

**NEW AGE: A GUIDE** by Daren Kemp, *Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2003, Pp. x + 211, £14.99 pbk.*

When the new 'spirituality editor' of the women's magazine *Cosmopolitan* was interviewed on the radio recently, she was asked her views on the decline of Christianity in the UK. Does Christianity have an image problem in this country? She replied that no, it was simply that people are 'looking for something more fluid that they can fit into their lives'.

The 'New Age' (or 'New Age Movement') is nothing if not fluid, and it flows into the most remote corners of our society. Its pervasive influence makes it a popular subject of sociological study, but its fluidity makes it hard to nail down in any empirical survey. Daren Kemp's book provides a helpful guide to the whole area. He begins with the well-trodden but inevitable question, *What is the New Age?* As soon as he tries to answer the question, however, we are submerged in a cataract of names of individuals and communities, teachers and therapies, philosophies, -isms and -ologies. Deepak Chopra, Findhorn, Esalen, Druids, astrology, crystals and past-life regression – as Kemp admits, the list could be endless. How to we get a grip on the phenomenon? Most of the examples of New Age spirituality usually listed by observers share a family resemblance (a useful concept which Kemp further dignifies with the term 'polythetic definition'). However, many of these groups and individuals would reject the term New Age as applying in any way to themselves, thus complicating the sociologist's task. If the New Age is a 'family' of influences and communities, it is a truly modern family, in which the traditional institution has given way to a free flow of relationships and temporary affiliations.

Fortunately Kemp channels the enormous amount of information he has gathered into a sequence of well-delineated chapters, so that we end up with considerably more clarity than we began. The overview with which he begins the book is immediately followed by a case study, enabling the reader to focus for a moment on one particular example. He chooses the *Course in Miracles*, a text supposedly dictated by Jesus to an American research psychologist called Helen Schucman between 1965 and 1972. Neither a cult nor a sect, the *Course* and its spin-offs are studied by well over 2,000 groups worldwide, and the texts sell hundreds of thousands of copies each year. The language is largely derived from Christianity (Schucman is Jewish by birth and a 'convert' to Catholicism), but the philosophy is definitely post-Cartesian, the idea being that radical, systematic doubt of conventional perceptions of truth and reality leads to the belief that miracles (though themselves ultimately unreal) can be brought about by a deliberate change of mind or consciousness. The *Course* appeals to the modern desire for personal transformation, empowerment and

transcendence, in a language that makes sense to people growing up under the increasingly remote influence of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Furthermore its loose structure (a 'polycentric network with many nodes') enables it easily to fit into people's lives without demanding too radical a commitment.

This case study is followed by a chapter situating New Age in the history of ideas. Kemp traces the interactions between the holistic health movement and the environmental and anti-nuclear movements of the 1960s, together with the drug, music and sexual subcultures that emerged in the same period. People who had been influenced by some or all of these were soon searching for alternative and more ancient sources of guidance and wisdom, beyond those tainted by association with the reviled 'Establishment'. They searched among the various occult and esoteric groups that flourished from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Theosophy, Spiritualism, Gurdjieff, Steiner), the margins of mainstream religion (Joachim of Fiore, Blake, Boehme, Eckhart, Teilhard), and the formal heresies of Catharism and Gnosticism, whilst looking even further back in imagination to the Celts, the Essenes and the Egyptians. Add to this a fascination with post-relativistic science (the New Physics, Parapsychology and Systems Theory) on the one hand, and an attempt to recover the ancient 'earth wisdom' of pre-Christian paganisms, on the other, and a much more complex picture emerges. The 'fluid' of the New Age is well and truly on the boil.

A chapter on philosophy then takes us deeper into the ideas and ideologies of these groups, which are mostly variations on holism and evolutionism. The discussion of whether New Age is more post-modern than modern is ultimately inconclusive, partly because the term 'postmodern' is itself continually up for negotiation. New Age seems to involve an element of rebellion against both phases of modernity: it offers a number of metanarratives constructed not on the basis of Reason but of private revelation and convergent intuition. The dominant metanarrative gives its name to the whole movement: the term 'New Age' refers to the belief in a clear historical progression (perhaps linked to the astrological Age of Aquarius) into a new and more enlightened period of human evolution. Other chapters explore the approaches of scientific anthropology, sociology and psychology, sample the views of sympathizers and critics of the movement, and offer a detailed survey of current academic research on the subject.

Many recent reports on the New Age commissioned by Christian bodies are based on inadequate or outdated research. Kemp's book would make an ideal starting point for an informed engagement with the phenomenon.

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