The term New Age refers to a wave of religious enthusiasm that emerged in the 1970s and swept over the West through the 1980s only to subside at the end of the decade. As with other such enthusiastic movements, however, it did not just simply go away, but like a storm hitting a sandbar, it left behind a measurably changed situation among those elements of the religious community most centrally impacted. Study of the movement was hindered, in part, by its perceived relationship to the older world of the occult. Historically, the world of occultism was not one to be understood, so much as denounced. Much of the history of western scholarship has been shaped by the desire to move beyond magic and occultism, which was equated with the crudest forms of superstition and supernaturalism. In one sense we already understood gullible people who were attached to occult superstitions. This perspective was institutionalised in the anti-pseudoscience movement (cf. Shermer 1997; Gardner 1988; Gordon 1988) and the competing Christian counter-cult movement (cf. Hoyt & the Spiritual Counterfeit Project 1987; Amoto & Geisler 1989).

Thus it was that only as the New Age peaked and began to fade that studies outlining the New Age movement’s place in the rapidly changing religious scene in the modern West were published. However, beginning in the 1990s, a series of books on the New Age appeared from which some overall perspective can be constructed (e.g. Melton, Lewis & Kelly 1990; Lewis & Melton 1992; Kyle 1995; Heelas 1996; Hanegraaff 1996).

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Toward a Definition of the New Age

It is a more-than-helpful exercise to confront a few of the issues that emerge in gaining some common perspectives on the New Age. First, we need to make a sharp distinction between the New Age and that class of religious groups that are variously termed New Religions, cults or sects. As a whole, New Religions are small, relatively new religious organisations distinguished by their intrusion into a dominant religious community from which they make significant dissent. A New Religious Movement brings people together around a singular history, belief, practice, and leadership. The great majority of New Religions are sectarian, that is, they are new variations on one of the older major religious traditions. Hare Krishna is a sect of Hinduism, the Divine Light Mission (now known as Elan Vital) is one of the many Sant Mat groups, and the AUM Shinrikyo was a Buddhist organisation. Many New Religions are Christian sects that adhere to the great majority of traditional Christian beliefs but either dissent on one or two important doctrines and/or champion a different lifestyle (communalism, separatism, high-pressure proselytisation, sexual freedom, etc). Most of the remaining groups attempt to create a synthesis of two or more of the older religious traditions, the Unification Church being the most notable example.

In sharp contrast, the New Age movement was never a single organisation, but originated as an idea spread by a group of Theosophical organisations that shared a common lineage in the writings of Alice A. Bailey. Movement leaders never challenged the integrity of these organisations or of anyone’s attachment to them. In this regard, in its earliest stages, the New Age movement was much like the Christian ecumenical movement prior to the formation of the World Council of Churches. Without attacking the integrity of the various churches, Ecumenism looked for a Christian community that could give a more visible expression to the shared oneness among Christians in the object of Christian worship. As the New Age movement grew, some Theosophical groups became enthusiastic supporters, some were mildly accepting, some indifferent, and a few were quite hostile. A similar spectrum was presented by different Christian denominations to the ecumenical movement.

Much of our confusion about the New Age also derives from the different ways we use the term ‘movement’. As applied to New Religions, ‘movement’ generally refers to the dynamic and informal nature of