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Source: *Arion*, Third Series, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Winter, 2003), pp. 57-111

Published by: [Trustees of Boston University](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20163901>

Accessed: 17/11/2013 11:56

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Cults and Cosmic Consciousness: Religious Vision in the American 1960s

CAMILLE PAGLIA

I. ECLIPSE BY POLITICS

COMMENTARY ON THE 1960s has been massive. Law and politics in that turbulent decade are well documented but remain controversial, and the same thing can be said of contemporary innovations in mass media and the arts. One major area remains ambiguous or poorly assimilated, however—the new religious vision, which for a tantalizing moment in the American sixties brought East and West together in a progressive cultural synthesis. Its promise was never completely fulfilled, for reasons I will try to sketch here. But the depth and authenticity of that spiritual shift need to be more widely acknowledged.

A political model currently governs interpretations of the sixties because of the enduring reform movements born in that period, including environmentalism, feminism, and gay liberation. Their mobilizing energy, as well as the organizational style that would also be adopted by antiwar protests, initially came from the civil rights movement sparked by the US Supreme Court's 1954 decision declaring segregation in public schools unconstitutional. In that crusade, it must be remembered, ordained Protestant ministers such as Martin Luther King, Jr., played a leading role, as they also had in nineteenth-century abolitionism. The civil rights movement, with its hymns and anthems, appealed not just to secular standards of social justice but to a higher moral code.

An expanded version of a lecture delivered on 26 March 2002 at Yale University, sponsored by the Institute for the Advanced Study of Religion at Yale.

ARION 10.3 WINTER 2003

Political expression on the Left in the American sixties was split. Radical activists such as Students for a Democratic Society (1960–68) drew their ideology from Marxism, with its explicit atheism. But demonstrations with a large hippie contingent often mixed politics with occultism—magic and witchcraft along with costumes and symbolism drawn from Native American religion, Hinduism, and Buddhism. For example, at the mammoth antiwar protest near Washington, DC, in October 1967, Yippies performed a mock-exorcism to levitate the Pentagon and cast out its demons. Not since early nineteenth-century Romanticism had there been such a strange mix of revolutionary politics with ecstatic nature-worship and sex-charged self-transformation. It is precisely this phantasmagoric religious vision that distinguishes the New Left of the American 1960s from the Old Left of the American 1930s and from France's failed leftist insurgency of 1968, both of which were conventionally Marxist in their indifference or antagonism to religion.

Members of the sixties counterculture were passionately committed to political reform, yet they were also seeking the truth about life outside religious and social institutions. Despite their ambivalence toward authority, however, they often sought gurus—mentors or guides, who sometimes proved fallible. One problem was that the more the mind was opened to what was commonly called “cosmic consciousness” (a hippie rubric of the sixties), the less meaningful politics or social structure became, melting into the Void. Civil rights and political reform are in fact Western ideals: Hinduism and Buddhism, by extinguishing the ego and urging acceptance of ultimate reality, see suffering and injustice as essential conditions of life that cannot be changed but only endured. Alteration of consciousness—“blowing your mind”—became an end or value in itself in the sixties. Drugs remade the Western world-view by shattering conventions of time, space, and personal identity. Unfortunately, revelation was sometimes indistinguishable from delusion. The neurological risks of long-term drug use were denied or underesti-

mated: the most daring sixties questers lost the ability to articulate and transmit their spiritual legacy to posterity.

The source material in this area is voluminous but uneven in quality, partly because sixties chronicles at their most colorful often rely on anecdote and hearsay. Hence, much of the present essay is provisional. My aim is to trace lines of influence and to suggest historical parallels—an overview that might aid teachers in the US and abroad who are interested in developing interdisciplinary courses about the sixties.

2. CULTS ANCIENT AND MODERN

Tens of thousands of young people in the American sixties drifted or broke away from parents to explore alternative world-views and lifestyles. A minority actually joined communes or cults. These varied in philosophy and regime from the mild to the extreme. The true cults that proliferated in the American sixties and early seventies resemble those of the Hellenistic and imperial Roman eras. Such phenomena are symptoms of cultural fracturing in cosmopolitan periods of rapid expansion and mobility. Consisting of small groups of the disaffected or rootless, cults are sects that may or may not evolve into full religions. Hence, the cult phenomenon even at its most bizarre demonstrates the sociological dynamic of the birth of religions, as they flare up, coalesce, and strengthen or sputter out and vanish. A cult is a foster family that requires complete severance from past connections—kin, spouses, friends. Membership in cults may begin with a sudden conversion experience where an individual feels that ultimate truth has been glimpsed. This may lead to zealotry, the conviction that the cult view is the only possible view, which therefore must be promulgated to the benighted or is too refined to be understood by others. A persecution complex and siege mentality may result: cult members feel that the world is the enemy and that only martyrdom will vindicate their faith.

During the Hellenistic and imperial Roman periods,

transnational mystery religions competed with the established state religions of the Olympian or civic gods, whose official worship was public and often located in city centers. The mammoth dissemination of Olympian images in sculptures and artifacts has resulted in Greco-Roman religion, from the excavation of Rome at the Renaissance, being portrayed by neoclassicism as stabler or more uniform than it was. Mystery religions, which generally produced fewer and less monumental stone or chryselephantine idols, offered personal salvation through initiation into an enlightened group bound by some special secret, often involving the promise of an afterlife, a recompense for present miseries. Hence mystery religions had great appeal to the powerless and dispossessed.

The major Mediterranean mystery religions—of Dionysus, Demeter, Isis, and Mithras—anticipated, influenced, or vied with Christianity. Compared to the sometimes dryly contractual veneration of the Olympians, mystery religion was characterized by a worshipper's powerful identification with and emotional connection to the god. Christianity, based on the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, one of many itinerant preachers in Palestine, emerged from a proliferation of splinter sects in Judaism, among which were the Essenes, who left the famous Dead Sea Scrolls in jars found just after World War II in caves near Qumran in Israel. The Essenes, ascetic and celibate hermits with an apocalyptic theology, were a cult by any modern definition. The American sixties, I submit, had a climate of spiritual crisis and political unrest similar to that of ancient Palestine, then under Roman occupation. But this time the nascent religions faltered under the pitiless scrutiny of modern media. Few prophets or messiahs could survive the deglamourizing eye of the invasive TV camera.

Yet a major source of cultic energies in twentieth-century America was the entertainment industry: the Hollywood studio system, cohering during and just after World War I, projected its manufactured stars as simulacra of the pagan

pantheon. Frenzied fans (a word derived from the Latin *fanaticus*, for maddened worshippers of Cybele) had already been generated by grand opera in the late-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when castrati sang female roles and were the dizzy object of coterie speculation and intrigue. Modern mass media immensely extended and broadened that phenomenon. Outbursts of quasi-religious emotion could be seen in the hysterical response of female fans to Rudolph Valentino, Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley, and the Beatles. Eroticism mixed with death is archetypally potent: there were nearly riots by distraught mourners after Valentino's death from a perforated ulcer at age thirty-one in 1926. The rumor that Elvis lives is still stubbornly planted in the culture, as if he were a demigod who could conquer natural law. Tabloids have touted Presley's canonization as the first Protestant saint. The same myth of surviving death is attached to rock star Jim Morrison, whose Paris grave has become a magnet for hippies of many nations.

Cultism of this demonstrative kind is persistently associated with androgynous young men, half sweet, half surly, who like Adonis are sometimes linked with mother figures. Presley, for example, sank into depression and never fully recovered from his mother's unexpected death at age forty-six in 1958; after long substance abuse, he died prematurely at age forty-two in 1977. Rock music, even at its most macho, has repeatedly produced pretty, long-haired boys who mesmerize both sexes and who hauntingly resemble ancient sculptures of Antinous, the beautiful, ill-fated youth beloved by the Roman emperor Hadrian. It's no coincidence that it was Paul McCartney, the "cutest" and most girlish of the Beatles, who inspired a false rumor that swept the world in 1969 that he was dead. Beatles songs and album covers were feverishly scrutinized for clues and coded messages: I myself contributed to this pandemonium by calling a New Haven radio station to identify mortuary lines from *King Lear* submerged in the climactic cacophony of "I am the Walrus." In cultic experience, death is sexy. The hapless McCartney had

become Adonis, the dying god of fertility myth who was the epicene prototype for the deified Antinous: after Antinous drowned in the Nile in 130 AD, the grief-stricken Hadrian had him memorialized in shrines all over the Mediterranean, where ravishing cult statues often showed the pensive youth crowned with the grapes and vines of Dionysus.

The evangelical fervor felt by many heretical young people in the 1960s was powered by rock music, which at that moment was becoming an art form. The big beat came from late-forties and fifties African-American rhythm and blues. But the titanic, all-enveloping sound of rock was produced by powerful, new amplification technology that subordinated the mind and activated the body in a way more extreme than anything seen in Western culture since the ancient Roman Bacchanalia. Through the sensory assault of that thunderous music, a whole generation tapped into natural energies, tangible proof of humanity's link to the cosmos.

"Flower power," the pacifist sixties credo, was a sentimentalized, neo-Romantic version of earth cult, which underlay the ancient worship of Dionysus. In the *Bacchae*, Euripides saw nature's frightful, destructive side, but that perception was gradually lost over time. *Bacchanalia* is the Latin term for the Dionysian ritual *orgia* (root of the English word "orgy"), where celebrants maddened by drink, drugs, and wildly rhythmic music went into ecstasy (*ecstasis*, "standing outside of"), abandoning or transcending their ordinary selves. Hence the association of Dionysus (called *Lusios*, the "Liberator") with theater. The Bacchanalia arrived in Southern Italy from Greece in the fifth century BC and eventually spread to Rome. Celebrants decked with myrtle and ivy danced to flutes and cymbals through city parks and woods in festivities that became notorious for open sexual promiscuity and opportunistic crime. After repeated outbreaks following the Second Punic War, the Bacchanalia were declared a threat to public order and officially suppressed by the Roman Senate in 186 BC. But their influence

persisted, as attested by Dionysian designs on sarcophagi and the walls of private villas. In the ruins of Pompeii, the hedonistic resort destroyed by a volcanic eruption in 79 AD, there is evidence that the Bacchanalia had evolved into private sex clubs. This process of secularization, where sex divorced from cosmology becomes permissively recreational, can also be seen in the transition from the hippie sixties to the manic seventies and early eighties: sex detached from Romantic nature cult withdrew to glitzy urban discos, bath-houses, and sex clubs like Plato's Retreat.

3. NEW MESSIAHS AND CULTURAL POLARIZATION

What we think of as the 1960s was really concentrated into the half-dozen years after the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963. Cultural changes exploded and burnt themselves out with tremendous speed. The religious impulse of the sixties has been obscured by a series of scandals that began mid-decade and spilled into the seventies—communes that failed, charismatic leaders who turned psychotic, cults that ended in crime and murder. The sensational chain of events began with the dismissal in 1963 of Timothy Leary and his colleague Richard Alpert from psychology lecture-ships at Harvard for experimenting with LSD on student volunteers. This episode first brought LSD to public attention. An Irish Catholic turned self-described prophet, Leary envisioned a world network of “psychedelic churches” whose Vatican would be his League for Spiritual Discovery (acronym: LSD), headquartered in Millbrook, New York, until it was closed after a 1966 police raid led by Dutchess County assistant prosecutor G. Gordon Liddy. Though registered as a religious institution, the League was noted for its sex parties—reportedly a frequent attraction of Leary’s Harvard offices as well.

The optimistic sixties saga degenerated into horrifying incidents of group psychology gone wrong. Most notorious is the case of Charles Manson, a drifter who became a fixture

of San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district during its famous 1967 "Summer of Love" and who gathered a group of fanatical devotees, hippie girls who thought he was both Jesus Christ and the devil. Though only 5'2" tall, Manson had hypnotic powers as a cult leader. He became patriarch of the "Family," a commune on a ranch near Los Angeles where heavy use of a cornucopia of drugs was promoted and ritualistic group sex practiced. A student of the Bible, Manson believed that the Book of Revelations prophesied the Beatles: modern pop culture, in other words, had an apocalyptic religious meaning. In August 1969, Manson dispatched a hit squad to slaughter seven people in two nights, including the actress Sharon Tate, living in a rented house in the Hollywood Hills. The details still shock: in jailhouse confessions, Manson's girls boasted of the "sexual release" they felt in their Maenadic frenzy as they plunged their knives into their victims. Tate, eight months pregnant, was stabbed sixteen times and a male companion fifty-one times.

By the seventies, cults seemed increasingly psychopathic. Radical political cells like the bomb-making Weathermen or the Symbionese Liberation Army, who kidnapped Patty Hearst in 1974 and whose emblem was a talismanic seven-headed cobra, began to merge in popular perception with nominally religious groups like Jim Jones' People's Temple, whose mostly black congregation was drawn from San Francisco at the height of the hippie era. Jones was a social worker and political activist who claimed to be the reincarnation of Jesus, Buddha, Ikhnaten, and Lenin and who eventually emigrated with his followers to a commune called Jonestown in the Guyana jungle. After a shootout that killed a visiting US Congressman in 1978, Jones ordered mass suicide by cyanide-laced punch: 914 people were found dead, including 280 children.

In the nineties, interest in the swinging sixties revived among curious young people at the same time as an acrimonious debate about the sixties legacy intensified with the election of the first baby-boom president, Bill Clinton. Thus, a

coincidental upsurge of cult incidents also triggered memories of the Manson era. In 1993, a Christian commune of Branch Davidians near Waco, Texas, was destroyed by fire, with the loss of eighty-one lives, after a four-month siege by agencies of the federal government. The Davidians were a branch of Seventh-Day Adventists with roots in the 1930s. Their leader, David Koresh, called himself “Yahweh” and kept a harem. In 1997, thirty-nine bodies, all wearing Nike sneakers and draped in purple shrouds, were found in a house near San Diego, California. An obscure cult led by Marshall Applewhite, the son of a Presbyterian minister, had committed mass suicide in the expectation of ascent to heaven, signaled by the Hale-Bopp comet. The cult followed a strict code of celibacy: Applewhite and seven other men had been surgically castrated to avoid homosexual temptation.

These sensational cases further distorted and distanced the religious dimension of the sixties. Though there are cults abroad—the Armageddon-style Solar Temple that resulted in fifty-three suicides in Switzerland in 1994 or the Aum Shinrykyo group who released sarin gas in the Tokyo subway in 1995, killing twelve and injuring five thousand—it is primarily in American culture that the sixties drama of idealism and disillusion has been played out. The sixties lost credibility through their own manifest excesses, which produced the counterreaction of Christian fundamentalism. The American evangelical and pentecostal movements, already stirring again in the early sixties, gained great momentum. In 1968, Richard Nixon won the White House on a law-and-order platform; by 1976, a “born-again” Southern Baptist, Jimmy Carter, was elected president.

The sixties were the breeding ground for the depressingly formulaic political and cultural pattern of the last thirty-five years—a rigid polarization of liberals and conservatives, with each group striking predictable postures and mouthing sanctimonious platitudes. Gradations of political thought have been lost. One reason is that liberals have shown continual disrespect for religion, thereby allowing conservatives

to take the high road and claim to be God's agents in defending traditional values. Liberals have forgotten the religious ferment on the Left in the sixties, so that progressive politics has too often become a sterile instrument of government manipulation, as if social-welfare agencies and federal programs could bring salvation. Memories of the sixties have been censored out of embarrassment, since the flakiest of sixties happenings seemed to delegitimize the period's political ideals.

On the other hand, it could be argued that there are traces of sixties religiosity in the liberalism of recent decades. An obvious example is the Arcadian matriarchal myth of "the Goddess" that emerged in feminism and lesbian separatism in the seventies and still flourishes in innumerable books still in print. A second example is the puritanical feminist ideology typified in the eighties by Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, who allied with far-right Christians in an anti-pornography crusade that threatened First Amendment liberties. With its ironclad dogma and inquisitorial style, the "political correctness" of the eighties should be regarded as a cult that brainwashed even sophisticated journalists until their deprogramming in the pro-sex nineties. A third example is poststructuralism, which infested American humanities departments from the late seventies through the mid-nineties: the uncritical academic adulation of Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and Michel Foucault was an insular and self-referential cult that treated pointlessly cryptic texts as Holy Writ.

Religion has always been central to American identity: affiliation with or flight from family faith remains a primary term of our self-description. America, of course, began in religious dissidence: many early Northeastern colonists, such as the Pilgrims, were seventeenth-century Separatists who had seceded from the Church of England. Psychic repressions perhaps produced by Protestant rationalism and intolerance of dissent among the Massachusetts Puritans erupted in the Salem witch-trials (1692), whose lurid imagery of sex

and demonism oddly resembles that of modern popular culture. The compulsive cycle of sexual license and puritan backlash remains a deep-seated pattern in American culture.

The 1960s' combination of spirituality with progressive politics was prefigured by the reformist world-view of the Quakers (the Religious Society of Friends), who emigrated to America in the seventeenth century after persecution in England. The Quakers rejected materialism, authority, and hierarchy and espoused pacifism, social activism, sexual egalitarianism, and liberty of conscience. The Shakers (a slang term that described their ecstatic transports) were English Quakers who emigrated to America for religious freedom in the late eighteenth century. Nineteenth-century Shaker communities were known for their code of celibacy and communal property as well as their plain style of furniture and crafts that would influence minimalist modern design.

The Mennonites, another sect in search of religious freedom, were Dutch and Swiss Anabaptists who fled to Germany and then to America in the late seventeenth century. Their most conservative branch, the Amish, still live in rural central Pennsylvania and reject electricity, automobiles, and contemporary clothing. The most successful of America's nonconformist sects, Mormonism (the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints), was founded by a self-proclaimed prophet, Joseph Smith, in upstate New York in 1830 and eventually found refuge in Utah. (The Mormons clashed with the federal government in 1852 when they adopted the Old Testament practice of polygamy, later renounced.) There were many, short-lived utopian communities in the nineteenth-century, such as Brook Farm (1841-47) and the "new Eden" of Fruitlands (1843-44), both established by Transcendentalists in Massachusetts. In Central New York, the Oneida Community (1848-81) were Christian Perfectionists who advocated communal property and open marriage.

Hence the religious dissidence and secessionist tendencies of the 1960s were simply a new version of a long American

tradition. The decade's politics loom large partly because demonstrations, unlike inner journeys, were photographable and indeed often staged for the camera. Today's young people learn about the sixties through a welter of video clips of JFK's limousine in Dallas, Vietnamese firefights, and hippies draped in buckskin and love beads. Furthermore, the most fervent of the decade's spiritual questers followed Timothy Leary's advice to "Turn on, tune in, and drop out" and removed themselves from career tracks and institutions, which they felt were too corrupt to reform. The testimony of those radical explorers of inner space has largely been lost: they ruined their minds and bodies by overrelying on drugs as a shortcut to religious illumination.

The absence of those sixties seekers from the arena of general cultural criticism can be seen in the series of unresolved controversies in the last two decades over the issue of blasphemy in art. With the triumph of avant-garde modernism by the mid-twentieth century, few ambitious young artists would dare to show religious work. Though museum collections are rich with religious masterpieces from the Middle Ages through the nineteenth century, major American museums and urban art galleries ignore contemporary religious art—thus ensuring, thanks to the absence of strong practitioners, that it remains at the level of kitsch. And the art world itself has suffered: with deeper themes excised, it slid into a shallow, jokey postmodernism that reduced art to ideology and treated art works as vehicles of approved social messages.

By the 1980s, during the conservative administrations of Ronald Reagan, an artist's path to instant success was to satirize or profane Christian iconography. Warfare erupted in 1989 over "Piss Christ," a misty photograph by the American Andres Serrano of a wood and plastic crucifix submerged in a Plexiglas tank of his own urine, and then a decade later over a 1996 collage of the Virgin Mary by the British-Nigerian Chris Ofili, who adorned the Madonna with breasts of elephant dung and ringed her with pasted-on photos of fe-

male genitalia clipped from pornographic magazines. The Ofili painting made hardly a ripple in London but caused an explosion in the US in 1999 when it was exhibited, with a deplorable lack of basic curatorial support, by the Brooklyn Museum. The uproar in all such cases was fomented by grandstanding politicians with agendas of their own: New York mayor Rudy Giuliani, for example, outrageously moved to cut off the Brooklyn Museum's public funding. Nevertheless, the ultimate responsibility for this continuing rancor rests with the arts community, who are fixed in an elitist mind-set that automatically defines religion as reactionary and unenlightened. Federal funding of the arts, already minuscule in the US, has been even further diminished because of the needlessly offensive way that religion has been treated in such incidents.

This cultural stalemate was aggravated, I contend, by the disappearance of voices from the sixties religious revolution. Even counterculture agnostics had respected the cosmic expansiveness of religious vision. There was also widespread ecumenical interest at the time in harmonizing world religions. The primary guide in this new syncretism was Carl Jung, who was the son of a Protestant minister and who began to study Asian thought in depth after his break with Freud in 1913. Jung's theory of the collective unconscious was partly derived from the Hindu concept of *samskaras*, the residue of past lifetimes. His interdisciplinary interpretation of culture was also influenced by Sir James George Frazer's multi-volumed work of classical anthropology, *The Golden Bough* (1890–1915). Jung revealed the poetry and philosophy in the rituals and iconography of world religions. But Jungian thought had little impact on post-sixties American academe, thanks to the invasion of European theory. French poststructuralism, the Frankfurt School, and British cultural studies all follow the Marxist line that religion is “the opiate of the masses.” The end result was that, by the eighties, the claim that great art has a spiritual meaning was no longer taken seriously—and was positively perilous to anyone seek-

ing employment or promotion in the humanities departments of major American universities.

4. TRANSCENDENTALISM AND ASIAN RELIGION

That the spiritual awakening of the 1960s belonged to a long series of religious revivals in America was argued by William G. McLoughlin in his splendid 1978 book, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*. McLoughlin's point was taken up again by Robert S. Ellwood in *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening* (1994), but general discussion of the sixties remains unchanged. The resistance of received opinion is too strong: the Right refuses to acknowledge anything positive in the sixties legacy, while the Left rejects religion wholesale.

In the Great Awakening of the mid-eighteenth century, the Congregational minister Jonathan Edwards lit up the Connecticut Valley with his call for a renewal of Calvinist belief. Edwards viewed the ease and slackness of contemporary religious practice as a falling off from the disciplined vigor of New England's Puritan forefathers. His terrifying 1741 "Fire Sermon" ("Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God") stressed man's contemptible weakness. But the 1960s spiritual awakening, as a program of rebellious liberalization, more resembled Transcendentalism (1835–60), which was influenced by British Romanticism and German idealism. Its leading figure, Ralph Waldo Emerson, had been a Unitarian minister (descended from a line of clerics) but resigned his post because he could not accept the doctrine of transubstantiation in the Eucharist. More generally, Emerson was repelled by the passionlessness and rote formulas of genteel churchgoing. His suave father, a Boston minister, had had the social success that Emerson spurned.

Emerson was reserved and austere, not unlike the Romantic poet, William Wordsworth, who had a similar reverence for nature. Emerson transferred his family's religious vocation to the Romantic cult of nature, a pagan pantheism. His holistic vision of nature, like that of his friend Henry David Thoreau,

prefigures 1960s ecology: indeed, Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), a journal of his experiment in monastic living in the woods near Boston, became a canonical text for the sixties counter-culture.

The most intriguing of the parallels between New England Transcendentalism and 1960s thought is Emerson's interest in Asian literature—mainly Hindu sacred texts (the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads*) and Confucius' maxims. India's religious literature had been unknown to the West until the first European translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* appeared in 1785, when Sanskrit studies had just begun.

The titles Emerson gave to his poems "Brahma" and "Maya" were inexplicable to most readers at the time. (Brahma is the Hindu creator god; Maya is the veil of illusion.) "Brahma," first published in 1857, was the butt of so many satirical lampoons that Emerson's publisher begged him, to no avail, to drop it from the 1876 edition of his selected poems. In his seminal essays (1836–41), Emerson refers to God as the "Over-Soul," a translation of the Sanskrit word, *atman*, meaning "supreme and universal soul." Emerson's "Over-Soul" would be reinterpreted by Friedrich Nietzsche as the *Übermensch*, which translators often misleadingly render in English as "Superman."

Emerson's study of Hindu literature, which intensified after his first wife's death, was documented by Arthur Christy, a professor at Columbia University, in his 1932 book, *The Orient in American Transcendentalism*. Christy inspected borrowing records at the Boston Athenaeum and Harvard College Library, as well as Emerson's journals and marginalia, to trace his considerable reading history of Asian texts. By contrast, Harvard Library records showed no sign that the undergraduate Thoreau ever withdrew books on Eastern religion. His transforming knowledge of it came entirely from his casual reading in Emerson's personal library, through which he was guided by Emerson's second wife. Among the other Transcendentalists, Bronson Alcott was most interested in Hindu philosophy, which he had explored

while working as a Philadelphia schoolteacher in the 1830s.

Emerson the sage was the main draw in the Transcendentalist circle. Harvard students and other young people flocked to hear him speak or made pilgrimages to his home in Concord. His warm rapport with and encouragement of the young came from his own conflicts with authority, from which evolved his doctrine of American individualism and self-reliance. Emerson's charismatic appeal as an anti-establishment mentor could be compared to that of the early Timothy Leary, who warned, "Don't trust anyone over thirty." (As a college student in 1966, I witnessed the mob scene around Leary when I traveled with other students from Binghamton to Cornell University to hear him speak about LSD and his new League for Spiritual Discovery.)

In *Leaves of Grass* (1855), Walt Whitman absorbed British Romantic poetry as well as Emerson's poems and essays, with their disparate Asian influences. Whitman's sprawling, pagan epic (expanded over succeeding decades) openly challenged Judeo-Christianity. After William Blake's allegorical long poems, *Leaves of Grass* is Western literature's closest approximation to the dynamic form and visionary style of Hindu sacred literature, with its cosmic scale. Whitman's poem would have tremendous influence on the 1960s via fifties Beat poetry, in particular Allen Ginsberg's prophetic protest poem, *Howl* (1956), which imitates Whitman's long, incantatory lines. Ginsberg regularly paid homage to Whitman, as in his amusing 1955 poem, "A Supermarket in California," which addresses Whitman by name.

The limitations in Emersonian Transcendentalism are suggested by the reservations expressed by both Emerson and Thoreau to the sexual material in *Leaves of Grass*, which, despite their great admiration for the poem, they felt to be crude flaws. Emerson, who had always disliked the bawdiness in Shakespeare's plays, actually advised Whitman to purge sexual references from later editions of *Leaves of Grass*. In this respect, the Romantic nature cult of Emerson and Thoreau betrays their Puritan lineage. They see nature in

clean, rigorous terms but cannot tolerate or encompass nature's stormier energies—the theme of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851). Significantly, though he enjoyed choosing hymns for Sunday services, Emerson did not much care for music. Despite the call for ecstasy in his poem “Bacchus,” he was evidently made uncomfortable by music's heady rhythms and emotional stimulation. It was the American 1960s that would complete Transcendentalism—through the new, barbaric medium of rock.

5. AMERICAN STRAINS OF ASIAN RELIGION IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The pervasive presence of Asian religion in the bohemian underground in the US after World War II was unparalleled in avant-garde and existentialist Paris during the same period. Anti-clericalism—hostility to priests and church hierarchy—has been entrenched among the European intelligentsia since the Enlightenment, partly because the Roman Catholic Church was once an active force in politics and economics and, in the period of the Papal States, was a nation in its own right.

The defiant rejection of organized religion by Beat poets and artists was a substantial part of their legacy to the 1960s counterculture. Their hip appropriation of Asian thought is illustrated by the title of Jack Kerouac's 1958 autobiographical novel, *The Dharma Bums* (*dharma* is a Hindu and Buddhist term for natural truth or right living). Though most of the Beats merely dabbled in Asian religion, they borrowed enough to help their second-generation fans critique Western intellectual assumptions. Ginsberg, Kerouac, and the other Beats who drifted to San Francisco in the fifties learned about Zen Buddhism from the poet Gary Snyder, a rugged, Thoreau-style naturalist from Oregon who would later live in a monastery in Japan. (A leading character in *The Dharma Bums* is based on Snyder.) Buddhist references percolated from the Beats into anti-academic poetry of other

schools from the fifties to the early seventies.

A Zen Institute was established in New York in 1930; San Francisco's Zen Center began in 1959. But American interest in Zen was primarily stimulated by two non-fiction writers, Daisetz T. Suzuki (1870–1966), a Japanese Buddhist scholar, and Alan Watts (1915–73), who was born in England. In the 1950s, Suzuki lectured extensively on Mahayana Buddhism in the US, including as a visiting professor at Columbia University. Watts was an Anglican priest with a master's degree in theology who had had an interest in Asian thought and culture since adolescence. His first book on Buddhism, *The Spirit of Zen*, was published in 1936 after he had met Suzuki in London earlier that year. Watts was Episcopal chaplain at Northwestern University near Chicago during World War II and then moved to the West Coast, where he taught at the School of Asian Studies in San Francisco and joined the Los Angeles Vedanta Society, devoted to Vedanta Hinduism. Watts' many books, such as *The Way of Zen* (1957) and *Psychotherapy East and West* (1961), were widely available as vividly bound paperbacks in the sixties. Though Watts has sometimes been dismissed as a popularizer, I can attest that his comparative studies of Asian and Western culture had a great impact on me as a student. In 1966, he spent several days at my college, where he lectured on "Narcotics and Hallucinogenic Drugs" and "Differing Views of the Self and Its Relation to Nature."

It was Watts' reference to "cosmic consciousness" in his 1962 book, *The Joyous Cosmology*, that put it into the cultural atmosphere of the time. The term had been coined by a Canadian psychiatrist, Richard Maurice Bucke, in a very odd, spiritualistic book, *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind* (1901). While superintendent of an asylum for the clinically insane, Bucke had begun to question the standard categories of Western logic and science. In 1894, he read a paper called "Cosmic Consciousness" to a meeting of the American Medico-Psychological Association in Philadelphia. In his book, Bucke attempted to

fuse Asian and Western religion by juxtaposing somewhat quirky profiles of figures like Buddha, Jesus, Dante, William Blake, and Walt Whitman. Such extraordinary individuals, Bucke felt, exuded a palpable magnetic aura because they had attained spiritual illumination.

The Hinduism of the American 1960s had several sources. Allen Ginsberg modeled his prophetic persona on Blake as well as on visionary rabbis in his own Jewish tradition. Though introduced to Buddhism by Gary Snyder, the gay, bookish Ginsberg had none of Snyder's athletic asceticism. Chatty and omnivorous, Ginsberg celebrated appetite and excess in food and sex. By the sixties, he had transformed himself into a genial Hindu guru. Playfully brandishing finger-cymbals and a squeezebox and sometimes dressed in Hindu robes, the bearded Ginsberg was a constant, mantra-chanting presence at major demonstrations. He turned political theater into vaudeville—much like the Yippies, who nominated a pig for president in 1968.

Hinduism had had an organized basis in the US since the 1890s, following the visit of Swami Vivekenanda, a disciple of the legendary Indian spiritual leader, Ramakrishna, to the Parliament of Religions at the World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893. Vivekenanda (1863–1902) founded the American Vedanta Society in New York City, from which numerous branches opened around the country. Until after World War II, however, American interest in Hinduism was mainly confined to urban centers and was connected in the popular mind with kooks, charlatans, and Hollywood actors. Aldous Huxley, who had moved to California, studied Vedanta Hinduism with Swami Prabhavananda in the 1940s and was a member of the Los Angeles Vedanta Society. Another British expatriate, Christopher Isherwood, edited a book about the Society, *Vedanta for Modern Man* (1951). The openly gay Isherwood, whose autobiographical *Berlin Stories* about decadent 1930s Germany inspired *I Am a Camera* and *Cabaret*, had converted to Hinduism after moving to Los Angeles.

The groundwork for the Asian trend of the American sixties was probably laid by Paramhansa Yogananda (1893–1952), the first yoga master to teach full-time in the West. Born in Bengal, Yogananda established the international headquarters of his Self-Realization Fellowship in Los Angeles in 1925. He lectured to packed audiences, including at Carnegie Hall, and met President Calvin Coolidge at the White House. His *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946) had an enormous impact, not least for the numinous, Christlike cover photo of the white-robed, boyishly beardless guru with long hair flowing over his shoulders. The Director of Forest Lawn Memorial Park, where Yogananda was buried, stated in an affidavit that there was “no physical disintegration” in his body twenty days after death, “a phenomenal state of immutability.”

A singular figure of lesser influence was “Avatar” Meher Baba (1894–1969), who arrived in the US in 1952 and opened a center in South Carolina. Baba was an author and teacher born to a Zoroastrian family in India. Mute from the 1920s on, perhaps as the result of being struck on the head years earlier, he communicated by smiles, gestures, and an alphabet board. He worked with the poor and insane in India in the forties. Baba’s sometimes nebulous philosophy of “spiritual value” and world harmony, resembling that of Yogananda, prefigured New Age. In the sixties, he strongly condemned the use of LSD and other drugs as a route to enlightenment.

The major Asian cult of the sixties was Transcendental Meditation, founded in India as the Spiritual Regeneration Movement by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in 1957. The Maharishi brought TM to Hawaii in 1959, from which it spread to North America and Europe. His practice of deep relaxation, whose aim is “bliss,” was based on ancient Vedic literature that he claimed to have learned from his master, Shri Guru Deva. At the start, TM had more cult-like characteristics, such as a personal secret mantra imparted by master to student. The Maharishi was at times accused of claiming godlike powers. By the mid-seventies, TM was more profes-

sionally organized as a business, with certified trainers teaching the system at stress-relief centers throughout the US. In 1974, TM bought the campus of a Presbyterian college in Iowa and opened the Maharishi University of Management. TM currently claims five million followers worldwide. Deepak Chopra, the New Age motivational speaker and best-selling author who became a media star through his visibility on Oprah Winfrey's TV show, was a disciple of the Maharishi but broke with him and TM in 1993.

Several cults caused much public concern in the sixties and seventies because of their hold on young people. The Hare Krishna movement—the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, which claims to have been founded in the sixteenth century—is still in operation, with headquarters in Mayapur, India. Its followers became notorious for their shaved heads, saffron robes and beads, and aggressive behavior on street corners as they sang, shook rattles and tambourines, and pushed pamphlets. Their ascetic founder, Swami Prabhupada (1896–1977), had begun preaching in India in the 1950s and moved to New York in 1965. There he wrote books and conducted mass chanting of Hindu phrases in Tompkins Square Park—provocative activity at the time. In 1966, he began publishing *Back to Godhead* magazine and incorporated his organization, which required disciples to renounce meat, alcohol, gambling, and extra-marital sex. He then took the Society to San Francisco, where it drew an enormous hippie following, particularly among those addicted to drugs. His disciples carried the message to London and Berlin; at the Society's peak, there were 108 centers worldwide. The movement won much publicity at the 1970 release of George Harrison's song, "My Sweet Lord," with its "Hare Krishna" refrain. The Hare Krishnas were pursued with huge fanfare by Ted Patrick, a "deprogrammer" who forcibly rescued young people from cults and returned them to worried parents. A former staff member for then-Governor Ronald Reagan in California, Patrick inaccurately warned that the Krishnas were a cult as

dangerous as Charles Manson's.

The Divine Light Mission was brought to the US in 1971 by thirteen-year-old Maharaj Ji, whose father had founded the organization in India in the 1920s. Its Sikh and Hindu philosophy required vegetarianism, celibacy, and meditation. American hippies searching for gurus in India in the sixties had appealed to Maharaj Ji, who claimed to be the successor of Jesus and Buddha, to visit America. The Divine Mission's Denver commune would become its world headquarters: it claimed 480 centers in thirty-eight countries. By 1973, there were thirty-eight ashrams in the US with 40,000 followers. The organization began to unravel later in the seventies when Maharaj Ji's taste for luxury cars and mansions was exposed. When he married, he incurred the wrath of the Divine Mission's power behind the throne—his mother, who returned to India and tried to supplant him with his brother.

As the Hindu boom subsided in the seventies, neo-Christian sects like Jim Jones' People's Temple rose to prominence. The Children of God, founded in 1968 as Teens for Christ by "Moses" David Berg in Huntington Beach, California, were negligible in number but came to public attention when they loudly prophesied that the US would be destroyed by Comet Kohoutek in January 1974. The group continues under the name "The Family" and is regularly excoriated by conservative Christian watchdog groups for its practice of free love (called "Flirty Fishing") as well as its heretical beliefs that Jesus was sexually active and that God is a woman.

The most important neo-Christian sect of the seventies was the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity, founded by the Reverend Sun Myong Moon in Seoul in 1954. Missionaries of the Unification church were at work in the US from 1959 on, but there was little publicity until Moon arrived in 1971. Moon was born into a farming family in North Korea in 1920. He was raised by Confucian principles until his parents became Presbyterians in 1930. In 1935, Moon claimed, Jesus appeared in a vision to summon him to ministry. Because of his staunch anti-

communism (he had been imprisoned by Korean Communists), he was welcomed by Republican legislators in the US and was hosted by President Richard Nixon in the White House. In 1981, however, Moon was charged with tax evasion and would eventually spend thirteen months in prison.

Though massive advertisements for the Unification Church still appear in major world newspapers, the zenith of Moon's organization was 1982, when he sponsored a mass wedding of 2,075 couples in Madison Square Garden. The grooms wore badges declaring "World Peace Through Ideal Family," upholding conservative family values against the sexual anarchy of the psychedelic sixties and disco seventies. However, most Americans, as evidenced by the slang term "Moonies" for its members, continue to regard the Unification Church as just another Asian cult. Moon's Christian theology is unorthodox: he preaches, for example, that Jesus was illegitimate, the product of an affair between Mary and her cousin's husband, Zachariah.

6. HINDUISM AND 1960S MUSIC

A main aperture through which Hinduism flowed into the sixties was popular music, which adapted the non-Western harmonics of raga and experimented with the sitar, the long-necked Indian lute. George Harrison, the Beatles' lead guitarist, was not the first British musician to experiment with the sitar, but he deserves principal credit for popularizing it in Anglo-American rock music. Jangling sitar riffs were a ubiquitous lyrical motif in late-sixties music. At the opening of songs, the sitar was equivalent in meaning and effect to the European church bell, summoning the faithful to worship.

The first Western album of Indian music, a collaboration between Yehudi Menuhin and tabla master Ali Akbar Khan, was released in 1955. In the late fifties, Khan's brother-in-law, Ravi Shankar, gave sitar concerts in Europe and the US. By 1959, Shankar had influenced jazz compositions by

Miles Davis and John Coltrane. By the mid-sixties, the sitar sound had traveled far afield into folk circles in Great Britain, New York, and San Francisco.

Harrison's interest in India began during production of the Beatles' second movie, *Help!* (1965), with its slapstick Hindu subplot. He was intrigued by the sitar used in an Indian restaurant scene filmed in London. While beach scenes were being filmed in the Bahamas, the Beatles were approached by a man in orange robes who handed them a signed copy of his book on yoga. It was Swami Vishnu-Devananda, the founder of Sivananda Yoga. Intrigued, Harrison began to study Hinduism. He then traveled to India to study the sitar with Ravi Shankar, who gave him a copy of Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi*. It was Harrison who invited Shankar to perform at the seminal 1967 Monterey Pop Music Festival in California, where the sitar's artistic kinship to the electric guitar was dramatically demonstrated. (See the 1969 documentary, *Monterey Pop*.) The sitar's cultural impact on the late sixties paralleled that of the Javanese gamelan on late-nineteenth-century music. Debussy was fascinated by the gamelan (a percussive instrument with gong and bells) when he heard it played at the Paris Universal Exposition in 1889. Through him, the gamelan's Asian harmonics transformed French and British classical music for the next half century.

In 1967, Patti Boyd Harrison, George's wife, took the Beatles to a lecture in London by the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. The Beatles fell under the Maharishi's spell and began to dress in quasi-Hindu style, with chic Nehru jackets and mod paisley fabrics, which revolutionized fashion around the world. In 1968, the Beatles flew to India to meditate at the Maharishi's ashram in Rishikesh. But their flirtation with Hinduism ended abruptly in bitter disillusion: the Maharishi ruined his saintly reputation by reportedly making sexual advances to another celebrity pilgrim, Mia Farrow, who was there with her studious sister Prudence. The Beatles and the Farrows decamped in high dudgeon. A record of that adven-

ture is contained in two Beatles songs on the 1968 *White Album*: “Dear Prudence” and “Sexy Sadie” (“You made a fool of everyone”), a transsexual tribute to the Maharishi’s seductive charms. Farrow confirmed the rumored details about the Maharishi’s blunder in her 1998 autobiography, *What Falls Away*. However, it was thanks to the Beatles’ cross-fertilization of Hinduism with rock that the Swami Satchidananda, seated in white robes on the stage, would give the prayer invocation that opened the 1969 Woodstock Music Festival.

In addition to the sitar, or an electric guitar strung and played to sound like one, the style of “acid rock” that originated in the San Francisco hippie scene can arguably be considered to have religious intonations. Acid rock helped promulgate the sixties concept of cosmic consciousness. Even those (like me) who did not take drugs were radicalized by the power and expansiveness of that shimmering music, with its unfixed keys, sonic distortions, ominous drone, wandering melodic lines, and twangy, floating, evaporating notes. The leading San Francisco acid-rock bands were Jefferson Airplane, the Grateful Dead, Quicksilver Messenger Service, and Big Brother and the Holding Company. Psychedelic effects were used in Los Angeles by the Byrds and the Doors and in England by the Yardbirds, Jeff Beck, the Jimi Hendrix Experience, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Donovan, the Kinks, and early Pink Floyd. The drugged mood of this “trippy” style was revived in British trance music (called “trip-hop”) in the early nineties as a development of the rave scene.

Because it consists of transient instrumental effects, psychedelic music has received far less attention than folk and folk-rock with overtly political lyrics, whose manifest content is easier to analyze. This is yet another factor impeding general recognition of the sixties’ religious legacy. Though the Beats left their mark in novels and poems, the counter-culture was less interested in constructing self-contained artifacts. The enduring achievements of the sixties generation were in music, modern dance, experimental film and video,

Pop and Conceptual Art, and performance art, which swallowed up poetry. Literature is strikingly underrepresented. Literary surveys of the sixties overrely on the work of figures like Norman Mailer, whose brilliant career began in the late forties. The major critics and theorists of the sixties—Marshall McLuhan, Leslie Fiedler, Norman O. Brown—also belong to an earlier generation. Hermann Hesse, whose novels *Siddhartha* (1922), about the early life of Buddha, and *Steppenwolf* (1927) were sixties cult classics, was born in 1877. Except for Tom Wolfe's New Journalism, most sixties culture crystallized outside the book.

The gap in the sixties' artistic and intellectual legacy partly occurred because too many young people followed their elementary understanding of Asian religion by making sensory experience primary. Shunning schedules and routine, they sought the "eternal Now," dramatized by the otherworldliness of psychedelic rock. Furthermore, the sexual revolution, which began in 1960 with the commercial release of Enovid, the first reliable oral contraceptive in history, finally overwhelmed the sixties' spiritual quest. Beat interpretations of Asian thought tended to exaggerate its sexual component. In 1958, Alan Watts criticized "Beat Zen" for its "anything goes" attitude toward sex. Similarly, hipsters often carelessly reduced Hinduism to the erotic acrobatics of Tantric yoga or Vatsyayana's *Kama Sutra* (c. 250 AD). But sexual codes have been very strict throughout India's history: at no time was promiscuity endorsed. The yoni and lingam (monumental stone genitalia in Hindu shrines) or the voluptuous copulating couples on the facades of Hindu temples belonged to a fertility cult where sexual intercourse symbolized the natural cycle of birth and death.

"Make love, not war" was a sixties rubric. Free love had been endorsed by radical Romantics like Percy Bysshe Shelley who sought to shatter the bonds of bourgeois marriage. A cheeky promiscuity was also affected by urban flappers in the 1920s, which was energized by the hyperactive dance rhythms of the Jazz Age as well as the seditious mood of un-

derground speakeasies. But free love was never achieved on a massive scale until the 1960s, when random sexual connection was blithely assigned a spiritual and redemptive meaning. "Getting it on" meant freeing mind and body to strike a blow against residual American puritanism. By the hedonistic seventies, spirituality had been abandoned, a change marked by the shift in drugs from communal, "mellow" marijuana and visionary LSD to edgy, expensive, hoarded cocaine, which sharpened competition and enhanced the ego sense of power and mastery. Sexual liberation, as should now be obvious, had its high costs, which we are still sorting out: sexual diseases, a soaring divorce rate, and a pandemic sexualization of media images with uncertain consequences for children. Self-presentation by early teens, for example, has become strikingly eroticized, leading to premature sexual pressures and demands.

Feeling trapped by a corporate and technological society, sixties rebels tried to empower sex as a quick route to reconnection with nature. The sixties dreamed of limitless sex without consequence—a bouncy, open-ended, Technicolor film with a rock soundtrack. Many genuine hippies dropped out of college to join communes, bake bread, and have babies. Others of the sixties generation who entered the professions often defied or delayed the procreative principle that was at the heart of ancient mystery cult. Two new models of sexual liberation who emerged in the seventies were the liberated woman, who put career before marriage and family, and the post-Stonewall gay man, in whose paradise of pleasures even lesbians were no longer welcome. Reproductive rights, establishing women's control over their own bodies, was always a major issue in feminism but over the next quarter century would become an obsessive preoccupation, determining campaign politics and judicial appointments. Feminism inextricably identified itself with abortion—with termination of life rather than fertility. (I am speaking as a militantly pro-choice feminist.) Feminism's foregrounding of abortion, which caused national turmoil and limited its out-

reach as a populist movement, was one consequence of the loss of sixties cosmic consciousness by the seventies.

For gay men, free love detached from all reference to nature meant that, by the eighties, their ruling theorist would be social constructionist Michel Foucault rather than the nature-revering Whitman or Ginsberg. Despite a seventies fad for the virile lumberjack look, the erotic ideal in the gay male world has reverted over time to the ruthless master type of the Greek beautiful boy, Antinous reborn: the shaved, sculpted, callipygian ephebe whose perfection is heartbreakingly transient.

7. PSYCHEDELIC DRUGS

“Sex, drugs, and rock and roll” was the fast-track reality for a significant segment, working-class as well as middle-class, of the sixties generation. Drugs melted defenses and broke barriers, creating a momentary sense of unity with mankind and the world. They functioned as magic elixirs for the missing initiatory rituals in an increasingly transient society. In the matter of drugs, I must stress, I was merely an observer: as an Italian-American, I am a product of Mediterranean wine culture, where intoxicants are integrated with cuisine. As a libertarian, I favor legalization of drugs, not because I approve of their use but because in my view government should have no power to dictate what individuals do with their bodies. On the other hand, I am painfully aware of the tragic toll that drugs took on my generation. This was one of the great cultural disasters of American history. I warn my students that recreational drugs—now a toxic cocktail of black-market tranquilizers—may give short-term gains but impair long-term achievement.

Nevertheless, it was drugs, abused until they turned on their takers, that helped trigger the spiritual explosion of the sixties. Getting high—as in the magnificent, rumbling Byrds song “Eight Miles High”—was to elevate perspective. Aspiring beyond materialism and conformity, young people manu-

factured their own martyrdom. They pushed their nervous systems to the limit, until social forms seemed to dissolve. What they saw was sublime—the High Romantic vision of creative nature, its vast energies twisting and turning along a continuum from the brain to the stars. That cosmic consciousness is precisely what is lacking in too many of today's writers and academics, especially followers of poststructuralism and postmodernism, cynical systems that are blind to nature.

The association of drugs with the avant-garde began with British High Romanticism. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's great "mystery" poems of the 1790s ("Kubla Khan," "Christabel," and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner") were partly inspired by his experiences with opium, present in laudanum, a common pain medication to which he had been addicted since childhood. In *Artificial Paradises* (1860), his response to Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821), Baudelaire described the hallucinations of his experiments with hashish mixed with opium. In late-nineteenth-century America, white middle-class women took "patent medicines" containing morphine, a derivative of opium, for their "nerves" or "female ailments." In the same period, opium dens were common in Chinese immigrant communities around San Francisco. Opium, extracted from the seedpod of the opium poppy, had arrived in China from India via Burma in the seventeenth century; by the next century, China was the center of a flourishing international opium trade. Non-prescription possession of opium and cocaine was banned in the US by the Harrison Narcotics Act of 1914, which helped create organized crime. Drugs, like alcohol during Prohibition, would be eagerly supplied by an underground economy.

William James first studied the connection between drugs and mystic vision that would become so basic a tenet of the 1960s. In his 1901–02 Edinburgh lectures, published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James described his experiments with nitrous oxide, which he believed duplicated the

altered perception reported by saints in their visions of God or angels. James skeptically viewed foundational religious figures as obsessives afflicted with “nervous instability.”

Havelock Ellis was more sympathetic: in an 1898 article, “Mescal: A New Artificial Paradise,” he described ritual use among Southwestern American Indians of mescal, obtained from the button of a cactus plant. He himself had experimented with mescal in London. Aldous Huxley cited Ellis’ essay in *The Doors of Perception* (1954), where he described his own experiment with mescaline (a synthetic version of the chemical agent in mescal) the prior year at his Hollywood home. (Huxley’s title, based on a Blake maxim, inspired the name of the Los Angeles art-rock band, the Doors.) Huxley’s partner in taking mescaline was Humphrey Osmond, a British research psychiatrist attending a convention of the American Psychological Association in Los Angeles. It is Osmond who invented the term “psychedelic” for the effect of hallucinogens on the brain. Later transmogrified into “psychedelia,” it remains the best word for the garish mental adventurism and extremism of the sixties.

The Beats used peyote, derived from mescal buttons. Snyder first tried peyote while studying American Indian culture at Reed College in 1948. It had been used since the Aztecs, who chewed the buttons or steeped them in a bitter tea. Ginsberg took peyote in New York in 1951 and Kerouac at Big Sur, California, the following year. Peyote use was common in bohemian Greenwich Village by 1957; mescaline arrived there the next year. In 1960, the Native American Church of North America won the legal right (revoked in 1990) to use peyote in its religious rituals. “Magic” mushrooms (“shrooms” for short) containing psychotropic psilocibin were also used by the Beats: Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Neil Cassady had been given them by Timothy Leary in 1960 after his return from summer vacation in Mexico, where he had first tried them. Before he began investigating LSD, Leary called his program the Harvard Psilocibin Project.

The sixties’ premiere drugs, however, were marijuana and

LSD. Marijuana entered the US in the early twentieth century with migrant Mexican farm workers in Texas. The hemp plant from which it comes was introduced to North America in the sixteenth century by the Spanish, who used it for fiber for rope and ship rigging. Before World War I, New Orleans was a major port for marijuana shipments from Mexico and Cuba. Marijuana use, then confined to the working class, spread through the rural South and was brought by blacks to Midwestern and Northeastern cities during the Great Migration for factory jobs during and after World War I. It was in the urban centers that marijuana became associated with music and the underground—a hip marriage that would last through the sixties and beyond. The Beats who made a cult of be-bop jazz (a style evolving from the late thirties through the mid-fifties) imitated black musicians' habit of smoking "reefer." Marijuana was then used by white folk musicians and spread across the country via leftist circles. It was through folk music (cf. Bob Dylan's line, "Everybody must get stoned," from "Rainy Day Woman") that marijuana was transmitted to college students in the sixties—the first time it had entered the middle class. For white users in the fifties and sixties, therefore, marijuana had the aura of creativity and progressive politics.

LSD-25 (lysergic acid diethylamide; hence the term "acid") was synthesized from rye fungus in 1938 by Dr. Albert Hofmann, a biochemist at Sandoz Pharmaceuticals in Basel, Switzerland. Hofmann discovered the chemical's hallucinogenic effects when he inhaled it by accident in 1943. Because it seemed to mimic the warped sense of space and time in psychosis, LSD was first viewed as a promising mental-research drug. Humphrey Osmond tested it in Saskatchewan as a potential treatment for alcoholism. LSD also seemed to reproduce the effects of peyote in ancient Mesoamerican rituals. In 1949, Dr. Max Rinkel brought LSD from Sandoz to the US, where he began experiments in Boston. ("Sandoz" lingered as a code term for LSD in the UK, as in the Animals' 1965 song, "A Girl Named Sandoz.") The CIA conducted its

own tests on LSD from 1951 through the decade.

LSD was being used in Greenwich Village by 1961 and was available on the East and West Coasts the next year. By the summer of 1964, it was widespread in the San Francisco Bay area, where it confused the political climate on the Left. (See Mark Kitchell's first-rate 1990 documentary, *Berkeley in the Sixties*.) Within a year, LSD had become a major street drug in cities nationally. It was popularized by a 1964 book by Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert, *The Psychedelic Experience*. The book's subtitle, *A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, showed the religious cast that drug-taking was acquiring. As a student volunteer at a California veterans hospital, novelist Ken Kesey first took LSD in 1959 (the same year that Ginsberg did) and later conducted "Acid Test" parties at his home in the hills near San Francisco. Neil Cassady was part of these carnivalesque gatherings, which evolved into the Merry Pranksters, a free-form hippie group that toured the US in a Day-Glo-painted 1939 school bus. By the late sixties, Kesey (who was jailed for five months for marijuana offenses) was denouncing LSD. His recantation resembled that of Alpert, who went to India in 1967 and became Baba Ram Dass, a drug-free Hindu guru.

Hyperbolic claims were made for LSD in the sixties. For example, Walter Houston Clark, a friend of Leary, predicted in a 1969 book, *Chemical Ecstasy: Psychedelic Drugs and Religion*, that LSD's intellectual effect on civilization would equal that of "the Copernican revolution." In his 1970 bestseller, *The Greening of America*, Yale Law School professor Charles Reich similarly celebrated marijuana as an indispensable "truth-serum" that exposed society as "unreal." Drug taking was also a gesture of rebellion against Western commercialism: marijuana—called "weed" or "mother nature" to highlight its organic character—was the intoxicant of choice for those who rejected the businessman's martinis or scotch and sodas. On the West Coast in particular, drug takers savored psychedelics' associations with the "vision quest" of tribal shamans. In *The Teachings of Don Juan* (1968), the first of

several best-sellers, Carlos Castaneda claimed, without substantiation, that he had received spiritual instruction in peyote from a Yaqui Indian shaman in Mexico. By establishing continuity or solidarity with Native American and pre-Columbian societies, drugs became an affirmation of multiculturalism as well as a vehicle of religious revelation.

The psychedelic “trip” into inner space replicated the shaman’s magic journey, from which he returned with secret knowledge for his tribe. This myth of a spiritual journey was a motif of premodern societies from Central Asia to the Amazon River basin. It is possible that hallucinatory shamanism was widespread in Native American cultures because it was brought from Siberia by the Indians’ North Asian ancestors when they emigrated across the Bering Strait. (“Shaman” is a Ural-Altaic word.) Furthermore, North America, in contrast to Africa, for example, is especially fertile in hallucinogenic plants. Even the species of strong tobacco (*nicotiana rustica*) used in Native American rituals had hallucinogenic properties.

Many ritual practices, such as fasting and marathon drumming, have been used throughout history to induce trance and facilitate divination. In some cases, techniques of flagellation or mutilation resemble those of the modern S&M scene, whose devotees claim to attain a beatific state. Mushrooms eaten by Siberian shamans caused convulsions. Hallucinogens, perhaps mushrooms, were used by worshippers in the Eleusinian mysteries. Possessed by Apollo, the Delphic oracle went into paroxysms after intoxication by fumes from a cleft in the earth. Fault lines have recently been identified in the bedrock at Delphi by an archaeologist and geologist, who speculate that the priestess was maddened by oozing petrochemical vapors like ethylene (prized by modern glue-sniffers). Drugs were also used in medieval European witchcraft. The iconic Halloween image of the witch flying on a broomstick is another version of the shaman’s visionary journey: ritual staffs were smeared with a greenish hallucinogenic ointment and “ridden,” to autoerotic effect.

The massive drug taking in the sixties, promoted by arts leaders and pop stars, redefined the culture and set the stage for the decade's religious vision. But shamanistic drug taking in tribal societies took place within small communities unified by a coherent belief system. Hippies and college students casually sampling hallucinogens were relative strangers and brought with them a *mélange* of private turmoils and family psychodramas. What they shared was a yearning humanitarianism—and rock music, which urged the liberation of sexual desire. Sex was portrayed as a revolutionary agent: the establishment, like the walls of Jericho, would fall before eros unbound. This overestimation of sex—the faith that sexual energy freed of social controls is inherently benign—was one reason for the dissipation of the authentic spiritual discoveries made by the sixties generation. A philosophy of random contacts and “good vibrations” built little that could be passed on to the next generation. At its mildest, the sixties cult of sex and drugs led to a frivolous dilettantism, youthful high jinks like the Florida spring flings of the fifties. At its worst, however, there was permanent damage that has never been systematically assessed. In retrospect, it is clear, for example, that the meteoric literary careers of Allen Ginsberg and Ken Kesey were sadly truncated by drug abuse.

8. MYSTICISM AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Social regroupings dramatized the generational change of the sixties—the mass gatherings of demonstrations, rock festivals, happenings, and love-ins, which began in temperate California. For example, the “Human Be-In,” subtitled “A Gathering of the Tribes,” which was held in 1967 in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, attracted 25,000 people. It fused politics with pop music and Asian religiosity: the leading San Francisco acid-rock bands performed; among the speakers (many in Hindu garb) were Alan Watts, Timothy Leary, and Beat poets Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti.

While the political sentiments of young people at such events were progressive, there was often little understanding of the slow process and banal practicalities of legislation, administration, and financial accounting. Repelled by the expanding bureaucracies of the fifties, the sixties counterculture was suspicious of hierarchy and embraced a simplistic egalitarianism predicated on quick fixes. The basic principle of the counterculture began as communality but ended as the horde, the most primitive entity in social history. The horde is prey to superstition and panic. It looks for leaders but ruthlessly slays them, then reveres them as ancestral spirits. As a survival response to its own flood of anarchic energies, the horde automatically generates cults and cultic belief.

The sixties horde that was a benign extended family of music-loving stargazers at the Woodstock Music Festival in August 1969 turned into a restless, bickering mob four months later at the Altamont Festival, where a murder was committed in front of the stage. The sixties never completed its search for new structures of social affiliation. Fifties liberalism was integrationist, but sixties Leftism, despite its claims of inclusiveness, disintegrated into the separatism of identity politics, with ghettoizing reclassifications and hypersensitive divisions by race, gender, and sexual orientation. The sixties code of “do your own thing” encouraged individualism but produced fragmentation. Similarly, the sixties’ global religious vision, inspired by fleeting contact with Hinduism and Buddhism, would broaden yet dissipate into the thousand cults of the present New Age movement.

Cults multiply when institutional religion has lost fervor and become distracted by empty ritual. Early Christianity, for example, began as a rural rebellion against the fossilized Temple bureaucracy in Jerusalem. In 1950s America, the political and professional elite were still heavily WASP. Prosperous congregations were overly concerned with social status at church or at its annex, the country club. Roman Catholicism, searching for social credibility, was steadily purging itself of immigrant working-class ethnicity, a process

of genteel self-Protestantization in music, ceremony, and decor that in middle-class parishes is now virtually complete. Many of those attracted to cults in the sixties and early seventies were escaping mainline denominations where bland propriety was coupled with sexual repression. It is a striking fact that few young African-Americans joined cults: surely the reason was that the gospel tradition, rooted in the South, invited emotional and physical expressiveness, stimulated by strongly rhythmic music. Dance, universal in pagan cults, had been banned in Christian churches in late antiquity. Its presence in Southern church tradition is a priceless vestige of West African tribal religion.

The social changes from the fifties to the sixties resemble, in compressed and accelerated form, those of the Hellenistic era following the conquests of Alexander the Great. In the three centuries of the Alexandrian age, the old city-states declined, and mercantile metropolises flourished. Hellenism—that is, Athenian high culture—spread throughout the Mediterranean world via a bustling commercial network that marketed Greek art works (often in shoddy knockoffs) as status symbols for the nouveau riche. The Romans had always clothed their provincial Italian mythology in borrowed Greek glory. As it transformed itself from republic to empire, Rome created a massive zone of cultural and religious exchanges extending from the Near East and North Africa to Northern Europe. Cosmopolitanism of this kind is usually produced by vibrant commercialism buttressed by military might. But when politics have overexpanded, there is a loss of psychological security; hence the rise of cults, which reinforce the borders of individual identity.

No sooner did the US displace Great Britain and France to attain superpower status after World War II than a surge of mysticism overtook the next American generation. The children born in the postwar baby boom, who would reach college age in the sixties, had been conceived with a jolt of military energy and were reared in a climate of national confidence. But they intuitively absorbed the hidden conflicts of

the fifties, with its surface tranquility masking the anxieties of an older generation whose life experiences had been economic depression and war. Mainstream fifties values promoted duty and uniformity, as if to recover the reassurance of known limits. Trade always opens up travel and tourism. The international network of Roman roads (so well-constructed that some are still in use) resembles that of the US interstate highway system, launched in the fifties as a national defense plan for emergency evacuation. Ironically, improved transportation weakens regionalism and nationalism too. Multiculturalism was spurred by the jet plane, which got Ravi Shankar so quickly to Monterey or the Beatles to India and back.

What commercialized Hellenism was for the Greco-Roman era, popular culture was for the American fifties and sixties. Hellenism was an artistic and philosophic system embedded with pagan mythology. The unifying language of youth culture from the mid-1950s on was new media—TV, teen movies, and rock 'n' roll, broadcast by a vast number of privately owned AM radio stations (then unparalleled in Europe) and received on portable transistors. America's pop Hellenism spread to England in the fifties and bounced back in the sixties via the British invasion. Popular culture remains a major American export, so vital and dominant that it has rightly been called cultural imperialism. Television has indeed turned the world, as McLuhan prophesied, into a global village. However, the general style of American mass media, rooted in nineteenth-century tabloids and early Hollywood, has always been luridly Hellenistic—extravagant, emotional, and sensationalistic, with a predilection for sex and violence.

Mass media inflamed the mind, while the institutional framework was being rigidified. A major social shift of the postwar period in America was the massive expansion of colleges and universities. In the two decades following the GI Bill, which subsidized higher education for veterans, college became an entitlement—still not the case in other nations. By

the eighties, America was in the grip of an overpriced, self-perpetuating education industry whose principal product is brand names and social status rather than humanistic cultivation. Fifties prosperity meant that middle-class young Americans did not have to go to work immediately after high school, as their parents had done. The down side was that adulthood, including marriage, was indefinitely postponed.

Despite their material comforts and privileges, therefore, middle-class students of the American sixties were also captives, hostages confined at their hormonal height in institutional frames without the venerable history or in-group identification of tony British schools. Classes became like warehouses, with students stacked in primary-school rows—unlike European universities, where student-teacher contact is either in tutorial or in unmonitored public lectures. Supervision of student behavior on American campuses was intrusive and authoritarian—another feature without parallel in Europe. When I was a freshman in 1964, colleges still acted *in loco parentis* (in place of the parent). Parietal rules were strictly enforced: at my public university, women students had to sign in at 11:00 PM, while men could roam free. Hence the late fifties and sixties were a period of high excitation yet repressive containment.

The paternalistic regimentation of American colleges was nearly military and thus can be viewed as a vestige of the national mobilization of World War II. Students were conscripts who often dressed in army-navy surplus, and the new brick dormitories of residential campuses resembled factories or army barracks—all the more ironic since college matriculation brought exemption from the draft. There have been town-gown problems since the goliardic carousing of the Middle Ages, but the frictions of the sixties were highly politicized. As the sixties counterculture spread, campuses became tense garrison towns, like the frontier outposts of the Roman legions, who occupied well-appointed camps of precise, geometrical design.

Roman soldiers were drawn not simply from Italy but from

all over the empire. They were stationed far from home for years and decades—in forts in the Sahara, on the Danube, or at Hadrian's Wall in northern Britain. They were notorious devotees of cults, above all that of Mithras, the bull-slayer, with his androgynous face, lanky hair, Phrygian beret, and blousy Persian trousers. Merchants, with their internationalist orientation, were another group who venerated Mithras, a Zoroastrian demigod representing the principle of light and truth. Mithraists, like early Christians, gathered in secrecy in small, cave-like rooms to memorialize a great act of ritual bloodshed. Amid the ruins of Roman camps in England and Germany, cult objects and idols from Egypt, Syria, and Anatolia are still being found. Cultic practice on the Roman frontier, I submit, paralleled that on American campuses in the sixties, when there was a syncretistic mix of drugs, Asian religion, and pop idolatry.

Cults arise when the official gods seem weak or fickle or subject to fate themselves. The cult phenomenon in the US escalated after the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963—the president who vowed to surpass the Soviet Union's 1957 Sputnik satellite by putting a man on the moon by the end of the sixties. The baby-boom generation was the first to grow up in the shadow of nuclear war. In elementary school, we were shepherded into dim hallways for civil defense drills requiring us to crouch down and cover our eyes. We were taught to fear not a rain of bombs from manned warplanes but rather a single, slim, strangely omnipotent object that could find its way over thousands of miles to unleash a monstrous fire cloud that would melt the nation in a split second.

The sixties generation, in other words, had been injected with a mystical sense of awe and doom about the sky. This is one possible reason for the sudden popularity and ubiquity of astrology, which for most of the twentieth century had been a fringe practice associated with eccentrics in Greenwich Village and West Hollywood. Zodiac and Tarot symbolism permeated the sixties, from jewelry and album covers to wall posters. "Aquarius," the signature song of

Hair (“An American Tribal Love-Rock Musical,” 1967) and a hit single for the Fifth Dimension in 1969, assumed public knowledge of astrological lore in its imagery of the moon in the seventh house and Jupiter’s alignment with Mars: “Then peace will guide the planets / And love will steer the stars. / This is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius!” With genuine poetry, the song also invoked “Mystic crystal revelation / And the mind’s true liberation.”

Astrology, for better or worse, was emblematic of the religious vision of the sixties. It countered the fifties’ paranoia about nuclear apocalypse with the promise of a humanitarian Aquarian age. Astrology is intertwined with the West’s pagan heritage. Despite unstinting efforts from antiquity, Judeo-Christianity has never succeeded in wiping astrology out. First refined by the Chaldean magi of Babylonia, astrology was widely practiced in the Hellenistic and imperial Roman periods, when elusive fortune was personified as female Tyche—chance or Lady Luck. Different branches of astrology still flourish in India and China. Like the *I Ching*, a Chinese book of divination widely used in the sixties, astrology reverently connects man to nature—the link that Judeo-Christianity has always tried to sever. Astrology is not the fatalistic determinism to which its opponents reduce it; on the contrary, it is a study of nature’s rhythms and cycles, to which humanity like the tides is subject.

This is yet another area where sixties drugs took their toll. Those most attracted to astrology lost their ability to defend it. Scientists rightly dismissive of superstition refuse to acknowledge that astrology anticipated modern theories about circadian biorhythms or cycles of solar flares whose electromagnetic storms disrupt telecommunications. The science community’s customary approach of derision and debunking has been futile and counterproductive: an immense alternative culture survived the collapse of the sixties and has steadily spread to this day under the name New Age—which discreetly elides its astrological reference to the Age of Aquarius.

9. THE RISE OF NEW AGE

The New Age movement began to form in the late seventies, gained visibility in the eighties, and became an international commercial success in the nineties. Because it is unstructured and decentralized, New Age has been underestimated as a force competing with mainline religions. It is a constellation of beliefs loosely drawn from Asian religion, European paganism, and Native American nature-cult. Its ethics can be described as non-judgmental humanism. The one common theme in New Age is cosmic consciousness, which it inherited from the sixties.

New Age is a marvel of Alexandrian syncretism. It is often impressionistic and soft-focus, seeking "spirituality" rather than the discipline of orthodox religion. Its followers run the gamut from harried office workers seeking stress relief through yoga and meditation to "neo-pagan" white witches rendezvousing on the moors to celebrate the summer solstice. Specialty shops and mail-order catalogs supply the ritual paraphernalia of New Age—amulets and talismans, healing crystals, angel icons, incense, candles, aromatherapy bath salts, massage rollers, table fountains, wind chimes, and recordings of trance music in Asian or Celtic moods.

A principal distinction between sixties and early seventies cults and their New Age successors is that the sixties sought the release of primal energy through the shattering of social conventions. *Paradise Now*, the title of the Living Theater's infamous 1968 performance piece, where nude actors infiltrated the audience, says it all. The sixties wanted to embrace and reclaim the senses, to plunge fully into matter, like the festival goers wallowing in the mud at Woodstock. New Age, however, has smoothly adjusted to the stubborn persistence of the social structures that the sixties failed to budge. An analogy might be the introspective period just before and after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, when the Roman empire seemed insuperable. New Age is much

more concerned with the afterlife—past lives, reincarnation, astral projection.

New Age sees a spiritual universe permeating or transcending the visible, material one. This idea descends from nineteenth-century spiritualism, a late Romantic stream that has flowed like an undercurrent through Anglo-American culture beneath the official history of literary and artistic modernism. Harold Bloom has argued, in his 1992 book of the same name, that “the American religion” (typified today by what he tartly calls “California Orphism”) has always been a version of gnosticism, which defines matter as evil and urges the soul’s emancipation from earthly limitation. The gnostic cults of second-century Christianity and Jewish mysticism were influenced by Hellenistic mystery religions as well as Plato’s dualism of mind versus matter. In gnosticism, as in New Age, it is matter itself, rather than society, that chains the soul. The 1960s, in contrast, hammered by the concrete power of rock music, grandiosely valorized sex and redefined heaven as present sensual ecstasy. The sixties at their most radical collapsed spirit into matter. Psychedelic voyagers claimed to corroborate the Zen insight, “I am that,” when feeling themselves flowing into and “becoming” the chair or wall—a perception commonly reported by schizophrenics. In sixties Pop Art, even mundane or commercial objects like soup cans or sponges become luminously animate.

The American ancestry of New Age began in the nineteenth century with two women who did their central work at virtually the same moment—Mary Baker Eddy, a New Englander, and Helena Blavatsky, who was born in Russia and moved to the US in 1873. Eddy (1821–1910) believed she had recovered from chronic invalidism through New Thought, the mental-health philosophy of Phineas Parkhurst Quimby, with whom she studied in Maine. In the 1840s, Quimby had fused Hindu and Buddhist concepts from Transcendentalism with hypnotherapy, based on Anton Mesmer’s eighteenth-century theory of “animal magnetism.” For

Quimby and Eddy, the material world is an illusion, and illness has no real existence. However, Quimby rejected Christianity, as Eddy did not. Her seminal book, *Science and Health* (1875), was shortly followed by her founding of the Church of Christ, Scientist, which focuses on the parables and miracles of Jesus. For Christian Science, only divine power, not physicians or medicine, can heal.

The line from Eddy to New Age can clearly be seen in the Alternative Medicine movement of the 1980s and 1990s, which restored the Asian concepts that Eddy had erased from Quimby. Andrew Weil, a graduate of the Harvard Medical School who had studied the effects of marijuana, claimed in his 1972 book, *The Natural Mind*, that altered consciousness is necessary for healing. From his clinic at the University of Arizona, he criticizes commercial pharmaceuticals as toxic and calls for “integrative medicine,” a sixties-style holistic approach combining the best of East and West. After his split from the Maharishi, Deepak Chopra also became identified with Alternative Medicine. From the Chopra Center, his headquarters at the La Costa Resort near San Diego, he promulgates ayurveda, a traditional Hindu medicine that claims disease can be cured by opening the organism to cosmic energy. Chopra also alleges that his mind technique can stem aging and bring success and wealth.

Other leading figures of this movement are Marianne Williamson, a bestselling author and inspirational speaker who first won a following in Los Angeles in the early eighties; Bernie Siegel, a surgeon trained at Yale-New Haven Hospital who claims that “creative visualization” can cure disease; and Caroline Myss, a lapsed Catholic and “medical intuitive” who divines illness by reading a patient’s “energy field” and who advocates healing through accupressure, reflexology, and “therapeutic touch.” Both of Williamson’s parents were liberal Jewish lawyers in Houston. Her books are Jungian in orientation but feature secular, multicultural prayers. Her major influence remains *A Course in Miracles* (1976), which she read after having a breakdown in her twenties.

The three volumes of *A Course in Miracles* were allegedly dictated by Jesus over seven years to Helen Cohn Schucman (1909–81), a psychologist at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in New York. A colleague, William Thetford, did the typing from her notebooks. Schucman's father was Jewish and Lutheran, while her mother had had contact with Theosophy and Christian Science. At twelve, Schucman visited Lourdes with her family; at thirteen, influenced by their devout black maid, she was baptized a Baptist. *A Course in Miracles* was published by the Foundation for Inner Peace in Mill Valley, California. Its original name in New York was the Foundation for Para-Sensory Investigation, reflecting the longstanding interest of its director, Judith Skutch Whitson, in parapsychology. The *Course* asserts that the universe is pure love and that sin does not exist. Though non-sectarian, it descends from Eddy in its Christian vestiges: our sole guide should be an internal "Voice" identified as our "inner Jesus."

The second of the nineteenth-century women progenitors of New Age was the occultist Helena Blavatsky (1831–91), who won an enormous international following. Her fame recalled but exceeded that of Emanuel Swedenborg, an eighteenth-century Swedish philosopher censured by Blake for his spiritualistic readings of the Bible. Madame Blavatsky claimed to have acquired secret knowledge through seven years of study in Tibet. In New York in 1875, she and Henry Steele Olcott founded the Theosophical Society, which combined Hindu and Buddhist concepts with the Western esoteric tradition. (Theosophy, meaning "divine wisdom," was associated with the seventeenth-century German mystic, Jacob Boehme, who taught that God is immanent in nature.) A Blavatsky ally, G. R. S. Mead, translated the *Corpus Hermeticum*, a densely symbolic work of Greco-Egyptian gnosticism from the third century AD. When its manuscript was rediscovered at the Italian Renaissance, the *Corpus Hermeticum* was incorrectly identified with Neoplatonism and boosted the fashion for magic, alchemy, and astrology.

In her two major works, *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), Madame Blavatsky tried to unify world religions by their shared mysticism. Her work also belongs to the nineteenth-century Egyptian Revival (spurred by Napoleon's invasion of Egypt), with its romanticized views of Egypt's magic arts. In 1878, Madame Blavatsky went to India and later made Madras the international headquarters of her Theosophical Society. A substantive result of her presence in India would be the renewal of interest in ancient Sanskrit religious texts, which were translated and disseminated around the world, providing the raw material for the twentieth century's spiritual healing movements as well as the Western practice of yoga.

Though she rejected the spookhouse spiritualism of mediums and séances, Madame Blavatsky lost credibility in the West because of her histrionic poses as a high priestess with healing powers. But her Theosophical Society would influence Gandhi, Nehru, and the movement for Indian nationalism. Blavatsky's anointed successor, Annie Besant, was a lapsed Catholic and former Fabian socialist. Despite having written *The Gospel of Atheism* (1877), she converted to Theosophy in 1889. In 1909, Besant declared that a fourteen-year-old Indian boy, Jiddu Krishnamurti (spotted at a beach by her pedophilic colleague, Charles Webster Leadbeater), was the messianic Buddha. In 1929, Krishnamurti denied he was the messiah and dissolved the Order of the Star of the East, the cult that had been built around him. But he continued to teach his theosophical system of "self-awareness." In 1969, Krishnamurti moved to Ojai, California, to establish the Krishnamurti Foundation; he died there in 1986.

Another figure directly influenced by Madame Blavatsky was Edgar Cayce (1877–1945), a clairvoyant born in Kentucky who toured the US for 40 years doing "life readings" and promoting his belief in reincarnation. Dismissed as a charlatan by mainstream journalists, Cayce prepared the way for sixties occultists and seventies and eighties channel-

ers like Jane Roberts (“Seth”) and J. Z. Knight (“Ramtha”), as well as for today’s New Age psychics and mind-readers.

The nineteenth-century fin de siècle in Europe and the US was teeming with spiritualistic sodalities, publications, and art images, part of the Romantic legacy of demonic archetypes from a glorified Satan to spellbinding femmes fatales. The most prominent British organization was the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, founded by three Freemasons interested in Rosicrucian thought. The Order’s Isis Urania Temple opened in London in 1888. One member was William Butler Yeats, who believed that his wife was a medium and who used Rosicrucian and astrological symbolism in his poetry. The Rosicrucians, called Illuminati, claimed their esoteric order was founded in ancient Egypt and was brought to Europe by knightly crusaders; however, it probably dates from the seventeenth century. Its cabalistic and Hermetic imagery includes the rose, cross, swastika, and pyramid. (The Nazis borrowed the swastika from the Rosicrucians because of its association with medieval chivalry.) There had been interchanges in eighteenth-century England between the Rosicrucians and Freemasonry, a secret, ceremonial order with roots in medieval guilds—though it too claimed descent from Egypt, Babylon, and Jerusalem. Leading figures of the American Revolution, such as Benjamin Franklin and George Washington, were Masons, whose anti-clerical creed was a coolly intellectual Deism.

A member of the Golden Dawn would have great impact on the 1960s: the Satanist Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), who joined the order in 1898. Crowley rebelled against his affluent British family, who were Plymouth Brethren, a puritanical, originally Irish Protestant sect. Throughout his flamboyant career, Crowley combined Asian mysticism with Western occultism and black magic. After the Golden Dawn self-destructed in quarrels in 1900, he began traveling the world—Mexico, India, Burma, and Ceylon, where he learned yoga. He took mescaline in 1910. He wrote many books, among them *Diary of a Dope Fiend* (1922) and *Magick in*

Theory and Practice (1929). Crowley advocated total sexual freedom, including orgies and bestiality. He called himself “The Great Beast” and took the Anti-Christ’s apocalyptic 666 as his personal number. From 1912, Crowley led a German cult, the Ordo Templis Orientis, that opened branches in the US. His politics were pro-Nazi—a dismaying detail usually lost in his legend.

Crowley’s influence fell heavily on the late sixties and seventies. Biographies of Crowley had been published in England in 1958 and 1959; his autobiography, *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley* (1929–30), was re-released in 1969. The Beatles inserted Crowley’s face (back row, second from left) in the cartoon cover collage of their landmark *Sergeant Pepper* album (1967). It is rumored that the title song’s first line (“It was twenty years ago today”) alludes to Crowley’s death in 1947. Because of its descent from blues—called the “devil’s music” in the American South—rock already had a voodoo element lingering from Afro-Caribbean cults. But the Satanism in classic Rolling Stones songs and the magic pentagrams on Led Zeppelin’s album covers and stage costumes came from Crowley. Jimmy Page, Zeppelin’s virtuoso lead guitarist, collected Crowley memorabilia and bought his mansion, Boleskine House, on Scotland’s Loch Ness. The fad for backwards messages in rock songs, which the Beatles popularized, is said (on what authority I cannot confirm) to have been inspired by Crowley, who lauded the practice of reverse reading of scripture in medieval Satanic rituals. Crowley admirers in seventies rock included David Bowie and heavy-metal musicians like Ozzy Osbourne, whose song, “Mr. Crowley” (“You waited on Satan’s call”), appeared on his first solo album after leaving Black Sabbath.

Sixties Satanism was nurtured in California by Anton Szandor La Vey (born Howard Levey in Illinois). The author of *The Satanic Bible* (1970), La Vey had been practicing Crowley-style Black Arts since the fifties. An advocate of Crowley’s creed of radical sexual liberation, he proclaimed “indulgence” to be the master Satanic principle. In 1966, La

Vey founded the Church of Satan at his home in San Francisco, an all-black Victorian house where he conducted black masses with perkily nude women in lavish, tribal animal masks (photos survive). Contrary to rumor, La Vey did not, according to his daughter, appear as Satan in Roman Polanski's occult hit film, *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), nor did he have any connection with it whatever. Celebrities and libertines (Mick Jagger reportedly among them) did visit La Vey's "Black House," which may have once been a hotel. One of the most brilliant songs of the seventies, the Eagles' "Hotel California," is said to have been inspired by rites at La Vey's house, whose address was 6114 California Street.

A startling and little-known example of Crowley's enduring influence is the Church of Scientology, founded in 1954 by science-fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard, one of the main shapers of New Age thought. Hubbard had met Crowley at the latter's Los Angeles temple in 1945. Hubbard's son has revealed that his father claimed to be Crowley's successor: Hubbard told him that Scientology was born on the day that Crowley died. The drills used by Scientologists to cleanse and clarify the mind are evidently a reinterpretation of Crowley's singular fusion of Asian meditation with Satanic ritualism, which sharpens the all-conquering will. The guiding premise of Hubbard's mega-bestseller, *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health* (1950), is that morality and spirituality can be scientifically analyzed and managed—as if guilt and remorse, in the Crowley way, are mere baggage to be jettisoned. Scientology, which attracts celebrities like John Travolta and Tom Cruise, has been pursued by the IRS for its tax-exempt status as a religion. Scientology's religiosity can be detected in its theory of reincarnation: the "process" allegedly eradicates negative thoughts and experiences predating our life in the womb.

After Madame Blavatsky, the most important architect of sixties-to-New Age thought was George Gurdjieff (1866–1949). Gurdjieff was a half-Greek Armenian who arrived in Moscow in 1913 and claimed to have spent twenty years gather-

ing esoteric spiritualist knowledge from Mecca to Tibet. As a refugee in France after the Russian Revolution, Gurdjieff created his “Fourth Way,” a mixture of Tantric Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sufi mysticism. Based on a method called “the Work,” it uses free movement and sacred dances along with intense group sessions where masks are stripped off to achieve a higher awareness. Gurdjieff’s Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man, relocated in 1922 to Paris, originated the “transformational” technique of encounter sessions that would be widely adopted in the US and serve in the vanguard of the sexual revolution. Gurdjieff demonstrated his dances in the US in 1924 but spent most of his life in France. Branches of the Gurdjieff Foundation opened in New York in 1953 and in San Francisco in 1958.

Gurdjieff’s influence can be seen in the Esalen Institute, established in 1962 at Big Sur, California, by two psychology graduates of Stanford University. Eventually, 100 Esalen Centers (named after an Indian tribe) opened around the US. Its headquarters, nestled in the mountains at natural hot springs overlooking the sea, remains the symbol of the enterprise, which combines Asian religious concepts with Western humanistic psychology. Esalen is a pure example of the sixties spirit in its explicit mission to fuse comparative religion with art and ecology. Its workshops, based on the Gurdjieff group session, drew a long list of writers and thinkers in the sixties, including Alan Watts and Aldous Huxley. Esalen’s continued exploration of mystical issues is shown by recent conferences at its Big Sur site—“Survival of Bodily Death” (2001) and “Subtle Energies and Uncharted Realms of the Mind” (2000).

Traces of the Gurdjieff encounter session can be found in EST (Erhard Seminar Training), founded in San Francisco in 1971 by Werner Erhard, a used-car salesman from Philadelphia. Erhard was Jewish but had been raised as an Episcopalian; he oddly gave himself a German name in adulthood. In the late sixties, Erhard investigated Scientology and studied Zen with Alan Watts in Sausalito. He claimed to have

gone to India to consult gurus like Swami Muktananda and Satya Sai Baba. In EST, Erhard gave the workshop format the fervor of a Protestant revival meeting and framed it with the language of Asian meditation and spiritual discovery. Participants in EST's Large Group Awareness Training were supposed to get "It"—Watts' term for the moment of revelation. Marathon, eight-hour sessions, in which they were confined and harassed, supposedly led to the breakdown of conventional ego, after which they were in effect born again. Erhard said he wanted "to blow the Mind" in the sixties way. Explicitly anti-Christian in philosophy, EST was generally regarded as a cult, but it was a private, for-profit organization. Its students were not runaways or hippies but prosperous professionals. In 1991, amid tax problems and unsavory family rumors, Erhard left the country.

In its focus on public meetings, EST resembled Alcoholics Anonymous, the model for today's twelve-step programs for recovery from drug or sex addiction, with their glossary of pat terms like "enabling," "co-dependency," and "interventions." AA has religious undertones: partly inspired by the Oxford Group, a Christian fellowship of British origins, it was founded in 1935 by "Bill W," a New Englander saved from alcoholism by visions of divine white light. AA members still profess faith in a "Higher Power" and practice public confession as well as missionary outreach. In the sixties, the Oxford Group, under a new name, sponsored the saccharine "Up with People" to foster wholesome behavior among increasingly rebellious American teens.

There was a confluence in the sixties of revisionist trends in psychology with "body work"—exercises or manipulations to release "blocked" energy, a concept directly or indirectly borrowed from kundalini yoga, with its symbolic spinal chakras. (The latter word entered the American vocabulary in the eighties through the New Age proselytizing of actress Shirley Maclaine.) In the early fifties, Abraham Maslow, an American influenced by the German school of Gestalt psychology (which focuses on present adjustment

rather than past conflicts), developed his theory of “self-actualization,” from which the contemporary obsession with “self-esteem” evolved. The term seems to echo Yogananda’s “self-realization.” Maslow was an early associate of Esalen but criticized it for its lack of a library, which he felt limited its definition of enhanced consciousness. He described his system as the “Third Force,” following the first two of Freud and behaviorism. He later advocated a “Fourth Force,” a sixties synthesis of transpersonal psychology with Asian mysticism.

Like Maslow, psychotherapist Carl Rogers sought “wholeness” of the person. Intriguingly, Rogers began his career as a theology student and Vermont pastor but afterward turned to clinical psychology. An admirer of John Dewey’s progressive education theories, he pioneered “client-centered” or “non-directive” therapy, which suspended and even questionably reversed the hierarchical relationship of doctor to patient. Among Rogers’ books was *Encounter Groups* (1970), with its obvious Gurdjieff lineage. Christian conservatives regularly, and probably with some justice, attack the self-actualization or human potential school of psychology for its “pagan” stress on personal needs and desires at the expense of moral reasoning and responsibility. For many people, humanistic psychology has indeed become a substitute for religion.

The sixties trend to look to the body for salvation was anticipated in the writings of Wilhelm Reich (1892–1957), an Austrian psychiatrist of the Gestalt school who worked and quarreled with Freud, then moved to New York in 1939 to escape the Nazis. Rejecting Freud’s theory of the social origin of neurosis, Reich envisioned “orgone energy” surging through the universe and the human body. In *The Function of the Orgasm* (1927), a sober book with a titillating title that was widely available as a paperback in the sixties, he argued for the biological necessity of sexual “discharge” of that energy—thus providing a rationale for pagan pansexuality. Reich’s work recalls passages about Romantic nature

in Emerson and Whitman, and his energy principle resembles that of kundalini yoga as well as the power of the Christian Holy Spirit. Reich founded an Orgone Institute in 1942. However, when he marketed a coffin-like “orgone box” to capture orgone energy at home, he was charged with fraud and sentenced to two years in prison, where he died.

While still in Europe in the 1930s, Reich had become interested in the physical-culture work of Elsa Gindler in Berlin. Around 1910, Gindler (1885–1961) developed a psychotherapy based on dance movements and correction of breathing: it resembled Chinese tai chi as well as the Alexander technique, used by actors and singers to free the voice from tension and fear. Gindler’s ideas were brought to the US by her student, Charlotte Selver, who began teaching at Esalen in 1963. The Sensory Awareness Foundation, dedicated to Gindler and Selver’s work, was established at Mill Valley, California, in 1971. Another important teacher at Esalen was Ida Rolf (1896–1979), who earned a doctorate in biological chemistry from Columbia University in 1920 and began exploring the body’s internalization of stress in the 1940s. Rolf combined aspects of yoga with the Alexander technique to create “rolfing,” a sometimes brutal reshaping of the muscles to release painful memories and resentments. The Guild for Structural Integration, based in Boulder, Colorado, is still dedicated to Rolf’s mission.

The principle of self-actualization in most methods of body work is closer to sixties Dionysianism than to New Age gnosticism. That is, body work assumes not that the aspiring soul must be freed from the opaquely material body but that spiritual maladies can collect and calcify in the body, clogging its vital connection to the macrocosm. Body work, like rock and its forebear, rhythm and blues, wants to “kick out the jams,” so that we can freely vibrate to nature’s music.

10. CONCLUSION

The New Age movement deserves respect for its attunement to nature and its search for meaning at a time when neither nature nor meaning is valued in discourse in the humanities. New Age has a core of perennial wisdom. It exalts the brotherhood of man, encourages contemplation, and finds beauty in the moment. But too much cultural energy has been absorbed by New Age over the past twenty years to the detriment of the fine arts, which frittered away their authority in their dalliance with trendy political tag lines. Despite its appeals to the archaic, New Age is fuzzily ahistorical. It lacks an analytic edge: with its soothing promises and feel-good therapies, New Age induces a benevolent relaxation that may be disabling in the face of aggression. In a world of terrorism, New Agers can only take to the hills and leave their scriptures in jars at Esalen.

There was a massive failure by American universities to address the spiritual cravings of the post-sixties period. The present cultural landscape is bleak: mainline religions torn between their liberal and conservative wings; a snobbishly secular intelligentsia; an alternately cynical or naively credulous media; and a mass of neo-pagan cults and superstitions seething beneath the surface. All-night radio features call-ins about crop-circles, UFO's, and abduction by aliens, science-fiction themes popularized by Swiss writer Erich Von Däniken's 1968 international bestseller, *Chariot of the Gods* (which attributes archaeological monuments to extraterrestrials). Prime-time TV programs are regularly devoted to seers like Rosemary Altea, James Van Praagh, and John Edward, who claim to hear messages from dead relatives hovering around audience members.

These developments are alarming. Science—its objectivity impugned by poststructuralism and postmodernism—is desperately needed to sort out the mystical muddle of New Age, but it cannot do so without understanding. J. B. Rhine's inconclusive 1936 experiments in parapsychology at Duke

University, for example, have been only erratically followed up. Claims of telepathy have yet to be systematically compared to known animal communication or to bird migrations linked to the earth's magnetism. These matters have been left to tabloids and talk shows, which have no apparatus of testing. There is nothing supernatural or occult—only natural phenomena that science has yet to chart or explain.

What is to be done? Higher education needs to be worthy of its name. My proposal is the same that I have made since co-creating the course “East and West” with artist and community activist Lily Yeh at the University of the Arts in 1990. The core curriculum for global education should be comparative religion. Study of the major world religions (including Islam) is the key to politics as well as art. As an atheist who worships only nature, I view religions as vast symbol-systems far more challenging and complex than poststructuralism, with its myopic focus on social structures. Poststructuralism has no metaphysics and is therefore incapable of spirituality or sublimity. There has been wave after wave of influences from Asian religion over the century and a half since Emerson and Madame Blavatsky, but the resultant New Age movement is choked with debris—with trivia, silliness, mumbo-jumbo, flimflam, and outright falsehoods. The first step in any solution is a return to origins—to the primary texts of sacred literature, supported by art history and archaeology.

The religious impulse of the sixties must be rescued from the wreckage and redeemed. The exposure to Hinduism and Buddhism that my generation had to get haphazardly from contemporary literature and music should be formalized and standardized for basic education. What students need to negotiate their way through the New Age fog is scholarly knowledge of ancient and medieval history, from early pagan nature cults through the embattled consolidation of Christian theology. Teaching religion as culture rather than as morality also gives students the intellectual freedom to find the ethical principles at the heart of every religion.

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