SCIENCE AS LEGITIMATION FOR SPIRITUALITY:
FROM THE AQUARIAN CONSPIRACY TO CHANNELING
AND A COURSE IN MIRACLES

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Introduction: The New Age Critique of Science

Followers of New Age spiritualities1 are famously critical of Enlightenment rationalism. If they were to adopt a Satan figure, it might well be Descartes. He is thought of as the founder of modern rationalism, the person who gave science a privileged position in Western society thus marginalising aesthetics, philosophy, religion and spirituality. Science, a form of institutionalised rationalism, appeared to admit to no truth except that obtained by the scientific method. Science gave rise to technology, together with a mechanised view of humanity and the cosmos which, according to the New Age narrative, enslaved humankind for centuries, by setting it against itself and against nature.

In his influential The Tao of Physics, Fritjof Capra, a physicist turned New Age writer, argued that intuition, experience, even altered states of consciousness are valid, perhaps superior, ways of obtaining knowledge about reality: “Absolute knowledge is an entirely non-intellectual experience of reality, an experience arising in a non-ordinary state of consciousness which may be called a ‘meditative’ or mystical state” ([1976] 1992: 37). In a later book, The Turning Point (1983: 37–62),

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1 Use of the term ‘New Age’ for the spiritualities which emerged in the 1980s has become problematic and unfashionable although it continues to have currency in academic writing. Many followers of the new spiritualities (including the publishers of A Course in Miracles) object to the term because they associate the ‘New Age’ with superficiality, celebrity glamour and commerce-driven motives which seem alien to the idea of sincere spirituality. For a discussion of the problems involved in using the label ‘New Age’, see James Lewis, ‘Approaches to the Study of the New Age Movement’, in James Lewis and J. Gordon Melton, eds., Perspectives on the New Age (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992). More recently, Christopher Partridge uses the term ‘occulture’ in his The Re-Enchantment of the West, 1, 2005, (London: T. and T. Clark). However, the expression, ‘New Age’, continues to be useful to describe the holistic spiritualities which emerged in the 1980s, because the term was common currency at that time, and continues to differentiate these spiritualities from other popular spiritualities also emerging at the time: paganism, heathenism and Satanism, for example.
Capra criticised Descartes on three counts. First, Descartes believed that only scientific knowledge was certain knowledge. Second, he pioneered an analytical method of reasoning—reductionism—in which complex problems and processes can be understood by breaking them up into component parts. Third, his famous statement—“I think therefore I am”—is thought to reveal a distinction between mind and matter. Mind was associated with the subject and thinking; matter, the object, became a machine. New Age spirituality admits no difference between subject and object. Furthermore, Capra criticised the scientific method itself, linking his criticism with three figures: Galileo for restricting scientific inquiry to material bodies which could be quantified in the language of mathematics, Bacon for introducing inductive reasoning, and Newton for combining the inductive approach of Bacon with Descartes’s deductive method to produce the scientific methodology which came to view the cosmos as a determinate machine.

If science and the network of new spiritualities are anathema to one another, science and traditional religions have also been seen in the popular mind as incompatible with one another. Science for its part has prided itself on its independence from religious dogma. It sees itself as dispassionate, detached, untainted by prejudice, investigating facts about the physical world without any preconceptions. But whereas Christian apologists have developed strategies to accommodate the naturalistic, non-supernatural outlook of modern scientific enquiry, many New Age devotees have seen this stance as a compromise between the old power elite of religion and the new one of science.

Olav Hammer lists four strategies adopted by religions to respond to the increasing dominance of a scientific worldview: 1) God of the gaps in which religion’s domain lies in areas unexplained by science; 2) a conflict stance in which science and reason are subservient to religious revelation; 3) the two worlds argument in which religion is so wholly other that it is immune from attacks from science; and 4) the scientist stance in which science “proves the validity of a religious point of view” (Hammer, 2004: 202–203). This chapter, which deals largely with the fourth strategy, will look at three influential figures of the 1980s New Age network of spiritualities: William Bloom, Fritjof Capra and Marilyn Ferguson. Secondly, the chapter will examine the practice of channelling because it has been influential in the development of central New Age ideas and because it appears to contradict the New Age emphasis on an epistemology of individual experience.