing facts to create an overall narrative with an implied message.

Using a narrative description, in which NA dons an image within a plot, Melton reaches a conclusion regarding the movement's inevitable future, or lack thereof—to be precise. Melton (2007: 77, my emphases) focuses on the visual image of a wave—and everyone knows how a wave crests and what happens after it peaks:

The term New Age refers to a *wave* of religious enthusiasm that emerged in the 1970s and *swept over* the West through the 1980s only to *subside* at the end of the decade. As with other such enthusiastic movements, however, it did not just simply go away, but like *a storm hitting a sandbar*, it left behind a measurably changed situation among those elements of the religious community most centrally *impacted*.

Later in his article, Melton speaks of the death of NA, as aforementioned, and the appearance of Post-NA.

Another example of this image is the biological body, as Hanegraaff (1998: 522) puts it: NA's concepts were born back in the late nineteenth century and matured over the first decades of the twentieth century. Within a different context, Hanegraaff (*ibid.*: 19) mentions the *cultic milieu* as comprised of a multitude of alternative-spiritual individuals and small groups who possess a coherent theology, that have consolidated and become self-aware over the latter half of the 1970s, and this self-awareness of a more-or-less unified body created NA. Nevertheless, the later developments concerned "some representatives of the original movement" in view of the "cheapening of the idea of a New Age." Therefore, Hanegraaff does not believe the same descriptions of vitality and youth, maturity and adulthood may be applied to present-day NA, as its portrayal is that of old-age and degeneration, chaos and confusion (2003: 251–254). This may have been why Hanegraaff preferred to return the focus of his later studies to esotericism, rather than NA.

As we can see, scholars' personal outlooks become involved in their choice of research subject, and further in their understanding of it. Scholars' associative world is unveiled as they describe the historic roots of NA. Should we dare take another step, we must address scholars' biographic experiences as basis for their study. As Sutcliffe (2003a: 24) states:

[T]he ground under our feet is, broadly, auto/biographically and culturally coterminous with the material base or footprint of 'New Age'. That is, the field of practice labelled 'New Age' is the popular religion of our own backyards. Hence in taking 'New Age' seriously and dealing with it properly, we cannot but

work self-reflexively: we necessarily historicise and anthropologise ourselves. Which is where I came in.

As we have discovered in the above review, *etic* categories are significant to NA historiography: “religion,” “movement,” or “philosophical movement”; Western esoteric, Eastern or Judeo-Christian origins; “altruism” or “self-salvation”; “narrative,” “auto-biography” or “genealogy.” They all carry their own value systems, premises, and hopes regarding what fruit the study, and NA itself, might bear. On this matter, we may only comment briefly, as we have dedicated this discussion to historical issues. However, it is important to note that Sutcliffe (2003a) had opposed the way in which the category “NA” itself was established and accepted within scholarly discourse, while other scholars have objected to this category by ignoring it in their research of NA phenomena (Ruah-Midbar and Ruah-Midbar 2012).

Scholars in the humanities and social sciences often face dangers akin to those Echo and Narcissus had faced—on the one hand, the danger of falling in love with their research subject, thus *echoing* its voice without adding anything significant, and on the other hand, the danger of falling in love with academic method and discourse, so much so that they can no longer see the object of the study—but only how it reflects their own image. When it comes to NA, the effect of ideology, biography, values, hopes and fears on scholarly discourse is evident. The challenge is even greater in historic research, challenging scholars to be extremely reflective, avoid leaning on historic aspects as the crux of the matter when studying a phenomenon, and be aware not to get caught up in their own personal scholarly imagination and associations as binding interpretations.

Though this discussion revolved around a contemporary religious phenomenon, which evokes strong emotions, these conclusions are also significant to the study of religious phenomena from other times. A historic discussion may deepen the analysis of a religious phenomenon and the understanding of its aspects and gives it greater meaning and context—but it cannot decipher it. Historic research can assist to a certain point, but not beyond it. We cannot rely on history in defining a phenomenon, in attempting to comprehend its essence, its power, its importance, and most certainly—not its future.

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