

Locating New Spiritual Paradigms: Reading Contemporary Literature for Themes of New Age

Sabin Mathew

Assistant Professor

Acharya Institute of Graduate Studies

Bangalore

Abstract

New religious practices promoting spiritual individualism are gaining importance than ever before. They are referred to as 'New Age', 'Neo-pagan', 'New Religious Movements', and alternative forms of spirituality. 'New Religious Movements' are seen by their adherents, sometimes as more fluid and less bounded than the established religions. New Age movements tend to be more individualistic and they are referred to as a form of "spirituality" rather than religion. It is a more non-institutionalized and individualistic approach to the divine which is different from the organized structures of the established religions. It is intended to take *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari* by Robin Sharma for the purpose of the study.

This paper aims at:

- (1) Understanding New Age spirituality as an alternate religious practice.
- (2) Probing for the themes of New Age in *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari*.
- (4) Analyzing how *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari* became a milestone in the search for alternative or new age religious beliefs.
- (5) Exploring the possible influence of traditional Eastern religions on new age spirituality.

Key Words: Religion, New Age spirituality, Sivanan system, Self-actualization, Life force, Transcendental Meditation

Introduction

A new trend towards religion is seen in the advent of digital technology, which makes cross cultural pollination of religions easier. Every religion tries to become more modern and accessible. For example, Buddhism has succeeded in reaching an international audience beyond the confines of a single religious tradition. The global transmission of Buddhism has also been taking place through the proliferation of CDs, DVDs, as well as through the internet. This access of religious information has given the freedom to every individual to 'pick and mix' whatever teaching is available and subsequently produce a blend of religion that is eclectic and without any specific context.

Apart from the new developments to these already established religions, there is recognition of the alternative ways in which religious practices, beliefs, and impulses are now conceptualized. Three broad groups of alternative spiritual movements can be identified. The first among these is New Religious Movements. They are also usually organized around a charming central figure such as Joseph Smith, Madame Blavatsky etc. Into this category fall Mormonism, the Theosophical Society, Scientology, Peoples Temple and hundreds of others. The second group that has roots in the nineteenth century is described New Age spirituality and has far more diverse and decentralized meshwork of beliefs and practices. They became particularly influential since the 1960s and '70s. The broad label "New Age" includes within it alternative spiritual practices, such as channeling, crystals, astrology and various ideas drawn from eastern religions. The individual is free to pick and choose from a wide array of spiritual options and its aim is the perfect psychological and spiritual development of the individual practitioner. Although the New Age is a leaderless phenomenon, there are many luring figures in the movement such as Deepak Chopra. The third group is Neopaganism, which is a term that covers the practical techniques for altering the internal and external world such as ritual, dance and magic.

Most of these new religions tend to share at least four common features despite their diversity. The first is the idea of correspondences. A complex network of hidden correspondences connects the entire universe, from the planets and stars in the heavens down to plants, animals and stones on the earth and every cell of the human body.

The second is the idea of nature as living. The entire universe is believed to be connected by a network. It is also believed to be a living organism having its own living energy or soul. Various forms of spiritual healing become possible with the correct understanding of this particular energy. Asian concepts such as the Chinese 'chi' and the Indian 'prana' are similar ideas that profess the energy flow through all of nature. The Gaia hypothesis depicts the idea of living nature in contemporary literature. It views the earth as a self-dependent living system that sustains the conditions for life. In popular culture, the idea of living nature has found its most popular form in the Star Wars films as "The Force," the vital energy that binds all things harmonized by the Jedi master.

Imaginary intermediary entities between the human and the divine is the third feature. Highly imaginative forms as angels, demons, demigods, and other supernatural beings form a chain of intermediary entities that bridge the gap between the human and the divine. The fourth feature is the concept of transmutation. Transmutation involves the transformation of the physical world through magic or the transmutation of the individual subject into a divine state. The transmutation of metals like lead into gold in alchemy is an example of such material manipulation. This is a metaphor for the spiritual transformation of the individual from a lower to an enlightened spiritual state. The New Age focuses mainly on the concept of physical and spiritual awakening like healing the mind and body through various techniques such as energy alignment, crystal healing or transforming the spirit through meditation. According to Hugh Urban, "They [New Age religions] have been, in a sense, affected by modern thought, colored by aspects of modern science, technology, popular culture, and in some cases consumer capitalism." (Urban 32)

New Age Spirituality in *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari*

The book is organized like a fable and it tells the story of Julian Mantle, a high-profile lawyer whose priorities are centred on money, power and prestige. He is represented as the

epitome of the desires of the world. One day he suffers a massive heart attack which makes him realize the emptiness of his life. An unsatisfied mind and an unhappy family life urges him to sell all his prized possessions including his red Ferrari and go on a spiritual odyssey to India. He reaches the Himalayas where he finds a monk of Sivana. He starts living in a village of Yogis where he is taught the Sivanan system. Julian returns from India to meet John, one of his associates and imparts the knowledge that he gained from India. The story is told from his perspective and this enhances the understanding of the readers.

The entire universe believed to be connected by a network of hidden correspondences according to the New Age philosophy. Since mankind is no different than any other animal we should live in harmony with them and ideally learn from them. 'Gaia' or the unification of earth and nature is frequently referred to in this thought system. It is respected and worshipped as god by many, for instance the American Indians. The New Age philosophy derives heavily from such esoteric traditions. According to Robin Sharma every creature is endowed with a divine beauty and we should take time to cherish this beauty. Once we are focused on our purpose the universe is said to take care of everything else.

The most important advice by Robin Sharma is laid out in the form of The 7 Timeless Virtues of Enlightened Living. The visualization begins with seeing oneself in a garden with a towering lighthouse (Sharma 41). As the name suggests there are seven different scenes from which we are to gain advice. Most of these seven virtues are intricately connected with nature. The beautiful garden, the yellow roses and the diamond strewn path, all serve as reminders according to Sharma. The yellow roses are representative of selfless service. Daily acts of kindness are said to increase the quality of your life. The quality of your contribution and the number of meaningful relationships with the fellow beings is of supreme concern. Similarly, the diamond strewn path emphasizes the richness of the present. Living each day as if it is the last can definitely contribute to the quality of life as a whole.

The very first virtue is a magnificent garden and this is symbolic of the mind. Diligent cultivation of the mind is possible with meditation as it helps to replace negative thoughts with positive thoughts and visualize positive outcomes. The Eastern traditions had a great influence on the New Age philosophy. One main factor that the New Age derived from the East is meditation. Yoga meditation practices help the people to get in touch with their super conscious, and thereby be guided by soul intuition. Mental and physical techniques of self-development become possible with yoga.

The religions of the future will be Self-realization. It will consist in understanding that the infinite love and joy of god are our own deepest reality and that god is our true Self. The true goal of divinity is, as the Indian scriptures declare, the 'Kingdom of god within you': the divine Self. Discovering life's purpose is one way in which we can become closer to self-actualization. This self-knowledge will further lead to self-enlightenment. According to Sharma dedicating your life to a meaningful purpose is the secret of success and happiness. Similar theme is presented by Coelho in The Alchemist as Santiago's Personal Legend. Fulfilling the personal legend is the supreme duty of every living being on the face of this planet.

The lesson the monk taught Julian is that success on the outside begins from within. Many people find it difficult to unshackle themselves from their mental prison. This is because they find it difficult to face their fears. This self-help book tells that we should identify the things that are holding us back and face them. Doing the things, you fear is like

building the foundation of success and leadership within yourself. But it will definitely take courage to promote self-discipline. According to the teachings of the New Age, the human spirit would languish and die if it had nothing higher to which to aspire.

The importance of nurturing the soul is something that the New Age philosophers always emphasized. The constant pressures of being a world class trial lawyer had broken the soul of Julian. His creative spark and his energy for living were rekindled only after he bid goodbye to his material possessions. According to Julian he received a kind of instruction from within once he started his spiritual voyage. Julian not only became aware of his own soul. He also began to connect with the Soul of the Universe; one that is described as the Soul of the World in *The Alchemist*.

Every being on this Earth, every object on this Earth has a soul. All souls flow into one; this is the Soul of the Universe...when you nourish your own mind and your own spirit, you are really feeding the Soul of the Universe. When you improve yourself, you are improving the lives of all those around you. And when you have the courage to advance confidently in the direction of your dreams, you begin to draw upon the power of the universe. As I told you earlier, life gives you what you ask of it. It is always listening. (Sharma 139)

The importance of spirit over form and of experiment over dogmatic assertions became the true focus in the new era of religious practices.

The genuine care and concern for the wellbeing of others stems from the belief that, only by elevating the lives of others can one's life reach its highest potentials. The sages of the East used to refer to a process called "shedding the shackles of self" (Sharma 176). It was the realization that giving to others is the noblest thing that one can do. New Age thinking which derived heavily from the East also stresses on this fact. Julian tells his former associate that the most important duty that was entrusted to him by the Yogis of India was to spread the message about their alternative form of living. He follows the instruction whole heartedly and the very first thing that he does is to meet his former associate and share the thoughts with him. Julian lost his ego and self-consciousness in the process and started to concentrate on a higher purpose. Spending one's time and energy for the sake of others is truly a divine thing to do; since these two are most valuable of resources. A life that revolves around the concept of giving is a paradigm shifting perspective, from the mentality of the survival of the fittest. Giving more to life and to the community is focused around gratitude. Practicing gratitude brings within us the belief that each day is a gift and is thus sacred. Robin Sharma talks about the unification of man with man in the penultimate chapter of his book which begins with a quote by William Blake, "Everything that lives, lives not alone, not for itself" (Sharma 173).

One of the most important points the new religions recognize is that we are, indeed, living in a new age of energy. Energy consciousness is not merely a passing fad but an actual fact. Energy needs to be accepted as an enduring aspect of human existence. Julian advises John to be aware of his 'life force.' Life force or internal energy has got enormous potential to work magic in the life of a person. Proper channelling of the life force can lead to emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing (Sharma 43). Excessive worry over any issue can drain this precious energy according the gurus of Julian. This energy leak is just like air leaking out of a tube and this leakage will finally leave one exhausted (Sharma 57).

Internal energy or internal psychic energy is a concept that is usually related with the technical side of martial arts. Breathing and coordinated movements are used in martial arts like Kung Fu to strengthen this energy of a person. The concept of this life energy is found in every great and ancient civilization of the world. Nowadays, researchers and scientists are able to prove the existence of this internal energy using ultra-modern technical innovations such as Electro-Dermal Screening or MSA (Meridian Stress Assessment), developed in 1940s by a famous German medical doctor and engineer Dr. Reinhard Voll.

The practice of yoga deals not only with mental and physical techniques of self-development, but with direct control of the inner energy (pranayama or energy control). It will soon come to be recognized as an actual science of religion. It may soon become the human science par excellence for the New Age. Yoga meditation practices help the people to get in touch with their superconscious, and thus to be guided by soul intuition. According to Sharma one should act in accordance with the laws of nature and that of the universe. At this point the person will be able to tap into the energy of another dimension. This will shift one's life from the realm of ordinary to the extraordinary (Sharma 134). The famous twentieth century dramatist Bernard Shaw propounded a similar concept and called it life force which is represented in *Candida* and *Pygmalion*.

Energy is a manifestation of thought. Thought is a manifestation of consciousness. According to Sharma saying that you don't have time to improve your thoughts is like saying "you don't have time to stop for gas because you are too busy driving". The quality of one's life is ultimately decided by the quality of one's thoughts. Each thought is to be filtered so that you only let the good ones enter your mind. And in case some unwanted thoughts gain an entry one has to immediately replace it with a positive one. If negative thoughts are your focus, you will embody it or worst, manifest it. This can in turn affect personal growth. The best example of transforming one's life by transforming one's thought can be seen in Julian. He transformed from a depressed and obese lawyer to an optimistic and youthful man full of the sap of life. He did all this just by guarding his thoughts and thereby conquering his mind. In short, the nurturing of his mind led to self-realization which further paved the way to self-actualization. In fact, this technique of manifestation is comparable to the idea of ego psychology propounded by American psychiatrists during the early phase of the twentieth century.

Looking East: The New Age and Oriental Traditions

Transcendental Meditation (TM) is the most important depiction of an Asian religious practice moving West. TM thus becomes the manifestation of the globalization process inherent in New Age religion. Transcendental Meditation which is the trademarked name of the mantra system first came to global public attention in the 1960s when its founder, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, became the spiritual guru of the Beatles, then at the height of their popularity.

When such practices like Transcendental Meditation moved out of the confines of the monastery it became necessary to reduce the complexity so that it became better accessible to the new crowd. And its practitioners like Yogi Maharishi didn't hesitate to do so. A small period of fasting and the chanting of a personalized mantra was all that it took to get initiated into the practice of meditation. All these contributed tremendously to the growth of TM in countries like the United States. Most of the esoteric religions of the East followed this lead and new urban forms of the traditional and established religions began to emerge as in the case of Buddhism.

Yoga, an important element in the assortment of spiritualities considered as the New Age was first introduced to the West in a lecture at the World Parliament of Religions in 1893 in Chicago by Swami Vivekananda. His lecture was on the, then, foreign philosophies of Hindu Vedanta and Yoga. The use of yoga and meditation for the attainment of self-realization is depicted by Robin Sharma in *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari*. He professes yoga as an extremely effective way to unlock one's reserves of vitality. It not only helps to rejuvenate the body but it also focuses the mind. The Sages of Sivana from Himalaya notable for their Indian spirituality boost the protagonist to realize his 'Self.' In the beautiful village of Sivana and with Yogi Raman as the guide, Julian Mantle started noticing the beauty in the most ordinary of things. Here Robin Sharma attracted reader's attention towards self-realization which further leads to self-actualization. The base of Robin Sharma's self-help book is found in Hinduism. Spirituality is often described as the inner journey toward meaning, wholeness and encounter with human life.

The entire universe believed to be connected by a network of hidden correspondences and this forms the basis of the idea of the living nature. Nature is considered as a living organism with its own energy or soul. The understanding of this basic concept forms the basis of both magical practice and spiritual healing. This concept of living nature is derived from Asian concepts such as the Chinese *chi* (as in the practice of Tai chi), and the Indian *prana*. It refers not just to breath but it is also a kind of vital energy that flows through the body and the whole of nature. In contemporary literature, the *Gaia* hypothesis refers to the earth as a complex self-regulating living system that maintains the conditions for life. In fact, the *Gaia* concept revived the idea of the living nature.

The concept of inner energy or life energy is found in every great civilizations of the world. The most famous examples include *Chi* and *Prana*. Different terminology is used to describe this phenomenon by different cultures but the meaning is essentially the same. In most of the cultures it is an invisible fluid with spiritual properties that streams through one's body meridians, chakras or organs. The very first mention of life energy - *Prana* is found in Sanskrit scripts written in mid second millennium BCE. Whereas, reference to the term *Chi* is found in another great script, an ancient Chinese medical text that belonged to the reign of the Yellow Emperor. It is an established document for Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) for more than two millennia.

The earliest Chinese classics describe *Chi* as the circuit of energy. All the different rituals conducted by Daoists, popularly known as *fengshui*, convey a dynamic cosmology. According to the teachings of cosmology, the universe creates itself out of primary chaos of material energy. It is then organized into the cycles of Yin and Yang and further formed into objects and lives. Yin is the receptive and Yang the active principle seen in the landscape, the annual cycle (winter and summer), sexual coupling (female and male) and socio-political

history (disorder and order). Humans are merely one among the myriad things formed out of this basic organization of material energies, or breaths, called *Chi* or *Qi*. Since humans are able to cultivate and channel this force they become a central part. Yoga or *pranayama* in fact, deals with the direct control of this inner energy. It is considered as a way for humans to be guided by their soul or soul-intuition. Buddhists seek to achieve enlightenment and the spiritual release described as Buddha hood by getting rid of the emotional entanglement that is, the self.

Tatvamasi, a commonly used term in Hindu philosophy and yoga is as “I am that” or “Thou art that.” The word has its origins in Sanskrit, *tat*, meaning “that”; *tvam*, meaning “you”; and *asi*, meaning “you were.” This interpretation is also sometimes varied among different traditions. Tatvamasi, alternatively spelled as *tat tvam asi* — is one of the Great Utterances or Great Contemplations, called the Mahavakyas, found in the ancient Sanskrit texts of the Upanishads. The Mahavakyas are short statements used for self-exploration by the Yogis. *Tat* (that) in the root of the word *tatvamasi*, refers to the Absolute Reality; the higher Self or Brahman. The divine nature is actually the essence of who you truly are and it has no relation with your worldly identity. Tatvamasi and the Mahavakyas may be contemplated in prayer or meditation or chanted as a mantra. Other Great Utterances include *Aham Brahmasmi* (“I am Brahman” or “I am divine”), *Pranosmi* (“I am breath”) and *Ayatma Brahma* (“My Self is Brahman”). The New Age spirituality which has derived heavily from the Hindu philosophy also believes in the divine authority of the Self.

Another major idea that the New Age philosophy borrowed from the east is ‘shedding the shackles of the self’ (Sharma 176). Losing one’s ego and self-consciousness can help to concentrate on a higher purpose. The noblest thing that one can do is to give their resources to others. This can be in the form of sharing time and energy which is the most valuable of all resources. “Yogi Raman said that when we are born, we are crying while the world rejoices. He suggested that we should live our lives in such a way that when we die, the world cries while we are rejoicing” (Sharma 176). This sense of leading a life that benefits others can happen at various levels. It can mean serious work like taking a year off from your regular work or studies, to devote time for the needy. It can also be incorporated in small day to day activities like letting a few cars pass during peak traffic hours. When you strive to help others in the ways you can, you truly make the world a better place.

In *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari*, the divine beauty of every living creature is stressed. Be it garden or just a rose flower, everything has the power to guide and motivate the human soul. For example, a simple yellow flower becomes a reminder to selfless service. This forms the central idea of the 7 Timeless Virtues of Enlightened Living. One can be guided by the soul intuition by getting in touch with the super conscious which becomes possible by meditation. Once the protagonist connected with the Soul of the Universe he was guided by an energy that he thought never existed before. Spirit is to be definitely favoured over form; but the transformation of the spirit will definitely lead to the development of the physical form too. Julian’s spiritual transformation became manifested in his body too as this middle aged man began to feel, walk, act and talk like a youth. Rather than gaining happiness from outside in the presence of his material possessions he began to seek happiness and wisdom from within. From being a world class trial lawyer who sought to undermine his opponent in every way possible, he changed to a selfless man who sought to upgrade the lives of others. Becoming one with nature and with fellow human beings and discovering oneself

in this process is an idea that Sharma could have derived from nowhere but from the New Age teachings. Proper channeling of the life force or inner energy is one of the main aims of yoga or meditation. Even a worrying thought can lead to the draining of this energy which stresses on the importance of a single thought. The efficient tapping of this energy is what shifts an ordinary person to the realm of the extraordinary.

Daoist priests conduct rituals for the opening of temples, which include dances with swords to command deities who are military heroes to bring demons under control. Funerals are also equally elaborate in this tradition. In lesser rituals, they issue talismans to rid clients of malign influences. An internationalization of such good luck charms has now taken place and we find Laughing Buddha, Lucky Bamboo etc. being cherished all over. The Laughing Buddha especially became extremely popular and is found in homes, restaurants, places of business and so on. The statue is believed to bring abundance and happiness. He is also referred to as the Buddha of Wealth. It is believed to bring wealth to the house or business enterprise in which it is placed. There are many variants of the Laughing Buddha statue. Some of them figure beads hanging from the neck. These beads represent pearls of wisdom. Laughing Buddha with the beads is normally kept close to the spot in which one usually meditates. Such talisman which were once part and parcel of ancient ways of life like those of Sumerians, the Babylonians and the Vedic Indians have now been so much integrated into the Western ethos that they represent, especially in North America an obsession with Eastern traditions.

Conclusion

Religion in the West and perhaps everywhere has always focused more on increasing the number of its adherents than on the quality of their worship. The insuperable handicap of blind belief has been ultimately recognized and religion is trying to move towards an emphasis on universal truths over outer frames. It is high time to explore man's inner relationship with his creator.

The notion of hidden correspondence between humans and the elements of nature is represented in *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari*. One of the most tedious tasks of human beings is to unshackle themselves from the mental prison. According to the new set of teachings, this becomes possible by nurturing the inner soul and also by the ignition of a creative spark. Yoga and Transcendental Meditation are advocated as the major techniques cultivate the garden of mind. Realizing one's own energy or life force will further lead to the elevation of the lives of others.

The true goal of pilgrimage is, as the Indian scriptures declare, to manifest the kingdom of God within you. The divine self is to be of utmost importance. The outer places of worship or the rituals, particular systems of belief are; after all, only man made definitions. New Age religious practices are bringing human beings closer to this concept, like never before. Also, the influence of the Eastern esoteric traditions on these new spiritual practices can never be overlooked.

References

- Sharma, Robin S. *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari*. Mumbai: Jaico, 2005.
- Cowan, Douglas E., and David G. Bromley. *Cults and New Religions: A Brief History*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008.
- Esposito, John L., Darrell J. Fasching, and Todd Lewis. *Religion and Globalization: World Religions in Historical Perspective*. New York: Oxford UP, 2008.
- Kriyananda. *Religion in the New Age: And Other Essays for the Spiritual Seeker*. Gurgaon: Ananda Sangha Publications, 2010.
- Lifton, Robert Jay. *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of "brainwashing" in China*. Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino, 2014.
- Medium, George, Jibu Mathew. "Rudiments of a Singularity-Philosophy of Religion." *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 8.1 (2018): 1-11.
- "New Age Spirituality." *Home Page of the ReligiousTolerance.org Web Site*. Web. 02 Mar. 2019.
- Prebish, Charles S., and Martin Baumann. *Westward Dharma: Buddhism beyond Asia*. Berkeley: U of California, 2002.
- Seager, R H. *Buddhism in America*. New York: Columbia UP, 1990.
- Urban, Hugh B. *New Age, Neopagan, and New Religious Movements: Alternative Spirituality in Contemporary America*. N.p.: U of California, 2015.
- Watkins, Light. "The 10 Commandments of New-Age Spirituality." *Medium*. 08 Sept. 2015. Web. 15 Mar. 2019.
- "What Is New Age Spirituality?" *The Stillness Project*. 24 Jan. 2017. Web. 08 Mar. 2019.
- Wilber, Ken. *Integral Spirituality: A Startling New Role for Religion in the Modern and Postmodern World*. N.p.: Integral, 2007.
- Woodhead, Linda, Christopher Hugh Partridge, and Hiroko Kawanami. *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations*. London: Routledge, 2016.