

A Psychological Study of New Age Practices and Beliefs

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To my family and ancestors,
the *Farias* of Sortelhão and the *Guerra* of Vale de Madeira

“There are only two types of constant mood with which life is worth living – with the noble joy of a religion, or with the noble sorrow of having lost one. The rest is vegetation, and only a psychological botany can take interest in such diluted humanity (so general a fungus).”

Fernando Pessoa

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Short Abstract

This thesis consists of a study of the motivational, cognitive and personality implications of adherence to New Age practices and beliefs. The New Age, unlike traditional Western religion, possesses no church-like structure and is usually characterised as a loose network of self-development practices, with a belief system centred on the spiritual evolution of the individual through successive reincarnations and the idea of a magical interconnectedness between all things. The studies carried out used a series of psychological measures, including self-report scales, analysis of self-concepts, autobiographical episodes and attributions to life events, and experimental visual and semantic tasks. Groups of traditional religious and non-religious individuals were also assessed to serve as contrasts to the New Age group.

Following from previous sociological literature on the individualist character of the New Age, the first study dealt with individualist and collectivist motivations. New Age individuals were found to emphasise more individualistic values than Catholics, but still differed from non-religious individuals in that they stressed more self-transcendent universalism values and global-holistic self-concepts. This pattern was labelled as 'holistic individualism' and the second study sought to define it more accurately by focusing on the analysis of agency and communion motivations through the analysis of autobiographical episodes. In this study, the New Age group showed a higher frequency of agency and a lower frequency of communion themes than traditional religious and non-religious participants and, in particular, emphasised life stories of self-empowerment by non-material 'energies' or entities.

The last two studies looked more closely at the New Age tendency towards highly abstract cognitions, in particular its sense of connectedness, by focusing on magical thinking and personality traits. New Age individuals were found to attribute events to magical rather than naturalistic causes much more often than the other groups. This cognitive disposition was confirmed in the last study, which found a positive association between the adherence to New Age practices and schizotypal personality traits, emotional hypersensitivity, and cognitive-perceptual looseness. Women were also found to be keener adherents to the New Age than men.

Given this set of results, it is suggested that the New Age should be thought of primarily as a magical, rather than a religious, system of practices and beliefs. It is also proposed that an individual may be drawn to the New Age not only because of its modern individualistic appeal, but in virtue of possessing a particular personality and cognitive disposition towards magical ideation and unusual perceptual experiences.

(This thesis is approximately 52,000 words in length)

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CHAPTER ONE

Approaching Religion

General Introduction

This thesis will look at the phenomenon of New Age practices and beliefs from a psychological perspective. The New Age has been classified as a modern form of religion but the differences it presents with traditional Western religion are significant enough to ask what is 'religious' about it. Because this thesis will empirically contrast the New Age with a traditional form of religion, it is important that differences in the interpretation of religion should be addressed. Thus, the first chapter will firstly focus on conceptual issues by addressing two major lines of definitions that have been used by theologians and scholars of religion. Then, the chapter will briefly summarise the psychological research on non-Christian forms of religious beliefs, including the attempts to validate 'spirituality' as an empirical construct alternative to 'religion'.

1.1 Defining Religion

Definitions of religion, and the behaviours with which it is usually associated, are so varied that many researchers are altogether tempted to neglect this task. In fact, religion as a specific domain of human life is mostly a Western concept, implying a dichotomy between what pertains to the sacred versus secular/profane, and is rooted in the theistic inheritance from Judaism, Christianity and Islam where God is essentially distinct from

creation (King, 1987). Although it only came into common usage in early modern Europe, with the division caused by the Protestant Reformation (Molnár, 2001), it is to the Romans that we owe this term. Etymologically it has two possible origins. The most probable, but less frequently used, relates it to the Latin verb 'relegere', which means 'to read over again' (Oxford English Dictionary (OED), 1989) or 'to cultivate, to develop' (Silva, 1997). Its most suggestive etymology however is that of 'religare', which means 'to bind together', and is usually understood as a binding of mankind with a transcendental power.

Definitions of religion have tended to either give greater weight to the subjective emotional elements, including a particular focus on religious experience, or to the system of doctrines and devotional acts regulated by a hierarchy of trained priests (Alston, 1967). Historically, this distinction mirrors, on the one hand, the pre-modern Catholic and Orthodox Christian understanding of religion and, on the other, the more recent movements stemming from the Protestant Reformation, which have emphasised more the individual's autonomy vis-à-vis religion. Of particular relevance for the establishment of a personal and emotional notion of religion has been Schleiermacher's (1768-1834) romantic definition of religion as a *feeling* of absolute dependence (Niebuhr, 1967). The enduring influence of his definition is felt even within the boundaries of the psychological study of religion, mostly via James's (1902/1929) celebrated work on religious experience and explicitly acknowledged by more recent studies (Hood, 1995). Rooted on his philosophical pragmatism, James argues for 'practical religion' and against the doctrinal 'metaphysical monster' taught by medieval theologians which he considers to be 'an absolutely worthless invention of the scholarly mind' (p. 437). For the purpose of his study, he defined religion as 'the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may

consider the divine' (p. 31-32). This kind of definition, which stresses the inner subjectivity of the individual, his emotions and intuitions, is at odds with a traditional understanding that considers emotions too deceptive and elusive to yield a clear knowledge of God (Hepburn, 1967). The importance of the study of scriptures and performance of acts of devotion and the distrust of emotions is found not only in Western Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity but equally in some Buddhist schools (Sharf, 2000) and Hindu philosophies, such as Sankara's Advaita Vedanta, that emphasised the centrality of knowledge to perceive truth (Smart, 1967).

In his *Interpretation of Religion*, Hick (1989) has tried to overcome the diversity of definitions and varieties of religious expressions by considering belief in the transcendent as the fundamental characteristic of religion. Thus, he proposes that

religion (or a particular religious tradition) centres upon an awareness of and response to a reality that transcends ourselves and our world, whether the 'direction' of transcendence be beyond or within or both (p. 3).

Henceforth, he considers that religions are but different ways of thinking and experiencing the same transcendent reality and that they evoke parallel possibilities of transforming human life. This transformation – the fruits of religion, as James (1902/1929) called it – is understood to entail the adoption of an ethic of self-transcendence that stresses values like compassion towards other beings. Such definition and operationalisation of religion, though attempting a common ground between diverse and sometimes antagonistic interpretations, nonetheless has its problems. A traditional religious interpretation of religion would find it too vague, for this concept of transcendence encompasses both theism and pantheism. In fact, it might even include an atheistic position, such as communism, which though denying a transcendental divine reality stresses the collective as an entity which transcends the individual. On the other

hand, a more secular-humanistic interpretation might rightly note that a man may be remarkably moral in his actions towards others, showing all the signs of the ‘fruits of religion’, but still be an atheist. Objections such as these are virtually insoluble but the difficulty of reaching a consensual definition helps to highlight the tensions and contradictions which are present in the very heart of religion as a system of beliefs and behaviours. Such tensions are particularly present in our days, given the plurality of religious traditions coexisting in the same social-cultural setting and the emergence of new forms of religious expression like the New Age, which are so devoid of institutional structure and normative beliefs that it is doubtful whether it can be properly called a ‘religion’.

From the point of view of a psychological enquiry, this thesis is concerned with behavioural and cognitive-motivational aspects of individuals whose lives are significantly embedded in a particular system of non-material beliefs. It is probable that underlying different definitions of religion are in fact diverse and even contrasting psychological aspects. Thus, rather than attempt a broad definition of religion, like Hick’s, it may be more useful to accept the diversity of interpretations while keeping in sight that the phenomena we are observing may have different origins and consequences, notwithstanding their shared belief in a ‘transcendent reality’.

1.2 Psychology and the Study of Religion

A psychological study of religion should focus upon those variables which may secure a better way of understanding how an individual’s behaviour may be shaped or influenced by his religion, without needing to make assumptions or denials regarding its metaphysical claims (Allport, 1951). However, the religious individual’s behaviours, as his

motivations, feelings and thoughts, are under the scrutiny of a psychological science which can provide insights and evaluations on a person's actions, without addressing the ultimate validity of beliefs. Indeed, it is plausible that almost any experience might be given a particular religious interpretation. This does not exclude the important task psychology may serve in illuminating inconsistencies in religious behaviour, as in the case of cognitive dissonance arising from failed prophecies (Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter, 1964), or even point out deception, coercion, delusion and mental illness, as it has happened concerning some recent cults or new religious movements (Galanter, 1989; Osherow, 1992).

Although religion is a multidimensional construct encompassing aspects such as ritual, beliefs, ethics, community and emotion, most studies have tended to use unidimensional indicators, such as church attendance or the rating of the importance of religion for one's life (Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, and Gorsuch, 1996). On the other hand, if one considers the interest related fields of enquiry, such as sociology, have taken in the study of new religious movements (e.g., Barker, 1989) it is surprising to contrast the scarcity of psychological studies outside the boundaries of Christianity (for an important exception, see the issue of *American Behavioral Scientist* edited by Richardson, 1977). For example, in a recent compilation of psychological religious measures, comprising over 100 scales measuring religious beliefs, practices, attitudes, orientation, and development amongst other constructs, only a few of these included items pertaining to non-Christian religiosity (Hill and Hood, 1999). Nonetheless, the rise of interest in non-Western and alternative forms of religion has been enthusiastically acknowledged since the late 1960s by some psychologists, including people such as Maslow, in the creation of an association and *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* functioning as an extension of humanistic psychology that studies human motivations which lie 'beyond the ego' (Walsh and

Vaughan, 1993). Unsurprisingly, as its premises lie more within the esoteric than in the scientific standards of a psychological science, this movement has not met with the approval of the larger psychological community.

There are two major exceptions to the general lack of interest psychology has paid to non-Christian forms of belief. One lies within the domain of superstitious, paranormal and magical beliefs and thinking. Rather than relating them to emerging alternative religious ideas and practices, most studies have treated them as instances of anomalous or abnormal beliefs that overlap in cognitive style and motivational functions (for reviews see Jahoda, 1969; Vyse, 1997; Zusne and Jones, 1989). Developmental and personality and clinical psychology have particularly addressed magical thinking (Rosengren, Johnson, and Harris, 2000; Eckblad and Chapman, 1983), while paranormal beliefs are the major concern of a somewhat marginal psychological sub-discipline of parapsychology, around which the putative existence of extra-sensorial faculties is debated and researched (Beloff, 1993). Research on magical and paranormal beliefs, though relatively scarce, provides some fundamental insights both conceptually and methodologically for a psychological study of people who hold such beliefs. This literature also presents some interesting parallels with anthropological research on the characteristics and function of magical thinking and practices in pre-modern societies (for a review see Cunningham, 1999) – a parallel which remains practically unexplored. The relevant literature on magical thinking shall be reviewed in chapters 5 and 6, where two studies assessing its frequency, characteristics and relevance for our understanding of New Age practices and beliefs will be described.

The second exception to the scarcity of psychological studies on non-Christian forms of religious beliefs and practices, concerns what has come to be called ‘spirituality’. The

often indiscriminate use of this term has been evoked and criticised by both traditionally religious and non-religious quarters. For example, the education officer of the British Humanist Association has found the word ‘superfluous’, ‘sentimental’ and ‘muddy’, arguing for its exclusion from the educational system (Mason, 2000). The matter at stake is that of using ‘spirituality’ as distinct from ‘religious’ on the grounds that while the latter concerns particular doctrines or teachings from a religious tradition, the former refers to moral and emotional aspects and qualities, such as the development of tolerance and forgiveness or the experience of very positive feelings. But centrally, it is used to address a feeling of a transcendent force or presence without the need to frame it within any theology or belief system.

As it seems to encompass a more universal and non-sectarian form of religious feeling, many researchers find the concept of ‘spirituality’ appealing, particularly when they need to refer to New Age forms of belief (e.g., Woodhead and Heelas, 2000). Interestingly, this term captures the intention of the more subjective type of definitions of religion reinforcing its emotional character. Thus, in a large survey of the religious and ‘spiritual’ orientations of the American baby boomer generation, Roof (1999) after mistakenly referring to the Greek ‘psyche’ – instead of ‘pneuma’ – as synonymous with the Latin ‘spiritus’, explains that the “spiritual comprehends but cannot be contained by intellect, cognition or institutional structure” and that “it abhors fixity in the interest of transformation”. This rendering is clearly at odds with traditional theology, in which the ‘spiritual’ refers to that part of being which is eternal and unchanging, but very close to the heart of the New Age ideology, which values ‘spiritual change and transformation’.

These problematic definitional aspects are reinforced in the introduction of this thesis because most of the language used by the New Age – and generally uncritically adopted

by those undertaking its academic study – is used in a very loose way, and ‘spirituality’ certainly being one of the most often employed terms. Opposing spirituality to religion is also a polarisation which seems biased. A study conducted to test the possibility of operationalising this concept as a psychological construct (Zinnbauer et al., 1997), showed that different religious groups used it in divergent ways, Catholics rating themselves as equally religious and spiritual, but New Agers considering themselves to be highly spiritual but not religious. The authors concluded that this polarisation, in which some people understand ‘spirituality’ to be the personal and ‘religion’ the institutional, is not only far from consensual but is an erroneous conception, as religion encompasses both the personal, and the institutional.

A significant attempt to validate spirituality as a heuristic construct was that of Schwartz’s (1992) cross-cultural research on universal types of values. Having operationalised it as including primarily values of inner harmony, detachment, meaning in life and spiritual life, results showed that this set of values did not group itself like other types of values, such as benevolence and tradition, which were consistently found across his 20 countries sample. Schwartz (1992) concluded that people may find ultimate meaning in life pursuing types of values other than those proposed by spirituality and that, rather than there being a universal type of spirituality, there may be a number of distinct types, each one with a different subset of values. Subsequent research conducted using Schwartz’s scale of values has measured spirituality as a single-dimensional construct (‘importance of spirituality in life’) and found it to have a different pattern of correlations than religiosity, especially in its positive association with value types of universalism, such as equality, social justice and unity with nature (Saroglou and Galand, 2004).

To summarise, the plurality of religious orientations in the modern world has so far not motivated a broad programme of psychological research into religion outside the boundaries of Christianity. Magical and paranormal beliefs have been addressed as particular forms of cognition but their association with the societal phenomenon of emerging non-traditional forms of religion has practically received no attention. The concept of spirituality, widely used today and of primal importance within the New Age belief system is, like that of religion, elusive to a uniform definition. The studies so far conducted have shown that it is not consensually applied, possesses no universal set configuration of values and, as a unidimensional construct, it was found to be positively associated with values of universalism. Although its popular use is in harmony with many New Age ideas of a personal subjective type of church-less religiosity, nonetheless the concept still seems to partly overlap with – and perhaps derive from – the types of religious definition which emphasise the private and subjective sphere. Thus, whilst not being easily categorised as a ‘religion’ because of its lack of a physical institution and body of fixed beliefs and practices, the New Age can nevertheless be appropriately named as a form of ‘religiosity’ – literally meaning ‘religious feeling or sentiment’ (OED, 1989). Eventually, the research described in the next chapters proposes that the most appropriate adjective to qualify the New Age is as a system of *magical*, rather than religious or spiritual, beliefs and practices. But before the empirical aims and studies are presented a characterisation of the New Age – its beliefs, practices, as well as the social-historical circumstances that shaped it – needs to be undertaken.

CHAPTER TWO

Portraits of the New Age

General Introduction

By the time Thomas (1971) published his historical survey of the decline in magical practices and beliefs in England, which attested to the progressive secularisation of the modern world, a cultural revival of interest for the occult and non-Christian forms of religiosity was on the rise (Eliade, 1976). Practices like Yoga, meditation, aromatherapy, astrology, Tarot, channelling, and energy healing, mostly held within a niche of the 1960s counter-culture, have in the past three decades become increasingly popular, and established themselves as part of a loose form of religiosity known as the New Age. Today its cultural influence is visible in the creation of dedicated sections in bookshops, ‘natural’ or ‘alternative’ health clinics and shops, the inclusion of horoscopes in many newspapers and even in the marketing of products like aromatherapy shower gels in supermarkets (Bruce, 2000). Although its organisation and aims make it distinct from new religious movements or sects (Heelas, 1996), its ideology encompasses other semi-structured social forms of magical thinking and practice, such as Neopaganism (Luhrmann, 1992).

Because of its lack of formal organisation, mostly being a network of independent centres and individuals, it is difficult to have an estimation of the number of people involved in it. In the USA, while the number of committed individuals might not exceed the hundreds of thousands, the number of people who might endorse some of its ideas

or have engaged in some New Age practices is far larger (Melton, Clarke, and Kelly, 1990). In France, in 1996, it was estimated that 10% of total book sales came from books dealing with New Age themes (Lacroix, 1996), and in London, in 1990, 12,000 programmes were distributed tri-monthly by *Alternatives*, a New Age centre at St James Church, Piccadilly (York, 1995). Although having emerged in Britain and the USA – historically, countries from where religious liberalism and individualistic ideologies sprang (Lukes, 1973) – its network has grown through the industrialised world, including predominantly Catholic countries such as Brazil (Amaral, 2000), and even Far Eastern countries such as Japan (Shimazono, 1999) and Taiwan (Chen, 2004).

The New Age tends to reject traditional religiosity, with its set of strict dogmas and rituals, and to adhere to a form of religious syncretism that stresses magical and paranormal beliefs, along with certain physical and mental techniques that aim to promote ‘higher levels of consciousness’. These techniques are borrowed from virtually all kinds of religious traditions, from shamanism to Buddhism, but also from modern psychotherapy, and are put together by the individual in order to promote one’s self-development. Examples of such techniques, which were assessed through a scale of New Age Practices in all the studies conducted for this thesis (see Appendix A), include (1) bodily and ‘energy’ techniques, and (2) divination and self-knowledge practices (Höllinger, 2000; 2003). In the first group are included practices such as Yoga, meditation, Reiki (a form of energy healing with the laying of hands without physical contact) and massage techniques. The other group consists of practices like the use of Tarot cards or consulting an astrologer for divination purposes and/or symbolic exploration of aspects of one’s personality, interpretation of dreams and the use of therapies such as past-life regression (where people under a semi-hypnotic trance supposedly remember events from ‘previous earthly incarnations’), as well as

participation in talks or workshops on topics of spiritual development. The main aim of these practices, according to the New Age ideology, is to promote self-exploration, self-development and healing.

Two illustrations might help convey the use of New Age techniques. In an anthology of New Age writings (Bloom, 1991) there are descriptions of such methods as visualisation and meditation, and past life regression by widely known New Age authors (Shakti Gawain and Roger Woolger respectively). In the first case instructions are given on how to use visualisation and meditation to heal someone at a distance:

Relax deeply... Think of yourself as a clear channel through which the healing energy of the Universe is pouring... Now picture or think of the person as clearly as you can. Ask him if there is anything in particular he would like you to do for him in your meditation... If you feel the impulse to work on healing a particular part of his body, or a particular problem, do so. Just see all problems dissolved, everything being healed and functioning perfectly.

Then picture him surrounded in golden, healing light... looking radiantly healthy and happy. Speak to him directly (in your mind); remind him that he is actually a perfect, god-like being and that no illness or affliction need to have any power over him. Tell him that you support him in being totally healthy and happy... When you feel complete, open your eyes and come back to the outer world feeling refreshed, renewed, healthy and invigorated. (p. 101).

The following illustration concerns a description of how regression therapy led to the realisation of aspects of one's present personality and attitudes, which were interpreted according to the retrieved memories from a past life:

I found myself almost grunting out the story of a very crude peasant-turned-mercenary soldier of that same period. This rough-and-ready character I seemed to have assumed was originally from the south of Naples and ended up in the papal army raised by the King of France to exterminate the heresy in the South. As this highly unsavoury individual, I found myself in the thick of some of the most hideous massacres...

Images from that first remembrance haunted me for years and it took me three more two-hour regressions to complete [the] story... Yet, amazingly, it started to explain to me disturbing fragments of torture and killing that had come in dreams, meditation, and unbidden fantasy over the years, images that no amount of psychotherapy had ever really touched. Also, the way the story ended seemed to explain a phobia, a fear of fire, I have had all my life. After one of the sieges, the mercenary I seem to have been, deserted and joined the heretics, eventually only to be caught and burned at the stake himself.

As I reflected on the story more and more, other pieces of my personal history in this life started to fall into place. Since adolescence I had developed a

very cynical attitude to almost all orthodox religion, especially Christianity. I found it hard to see any Church as anything but authoritarian and dogmatic, denying people the freedom of personal enquiry and experiment. But even more adamant had been my early rejection of all forms of militarism and a strong inclination toward pacifism... Could it be that from early on I had unconsciously been reminded of parts of that soldier's brutal experience? (p. 146).

There is a plethora of other practices which have been popular at one time or the other. Healing with the use of crystals remains a popular practice, as well as the invocation of or 'working with' angels and nature spirits. The practice of 'channelling', which is similar to the spiritualist form of communication with the dead – except that the medium does not lose awareness and the 'entity' communicating is often understood to be a spiritual being of non-human origin, an important religious figure (e.g., Jesus) or even an extraterrestrial – has a special importance as many of these 'channelled' messages have attained the status of divine revelations (Riordan, 1992; Hanegraaff, 1996). Since the New Age is not organised as a church structure – though there are a few specialised centres – usually talks, courses and workshops take place in the premises of other religious organisation, such as Quaker's houses or Anglican churches, like St James Church, Piccadilly, in London, and also community centres and hotels. In the programme of activities of two major New Age centres in London (*Alternatives*, 2002, and *The College of Psychic Studies*, 2001) one can find illustrations of events that are popular topics of New Age interest: "Power Crystals", "Opening Ourselves to Magic", "Psychic Protection", "Transforming Anger", "The Urban Shaman", "Exploring Past Lives", "Healing with Sound", "Exploring Your Inner Light", "Opening to Your Psychic Gifts", "Unconditional Success", "Sacred Geometry of Stonehenge and Chartres", "Healing and Self-Healing" and "The Magic of Soul Connections". While the courses and workshops are fundamentally 'experiential', i.e. using particular psychological or physical techniques for self-exploration, the talks often involve practical applications or are based upon the speaker's personal experience of a spiritual dimension or a particular technique. For

example, a talk on 'Psychic Powers' might involve a brief exercise in which it is asked of participants to 'draw' information from a person sitting close by, and whom they do not know, by holding her hands and intuitively or telepathically 'connecting' to her. One other talk might involve showing drawings of angels which the speaker, through his special clairvoyant abilities, was able to perceive in natural settings. An observant participant taking part in these talks – as one conducting research work and searching for volunteers to fill in questionnaires is – would also notice that one corollary of the New Age emphasis on this 'experiential' criterion is the difficulty in addressing criticisms to the nature of personal experiences, spiritual or paranormal abilities or the general ontological framework proposed. Although New Age individuals can be quite critical of scientific paradigms and societal issues, criticism of their ideology and unusual spiritual-paranormal experiences tends to be dismissed as an example of rational reductionism and personal lack of intuition and spiritual development.

After this brief exposition of the New Age, the remainder of this chapter will summarise the academic literature on the New Age, centring around two fundamental works which have described its ideology and historical roots (Hanegraaff, 1996), and its societal context, including its modern appeal and psychological effectiveness (Heelas, 1996). A brief contrast with traditional religious beliefs will be given and, finally, the limitations of the available studies shall be discussed and the scope of this thesis laid out.

2.1 The New Age: Old Wine into New Wineskins?

Writing on the emergence of spiritual support groups in the USA during the 1990s, Wuthnow (1996) gives a vivid description of a 'tamed' spirituality, where the traditional

concept of God is transformed into an internal emotional presence that can help meet individual needs:

At one time, theologians argued that the chief purpose of humankind was to glorify God. Now it would seem that the logic has been reversed: the chief purpose of God is to glorify humankind. Spirituality no longer is true or good because it meets absolute standards of truth or goodness but because it helps us get along. (p. 18).

He calls this type of spirituality a secular spirituality. Hanegraaf (1996; 1998) uses a similar terminology when he classifies the New Age as a form of secularised esotericism – a recreation, rather than a continuous historical chain, of esoteric traditions in western culture. Accordingly, he subtitled his major opus on the New Age as “Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought” (Hanegraaff, 1996). However, the main thrust of this work is an extensive analysis of primary sources, in which he considers as major trends in the New Age: (a) the phenomenon of channelling understood as communication with ‘entities’ living on higher spiritual levels; (b) healing and personal growth, which encompasses the vast field of alternative therapies and psychotherapies; (c) the appropriation and recreating of scientific theories and the attempt to create a less materialistic and a more ‘holistic science’; (d) the several movements of Neopaganism, like Wicca, which are centred around the relationship of humankind with the natural environment, and the practice of magical rituals; (e) finally, he sees the New Age divided between those whose expectancy of the ‘Age of Aquarius’ – a new Golden Age – is a central part of their beliefs, and the others – today the majority – who see the New Age in the more general sense of an alternative view of life.

Following from the detailed account of these trends, he turns to analyse the variety of New Age beliefs on topics such as the nature of reality, God and spiritual entities, consciousness and the Self, death and reincarnation, good and evil, myths and historical visions, and finally the coming of the ‘Age of Aquarius’ – understood to be a time of

rapid change with important possibilities for the spiritual evolution of humanity.

Hanegraaff summarises the results of his analysis in five central features, which can be regarded as constitutive of New Age religion: (1) an attitude of this-worldliness that is focused on life in the present world, as opposed to the otherworldliness view that seeks truth and goodness in a 'higher' realm; (2) holism, which emphasises the universal interrelatedness of all things; (3) evolutionism as the teleological idea that souls are on a process of learning and consciousness progression; (4) the psychologization of religion and sacralization of psychology, which replaces the religious emphasis on God-realisation for a psychological Self-realisation and endows the individual mind with the power to 'create reality'; (5) expectations of a coming New Age, which may range from social improvements to the idea of a blissful Golden Age (pp. 365-366).

Hanegraaff (1996) dedicates the last part of his work to a historical interpretation of the New Age, relating it to other esoteric movements in the Western world. Although the continuity between some movements such as Spiritualism and the Theosophical society and the New Age had been previously pointed out by other authors (e.g. Gordon, Jerome, and Kelly, 1990), Hanegraaff provides a much more detailed account which goes back to the Renaissance. Thus, he includes descriptions of movements as diverse as Renaissance Hermeticism and Neoplatonism, the emergence of Romanticism and Occultism, Mesmerism, Spiritualism, the Theosophical Society and, finally, ends with a reflection on Jung – whose theories of the archetypes and synchronicity have been adopted by the New Age – whom he addresses as the major contributor in presenting an esoteric worldview in psychological terms: “The result was a body of theories which enabled people to talk about God while really meaning their own psyche, and about their own psyche while really meaning the divine.” (p. 513)

When Hanegraaff refers to Western esoteric traditions of which the New Age would be a modern development, his emphasis is on modern esotericism, which came about only when the Medieval God-centred worldview was replaced by a “secularisation of the cosmos”, a turning to nature and the practice of *magia naturalis* (which was distinguished from older ‘superstitious magic’ for its more philosophical and quasi-scientific naturalism). In this sense, Hanegraaff uses ‘esotericism’ in a different way than what is usually understood – from ‘esoteric’, pertaining to the secret inner teachings which are only given to a group of selected people, while ‘exoteric’ refers to the outer doctrines which are communicated to the public (OED, 1989). In the original sense of the term, the New Age in fact aims to be a form of synthesis of esoteric teachings that in modern days have become accessible to most people, without need for secrecy. The claim to a connection between modern alternative religious movements and ancient esotericism has been proposed by Ellwood (1979), who subsequently applied it to the New Age, which he called a modern revival “of a longstanding tradition of what may be called the alternative spirituality of the West” (Ellwood, 1992: 59). In the first work, he considered a dichotomy between mainstream ‘temple’ religion, and the religion of the ‘different ones’, which he compares to those who in the Platonic allegory of the Cave break away from the chains and come into the light. He finds this ‘Cave’ type of religion to also have its own succession as the “undying Platonic and Neoplatonic spiritual tradition in some form, whether called Gnosticism, Kabbalah, Hermeticism, Theosophy, or Spiritualism” (1979: 7).

Hanegraaff’s (1996) argument is different, in that his claim is not that of a continuity of a hidden spiritual tradition but of a reinterpretation of certain esoteric currents that arose in the Renaissance. Furthermore, in subsequent articles where he proposes a programme of research for the study of western esotericism, he states that this study will have to

“free itself from the idea of esotericism as an autonomous and coherent “counter-tradition” or “alternative tradition”...” (1998b, p. xv), and goes as far as proposing that its recognition as a ‘scholarly construct’ is necessary and that the “construed nature of “esotericism” [is] an important condition for going beyond a merely descriptive approach” (1998c, p. 11). Essentially, Hanegraaff’s (1996) historical interpretation of the New Age as being a modern reinterpretation of western esotericism is built upon the discovery of the importance hermetic spirituality played in Renaissance (Yates, 1964/2004), and the subsequent research by Faivre (1994), who first proposed a theoretical model which puts together the different religious-magical currents present in the Renaissance as western esotericism. This model is crucial to understanding the way in which Hanegraaff classifies the New Age as a form of western esotericism.

At the onset of his work, Faivre (1994) emphasises that esotericism cannot be defined as opposed to the mainstream churches for, indeed, there are many points of contact and even overlap between the two. His understanding of the function of esotericism and its presence until our days is very much psychological and, motivational, in particular. He understands it to be the counterpart expression to the dominant scientific and secularised vision of the western world, corresponding to a ‘pole of the human soul’ – the myth-making imaginative capacity – while the other pole would be rational thought. Thus, he explains that esotericism as found in the Renaissance only emerged at a time when the secularisation of the cosmos started taking place. Before that, during the Middle Ages, esotericism as a separate body was not autonomous from Medieval theology, which fulfilled the mythic-imaginary motivation and offered a belief system which had bearing upon all aspects of life. However, as theology became more metaphysical, explanations of the natural domain became secondary and, eventually, at the dawn of Renaissance some humanist scholars attempted an articulation between metaphysics and cosmology, still

clinging to Christian ideas, but emphasising more nature and its manipulation. Thus, Faivre attempts to unify the different Renaissance currents which were a synthesis of philosophy, religion, magic and quasi-science by referring to them as western esotericism, defined as “a frame of mind, a style of imaginary... an ensemble of cultural and religious realities, [with] a family resemblance” (p. 19).

In this and other works (1998; 2000) Faivre characterises esotericism as a *form of thought* constituted by four fundamental elements. These are: (a) *The idea of correspondences*, where the whole universe is envisaged as a ‘theatre of mirrors’, full of hidden connections for the individual to decipher, each part of the microcosmos having its macrocosmic counterpart, each part of the visible world its invisible correspondence. (b) *Living Nature*, where nature is perceived as a living being permeated by a light or hidden fire circulating through it. It was this living nature that the Renaissance esotericist, through the knowledge of the network of ‘sympathies and antipathies’ between nature and Man, tried to manipulate by the use of magic and alchemy. (c) *Imagination and Mediations*, two notions which are interconnected. Faivre considers imagination to be an ‘organ of the soul’ which, in conjunction with mediations such as rituals and symbols, allows the individual to understand the ‘hieroglyphs of Nature’ and the processes of interaction between Man, God and the universe. (d) *Experience of Transmutation*, which refers to the belief that individuals, as well as nature (such as in the alchemical practice of changing lead into gold), can undergo a modification, a ‘second birth’, or a spiritual regeneration.

Hanegraaff (1996) points out that there is a suggestive similarity between Faivre’s (1994) characterisation of western esotericism and the New Age:

The holographic paradigm, according to which the whole cosmos is reflected even in its smallest components, looks as if it is designed as a modern reformulation of the correspondence between macrocosmos and microcosmos. That the cosmos is permeated by divine spirit, or “energy”, is a commonplace

of New Age thinking. A belief in “mediations” is evident in the cosmic hierarchy of spiritual levels, inhabited by spiritual entities... The importance attached to “individuation”, and the arduous ascent of human souls upwards through the spheres seem to exemplify the elements of spiritual transmutation. (p. 400).

Notwithstanding the similarities he proceeds to a historical examination of how Renaissance esotericism changed until the 20th century and how the New Age, though descending from these currents, has also absorbed much of other movements, such as Romanticism, and also of the secular characteristics of its own time. Thus, he sums up his portrait of the New Age as secularised esotericism stressing its continuity as well as its rupture with Renaissance esotericism in the following way:

All New Age religion is characterised by the fact that it expresses its criticism of modern western culture by presenting alternatives derived from a secularised esotericism. It adopts from traditional esotericism an emphasis on the primacy of personal religious experience and on this-worldly types of holism (as alternatives to dualism and reductionism), but generally reinterprets esoteric tenets from secularised perspectives. Since the new elements of “causality”, the study of religions, evolutionism, and psychology are fundamental components, New Age religion cannot be characterised as a return to pre-Enlightenment worldviews but is to be seen as a qualitatively new syncretism of esoteric and secular elements (pp. 520-521).

In a more recent article, Hanegraaff (2003) develops the idea of the counter-ideological aspect of contemporary magical practices, as a reaction to the dominant instrumental (i.e., rational) causality. Thus, magic would reaffirm the emotional need of humankind to *feel* a sense of mystical non-rational participation in the world. Here we have again Faivre’s (1994) motivational theory of the ‘two poles of the soul’, which underpins Hanegraaff’s (1996) historical analysis of the New Age. Hanegraaff (1996) attempts a more elaborate classification by distinguishing between several approaches to attaining truth based on reason, faith and gnosis. While the *reason* type presupposes that truth can only be discovered by the use of human rational faculties, *faith* emphasises the power of a transcendent revelation found in traditional scriptures, and in *gnosis* (literally, knowledge) truth can only be found by personal, inner revelation or insight. While reason and faith

have been part of the dominant culture, gnosis would be associated with the traditional esoteric counter-culture; thus the New Age would today fulfil a role in the criticism of science and religion, reductionism and dualism, similar to that played by traditional esotericism in times such as the Renaissance and Romanticism.

In summary, Hanegraaff's (1996) historical portrait of the New Age as a form of "popular western criticism expressed in terms of a secularised esotericism" (p. 521) is based upon: (1) a dualistic psychological conception which understands human motivations to be expressed, on the one hand, through rationality or instrumental causality, and on the other hand through the imagination and an emotional/mystical sense of participation (i.e., personal religious experience). Thus, the cultural predominance of one over the other would justify the emergence of the latter as a form of counter-cultural criticism. (2) A model of western esotericism which is primarily characterised in cognitive terms, as a form of thought which perceives the world as an animate living entity in which all things are interrelated in an analogical way. This form of thought also finds expression in the use of symbols and belief in spiritual entities, as well as in the idea of transmutation (both of the individual and nature).

There are some problems with this portrait of the New Age. The first one concerns their particular definition of esotericism, which is addressed by both Faivre (1994) and Hanegraaff (1998b), especially in trying to demarcate it from that exposed by Guénon, whom Eliade (1976) presented as the 'foremost representative of Western esotericism' – and Faivre (1994) himself calls "an impressive voice of intellectual asceticism" and a "Descartes of esotericism" (p. 101). The problem is that Guénon (1921/1975; 1927/1962) wrote devastating criticisms of modern spiritual movements such as the Theosophical Society and considered the Renaissance, in its turn to humanism, to be the point at which

individualism and materialism took hold, which inevitably led to the degeneration of all traditional esotericism. Thus, as Faivre (1994) points out, the sort of Renaissance esoteric currents like Hermeticism, are for Guénon not true metaphysical knowledge but rather secondary cosmological applications. Furthermore, while Hanegraaff (1996) sees in the ‘primacy of religious experience’ a mark of esotericism, Guénon (1945/1953) criticizes such experiences as sentimental and goes as far as explaining that an experience of ‘cosmic consciousness’, rather than being a transcendent experience, is in fact an experience which “shuts out all «transcendence» and so also shuts out all effective spirituality”, comparing its outcome to the action of a person who “flings himself into the Ocean and has no aspiration but to drown himself in it” (pp. 288-289).

There is, however, a much more obvious problem with Faivre’s (1994) characterisation of western esotericism to which Hanegraaff (1998b) has alluded, when he suggested that it might not be too difficult to see the four elements that constitute esotericism as universal, rather than the product of specific western historical developments. In fact, it is hard to see in what way Faivre’s (1994) description of esotericism as a ‘mode of thought’ differs from magical thinking. Anthropological and psychological work on magic has observed that the underlying principle of magical thinking – that “everything is connected to everything else” – is found in both pre-modern societies and children (Zusne and Jones, 1989). This sense of connectedness also weaves together the ideas present in esotericism. But, in particular, the first two elements of the idea of correspondences and living nature seem to mirror Frazer’s (1900) laws of similarity and contact (for an empirical study see Rozin, Millman, and Nemeroff, 1986). The law of similarity holds that things that resemble each other share fundamental properties – for example, an image of an object possesses the properties of the object and can affect it –, and the law of contact implies the idea that objects have a certain power and that once

they have been in contact they will be able to retain a part of the other's power and thus exert an invisible influence. Faivre's first two elements also describe invisible networks of 'sympathies', invisible influences and correspondences based on physical or symbolic resemblances that operate under the law of similarity and, to a lesser extent, the law of contact. The other two elements of esotericism – imagination and mediation, and the idea of transmutation, also belong to the practice of magic in pre-modern societies and magical thinking in children – e.g., the existence of supernatural entities, the special power attached to some objects, the rituals to manipulate the environment and the possibilities of physical metamorphosis (for magical thinking in children see Rosengren, Johnson, and Harris, 2000). The fact that esotericism is defined as a 'mode of thought' which links together different cultural elements which share a 'family resemblance' only make the similarity with magical thinking more striking. Thus, Hanegraaff's (1998b) suggestion of the possible universality of these elements is not just plausible but very probable, given the variety of geographical and historical contexts where magical thinking has been reported (see Jahoda, 1969; Neusner, Frerichs, and Flesher, 1989; Thomas, 1971; Vyse, 1997). It is also possible that magical thinking underlies the emotive/mystical or imagination pole of Faivre's and Hanegraaff's motivational theory, which they oppose to rationality, as recent experimental data has showed differences in reasoning between people high and low on magical thinking (Brugger and Graves, 1997). It is unlikely that Hanegraaff could have overlooked the resemblance between the characteristics of magical thinking and those of esotericism, for in his New Age opus he summarised the anthropological theories on magic and more recently (2003) attempted to rehabilitate Lévi-Bruhl's notion of *participation* – as a perception and/or mystical feeling which entails seeing persons and objects in a connected manner without strict boundaries – to explain the survival of magic in modern societies. It is more probable that the failure to notice this similarity has been partly due to the current anthropological paradigm which has

tended to reject the early work on magic, and the way in which it was understood to be distinct from religion, as culturally biased (Cunningham, 1999).

One other problem with Hanegraaff's historical interpretation of the New Age is that his focus on the esoteric elements and the emotive/non-rational motivations made him overlook a much more obvious historical association between the Renaissance and individualism as a cultural construct with deep psychological implications (Triandis, 1995). His emphasis on the role of Romanticism and its counter-cultural ideology – and the New Age as a successor to this (Hanegraaff, 2003) – also neglects that one of the major proposals of the Romantics was a particular type of individualism, which emphasised the self-discovery of human uniqueness. This Romantic idea of individuality, which was contrasted with the rational, universal and uniform ideas of Enlightenment, generated an “individualism of difference” in which the individual aimed to be “personally free in morals and in truth” (Lukes, 1973: 18) – a concept which is inextricably associated with New Age religiosity (Heelas, 1996). But if the assertion of the individual's autonomy was progressively made more salient since the Renaissance, and then progressed with Enlightenment and Romanticism – independently of all the differences between these movements – it was with the Protestant Reformation that a form of religious individualism took shape (Lukes, 1973). Hanegraaff (1996) briefly mentions the possible role of esotericism in the Protestant Reformation but fails to point out the association between its religious individualism – and its emphasis on personal religious experience – and the New Age. This connection between Protestantism and the New Age has been empirically tested by Donahue (1993), who found that nearly a third of individuals from different Protestant congregations endorsed attitudinal statements supportive of a New Age ideology (e.g., “An individual should arrive at his or her own

religious beliefs independent of any church” and “I am in charge of my own life – I can be anything I want to be”).

In summary, Hanegraaff's (1996) study is an invaluable piece of research which accurately documents New Age beliefs, practices and further proposes an original historical framework that traces its esoteric ancestry, its counter-ideological aspects and non-rational motivations. However, apart from the lack of consensus on what esotericism is, its characterization closely resembles that of magical thinking and he further overlooks the cultural emergence of an individualistic concept of the self with the Renaissance and its development with the Reformation and Romanticism, which is central for the New Age concept of the self. This concept is particularly developed by Heelas (1996) whose analysis focuses more on the sociological and psychological aspects of the New Age and its relation to modernity.

2.2 The Modern Search for the Self

Sociologists have been debating the consequences of modernity for decades. Some have argued that modernity led to a loss of traditional structures of meaning, including those pertaining to ultimate concerns, the increasing individualisation and subjectivization of consciousness; as a consequence, individuals have been led into an unending search for their identities (Berger, Berger, and Kellner, 1973). Heelas (1996) has proposed that what makes the New Age a particular modern form of religiosity is its sacralisation of the self, whereby the individual is established as his own source of authority. In other words, one is free to choose one's own god(s), and to pursue whatever ways and techniques are found adequate to reach this god, energy, or inner/higher self. "The primary goals of New Age rituals and disciplines is" – according to Heelas – "working within to find the authentic Self" (p. 76).

In his study of the New Age, Heelas (1996) is not so much concerned with historical factors as with framing this movement within its modern societal background and understanding its motivations and psychological contours. Thus he summarises his argument in the introduction:

"Why, in other words, have we seen a resurgence of teachings and practices normally associated with the mystic, magician or shaman of pre-modern worlds? These puzzles are first addressed by way of the claim that the New Age is a response to the cultural uncertainty of our times. Those attracted, the argument goes, are unsure about their identities. Whether because they have become 'homeless' or because they are torn between different modes of identity provision, the New Age appeals because it provides solutions to the loss of certainty... The puzzles are then addressed by way of a very different scenario, namely that development owes a great deal to beliefs in the certainties of modernity. The New Age, it is argued, appeals because its teachings are in tune with widespread cultural options." (p. 3).

Heelas' (1996) approach is on the one hand sociological, and on the other psychological and ethical, for he is actually interested in understanding how effective are New Age practices for the achievement of wisdom and self-transcendence. His framework is based upon sociological works on the consequences of modernity, namely those of: a) Berger et al. (1973) who describe the individual as someone who is left without objective certainties and thrown back upon his own subjectivity in an endless search for his identity; b) Lasch (1978), whose appraisal of the contemporary American culture of narcissism, with its focus on illusory feelings, health and personal well-being, has in psychotherapy one of its most symptomatic developments: for even when "therapists speak of the need for 'meaning' and 'love' they define love and meaning simply as the fulfilment of the patient's emotional requirements... 'Love' as self-sacrifice or self-abasement... strike the therapeutic sensibility as intolerably oppressive, offensive to common sense and injurious to personal health and well-being" (p. 13); c) Bellah et al. (1996) concepts of utilitarian and expressive individualism – referring respectively to the fulfilment of the individual's material self-interests, and the discovery of one's 'true' individuality and the expression of inner feelings. He also refers to other notions such as detraditionalisation, which concerns the breaking away from traditional family, values and religious structures (Heelas, 1996b). Heelas (1996) finds the expressive form of individualism harmonious with modern humanistic ideals which the New Age adopts as 'sacred', such as "freedom, authenticity, self-responsibility, self-reliance, self-determination, equality, dignity, tranquillity, harmony, love. Peace, creative expressivity, being positive and, above all, 'the self' as a value in and of itself" (p. 169). The New Age is also essentially – and here again following the Romantic ideas – an optimistic ideology, which stresses the intrinsic goodness of humankind and the possibility of changing for the better, whilst also attributing particular value to nature.

This form of individualism has very direct consequences for the New Age as a form of religiosity. One of the leading New Age figures in Britain has synthesised its individualism in the following way:

The great beauty of the New Age movement is that if someone in it is approached by someone else looking for insight or counselling about the inner or religious dimension, he or she will not be told: *'Believe this! Do this! Don't do that!'* but rather: *'There are a thousand different ways of exploring inner reality. Go where your intelligence and intuition lead you. Trust yourself.'* (Bloom, 1991: xvi).

Heelas' (1996) presentation of the New Age as a 'spirituality of and for modernity' is particularly persuasive in his description of the adoption of New Age techniques by companies and businessmen where the New Age is turned into an utilitarian 'spirituality of prosperity'. The matter of the ultimate aim of New Age techniques is more thoroughly analysed in the last part of the book, which concerns the moral aims and practical results of New Age practices. The lack of data from controlled studies makes this a difficult task and Heelas has to rely mostly on anecdotal evidence, and the results of a few surveys (e.g. Rose, 1996). One questionnaire study that he himself conducted included the use of a personality inventory (California Psychological Inventory), taken before and after participation in a New Age seminar. Results showed a number of negative and positive outcomes, such as: higher interpersonal understanding and manipulation of others; higher individual autonomy; rebelliousness and impulsivity; better sense of self-worth and social confidence; and increase in optimism and enthusiasm. Heelas also reviews psychological theories and data from general studies on religious experience and conversion in trying to evaluate the New Age claims about the authority of their spiritual experiences and how they arrived at their own beliefs. He observes that such experiences do not occur in a vacuum and that New Age people might use the most readily available interpretation to provide an explanation for their experiences.

Altogether, Heelas attempts a balanced conclusion, pointing out what he sees as the benefits and pitfalls of the New Age, and including the conditions which might lead to adherence to the New Age (e.g., being dissatisfied with life and having intense unusual experiences). Two benefits concern the fact that New Age practices can improve the quality of personal life and that it may enhance commitment to values to do with nature, egalitarianism, authenticity, love, responsibility and forgiveness. On the negative side, he sees the danger of the hedonistic needs of the individual turning the New Age practices into an exercise of self-satisfaction. In a subsequent article he restated his hopes and sympathy for the New Age ideals, when speaking of the important challenge to be faced by the social sciences in trying to ascertain “whether people find ‘new’ sources of significance for their lives when traditional, long standing formations do in fact lose their hold, rather than simply engaging in hedonistic consumption and bland relativism” (Heelas, 2000:237).

Heelas’ (1996) work faces the paradoxes of the New Age in its modern and counter-cultural stance and, most importantly, asks fundamental questions about what draws people to it and whether it is able to meet its ideological aims. Most subsequent research on the New Age pays tribute to his work by picking up from one or other of his points. Moreover, his own doubts about the ultimate aims of the New Age have become a central point of dispute amongst researchers who argue for or against the value and genuine spiritual aims of New Age beliefs and practices. It is mostly a sociological debate with moral underpinnings which is entangled in the paradox of the New Age: is an individualistic religiosity compatible with the fostering of self-transcendent values? Although it is rarely made explicit, the New Age is intuitively compared to traditional religiosity when one talks about evaluating moral aims. To make this comparison more

clear-cut, a brief characterisation of New Age tenets and its contrast with those of traditional religiosity shall be presented next.

2.3 Contrasting Beliefs: The New Age vis-à-vis Traditional Religion

Traditional religious bodies have noticed the growing influence of the New Age. In fact, the first bulk of critical writings about the New Age comes from Protestant Evangelical writers who were concerned about the way New Age practices and ideas were becoming part of mainstream culture (e.g., in the education and caring professions) without an explicit public awareness (Hexham, 1992). Most of these writers also criticised the New Age for its heterodox ‘unbiblical’ religious beliefs (Groothuis, 2002). Recently, the Vatican (2003) released a lengthy report noting that “the New Age religiosity addresses the spiritual hunger of contemporary men and women” (p. 2) and examining the differences between a Christian and a New Age perspective. New Age ‘mysticism’ is considered to be individualistic and pantheistic for it does not aim to the meeting with God “but to the experience engendered by turning in on oneself, an exhilarating sense of being at one with the universe, a sense of letting one’s individuality sink into the great ocean of Being” (p. 23). From the Catholic point of view however, the mystical progress to God involves a “trusting self-abandonment to God and openness to other men and women” and the “need to be converted from sin, spiritual myopia and self-infatuation” (p. 24). Heelas’ (1996) analysis of the New Age is fully acknowledged in this report which points the finger at the New Age individualism, particularly in its practices which are not accessible to all but only to those who can afford them and, moreover, reduce the concept of God by promoting the individual (Vatican, 2003).

Woodhead and Heelas (2000) have graphically described the difference between a traditional form of religiosity, such as Roman Catholicism, and the New Age by picturing the traditional forms as highly differentiated types of religion in which God lies above Creation. On the other hand, the New Age would be a holistic type of religiosity, which can be visualised as a circle where self, nature and the divine coexist in a non-hierarchical manner. While the first type stresses a historical body of traditions and beliefs, tightly-bounded communities, values of obedience and humility, and the concepts of sin and salvation, the second type emphasises the present and finding out the divine in oneself, values of freedom and self-assertion, and understands human nature to be essentially good.

The main differences between New Age and traditional religiosity may be summarised, in a somewhat schematic way, by considering five pairs of opposing tenets:

a) The primacy of experience versus the primacy of belief

New Age individuals often state that beliefs should be repudiated unless they are the result of a personal experience. In contrast, beliefs are of central importance in traditional religion, as their authority is rooted in the sacred scriptures, and faith in them plays a fundamental role in personal salvation.

b) Relativism and eclecticism versus faith and dogma

As a consequence of the emphasis on experience, for the New Age any religious practice and belief is part of the perennial truth of the spirit; thus the individual is free to pick and choose from any teaching as long as it personally benefits him or her. On the other hand,

faith in a set of unmoveable and indisputable principles is a central tenet of traditional religion.

c) The Self versus the Church, as sources of authority

Traditional religion entails an institutionalised hierarchy which mediates the word of God, confers special sacraments, and sets standard moral norms. However, for the New Age, the individual is the ultimate and highest source of authority and is motivated to always look inward to find his or her own truth rather than obey norms.

d) 'Empowerment' versus 'Salvation'

In traditional Western religions the individual is in a state of sin and needs to be rescued; such rescue cannot be achieved by the mere action or will of the individual but it requires the merciful intervention of God. On the other hand, for the New Age, one is already saved – for the Self is divine – and one just needs to be 'empowered', i.e., to realise and fulfil one's potential.

e) Holism versus differentiation

There is a significant ontological difference in considering God as the 'wholly other', or finding each individual to ultimately be God. Furthermore, the New Age concept of the divinity is not personal but what they call holistic. Under this conception, there is the sense of a permeating divinity which *connects* all living and non-living things. This holistic sense of connectedness is particularly visible in the array of magical beliefs present in New Agers' everyday explanations, as well as the notions of karma or the Jungian idea of synchronicity (Jung, (1952/1972) which cognitively allows the individual to establish a

virtually unending network of connections. The New Age practices also emphasise this sense of “being connected”, either through techniques aimed at expanding or enlarging the sense of the self or even in divinatory practices such as astrology. On the other hand, traditional religion stresses a hierarchy of being, in which humankind has a privileged place and relationship with God and its religious practices rather than seeking an expansion of the self aim to get closer to a transcendent God.

2.4. Limitations of Previous Studies and Scope of this Thesis

Given such contrasts, it is altogether probable that the differences between these forms of religiosity lie not only on the ideological level but may have deep implications at the individual motivational and cognitive levels. However, with few exceptions, most empirical studies of the New Age are either ethnographical descriptions of particular groups or techniques, or sociological questionnaires which tend to treat uncritically concepts and claims of New Age individuals, such as their ‘spiritual’ and ‘personal transformation’. Wood (2003) has addressed a similar criticism when he stated that “the majority of academic studies of the New Age are primarily either replications of insider’s accounts of their worldviews, or guides to resources available to religious seekership, or both.” (p. 165). One example is that of Rose (1996) who conducted a large survey from which he found that the majority of New Age people report to have benefited from New Age activities and ideas, namely in that they have become ‘more spiritual’. For sure, if one asks an individual that spends a considerable amount of energy in activities concerning his religious beliefs whether these have helped him become a better person, it is highly unlikely that the individual would not respond enthusiastically. Rose’s (1996) survey, however, provides some valuable demographic information. Most people taking

part in New Age activities were middle-class, female (70%) and middle aged (57% are 35 to 44 years old, and 24% are 45 to 64 years old).

A recent review of the literature has shown that although there is now a ‘voluminous’ amount of qualitative research on the New Age, its statistical study is still in an early stage (Kemp, 2004). This voluminous research includes cultural approaches focusing on the relationship between the New Age and modernity, postmodernity and late capitalism (Heelas, 1993; Lyon, 1993; Possamai, 2003), the reinvention of spiritual traditions according to the local culture, such as the appropriation of the Celts by British New Agers (Bowman, 1993), and of Japanese folk religiosity, Shinto and Buddhism by Japanese ones (Susumu, 1999). Other cultural and anthropological approaches have looked at the popularisation of the New Age in some Christian circles (Kemp, 2003; Woodhead, 1993), and its history and communities such as Findhorn in Scotland (Sutcliffe, 2003). There is also a set of descriptive studies which look at particular New Age beliefs like reincarnation, how it has been adapted into a modern optimistic evolutionary framework of a soul that never ceases to learn through earthly incarnations (Campbell, 2001), and the way in which such beliefs are part of an epistemology that adapts mainstream scientific discourses into a particular New Age scientism (Hammer, 2001). A variety of ethnographic studies cover topics as diverse as New Age individuals who go on ‘pilgrimages’ to certain places such as Sedona, Arizona, and how they relate to and understand nature (Ivakhiv, 2003), holistic healing as used by New Age nurses which includes practices such as massage accompanied by visualisation (Hedges and Beckford, 2000), and healing workshops with detailed accounts of the techniques used for emotional expression and search of one’s identity (Amaral, 2000). Two ethnographic studies deserve special mention for their attempt to provide models of how people turn

to magical and occult practices and beliefs. Lurhman (1992) did participant observation of magical Neopagan groups in Britain, and reports a slow 'interpretive drift' as individuals become acquainted with a set of beliefs and ritual experiences, and start rationalising in a magical way about everyday occurrences. She explained how

the new magician learns to identify evidence for magic's power, to see patterns in events, to explain the success or failure of rites. She acquires a host of knowledge, which enables her to distinguish between events and to associate them to other events in ways not done earlier... With greater involvement comes greater knowledge, and magical ideas gain still greater structure and cogency. (p. 313).

Lurhman also explains that apart from the social interaction with other believers, because of its intrinsic individualism, the crucial element in becoming a 'convert' is the *private* phenomenological experience with the practice of magic. Another model was put forward by Lynch (1977) who studied an occult group which practised ritual magic and meditation exercises. He participated in the events of this group and interviewed a number of members and ex-members. His model of 'conversion to the occult' suggests that the first phase of such process is triggered by intellectual curiosity and readings on the subject, which is then followed by a second phase characterised by personal psychical or mystical experiences and emotional conviction of occult beliefs. Nearly two thirds of members interviewed had read book on occult themes before getting in contact with this group and over 30% of them had had a first hand-experience of the 'occult realm'. Lynch considers an independent factor of tension and stress which may lead people into the occult without any prior intellectual interest or curiosity. He also reports that about 60% of the people interviewed were experiencing moderate to severe tension and stress at the time they joined the group. The other two phases comprise contact with the group and reinforcement of occult ideas via collective rituals, social support and sense of individual development. Although both models provide interesting hypotheses as to what may drive

people into the arena of New Age magical-occult beliefs and practices, there is nevertheless the need to validate such models through more controlled research and, in particular, the use of contrast groups as suggested by Lynch.

Finally, there has recently been an attempt to study the New Age through the use of a quantitative comparative methodology. Perhaps the most important result from these studies is their indication that New Age individuals tend to differ from traditional religious people in a set of different sociological and psychological measures. Thus, one study reported that New Agers showed greater levels of moral individualism, indicated by the rejection of authoritarianism and traditional ideas about family life and sexuality, than religious participants (Houtman and Mascini, 2002). The other study looked at types of parental attachment, and revealed that New Age individuals had higher levels of emotional insecurity, compared to other groups, when retrospectively considering their relation to their parents (Granqvist and Hagekull 2001). This study also found that a scale of New Age orientation was positively associated with emotionally-based religiosity.

A comparative type of methodology, though time consuming to put in practice, should be the norm in approaching a new social-cultural phenomenon. In the case of the New Age, as there seems to be an agreement on its modern or secular aspects, the comparison should also include a section of the secularised population. Although the New Age seems to be distinct from a purely secular outlook, it remains unclear how and to what extent New Age individuals are different from both a secular and traditional religious population.

This thesis represents an attempt to put together the several pieces of this puzzle, using a broad range of psychological tools which look at motivational, cognitive, and personality implications of the adherence to New Age practices and beliefs. Rather than following a specific theoretical framework, the study of the New Age was approached in a thoroughly exploratory way. This exploration took as primary references Heelas' (1996) and Hanegraaff's (1996) characterisation of the New Age and tried to discriminate central societal and cognitive features which could be operationalised for psychological assessment. A decision was taken to start at the centre of the debate regarding the individualistic motivational aims or values of the New Age, which is not only a topic of primary concern for researchers but also for people engaged in the New Age (William Bloom, personal communication). Secondly, the New Age holism and sense of connectedness which are central to the New Age belief system and its characterisation as a 'form of thought' contiguous with western esotericism (Hanegraaff, 1996), was investigated using a more social-cognitive approach. Finally, the combined results from the exploration of these topics allowed the thesis to move into the personality and cognitive-perceptual domain. A basic conceptual guideline was to follow a comparative methodology. This was implemented by the use of contrast groups, including traditional religious (Catholic) and secularised (non-religious and non-spiritual) individuals and by the use of scales assessing the frequency of New Age and religious activities, since the New Age emphasises experiences rather than beliefs. Thus the essential criterion for the selection of individuals was behavioural: all groups were carefully selected on the basis of the frequency of New Age practices, traditional religious activities and, on the other hand, the lack of belief and infrequency of such practices for the secularised group. Other indicators, such as types of religious affiliation, were also taken (religiosity measures can be found in Appendix A, religious affiliation results are included in Appendix B and the complete questionnaires with all scales can be found in Appendix

C). As the data was collected in Britain (mostly in London and Oxford), the use of Church of England members for the traditional religious contrast group would be the easier option. However, it was considered that Catholicism is more orthodox in its beliefs and social regulations, and thus a better counterpoint to the New Age and to a purely non-religious worldview.

Altogether, four studies were carried out, the first three using selected groups and the final one using a within subjects correlational design with a general population, so that its results could be further generalised. Finally, to assert the relevance and originality of this thesis: although it uses a psychological approach, this thesis tests many of the previous claims on the New Age reviewed above and provides new insights on its nature. On the other hand, it also contributes to psychological research on forms of Western alternative religiosity which are growing in cultural significance, and to the psychological understanding of religion as a multidimensional construct.

CHAPTER THREE

Holistic Individualism in the ‘Age of Aquarius’

General Introduction

In the previous chapter New Age religiosity was described. Heelas (1996) has reported it to be an exemplary religion of modernity, which emphasises the importance of self-expression and self-development through the use of a set of bodily and magical practices or techniques (e.g. Yoga, meditation, astrology, Tarot). Attempts to establish whether New Age ideas and practices were oriented towards self-transcendence or if, instead, they reinforced secular individualistic values and behaviours have become a central point of debate amongst researchers. This chapter describes a study conducted to help clarify this controversy in which New Age, traditional religious (Catholic) and non-religious participants were assessed on a battery of social-psychological measures, including values, self-concepts, self-esteem and vertical and horizontal Individualism/Collectivism.

3.1 Individualism and New Age Religiosity

New Age practices and beliefs are in harmony with the modern individualist emphasis on the self. ‘In the context of our culture’, Heelas (1996) writes, ‘it is impossible to think of a self that is more autonomous or free, more in control or powerful, more responsible, more perfect, more internalised, more expressivistic than that presented in various New

Age discourses' (p. 154). On the other hand, the ideals of the New Age point towards values of self-transcendence. Given this ambiguity, many academic studies have tended towards a somewhat sympathetic view of the New Age following Heelas's (1996) suggestion that while being an individualistic modern spirituality – a 'self-religion' –, its activities are able to transform people in a positive way. Similarly, Rose (1996) concluded from the analysis of his large scale survey conducted in Britain, that although New Age participants employed many therapies that could be used for narcissistic and hedonistic purposes, they stressed the importance of spirituality and not that of sensual pleasure. Likewise, Hedges and Beckford (2000) in an ethnographic study of New Age healing, have argued that self-centred and selfless practices coexist in the New Age, and that rather than individualising tendencies the New Age may foster, through its universalism, a commitment to values of benevolence and compassion.

In contrast, other sociologists are quite clear in their categorical rejection of the New Age as a 'real' religion, considering its principles to be a replication of the 'modern epistemology of capitalism and individualism', in which religious practices are hedonistically treated like consumable products (Bruce, 2000). The most important piece of empirical evidence showing that adherents to New Age practices and beliefs are more individualistic than religious people has been provided by Houtman and Mascini's (2002) study using a Dutch nationally representative panel of respondents. Over 1,800 participants filled in a questionnaire with measures on New Age and Christian religiosity, and a set of other measures including rationalism and moral individualism. Moral individualism was operationalized as the rejection of authoritarianism and traditional ideas about family life and sexuality, a democratic inclination and an emphasis on 'postmaterialist' values (e.g. liberal attitudes towards law and order). They combined a set

of measures, including scales of authoritarianism and sexual permissiveness, and Ingleheart's index for postmaterialism which combines items that measure social and economical attitudes, to arrive at a final score of moral individualism. From the results it was concluded that the rise of the New Age and the decline of the Christian churches was associated with increased levels of moral individualism, New Age individuals being more individualistic than Christians, and as much as non-religious people. These results are the strongest evidence supporting that New Age practices and beliefs are associated with more individualistic values than a Christian orientation. However, two limitations of this study have to be considered: first, its definition of and measures of individualism are mostly restricted to social-political attitudes; second, it does not allow to tell apart how the sort of individualism espoused by New Age participants differs from that of non-religious people. The fact that moral individualism is understood to be the cause for both the rise of the New Age and non-religiousness does not explain the obvious contrasting ideological and behavioural differences underlying these two groups. In order to assess this, it is necessary to utilise a combination of measures of individualism that are sensitive to social-individual dimensions, including motivational and cognitive aspects.

3.2 The Social Psychological Measurement of Individualism and Collectivism

Individualism as an ideology which stresses the individual as an autonomous, self-directed, private, abstract being, has only achieved cultural prominence since the Renaissance and, more particularly, with the Protestant Reformation (Lukes, 1973). Tracing the evolution of the term, Lukes notes that it originated in 18th century France

with a pejorative connotation – mostly a synonymous with egoism – and that it was in Germany that it acquired a positive (Romantic) connotation linked to uniqueness and self-realisation; finally, in the USA, it gained its triumphal character of celebration of capitalism and liberal democracy. Individualism is then a cultural characteristic that became prevalent only in modern societies and it contrasts with the collectivist orientation of the pre-modern world.

Social psychologists have observed that there are industrialised countries, especially Asian, in which a predominantly collectivist setting prevails (Triandis, 1995). A number of studies have reported that holding an individualist or independent versus collectivist or interdependent concept of the self has different implications for cognition, emotion and motivation (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). For example, the significance and value attributed to emotions may differ from an individualist to a collectivist culture: people from individualist cultures show a significant positive correlation between the judgements about life satisfaction and their private feelings, while in collectivist settings people would attend more to the cultural norms and their social network (Suh, Oishi and Triandis, 1998). The authors suggest that “regardless of why or how a person feels a specific emotion, the extent to which this phenomenological feeling permeates into and influences other global aspects of his or her life may vary across cultures” (p. 490). This variation may be explained by the fact that in a collectivist setting individuals are more likely to see themselves as part of an encompassing social network and to act in accordance to what one perceives to be the feelings, thoughts and actions of the others, but in individualistic cultures the self is construed as separate, autonomous and self-contained (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Cognitive differences have also been observed between individualism and collectivism within the same culture. For instance, individual differences in individualism have been found to predict the extent to which people

interpret behaviours based on personality traits (e.g., selfish, modest, smart) (Newman, 1993). On the other hand, contextual thinking is more emphasised in collectivist cultures. This usually involves a cognitive self-categorisation of the individual in more concrete (physical and social) terms rather than abstract and psychological ones, which however does not preclude that individuals may not also use more abstract categories (Cousins, 1989). Psychological cross-cultural research on individualism/collectivism (I/C) has also brought to our attention the fact that the majority of research and theories conducted in psychology has been undertaken in a western individualistic setting and its applicability to other cultures will be partly biased and limited. Thus, this construct as has been developed in social-psychology seems particularly relevant to a study which tries to contrast the New Age, as a modern form of individual religiosity, with a traditional collectivist religion such as Catholicism.

The development of instruments for the assessment of a construct that deals with such a variety of human behaviours and attitudes, and which moreover needs to be applicable in different cultures, is not without problems. Triandis and colleagues (Triandis, McCusker, Hui, 1990) have tested a variety of measures and generally advocated that the best way of assessing I/C is by combining several instruments. Some of the most often used and validated methods include the analysis of self-concepts (e.g. Cousins, 1989; Lalljee and Angelova, 1995; Shweder and Bourne, 1982), values or motivational goals (Schwartz, 1992; 1994), and the personal versus ingroup structure of these goals, which led to the differentiation between vertical and horizontal types of I/C (Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk, and Gelfand, 1995; Triandis, 1995).

Thus, it has been found that the analysis of self-concepts is one of the most direct ways of testing how the individual perceives him or herself in relation to his in-groups and society; furthermore it also allows for a more particular understanding of how individualist and collectivist cultures may endow their members with a cognitive framework which emphasises either contextual or abstract forms of self-perception. For example, collectivism has been reported to be associated with self-concepts that include references to social entities (e.g., “I am a son”, referring to family, or “I am a Catholic” referring to religion) (Triandis et. al, 1990) and to concrete self-concepts (e.g., “I am 20 years old”, or “I am a student”), while individualism is associated with more abstract self-definitions which often emphasise psychological traits (e.g., “I am honest” or “I am intelligent”) (Cousins, 1989).

Cross-cultural research on values has had a significant impulse with Schwartz’ (1992) development of a survey comprised of 56 single values, which are clustered in 10 distinct motivational types of values, as described in Table 3.1.:

Table 3.1: Definitions of Motivational Types of Values in Terms of Their Goals (Schwartz, 1994: 89)

POWER:	Social status and prestige, control or dominance over people and resources.
ACHIEVEMENT:	Personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards.
HEDONISM:	Pleasure and sensuous gratification of oneself.
STIMULATION:	Excitement, novelty, and challenge in life.
SELF-DIRECTION:	Independent thought and action – choosing, creating, exploring.
UNIVERSALISM:	Understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature.
BENEVOLENCE:	Preservation and enhancement of the welfare of people with whom one is in frequent personal contact.
TRADITION:	Respect, commitment, and acceptance of the customs and ideas that traditional culture or religion provide.
CONFORMITY:	Restraint of actions, inclinations, and impulses likely to upset or harm others and violate social expectations or norms.
SECURITY:	Safety, harmony and stability of society, of relationships, and of self.

This survey has now been validated in more than 50 countries and the scale has also been used to study how value types are related to religiosity. A recent meta-analysis (Saroglou, Delpierre and Dernelle, in press) reviewing studies from 15 countries, using more than 8,000 participants mostly from a Catholic religious background – but also including Protestant denominations, Greek Orthodox, Jews and Muslims – has shown that religion is positively associated with values of Tradition, Conformity and Benevolence, and negatively correlated with Hedonism, Stimulation and Self-Direction. Similar results had been obtained in a previous study (Schwartz and Huisman, 1995), where this set of correlations was predicted on the general assumption that traditional religious orientations characteristically stress ‘reaching toward and submitting to forces beyond the self’ (p. 91), thus emphasising values of Tradition, Conformity, and Benevolence.

Regarding the I/C construct, Schwartz (1994) has suggested that the most adequate operationalisation entails focusing on the autonomy or embeddedness of the person vis-à-vis the group. In this way, values of Openness to Change (achievement, stimulation, self-direction and hedonism) would stress personal autonomy and thus be associated with individualist cultures, while values of Conservation (tradition, conformity and security) emphasise group embeddedness and are related to collectivist cultures. In summary, research undertaken with this instrument reports that traditional religiosity is positively associated with types of values characteristic of collectivism and negatively correlated with individualistic ones. However, although Benevolence and Universalism are values that belong to the Self-Transcendence dimension, research shows no significant association between Universalism and religiosity. It may be that because collectivism emphasises the relation to the in-group, the collectivist person would value more benefiting someone closer to him. On the other hand, universalist values are defined in a more abstract and secularised way (e.g., social justice, equality, union with nature).

Individualism, both at the cultural and individual level, has also been shown to be associated with the prioritisation of personal goals over the goals of the in-group, whether family or colleagues, while the collectivist self gives priority to the in-group, even if it may involve self-sacrificing one's own interests (Singelis et al., 1995; Triandis, 1995). Typically, individualism asserts independence and priority of individual goals over those of the in-group, including the stimulation of competition; collectivism, on the other hand, usually gives priority to the goals of the in-group (Triandis, 1995). In order to measure the structure of the individual goals regarding the in-group while accounting for hierarchy (acceptance of in/equality), measures of vertical and horizontal I/C were developed (Singelis et al., 1995). Thus, Vertical Individualism is understood as a cultural pattern that postulates an autonomous self where inequality is expected. For Horizontal Individualism, though sharing the same principle of the autonomy of the self, equality between individuals is assumed. On the other hand, in Vertical Collectivism the individual sees the self as an aspect of the in-group, but inequality between members of group (some will have a higher status than others) is expected. Finally, for Horizontal Collectivism the self is interdependent but equality is an essential characteristic of this pattern. Triandis (1995) has suggested some cultural-nation examples for each of these patterns. He considered that the United States were an example of Vertical Individualism, Sweden of Horizontal Individualism, India would be an example of Vertical Collectivism, and for Horizontal Collectivism he referred to the Israeli Kibbutz. Although intended to be used as four different measures, in order to increase the reliability of a measure of I/C at the cross-cultural level, Singelis and colleagues (1995) have reported that the horizontal-vertical constructs are statistically related to each other and can be collapsed. Finally, from their analysis of how it relates to other measures and previous literature, they have concluded that Vertical Collectivism represents the most central element of

collectivism, in which the individual not only feels to be part of the in-group but is also ready to sacrifice himself for the collective.

3.3 Study 1

The purpose of this study was to test whether New Age participants emphasised an individualistic pattern of self-concepts, values and structure of goals, or whether a collectivist pattern and an emphasis on self-transcendent values of benevolence similar to that of traditional religiosity emerged. Two contrast groups were used, one consisting of practising Catholics and the other of non-religious participants. While the first group was expected to be a collectivist counterpoint to the modern individualist ideology of the New Age, Non-Religious participants were assessed in order to understand whether New Age practices and beliefs made its participants differ – and in what ways – from a purely secular group.

3.3.1 Method

Participants

A total of 159 participants (53 per group), composed of 55 men and 103 women, recruited in Oxford and London completed and returned a questionnaire. For the Catholic group, questionnaires were distributed at Catholic churches after mass and for the New Age group, they were handed out after a talk at New Age centres. Non-Religious participants were sought through a pool of subjects from the Department of

Experimental Psychology, University of Oxford, and through advertisements around the city that asked for individuals who were agnostic and/or atheist to participate in a questionnaire study. The questionnaires were handed-out in a self-addressed, stamped envelope and subjects in the New Age and Catholic groups were simply asked to take it home, complete it and post it back or, for the non-religious group, questionnaires were individually mailed to their home addresses with a return envelope inside. The return rate was of 45.3% ($N = 53$) for the Catholic group, 40.5% ($N = 53$) for the New Age group and 80.2% ($N = 101$) for the non-religious group. For this last group, 47.2% ($N = 48$) of the questionnaires were excluded as they did not comply with the criteria that guaranteed the independence of this group from the others. The exclusion criteria were the following: subjects who prayed or attended religious meetings more often than rarely; subjects who rated themselves as spiritual or religious (more than 3 in a 0-7 point scale); subjects who had practised, at least once, more than 5 alternative spiritual activities. Detailed description of these measures can be found in the Appendices. The majority of excluded cases were those of people who considered themselves to be moderately to highly spiritual and practised several types of alternative spiritual activities, which would fit the profile of the New Age group.

For the total sample, ages ranged from 18 to 84, with a mean of 43.7 ($SD = 17.1$). There was a significant age difference between groups [$F(2, 156) = 10.96, p < .001$]. Catholics ($M = 51.4, SD = 16.5$) were older than New Age ($M = 43.0, SD = 12.5$) and Non-Religious participants ($M = 36.7, SD = 18.5$). Rose (1996) reported that 63% of the New Age subjects in his British sample were 18 to 44 years old and Houtman and Mascini (2002) also found this group to be younger than Protestants in the Netherlands.

Most subjects (80.4%) had British nationality. Regarding occupation, 10.7% were retired, 3.1% were housewives and 18.9% were students. The remaining individuals were employed across a range of middle-class professions, such as management, administration, high-school teaching, university lecturing, medicine, journalism and arts.

Measures

Materials consisted of three measures of I/C, including self-concepts, Vertical and Horizontal I/C, and values. A scale of self-esteem was also used to assess whether the New Age emphasis on the self might be associated with a higher sense of self-worth. Measures for New Age Practices (NAP) and Traditional Religiosity were included to control for the homogeneity of the groups (the characteristics and description of results of these measures are reported in Appendix A).

1. Individualism/Collectivism Measures

Twenty Statements Test (TST). Initially developed by Kuhn and McPartland (1954) to assess self-attitudes it has been one of the most often used instruments in the cross-cultural study of self-concepts. It uses an open ended format in which the individual is asked to write 20 statements in reply to the question 'Who am I?'. Scoring codes usually consider social versus non-social responses or, in more elaborate formats, four basic categories along a concrete-abstract continuum (physical, social, attributive and global self-concepts) are used (Cousins, 1989). Due to the varied content of the abstract attributive and global concepts, subcategories were also included (see table 3.2 for full description with examples taken from participants of the current study).

Table 3.2: TST Scoring Code with Examples (Adapted from Cousins, 1989)

<p>A – Physical References to observable, physical attributes of self which do not imply social interaction: <i>I am 40 years old; 1.70 cm tall; a man/woman; white.</i></p>	<p>D. Global References to self as abstracted from social role and social engagement</p>
<p>B – Social Reference to social role, institutional membership or other social defined status: <i>I'm a student; a secretary; a Catholic; a husband; English/European; a member of a club; I'm a neighbour; a friend; a brother.</i></p>	<p>D.1 Existential-individuating Highly private statements of self as unique and individuated: <i>I am me / myself / I / an individual; a unique creation; a person; a person who loves; I am of significance; I am special; I am fundamentally alone.</i></p>
<p>C – Attributes References to self as a situation-free agent characterised by personal styles of acting, feeling and thinking.</p>	<p>D.2 Universal-Holistic Suggests membership in or connection with a universal, undifferentiated category: <i>I am a human being; part of the universe; a drop in the ocean; a child of God; created by God; a link in a chain; I'm of this world; I'm connected; a person in a wider society.</i></p>
<p>C.1 Preferences, interests, attitudes, beliefs <i>I am one who is interested in other people; who believes in justice; who likes reading; who enjoys cooking; a lover of nature; I'm fond of walking.</i></p>	<p>D.3 Metaphorical Use of metaphors to describe oneself: <i>I am an illusion; an enigma; a rose; a paradox; I am whole; I'm a bridge; a totem; light; Yin & Yang.</i></p>
<p>C.2 Wishes, aspirations <i>I want to adhere to my principles; to learn dancing; I'm hoping to achieve happiness; looking forward to my holidays; I'm seeking approval.</i></p>	<p>D.4 Existential-transformation <i>I am passing; I am on a journey; I am growing within; I am finding myself; I am a changing thing; a person learning/exploring.</i></p>
<p>C.3 Activities, habits <i>One who reads books; who's busy; I'm enjoying my job; I swim often.</i></p>	<p>DM Global miscellaneous <i>I am a carer of the planet; I am an awakener; I am a transformer; I have many souls.</i></p>
<p>C.4 Qualified psychological attributes Any psychological attribute that includes reference to other people, to time, or locale: <i>I am a travel companion; I'm concerned about my family; I am kind at work; I am a warm person towards my friends; I love my daughter.</i></p>	<p>O. Other O.A Modified Physical: <i>I am too short; My mind is still active.</i></p>
<p>C.5 Pure psychological attributes <i>I am honest; kind; ambitious; friendly; extroverted; a hard worker; a listener; a dreamer; an optimist; a spiritual person; funny; sensitive.</i></p>	<p>O.B Modified Social: <i>I am a mediocre student.</i></p>
<p>CM Attributes miscellaneous <i>I'm happy to have a nice home; I'm a person who has lost time; I'm fortunate and grateful.</i></p>	<p>O.I Immediate situation: <i>I am hungry.</i></p>
	<p>O.E Modified existential <i>Who is any of us?; Can't say.</i></p>
	<p>U Unreadable</p>
	<p>X Uncodable</p>

Vertical and Horizontal I/C. This 29 item measure looks at the structure of personal versus in-group goals and is divided into four scales (Singelis et al., 1995; Triandis, 1996): Vertical Individualism stresses competition and standing out (e.g. “Competition is the law of nature”); in Vertical Collectivism individuals have a high sense of duty and sacrifice themselves for the benefit of the group (e.g. “Self-sacrifice is a virtue”); Horizontal Individualism measures uniqueness but not distinction (e.g. “Being a unique individual is important for me”); Horizontal Collectivism is concerned with co-operation but not subordination to the in-group (“I like sharing little things with my neighbours”). From these four scales scores for Collectivism and Hierarchy were derived, considering the existence of two dimensions with opposite poles (Individualism-Collectivism; Horizontal-Vertical), as theoretically proposed by Triandis (1996) following Schwartz’ (1992) findings.

Values. Schwartz’s (1992) scale of values comprises 10 universal types of values grouped across 2 dimensions. The first dimension, *Openness to Change* versus *Conservation* combines Stimulation and Self-direction versus Security, Conformity and Tradition types of values; the second dimension, *Self-Enhancement* versus *Self-Transcendence*, opposes Power and Achievement to Universalism and Benevolence. Finally, Hedonism is related both to Openness to Change and Self-Enhancement. Respondents were asked to rate 56 values in a scale ranging from –1 (opposed to my values) to 7 (of supreme importance).

2. Self-Esteem

Rosenberg’s Self-Esteem Scale (1965), which consists of 10 items scored using a four point response format (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree) was used. Items

consist of statements about one's sense of self-worth (e.g., 'I feel that I have a number of good qualities), half of which are stated in a negative way (e.g., 'I feel I do not have much to be proud of').

3.3.2 Results

TST

The coding reliability was assessed between 2 researchers for 40 subjects of the sample. The overall agreement on coding categories was 84.6%. Results were calculated based on the proportion of responses in a given category to the total number of statements found on each questionnaire. A between subjects MANCOVA, with age as covariate, and Bonferroni Post-hoc tests was conducted for the main categories, and for all the subcategories respectively. Table 3.3 presents the results for the main categories [$F(2, 152) = 6.46, p < .001$]. For the two first categories, which represent the most concrete kind of self-concepts, New Age participants consistently showed lower results than the other groups. On the other hand, the Catholic and non-religious groups did not show significant differences between each other. The Physical category was used more frequently by the non-religious group and least frequently by the New Age participants, and the Social category was used more frequently by Catholics and least frequently by the New Age group. The non-religious group also showed a significantly higher frequency of Social self-attributes than New Age individuals. Similar results were reported for the Attributes category, where the New Age showed a lower frequency than non-religious people. Finally, it was found that New Age individuals have a much higher frequency of Global self-concepts than the other groups. There were no differences between groups for the Other category.

Table 3.3: Proportion of Main Categories Use by Group for TST

		New Age	Catholic	Non-Rel.	F
A	Physical	.041 [°]	.053	.077	3.94*
B	Social	.159 [~]	.343	.254	9.54**
C	Attributes	.364 [°]	.455	.479	3.15*
D	Global	.374 [^]	.073	.140	23.98**
O	Other	.063	.058	.029	1.47

* The mean difference is significant, $p < .05$

** The mean difference is significant, $p < .001$

[°] The proportion is significantly lower for the New Age than for the Non-Religious group.

[~] The proportion is significantly lower for the New Age than for the Catholic and Non-Religious groups.

[^] The proportion is significantly higher for the New Age than for the Catholic and Non-Religious groups.

Table 3.4 presents the results for all the sub-categories [$F(2, 152) = 4.06, p < .001$].

Within the Attributes category, the only significant difference is in the Preferences, Interests and Attitudes sub-category, with Catholics showing the highest frequency and the New Age the lowest. Non-religious individuals were also higher on this sub-category than the New Age group. It is however in the Global category that the most striking differences between groups are observed. With one exception, the New Age group showed to use Global sub-categories more often than the other groups. The Metaphorical and Universal-Holistic sub-categories in particular were the most frequently employed by New Age individuals in this category.

Table 3.4: Proportion of Subcategories Use by Group for TST

Categories		New Age	Catholic	Non-Rel.	F
<i>A</i>	<i>Physical</i>	.041 ^o	.053	.077	3.94*
<i>B</i>	<i>Social</i>	.159~	.343	.254	9.54**
<i>C</i>	<i>Attributes</i>				
C1	Preference, interest, attitude	.026~	.104	.067	6.25*
C2	Wish, aspiration	.014	.010	.021	.51
C3	Activity, habit	.029	.043	.050	1.78
C4	Qualified attribute	.015	.030	.030	1.36
C5	Pure attribute	.269	.250	.297	1.00
CM	Attributes miscellaneous	.011	.019	.014	.36
<i>D</i>	<i>Global</i>				
D1	Existential-individuating	.071	.037	.078	.70
D2	Universal-holistic	.086 [^]	.028	.022	15.44**
D3	Metaphorical	.126 [^]	.003	.007	14.01**
D4	Existential transformation	.037 [^]	.001	.001	25.61**
DM	Global miscellaneous	.053 ^a	.004	.033	5.70*
<i>O</i>	<i>Other</i>	.063	.058	.029	1.47

N = 156

* The mean difference is significant, $p < .05$.** The mean difference is significant, $p < .001$.^o The proportion is significantly lower for the New Age than for the Non-Religious group.

~ The proportion is significantly lower for the New Age than for the Catholic and Non-Religious groups.

[^] The proportion is significantly higher for the New Age than for the Catholic and Non-Religious groups.^a The proportion is significantly higher for the New Age than for the Catholic group.

Overall, results for this section show that New Age individuals used significantly more abstract Global types of self-definitions and less concrete physical and social type of self-concepts than both Catholic and non-religious groups. Although this result was expected, it was somewhat surprising that the Catholic and non-religious groups did not differ significantly in any of the main or sub-categories, though Catholics reported a higher frequency for the Social category (0.34 against 0.25 for the non-religious participants).

Vertical and Horizontal I/C

Table 3.5 shows that this measure revealed only a moderate reliability on most scales and a very low alpha (.24) for Horizontal Collectivism. A between subjects MANCOVA, with

age as covariate, and Bonferroni Post-hoc tests was conducted for the scales on Horizontal and Vertical I/C [$F(2, 135) = 9.40, p < .001$]; individual ANCOVAS were conducted for the scales of Collectivism [$F(2, 135) = 5.17, p < .01$] and Hierarchy [$F(2, 135) = 18.29, p < .001$]. Turning first to the general dimensions, it can be seen that the Catholics had the higher score on Collectivism and the non-religious group the lowest. On the Hierarchy dimension, Catholics again had the highest score and the New Age group the lowest. In fact, New Age respondents had significantly lower scores than both other groups on the Hierarchy dimension.

Table 3.5: Alpha Coefficient and Mean Scores for Vertical and Horizontal I/C

		New Age		Catholic		Non-Religious		
	<i>Alpha</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>
Vertical Ind.	.76	3.71~	1.36	4.54	1.01	4.84	1.49	9.40**
Vertical Coll.	.67	4.24~	.90	6.02+	.95	4.85	1.13	32.18**
Horizontal Ind.	.62	6.96	1.07	6.98	1.09	7.28	1.01	1.25
Horizontal Coll.	.24	6.71	.95	6.97	1.00	6.43	.99	1.36
Collectivism	.69	5.03	.51	5.33§	.56	4.75	.80	5.17*
Hierarchy	.71	5.26~	.69	6.04	.53	5.76	.61	18.29**

$N = 135$.

* The mean difference is significant, $p < .05$.

** The mean difference is significant, $p < .001$.

~ The mean score is significantly lower for the New Age group than for the Catholic and Non-Religious groups.

+ The mean score is significantly higher for the Catholic than for the New Age and Non-Religious group.

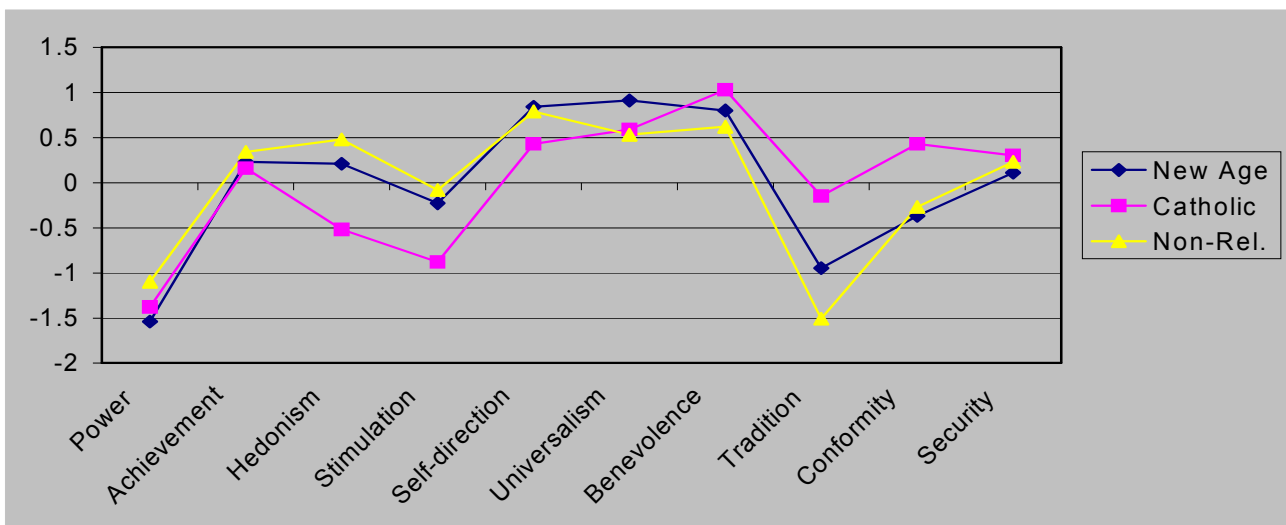
§ The mean score is significantly higher for the Catholic than for the Non-Religious group.

Further examination of the results for the Vertical and Horizontal I/C measures shows that New Age participants were significantly lower than both other groups on Vertical Individualism and Vertical Collectivism. Catholics also emphasised more Vertical Collectivism than the other groups. No significant differences between groups were found for Horizontal I/C. Overall, the results highlight that Catholics tend to be the most collectivist and that New Age individuals attribute less importance to Hierarchy and Vertical I/C than the other groups.

Values

Alpha reliability coefficients for each type of value scale were considered adequate: Power (.72), Achievement (.65), Hedonism (.61), Stimulation (.79), Self-Direction (.65), Universalism (.81), Benevolence (.76), Tradition (.67), Conformity (.75), and Security (.69). Following Schwartz's (1992) recommendation individual scores were standardised (see Fig. 1) and a between subjects MANCOVA, with age as covariate, and Bonferroni Post-hoc tests was conducted for the 10 types of values [$F(2, 137)=6.56, p<.001$]. On the Openness to Change versus Conservation dimension New Age and Non-Religious participants tended towards the first pole and Catholics towards the opposite. Thus for the value types of Hedonism [$F(2,137)=14.80, p<.001$], Stimulation [$F(2, 137)=6.99, p=.001$] and Self Direction [$F(2,137)=9.08, p<.001$], the New Age and non-religious groups scored higher than Catholics. On the other hand, for the value types of Tradition [$F(2, 137)=35.66, p<.001$] and Conformity [$F(2, 137)=15.85, p<.001$] Catholics scored higher than the New Age and non-religious groups. However, no differences were found between groups for Security [$F(2, 137)=1.47, n.s.$]. Overall, little differences were reported between New Age and Non-Religious subjects for this dimension, with the exception of Tradition on which the New Age group scored higher than non-religious participants.

Figure 3.1: Mean Standardised Scores for Types of Values by Group



On the other general dimension, which opposes Self-Enhancement to Self-Transcendence, the results were more ambiguous than for the previous dimension, though Catholics seemed to lean more towards Self-Transcendence than the non-religious group, and the non-religious group tended more towards Self-Enhancement. Thus, for Power values [$F(2, 137)=6.51, p=.002$] the non-religious group scored higher than Catholics, and Catholics emphasised more Benevolence values than non-religious people [$F(2, 137)=4.21, p<.05$]. For Universalism values [$F(2, 137)=7.17, p=.001$] the New Age group scored higher than the other groups. There were no differences between groups on values of achievement [$F(2, 137)=0.26, n.s.$].

Overall, results highlight important differences between groups and a similarity between the New Age and non-religious group on the dimension of Openness to Change versus Conservation. Thus, as New Age and non-religious groups tended towards the Openness to Change pole, the Catholic group was higher on the Conservation side. Results for the other dimension showed that Catholics were more inclined towards Self-Transcendence than the non-religious group, which tended more towards Self-Enhancement. As for the

New Age group, the most significant result on this dimension was its higher stress on Universalism values, which sets it apart from the other groups.

Self-esteem

The alpha reliability coefficient for this scale was .85. A between subjects ANCOVA with Bonferroni Post-Hoc tests was conducted but no differences were found, [$F(2,151) = .166$, n.s.]. The mean score for the New Age group was 30.10 ($SD = 4.98$), 30.60 ($SD = 4.27$) for Catholics and 30.59 ($SD = 4.94$) for non-religious participants.

3.3.3 Discussion

The main results of this study suggest that the New Age is distinct from a more traditionally oriented form of religion, such as Catholicism, and furthermore it also shows features which differentiate it from a secularised non-religious orientation. The results for the TST show that New Age individuals used more global self-concepts, particularly of universal-holistic and metaphoric character than Catholics and non-religious people. On the other hand, non-religious people reported a higher frequency of physical, social and attributes categories than the New Age group, and Catholics were also higher on social self-concepts. The highly abstract character of the New Age global self-concepts highlights an important cognitive aspect that is related to their belief system. Although it was expected that Catholics would emphasise more physical and social categories of self-concepts, which is typical of collectivism, it was somewhat surprising that the set of results for the non-religious group did not show significant differences from the Catholic. Furthermore, the sub-category of pure attributes, which Cousins (1989) describes in his cultural study as defining the essential element of

individualism in a cross-cultural comparison was similar across all groups. Perhaps, as Triandis (1995) has argued, the TST is a highly reliable measure of I/C at the cross-cultural level, but it does not do so well at the individual level.

For the scales of Vertical and Horizontal I/C, Catholics were found to be more collectivist than the non-religious group in the general dimension of Collectivism and to have a higher score on Vertical Collectivism than both other groups. Altogether, Catholics emphasised more Collectivist goal structures than the other groups. Let us recall that Vertical Collectivism is deemed to be the central element of collectivism (Singelis et al., 1995) and it entails self-sacrifice and the performance of duties which the individual may dislike for the benefit of the group. The other significant finding using these scales was that for both Vertical I/C scores and for Hierarchy, New Age individuals showed significantly lower scores than the Catholic and Non-Religious groups. This suggests that this group de-emphasises both competitive and self-sacrificing goals. Hierarchy is also associated with power distance, which has been found to be negatively associated with individualism (Hofstede, 1980). Thus, in this case, the New Age low scores can also be understood as a non-acceptance of inequality – inequality being taken for granted in both Vertical scales (Singelis et al., 1995).

The results for the values scale showed that New Age and non-religious individuals were higher on values of Hedonism, Self-Direction and Stimulation, which emphasise the autonomy of the individual, while Catholics stressed more values of Tradition and Conformity, which are related to embeddedness in the collective. Results for this dimension are in harmony with those previously reported in which New Age participants were found to be more morally individualistic – as much as non-religious people – than Christians (Houtman and Mascini, 2002). As discussed in the introduction, this latter

study by choosing a 'moral' definition of individualism mostly based on societal categories, was only tapping into a narrow aspect of the construct which may be similar to this dimension of Schwartz' (1992) scale. The results for the second dimension of this scale, though not as clear as for the previous one, nonetheless shows Catholics to tend more towards the Self-Transcendent pole and non-religious people towards Self-Enhancement. Regarding the New Age group, it showed to have a higher score on Universalism than the other groups. Universalism emphasises values of harmony and egalitarianism, which again seem to reinforce the suggestion that New Age individuals de-emphasise hierarchy and inequality. Finally, the similar results reported for all groups on the self-esteem scale suggest that the frequency of religious or New Age practices and adherence to these types of beliefs does not influence the level of one's self-worth in a significant way.

What do these results tell us in particular of the New Age individual and how does it relate to previous findings? First, its individualistic nature when compared to a traditional religion, which is more collectivist oriented, stands out. But there are other important characteristics which provide us with a more complete picture of how the New Age individualism is perhaps unique, and also differs from that of non-religious individuals. There seem to be two central aspects to this form of individualism. One, which pertains more to the cognitive domain, concerns the abstract types of self-definition used by the New Age group where the individual tends to see him or herself as integrated in a larger whole to which he finds oneself connected. The nature of this connection is highly personal and abstract, rather than socially embedded. Thus, one may indeed aptly name as 'holistic' the New Age form of religiosity (Woodhead and Heelas, 2000) to stress the particular nature of its individualism. The second characteristic, which pertains to the motivational domain, is related to the emphasis on values of universalism and the

avoidance of hierarchical structuring of ingroup goals, whether of a competitive individualistic type or a dutiful collectivist one. This characteristic sets it apart from Catholics and non-religious people who tend to emphasise hierarchy, although with different goals and motivations in mind.

Woodhead (1993) has written about the ‘radical egalitarianism’ of the New Age associating it with its ideas of ‘connectedness’. She explains that the New Age “loathes any form of hierarchy and is suspicious of all power except ‘spiritual’...It attacks all forms of dualism (male/female, us/them, spirit/body, etc.), regarding them as disguised hierarchies. Its ideal is connectedness and wholeness; a state where everything is on a level” (p. 174). Woodhead speculates that the New Age holism and connectedness is in fact the outcome of this radical egalitarian motivation which finds its roots in the modern social and economical changes, and in ideologies like Marxism. Thus, ‘connectedness’ and ‘wholeness’ would be ethical notions which highlight the ideal of equal treatment. With regard to this, it is curious to note that the New Age belief in reincarnation which became popularised in the West through 19th century spiritualism was in harmony with the egalitarian tendencies of the period (Faivre, 1994), and was used by influential socialists who saw in it a way of accounting for the inequality of social conditions (Guénon, 1921/1975; Hanegraaff, 1996). Still, this would not explain why this radical egalitarian motivation becomes associated with religious ideas in some people and not others and why it would lead individuals to describe themselves using such abstract global concepts (instead of more social ones). Finally, it is also reasonable to ask why individualism – and not collectivism – would be associated with such radical egalitarianism, as it happens in the New Age.

Altogether, it seems it is necessary to have a more clear understanding of the New Age type of holistic individualism and how it relates to other psychological variables in order to provide answers to such questions. It should also be considered that this type of holistic individualism is an anomaly within the social-psychological literature on I/C. Holism has in fact been previously used referring to a collectivist interrelated outlook (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). However, New Age people simultaneously describe themselves in holistic terms and emphasise their individual autonomy. As puzzling as it may be at first sight, this holism is of a different nature from that found in collectivist settings, for it is not built upon a strong social relatedness and it features a universalistic stance that shifts the type of typically collectivist in-group embeddedness towards nature/cosmic connectedness.

The New Age with its promotion of a set of individualistic values that value autonomy and de-emphasise hierarchy and authority, while at the same time stressing values of Universalism, seems to be a particularly attractive form of religiosity for our modern days. But how do the holistic sense of connectedness and non-hierarchical individualism function in motivational and cognitive terms in everyday life? And what different implications does it carry from those of a traditional collectivist-oriented religion or an individualistic non-religious worldview? The next studies will address such questions by looking at how New Age individuals' holistic form of individualism is construed in life events.

CHAPTER FOUR

Agency and Communion Themes in Autobiographical Life-Stories

General Introduction

The previous chapter addressed the motivational aspect of New Age practices and beliefs, which has been a source of debate amongst scholars, and contrasted the New Age with Catholic and non-religious people. This debate, in its opposite stances, considers that New Age practices are just a new consumer's fad – like “Feng Shui is a new angle on decorating and furniture arranging... [and] aromatherapy is just a new word for bubble bath” (Bruce, 2000: 234) –, or that, on the other hand, the New Age is a mystical movement whose adherents are positively transformed by its practices (Rose, 1996). Using a set of varied instruments, the first study reported that while Catholics stressed more collectivist values of tradition and conformity, and self-transcendent values of benevolence, New Age respondents were found to emphasise individualistic value types (hedonism, self-direction, stimulation) together with self-transcendent values of universalism. Furthermore, they also showed lower scores for hierarchy, competitive individualism and self-sacrificing collectivism than both other groups, and used more global self-concepts especially of a holistic type which emphasises an abstract form of connectedness. This study confirmed previous findings on the higher levels of individualism found in both New Age and non-religious participants when compared to traditional religious ones (Houtman and Mascini, 2002). Moreover, it provided a conceptualisation on the kind of individualism found in the New Age – a holistic

individualism – and how this was differentiated from that found in people with a purely secularised outlook.

The present chapter describes a study which aimed at further understanding the characteristics of the holistic individualist motivational-cognitive pattern found for New Age individuals by looking at autobiographical descriptions of life events. The analysis of these narratives was based upon Bakan's (1966) theory, which considers the existence of two main modalities of human motivation, one stressing the autonomous organism as an agent while the other entails the individual in co-operative communion.

4.1 New Age Holism

In Chapter 2 it was mentioned that traditional religious bodies, such as the Vatican, have argued that the New Age individualist ideology is at odds with a Catholic understanding of spirituality, which is envisaged to be not an individual accomplishment but “always and in every way a free gift... and the one who benefits from it knows to be unworthy” (Vatican, 2003: 24). In this report, the New Age is also accused of promoting a form of ‘implicit pantheism’ because of its ‘holistic’ ideology. Holism is for the New Age the antidote to reductionism, a new way of thinking which unites intuition and intellect and is able to connect each individual with nature and other beings (Hanegraaf, 1996). The previous chapter reported the presence of such holistic framework in the way New Age individuals define themselves. Thus, whereas Catholics emphasised more concrete social based definitions (e.g., “I am a neighbour”, “I am English”, “I am a mother”), New Agers used substantially more abstract universal-holistic and metaphoric self-concepts

(e.g., “I am connected”, “I am part of the universe”, “I am a bridge”, “I am many souls”).

Many of the ideas present in the New Age belief system, in particular concerning the adaptation of the Hindu concepts of karma and reincarnation (Campbell, 2001) and its holistic framework, are already found in its historical predecessor – the theosophical movement (Melton, Clarke, and Kelly, 1990). Catholic author G.K. Chesterton (1909) provided an illustration of how the theosophical sense of universal self advocated by one of its leaders was opposed to the traditional Christian one because of its idea of a universal holistic self:

A short time ago Mrs. Besant, in an interesting essay, announced that there was only one religion in the world, that all faiths were only versions or perversions of it, and that she was quite prepared to say what it was. According to Mrs. Besant this universal Church is simply the universal self. It is the doctrine that we are really all one person; that there are no real walls of individuality between man and man. If I may put it so, she does not tell us to love our neighbours; she tells us to be our neighbours. That is Mrs. Besant's thoughtful and suggestive description of the religion in which all men must find themselves in agreement. And I never heard of any suggestion in my life with which I more violently disagree. I want to love my neighbour not because he is I, but precisely because he is not I. (pp. 242-243).

Chesterton alludes to a universal understanding of the self and the relation of oneself to others, which seems to parallel the way in which New Age individuals use abstract holistic self-concepts. Still, this holism is not associated with collectivism but with an emphasis on individualistic goals. This combination has led some to consider the New Age the ‘acme of metaphysical selfishness’ (Houston, 1994). Such an individualistic tendency however is not particular to the New Age but can generally be found to be embedded within modern culture and its emphasis on goals of individual rather than collectivist achievement (Triandis, 1995). Thus, it is perhaps legitimate to consider the New Age a form of religion that adopted the attitudes and motivational goals of the historical-cultural context it emerged from, in the same way the major western religions

did in their own time. But even if this assumption could be verified, it would still be important to understand its particular characteristics, and how – and why – it differed from traditional religion and from a secularised non-religious worldview. After all, the holistic individualist profile of the New Age individual does not fit in with the I/C construct and differs from both a collectivist religious and an individualist non-religious orientation. The study described in the present chapter further explores this holistic individualism through the elicitation of personal narratives of life events and its categorisation in agency and communion motivations, and types of affect.

4.2 Agency and Communion

Bakan (1966) categorised agency and communion as two fundamental modes of human existence. Agency concerns the person as an individual organism whereas communion involves taking part in a larger organism. These two modes find different forms of expression in everyday life:

Agency manifests itself in self-protection, self-assertion, and self-expansion; communion manifests itself in the sense of being at one with other organisms. Agency manifests itself in the formation of separations; communion in the lack of separations. Agency manifests itself in isolation, alienation, and aloneness; communion in contact, openness, and union. Agency manifests itself in the urge to master; communion in noncontractual cooperation. (p. 15).

Following from Weber's (1930/2001) work on the influence of Protestantism in the making of capitalism, Bakan (1966) argued that the Protestant Reformation led to an exaltation of the agentic mode in modern life and the consequent repression of the communion component. The accumulation of material wealth, the emphasis on productivity and the methodical effort in controlling nature's resources are understood by him to be forms of agentic mastery. Furthermore, he also found the agency mode

prevalent in the Protestant idea of *privacy* – opposed to the Catholic idea of confession and mediation of the divine – which has become in a secularised form a central tenet of modern individualism (Lukes, 1973).

McAdams and colleagues (McAdams, Hoffman, Mansfield, and Day, 1996) have used Bakan's theory and further developed it into categories to analyse autobiographical narratives. They have considered agency to involve themes of self-mastery, status, achievement and empowerment, whereas communion includes love/friendship, dialogue, care/help and community. In accounts of significant autobiographical scenes, such as 'high points' in life, positive associations were found between agency/communion themes, and the motives of achievement, power and intimacy as assessed by the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT). Agency was found to be positively correlated with self-report scales of dominance and achievement, and personal strivings for feeling strong and successful. On the other hand, communion was related to needs for affiliation, nurturance, and personal strivings concerned with warm and close relationships. The orthogonal character of the themes of agency and communion stood out in these studies and further research with young children has confirmed it (Ely, Melzi, Hadge and McCabe, 1998).

For this study, the autobiographical narratives were analysed for agency and communion motivations by dividing each mode into four different themes (McAdams et al., 1996; McAdams, 2001). These themes are described below with illustrations taken from the life stories collected for this second study.

Agency

(1) Self-Mastery. Bakan (1966) stresses this as the prototypical separation theme, as the individual isolates him or herself from others in search for personal mastery of the self and the world. Thus, this category sees the individual attempting to master, control, enlarge, or perfect the self through forceful or effective action, thought, or experience. A relatively common expression of the theme involves the protagonist attaining a dramatic insight into the meaning of his or her life. The insight may be seen as a transformation in self-awareness or a leap forward in self-understanding that entails the realisation of new goals, plans, or missions in life. Another relatively common expression of this category involves the protagonist's experiencing a greatly enhanced sense of control over his or her destiny in the wake of an important event.

In this study, Self-Mastery is present in very different sorts of accounts. One illustration of how a change in one's appearance leads to Self-Mastery is given by someone who gets a haircut:

I was sixteen, and had long hair for 2 years. I was shy, had acne and hid behind my hair. Finally, I got it cut, and the moment I walked out of the hairdresser I felt so much more confident and happy. I finally realised that I wasn't ugly, and it just improved my life so much.

Another example is that given by a participant whose perspective on life changed after reading a book on philosophy:

Whilst reading the book my perspective on life and my place in it shifted... I became more philosophical! I read the book in my room, on a bus and on a train journey, digesting each of the chapters and their wisdom over those days. I was the only person involved, I don't think that I spoke to anyone about the book for a few weeks afterwards. I arrived at a mindset, albeit a shaky one, where I realised that I dictated what I felt and how I reacted to certain situations and fundamentally I was able to, in small and large ways, control my feelings.

This theme can also occur in narratives of relationships. In the following illustration, taking the decision to break up a romantic attachment leads to an enhanced sense of control:

I'm glad I trusted that 1% of me that wasn't sure. It ended in pain but it was the bravest choice I think I ever made and I will never regret it a single minute.

(2) **Status.** In this category there is always an interpersonal and implicitly competitive context, as the protagonist attains a heightened status or prestige among his or her peers, through receiving a special recognition or honour, or winning a contest or competition.

This theme is usually reported in association with professional success, as in the following example:

Owing to the close competition for this position I had not altogether expected to achieve it. I was satisfied at the achievement, proud of having done so well, and elated at my success. I felt 'singled out' from the crowd and happy at the recognition this implied.

(3) **Achievement.** The person reports substantial success in the achievement of tasks, jobs, instrumental goals, or in the assumption of important responsibilities. The protagonist of the story feels accomplished or successful in (1) meeting significant challenges or overcoming important obstacles concerning instrumental achievement in life or (2) taking on major responsibilities for other people and assuming roles that require the person to be in charge of things or people. The main difference between Achievement and Status is that the latter emphasises competition and prestige, while Achievement focuses more on the success of the task, although a sense of personal enhancement may also be present.

Examples of Achievement occur when one succeeds in some activity, like playing in a concert:

I had been rehearsing with my band, in which I sing and play synthesiser, for some months before but it was our first public performance... The songs we played went almost without a mistake – it was great fun: the most satisfying performance I've done so far.

Achievement can also appear in a work setting:

The room was full, people were engaged and open to the ideas I was conveying. Prior to the workshop I was nervous but on the day, it went like magic. I was really pleased with how I handled myself in front of these captains of industry.

(4) Empowerment. The subject is enlarged, enhanced, empowered, or made better through his association with someone or something larger and more powerful than the self. The self is made even more agentic by virtue of its involvement with an even more powerful agent of some sort. The empowering force is usually God, nature, the cosmos, or some other manifestation of a larger power in the universe; or a highly influential teacher, parent, or authority figure that provides critical assistance or guidance for the individual.

Experiences of empowerment can take many forms. In the first example, empowerment is preceded by a feeling of moral emptiness:

...I was a young woman. I was part of the acting/modelling world, partying along the surface, spoiled and self-centred. Standing alone on the balcony of a friend's flat overlooking the harbour, feeling quite unusually hollow, I was suddenly filled with the profoundest warmest, love, peace and connection to the world!

I don't know how long it lasted but the memory of it has lasted a half-century and it was, and is, as if that was the time of my real birth, and my real life's journey.

Empowerment also happens in association with nature:

I left show business behind from a world of glamour and travel into the woods and solitude. It was spooky at first and yet after a while the feeling of unity and connection with nature was a healing after the world of cabaret. I then was able to write music and concentrate for the first time in my life... Soon I felt bliss like never before and truly connected in another world of reality on a higher vibration one might say. I became a channel for poetry and music that could not be learned in college. It felt like a force of nature was helping me and sometimes I can hardly recall being fully present.

Finally, religious experiences within a more traditional setting (e.g., a church) are also illustrative of this theme:

At the age of about 38 after staying away from the sacraments for some years I went to confession and Holy Communion. After I had received the Holy Communion the choir sang 'Lead Kindly Light' amid the encircling, 'Lead through me on'. I was in tears and experienced a feeling of peace and elation unsurpassed in my life.

Communion

(1) Love/Friendship

The individual experiences an enhancement of friendship or erotic love toward another person. This category refers primarily to love and friendship between peers, as in heterosexual or homosexual relationships and same-sex as well as opposite-sex platonic friendships, and it does not include tender feelings of nurturance or caring as experienced in parent/child relationships.

In this study, most of the events categorised under this theme refer to stories of romantic relationships, such as the example given below:

When my husband told me he loved me for the first time. We had been seeing each other for quite a few months already and he could not say 'I love you'. When he did tell me it was very late at night and we were lying in bed together – he softly said I love you and it felt like my whole body went on fire starting from my feet right to the top of my head.

In this other narrative, the beginning of a romantic relationship is described:

We arrived at the river and sat down close together on a wet slab of rock near the water. Our hands remained together, and we began to explore each other's palms with our fingers. At first I felt uneasy and unnatural, not knowing how to show my affection through this form of contact. After some time I began to feel an incredible sensation of intimacy and inclusion...

(2) Dialogue

A person experiences a reciprocal and non-instrumental form of communication or dialogue with another person or group of others. This theme practically did not occur in this study.

(3) Care/Help

The individual reports providing care, nurturance, aid, support, or therapy for another, providing for the physical, material, social, or emotional welfare or well-being of the other. The subject usually expresses strong emotional reactions of love, tenderness, care, nurturance, joy, warmth, or the like in response to the event. Many accounts of childbirth score for this theme, as well as stories of adoption. Providing assistance or care for spouses, siblings, parents, friends, co-workers, and colleagues may be included, as well.

Most accounts that qualify for Care/Help in this study are those of giving birth or being a parent as in the two accounts below:

The high point of my life was the birth of my son on a Sunday afternoon nine years ago... I held him in my arms for what seemed like hours on that Sunday evening... My life changed in an instant – my priorities changed. I knew I would do whatever I could and give whatever I had for the wellbeing of my son – my own interests were immediately subjugated.

The birth of my daughter. A perfect little baby was placed beside me with her eyes wide open and looking at me. It gave me great peace and a profound feeling of thanks to our maker. It was mothering Sunday and the sun shone through the window onto my bed. I was in tears with joy. I looked forward to sharing our daughter with my husband; she was absolutely beautiful.

(4) Community

Whereas the other communal themes tend to specific particular relationships between the protagonist and one or a few other people, this theme captures the communal idea of being part of a larger community. The protagonist experiences a sense of oneness, unity, harmony, synchrony, togetherness, allegiance, belongingness, or solidarity with a group of people, a community, or even all of humankind.

This theme shows up in life stories which narrate being with or realising the importance of one's family and friends, as when taking part in a sister's wedding:

Sitting in the pews, the music began and I saw my sister walking down the aisle. It was an unexpected burst of emotion – I felt proud of her, thought how beautiful she looked and just felt happy for her (and my parents)... Although of course I knew I loved her I was surprised at how emotional I felt. It reminded me just how special my family and friends are.

In this other account, a man feels a sense of unity with his family and the world after the birth of this daughter.

I thought she was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. The woman I loved, my daughter – I cried my eyes out and wanted to tell the world. In fact I phoned my mother – then went to a friend's pub and had a couple of drinks... A wonderful day – my heart felt full of love for my wife, child, in fact, the world.

Although the analysis of agency and communion themes has been undertaken within the areas of motivational and personality theory, there is an obvious parallel with research from cross-cultural psychology which differentiates between an independent and interdependent self (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). While the independent self emphasises agentic characteristics such as autonomy, egocentrism, separateness and self-containment, the interdependent self is understood to be sociocentric, connected and relational – which pertain to the communion mode. The New Age emphasis on holistic

connectedness, on the one hand, and personal autonomy, on the other, seems to simultaneously integrate elements pertaining to both modes. However, it should be pointed out that under agency, the themes of self-mastery and empowerment emphasise a form of individualism more associated with the romantic concept of finding one's uniqueness or the New Age sense of an expanded self. On the other hand, achievement and status themes are more closely associated with a form of utilitarian individualism (Bellah et al., 1996), which the New Age seems to oppose, as verified in the low scores for vertical individualism in the first study.

This narrative approach with its focus on agency/communion themes has two advantages for the study of New Age individuals. First, it provides a categorisation system that partly overlaps with the construct of individualism/collectivism, thus allowing for an understanding of how the New Age pattern of holistic individualism presents itself in life events. Second, by eliciting personal narratives without reference to any belief system, it allows for an assessment free from the biases inevitably arising when individuals are directly asked about the influence of their beliefs in their lives, which has been a privileged methodology in questionnaire and ethnographic studies of New Age practices and beliefs (e.g. Rose, 1996; Hedges and Beckford, 2000).

4.3 Types of Affect

'High point' life stories asked about the description of events which are associated with positive affect. On the other hand, 'substantial change' narratives may elicit episodes with a more varied pattern of emotions. Thus, 'substantial change' narratives were coded for instances of affect, through the use of three basic categories of Positive, Negative and

Neutral affect. A more dynamic category of Transformation was added to these, as narratives sometimes presented an evolution from negative to positive affect, though in the present study no stories revealed the opposite evolution from positive to negative. In this way, when a narrative that started out by expressing negative affect ended with an expression of positive affect, this was scored as Transformation.

Positive affect was defined as an expression of good mood, happiness and sense of control or purpose, as often found in situations of romantic encounters, giving birth, change of lifestyle or winning an award.

Some examples are given below:

I've met my girlfriend the first week I came to Oxford. We've been together ever since...I feel I have someone to trust and to not be lonely ever again.

A substantial change in my life was the transition from a relatively sheltered home life in a small Scottish town to become one of 30+ new recruits to the W.A.A.F... It was very exciting – the beginning of the process of maturation and independence.

My life changed out of all recognition when I became a journalist in 1956... I discovered I had found my vocation, and began to blossom both as a writer and as a personality.

Negative affect comprised expressions of bad mood, sadness and distress. Here were included most stories that describe illness, death and divorce.

Some examples are:

I was beaten up by coppers and for the first time in my life I wanted to kill those bastards.

There have been few substantial changes in my life, perhaps the only one has been the divorce of my parents... This has damaged my own self-confidence and trust in others.

My children's father died. He was not happy and was ruled by drugs. Killed himself because I had to move and not tell him where to... He never was who I wanted him to be for me and the kids.

Positive and negative affect could be qualified as such without the explicit mention of positive or negative emotions (e.g, 'I felt happy/sad/angry'), as long as the narrative description emphasised – even if implicitly – such emotions (as illustrated above).

Neutral affect was more seldom found, as it entailed talking about an important event in one's life in an almost descriptive, un-emotional way.

In the following story, someone tells in a very neutral tone the process of coming to England and learning about getting on alone:

Years ago when I came to England for the first time... I had to grow up quickly, I did not know the world at all. I had to learn to stand for my self, to be self-sufficient and self-reliant. I had to learn what working was, I had to learn about sex, I had to learn how to do my shopping and tidying up my house, etc, etc.

Another example is how what would generally be a difficult event (divorce of parents) is narrated in a very detached manner:

My parents split up when I was 6 years old. My mum left my dad, after school she drove me and my brother (2 years old) and my sister (6 years old) away, without telling my father... The event does not seem traumatic, perhaps because my dad was violent to us all... My school work did not suffer and my life seemed good.

Transformation described a situation with negative affect that shifted and ultimately led into positive affect. This positive outcome was most of the times subjectively rationalised as leading to a better understanding of oneself, rather than leading to a positive physical outcome (e.g. loss of job leading to finding a better one, or divorce event changed into meeting a more suitable partner).

The following two examples describe how participants “grew” from experiencing cancer and anorexia:

When I discovered I might have testicular cancer during the week before my 18th birthday. I know quite a lot about cancer and its causes and “cures” but this hit me quite hard inside... I sometimes think about what it would be like if it had never happened and I am sad but I feel overall it was a strengthening experience... Also, having faced cancer I feel I can at least sympathise better if not truly empathise with others in similar situations.

When I was 13 years old I changed schools... I couldn't identify with my new peers at school...I felt very isolated especially without my sister and within 6 months I had become anorexic... I learned to love myself more, to realise that everyone has difficulties...The whole experience has made me aware of my emotions; of spirituality, of the importance to remain open towards society rather than to refute it.

4.4 Study 2

The purpose of the present study was to understand how the New Age pattern of holistic individualism, which associates individualistic goals with global abstract self-concepts and universalism values was implicated in the life events of New Age people through the analysis of agency and communion themes in autobiographical narratives. Further to this, an elucidation of how New Age participants may differ from traditional religious (Catholic) and non-religious people on agency/communion was also sought. Given the similarity between the I/C construct and agency/communion, it was expected that New Age individuals would stress both agency and communion motivations. Analogously, the individualist type of motivations previously found for Non-Religious people, suggested that this group would probably emphasise agency themes more than

any of the other groups. Finally, traditional religious people, due to their more collectivist orientation, were expected to report more communion themes in their life stories than the other groups. The study of affect in 'substantial change' life stories was exploratory and no particular predictions were made.

4.4.1 Method

Participants

Three groups of people were recruited in Oxford and London, composing a total sample of 163 participants. For the practising Catholic (N=57) and New Age (N=52) groups, questionnaires were distributed after mass and after talks at New Age centres, respectively. The return rate was 26% for Catholics and 24% for the New Age group. Subjects for the non-religious group (N=54) were recruited through advertisements and a pool of volunteers. The advertisements and letters sent out requested people who were neither religious nor spiritual to participate in a questionnaire study. The return rate for this group was 79%. The higher return rate for this group is explained by the fact that most of them had already taken part in the previous study.

There were a total of 100 women and 61 men (gender data missing for 2 respondents). The gender proportion was very similar for the Catholic (70.2% female and 29.8% male) and New Age groups (80% female and 20.0% male). For the non-religious group there was a larger number of men (63%) than women (37%). The difference in gender distribution between groups was significant ($\chi^2(2) = 22.8, p < .001$). Women have often been found to be more religious than men, both in frequency of practice and conviction

in their beliefs (Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, and Gorsuch, 1996: 86), so the reverse would be expected for the non-religious group.

The description of age for the total sample and per group is shown on table 4.1.

Catholics were found to be older than non-religious subjects [$F(2, 162) = 5.07, p < .008$].

Differences in sex and age were statistically corrected for in all analyses reported below.

Table 4.1: Age Description

Group	Mean	s.d.	N
New Age	45.7	14.8	52
Catholic	48.2	19.7	57
Non Religious	37.8	18.7	54
Total	44	18.4	163

Most subjects (83%) had British nationality. Regarding occupation, 20% of participants in the total sample were retired (17% for the New Age group, 11% for Non-Religious individuals and 32% for Catholics) and 25% were students. The Non-Religious group had a greater proportion of students (48%) than the Catholic (29%) and New Age (6%) groups. The remaining individuals were employed across a range of middle-class professions, such as management, administration, high-school teaching, university lecturing, medicine, journalism and arts.

Measures

Materials consisted of a questionnaire with 3 sections. The first section asked participants to write about two significant events in their lives, depicting (a) a 'high point' event and

(b) an episode of ‘substantial change’. The instructions were loosely adapted from McAdams’ (1995) format of a ‘life story interview’ and requested the respondent to describe (a) an event where they experienced extremely positive emotions, like joy, excitement, great happiness, or deep peace, and (b) and an episode when the person might have experienced substantial change in life. It was specifically requested that the respondent report the episode regarding its action, the context where it occurred, who was involved, what feelings and thoughts arose, and its general impact on one’s identity. Section two was constituted by measures which form the third study of this thesis and will be reported in Chapter 5. In section three, scales for New Age practices (adapted from Hollinger, 2000) and traditional religiosity were used as control measures to assess the homogeneity of the groups. Results for this section are reported in Appendix A.

Scoring Codes

Autobiographical life stories were coded for Agency and Communion themes, following McAdam’s (2001) scoring code based on Bakan’s (1966) work. Agency included themes of self-mastery, status, achievement, and empowerment, while Communion was divided into themes of love/friendship, dialogue, care/help, and community. A score of 1 was attributed if the theme was present and 0 if not. Each theme could be attributed only once per narrative, though more than one theme could be present. Reliability for all categories was calculated by having two researchers independently scoring 20% of the narratives (N=60). The proportion of agreement between the two researchers for each theme category and the totals for Agency and Communion are reported in table 4.2.

Table 4.2: Reliability for Agency and Communion Themes

Self-Mastery	0.86
Status	0.92
Achievement	0.75
Empowerment	0.91
<i>Total Agency</i>	0.86
Love/Friendship	0.93
Dialogue	1.00
Care/Help	0.92
Community	1.00
<i>Total Communion</i>	0.96

‘Substantial change’ life stories were coded for positive, negative and neutral affect, and transformation of negative into positive affect. A score of 1 or 0 was attributed for each type of affect per narrative. As with the scoring of the Agency and Communion themes, each type of affect could only be scored once per story, though more than one type could be simultaneously present. This scoring code did not evaluate the intensity of affect on a continuum, nor did it consider the number of times that a certain type of affect was mentioned per narrative. The more conservative scoring code adopted concentrates on evaluating central moments of affect. This was considered to allow for a more accurate scoring across very different types of events.

Reliability for all types of affect was calculated by having two researchers independently scoring 20% of the narratives (N=60). Each type was individually scored for reliability as described above for the Themes of Agency and Communion. The proportion of agreement between the two researchers for each type of affect is reported in table 4.3.

Table 4.3: Reliability for Types of Affect

<i>Types of Affect</i>	
Positive	0.88
Negative	0.88
Neutral*	0.55
Transformation	0.90
<i>Total</i>	<i>0.89</i>

* Due to the low reliability for neutral affect further analysis was discontinued.

4.4.2 Results

Autobiographical ‘High Point’ Life Stories

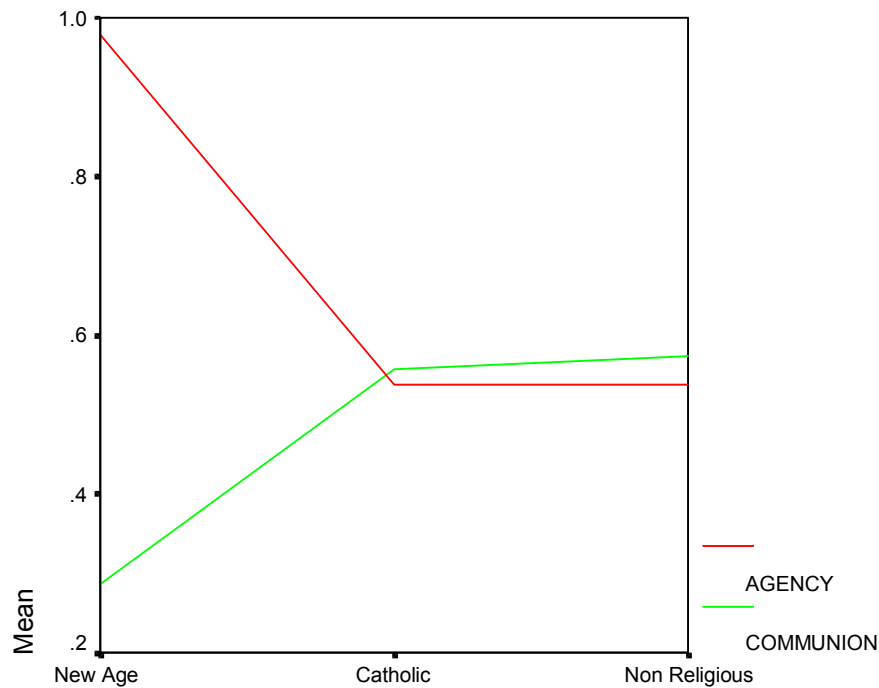
Frequencies for the total agency and communion themes in autobiographical ‘high point’ life stories are reported in table 4.4

Table 4.4: Frequencies for Agency and Communion

	Agency	Communion	Total	N
New Age	48	16	64	49
Catholic	28	29	57	52
Non-Religious	29	31	60	54

Catholics and non-religious respondents showed similar scores for agency and communion, while the New Age group reported a three times greater frequency for agency than communion themes. Figure 1 illustrates the interaction of these results as means of frequencies.

Figure 4.1: Mean Scores for Agency and Communion



A between subjects multivariate analysis of variance, with Post-hoc Bonferroni tests and with age and sex as covariates was conducted to test for differences between groups in the total frequencies of agency and communion scores [$F(2, 150) = 5.40, p < .001$]. New Age individuals were higher on agency ($M = .98, SD = .59$) than Catholics ($M = .54, SD = .50$) and Non-Religious participants ($M = .54, SD = .57$), [$F(2, 150) = 10.94, p < .001$]. Inversely, New Age respondents showed a lower communion score ($M = .29, SD = .46$) than Catholics ($M = .56, SD = .61$) and non-religious participants ($M = .57, SD = .60$), [$F(2, 150) = 4.68, p = .01$].

Another between subjects MANCOVA with Post-hoc Bonferroni tests and with age and sex as covariates was conducted for all 8 of the agency and communion themes [$F(2, 150) = 2.54, p < .001$]. Table 4.5 shows that overall the New Age group scored higher on all agency themes except status (this category involves the idea of competition or triumph

vis-à-vis others) than the other groups, and the achievement score did not reach significance. For the categories of self-mastery and empowerment, New Age respondents scored significantly higher than Catholics. While emphasis on self-mastery was also characteristic of the non-religious group, the empowerment category was stressed by Catholics but practically non-existent for Non-Religious subjects. No significant differences were reported for the communion categories but overall the New Age group scored significantly lower than both other groups on the total communion score.

Table 4.5: Mean Scores for All Agency and Communion Themes

	New Age		Catholic		Non-religious		Manova F
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Self-Mastery	0.31 ^a	0.47	0.02	0.14	0.20	0.41	7.58**
Status	0.04	0.20	0.19	0.40	0.17	0.38	2.42
Achievement	0.16	0.37	0.08	0.27	0.11	0.32	0.81
Empowerment	0.47+	0.50	0.25	0.44	0.06	0.23	9.98**
<i>Total Agency</i>	0.98+	0.59	0.54	0.50	0.54	0.57	10.94**
Love/Friendship	0.10	0.31	0.25	0.44	0.31	0.47	2.11
Dialogue	0.02	0.14	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.63
Care/Help	0.08	0.28	0.19	0.40	0.09	0.29	2.24
Community	0.10	0.31	0.12	0.32	0.17	0.38	0.53
<i>Total Communion</i>	0.29-	0.46	0.56	0.61	0.57	0.60	4.68*

N = 150

* The mean difference between groups is significant, $p = .01$.

** The mean difference between groups is significant, $p < .001$.

^a The mean score is significantly higher for the New Age than for the Catholic group.

+ The mean score is significantly higher for the New Age than for the Catholic and Non-Religious groups.

- The mean score is significantly lower for the New Age than for the Non-Religious group (Bonferroni comparison between New Age and Catholic groups, $p = .06$).

Illustrations of Empowerment in 'High Point' Life Stories

The results show that the New Age group mostly emphasised agency themes of empowerment and self-mastery on their autobiographical life stories. Empowerment stories typically reported experiences of an altered state of consciousness, sometimes interpreted as the contact with a supernatural force or 'energy'. To further explore the nature of this category and its centrality for New Age participants some illustrations are given below:

(R. 133) The high point in my life was as follows:
... I was on a course called something like 'Develop Your Psychic Powers' knowing fully well that nothing would happen as I am as thick as two planks. And sure enough, no matter what we did, nothing worked for me. However, at the end of the day before we closed the guy who held the workshop said: 'Let's send love or energy to East Timor' (this was obviously at the time when there was all that trouble). Since I do not know what the word 'love' means or maybe I am incapable of such a thing, I sent energy... And after a while when I was concentrating real hard to send energy to East Timor, I suddenly felt a beam coming from both my hands (as you sometimes see in pictures of Jesus Christ – at least these were common when I was a kid). This beam occurred as if someone had switched on an electricity switch (needless to say, it was not visible – I could only feel it)... Ever since that time I believe in an hereafter and that there are things we do not know about.

The empowerment theme was also reported by New Age participants in conjunction with self-mastery, a combination which did not happen for any of the other groups. These narratives usually illustrated an experience of supernatural empowerment in association with a sense of physical mastery, such as in the following examples about riding a horse and helping control the other horses:

(R. 155) I was riding my horse out with friends last year. We had to pass through a field with cattle in it. My horse is completely terrified of cattle. He bolts. This time we went into the field, and the young bullocks came charging towards us, full of bumptious curiosity. Suddenly I was aware that my horse and I were encased within a bubble of white light. He and I were one. The "bubble" was about two feet over my head, and was in the earth beneath us, and about 8 ft. to each side.
We walked across the field as if we were competing at the highest level of dressage. Slowly, calmly, beautifully. The other horses all bolted. My horse and I helped to calm everyone else, and opened and shut the field gate for everyone

else. A transcendent experience. At the beginning of the field I was terrified. At the end I felt transformed. And felt that I can trust in life – the life force – and ask for help.

Although these events were sometimes classified by its narrators as ‘transcendent’ or ‘spiritual’, they seldom qualified for any of the communion themes. Only a few life stories reported an empowering of the individual accompanied by an explicit reference to a group of other people or a sense of abstract togetherness with humanity and/or the world. In the following narrative, the sense of empowerment associated with a meditation state in which the individual’s identity was expanded and confounded with animal and natural elements, also showed an abstract sense of community (unity with ‘all’):

(R. 134)...I was sitting in my living room early one Sunday morning around 6.30 a.m., a beautiful, warm, ... summer morning looking into the window. I was deep in trance looking out at a small tree in the garden, when a bird landed on one of the branches; it settled itself and then turned around and looked in at the window. I held the gaze of this bird, it seemed as if the bird was motionless, just holding my gaze back. So immersed in this state, I became the tree, then as the bird remained motionless and continued to hold my gaze – I became the bird, the bird became me, transcending this, all became one; I truly became one with all and lost time and all motion. My husband appeared and entered the room, I lost the gaze, the bird flew away and that experience was passed – but I felt rich from this that words cannot express.

The empowerment theme was also present in Catholics though featuring Christian elements. In the following life story, given by a Catholic, empowerment, expressed in feelings of intense happiness attributed to God and the idea of how God cares about him, was associated with an abstract sense of community (unity with the surroundings):

(R. 38) It was in the middle of the week, in the evening, coming back to College from a normal day... As I walked out of the building I started thinking how wonderful God has been with me throughout my life, especially for allowing me to go back to Christ’s path, since I was an agnostic for more than six years... All of a sudden, I felt such happiness in a way I don’t remember ever having felt before, especially for so long – it lasted more than half an hour. Walking on the street, I felt like being one with everything surrounding me: people, animals, things, etc. Most of the time I was praising God and Jesus Christ, and this kind of seemed like a feedback mechanism that made me feel even better...This

experience indicated for me how precious I am to God, how he cares about me and everybody else in this world. It showed me also the value of communicating with him (i.e., praying).

A final illustration depicting the life story given by a non-religious respondent shows the category of community expressing a sense of togetherness with the family, friends and the world, without any agency theme:

(R. 82)... At about 1:18 p.m. our daughter was born....I thought she was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. The woman I loved, my daughter – I cried my eyes out and wanted to tell the world. In fact I phoned my mother – then went to a friend’s pub and had a couple of drinks... A wonderful day – my heart felt full of love for my wife, child, in fact, the world.

Autobiographical ‘Substantial Change’ Life Stories

Frequencies for the total agency and communion themes in autobiographical ‘substantial point’ life stories are reported in table 4.6.

Table 4.6: Frequencies for Agency and Communion

	Agency	Communion	Total	N
New Age	44	12	58	48
Catholic	35	24	60	52
Non-Religious	41	21	67	53

All groups reported a higher frequency of agency than communion. A between subjects multivariate analysis of variance, with Post-hoc Bonferroni tests and with age and sex as covariates was conducted to test for the differences between groups for agency and communion, but revealed a non-significant interaction [$F(2, 146) = 1.64, p = .n.s.$].

A similar statistical analysis conducted for all themes also revealed to be non-significant [$F(2, 146) = 1.23, p = .n.s.$]. Description of main scores for all themes shows that Self-Mastery was the most commonly used category for all groups (see table 4.7). As with the ‘high point’ life stories, the New Age group reported a higher agency score and a lower communion score than the other groups.

Table 4.7: Mean Scores for All Agency and Communion Themes

	New Age		Catholic		Non-religious	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Self-Mastery	0.74	0.44	0.50	0.50	0.62	0.49
Status	—	—	—	—	0.02	0.14
Achievement	0.09	0.29	0.12	0.32	0.13	0.34
Empowerment	0.11	0.31	0.06	0.24	—	—
<i>Total Agency</i>	0.93	0.44	0.67	0.51	0.77	0.57
Love/Friendship	0.15	0.36	0.19	0.40	0.15	0.36
Dialogue	—	—	0.02	0.14	0.02	0.14
Care/Help	0.02	0.15	0.12	0.32	0.08	0.27
Community	0.07	0.25	0.13	0.35	0.25	0.43
<i>Total Communion</i>	0.24	0.43	0.46	0.61	0.40	0.60

N = 146

Types of affect are the last section to be looked at. A between subjects multivariate analysis of variance, with Post-hoc Bonferroni tests and with age and sex as covariates revealed a significant difference between groups [$F(2, 146) = 2.59, p < .05$]. Mean scores for affect reported in table 4.8 show that the scores for positive and negative affect were very similar across groups and that New Age respondents showed a higher frequency for Transformation of affect.

Table 4.8: Mean Scores for Affect

	New Age		Catholic		Non-religious		Manova
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F
Positive	0.33	0.47	0.44	0.50	0.47	0.50	0.59
Negative	0.72	0.46	0.62	0.49	0.62	0.49	1.02
Transformation	0.46+	0.50	0.15	0.36	0.15	0.36	6.52*

N = 150

* The mean difference between groups is significant, $p < .01$.

+ The mean score is significantly higher for the New Age than for the Catholic ($p < .01$) and Non Religious ($p = .05$) groups.

Illustrations of Transformation from Negative into Positive Affect

Twenty-one out of 48 New Age participants narrated life stories of substantial change where negative affect was firstly described and subsequently changed into positive affect.

A close look at these stories revealed them to contain many of the New Age beliefs about ‘personal growth’ and ‘self-development’. Although the content of the stories was varied, there was a similar pattern of rationalisation which led from a negative episode into a positive justification. In order to illustrate this pattern some excerpts are provided below. Some expressions are highlighted to point out frequent New Age beliefs about what they understand to be their self-developmental process:

(R. 124)... my best friend died from cancer. She died within 3 months of finding out she was sick. By then I had been married for 20 years. I had dedicated my entire existence to my 2 children and husband. But after her death I started to question my life and I began to change. Bringing up my children and being a full time mother wasn't fulfilling anymore; I wanted to give myself time and attention. So I decided to return to study. This decision wasn't welcomed by my husband and things started going wrong... I'm doing some Gaia healing. This experience of awakening has taken me into a more spiritual world. I've learned to do Gaia healing and I am growing spiritually day by day. During my youth I gave life to my 2 children who are quite advanced spiritually and in the second point of my life I will be able to help others and can rejoin the spiritual path that I was away from for a while.

(R. 125) I was in a therapy session and became aware of how difficult I found it to fully receive positive comments – I liked them but I could only allow a little bit. At the same time I was becoming more aware of my limitations, also “allowing” my own sadness. I felt I would like to allow “both”, and for a time

felt swamped by sadness (mainly hysterical in nature). Gradually I came to feel better and more relaxed, I also needed to reach out for help and I came to understand that I needed to live more deeply. I had a fantasy that “difficult” feelings, especially historical ones, were like churns of meat to a Labrador dog – they could be transformed provided I offered them. Later I came to understand this as an alchemy involving the connection between such feelings and the transpersonal.

(R. 134) Just over two years ago I was living a happy married life...., my husband hit midlife and had a different agenda – namely drugs and another woman. I was shocked, devastated and left in financial ruin. I tried in vain to seek counselling for us but he didn’t want to know, he was gone. I then began the long arduous journey, through all stages of acceptance, recovery and healing. For the various reasons that were unique to my own journey in life, this hurdle/crisis has been the most traumatic and most difficult in my lifetime. Each step a powerful experience. Today, I can honestly say this has made me richer than I could ever thought possible and I am not speaking materially either – the scars and pain will always remain and I will always love him and feel a compassion for him as he is still blind – “I once was blind but now I see” and see all is just as it is meant to be.

(R. 139) When I split up with my partner my whole life changed. Part of the problems in my relationship was due to old beliefs and patterns that needed relinquishing, which were getting in the way of my path. After we split up and I returned from holidays I experienced severe depression and I isolated myself from friends... Doors started opening. I was drawn to pursue healing at a deeper level: I had practised Reiki before but somehow I never felt a strong connection. This time I was drawn to Pranic Healing and since then I haven’t looked back. I met new friends along the way and now I’m a lot happier. I now have a deep understanding of who I am and what I am here to achieve. There is still so much to learn but I’m having lots of fun doing it.

As a way of contrast, an excerpt from a story by a non-religious participant is given below, where transformation of affect is reported without any of the vocabulary of self-development found in the New Age narratives:

(R. 104) After my husband died, seven years ago, I felt grief, anger, and great anxiety. A week before he died, I had been made redundant from a job I had held for then years...I felt very vulnerable. I tried two jobs in quick succession, each of which was a disaster. ... I was trying to find a suitable employment, but Saturday mornings would see me sitting at the kitchen table, crying my eyes out, with my loyal cat on my lap. I did then find a job in town, working for a wonderful woman who really picked me up ‘off the ground’ – but the commute was increasingly difficult from where I lived: I decided I would try my luck in Oxford... I took a leap of faith and, all on my own, sold my London house and bought my Oxford house – and within a month I was employed... I felt much

stronger than I had done twelve months earlier, more autonomous. I began to value myself again, and to forge new friendships.

4.4.3 Discussion

The results showed that New Age participants emphasised more agency and less communion themes than the other groups in 'high point' life stories, with particular stress on themes of empowerment and self-mastery. Against the predictions, they showed a low frequency in all communion themes. Also against what was expected, the non-religious group had very similar results to Catholic respondents. Although there were differences amongst the distribution of themes between groups, particularly in the higher frequency of empowerment for Catholics and of self-mastery for non-religious participants, these did not reach significance. This discrepancy from the predictions is suggestive that the scoring of agency and communion themes for 'high point' life stories does not exactly overlap with the individualism/collectivism construct. It is unclear whether this has to do with the theoretical aspects of the agency/communion construct or with the context in which it was measured, in this case referring to an analysis of a specific type of life events.

Nonetheless, results for the New Age narratives provide us with a clearer conceptualisation of holistic individualism and its presence in particular life events. New Age people prominently gave accounts of themselves both as individual agents who feel in control of themselves (self-mastery), and as experiencing a sense of personal enlargement through the attainment of certain expanded states of consciousness and/or association with magical forces or energies (empowerment). The holistic character of the New Age movement is evident in this category of empowerment, where the individual

shows a sense of self-expansion and connectedness with abstract forces. However, the focus of these narratives, which New Agers would classify as ‘spiritual’ or ‘transcendent’, is on the individual as a particular self-contained person who enlarges oneself – and not on any particular relation with a larger community of people, or even the world.

‘Substantial Change’ life stories elicited much more homogenous responses in agency and communion themes across groups. Although New Age individuals showed higher agency and lower communion scores than the other groups, these were not significant. Overall, the analysis of agency and communion themes for this type of narratives did not reveal the thematic diversity of the ‘high point’ life stories. Results suggest that the elicitation of autobiographical stories of substantial change is particularly associated with the theme of Self-Mastery which was the most often theme found across groups. However, this finding does not provide any insights for the current study. Nonetheless, while the ‘high point’ life stories uniformly refer to episodes of positive affect, the ‘substantial change’ narratives revealed moments of positive and negative affect. Furthermore, analysis of types of affect highlight the way in which New Age participants tend to attribute an ultimate positive meaning to negative events. This can be looked upon as a positive way of coping and of deriving special meaning from difficult events in life. At the same time, it is related to the New Age’s ideological insistence on self-transformation, and on the necessity to think ‘positively’ and try to shape reality according to one’s own desires (Melton, Clarke, and Kelly, 1990). This attitude is in contrast with both a more secularised rational way of viewing life as not necessarily just, and the religious Catholic way which emphasises faith on a higher divine justice. On the other hand, New Age participants while stressing the transformation of emotional state in these stories, also painstakingly narrate their changes in lifestyle, attitudes and beliefs. Is this a true rapid change in personality as has been suggested to occur (Miller and C’deBaca, 1994)? Or is it

rather a “superficially optimistic” process that “radiates a profound despair and resignation” as Lasch (1978: 51) wrote regarding the ideology of personal growth? What fundamentally comes across in these stories of transformation is their self-referential character. People talk often about deep insights on ‘who they truly are’, on ‘growing up’ spiritually, on the ‘connection’ with the spiritual, but all these holistic characteristics are mostly abstract, seldom acknowledging other people. This result bears some similarity to the New Age emphasis on values of Universalism, which differs from Benevolence in that the latter emphasises a relation with other people (e.g., helpful, responsible, forgiving), instead of an abstract collective entity.

The self-referential character associated with the New Age ideology is particularly present in the ‘high point’ narratives of empowerment. In many of these stories of agentic empowerment, New Age respondents use expressions such as ‘personal transformation’, ‘growing up spiritually’, ‘feeling connected’, and ‘finding out who they really are’ as the outcome of their experiences. These expressions have been interpreted as reflecting the New Age emphasis on personal self-development associated with goals of self-transcendence (Heelas, 1996). It has been argued that in complex modern societies alternative spiritual practices and belief systems such as the New Age may fulfil the same communal role as religion in traditional societies (Bloch, 1998). However, so far no study has been able to establish how the New Age is able to generate any forms of community or social solidarity which are functional within the modern world (except in a few small communities such as Findhorn). One of the first influential books on the New Age defined it as a conspiracy of people working in ‘little clusters and loose networks’ who shared a set of ideas about the coming of a new age, symbolically associated with the influence of the zodiacal sign of Aquarius (Ferguson, 1982). This was understood to be a revolutionary social movement that would lead to an overall change in values and even

scientific thinking – which would holistically unify the intellect with intuition. The present study has showed that notwithstanding the New Age sense of holism, with its stress on connectedness with the cosmos and its values of universalism, most New Age individuals tend to give accounts of ‘high point’ life stories in which they portray themselves in an agentic self-referential way. This portrait is not unlike Chesterton’s (1909) critical account of the theosophical advocacy of an expanded universal self and parallels Campbell’s (2001) analysis of the New Age sense of self-transcendence as an inflation of the self, “since in general the cosmic scenario is employed purely as a backcloth or setting for the personal drama of the self” (p. 84) .

However, these data do not allow for a moralistic judgement of the New Age, such as a ‘narcissistic’ modern religiosity or a ‘pseudo-religion’. What the results of the first two studies of this thesis have showed is that the New Age can be differentiated from traditional religion and a purely secular outlook on a set of motivational and cognitive aspects. First, regarding motivation, the New Age and traditional religious individuals are different in that the latter emphasise more a set of collectivist goals, while the New Ager – similarly to the secularised non-religious individual – aims towards the fulfilment of individualistic goals. Moreover, this individualism is of a non-competitive type and is thus set apart from a purely secularised competitive form of individualism. Secondly, the New Age individual shows a particular cognitive style, which stresses abstract holistic self-concepts and a form of empowering agency associated with magical ideation and unusual perceptions – what New Agers would call ‘spiritual’ or altered states of consciousness experiences. The seeming contradiction of these motivational-cognitive features has generated most of the controversy surrounding the characterisation and aims of the New Age. It is argued, however, that there is no contradiction. The holistic individualism construct found in New Agers, though presenting an unusual combination

of elements, is nonetheless a variation of individualistic agentic motivations associated with a highly abstract cognitive style. In fact, it seems as if the New Age ideas of holism and connectedness lead the individual towards engagement with abstract forces and processes rather than in direct interaction with others and the world. The next chapter will take a closer look at the cognitive aspects of the New Age 'holistic' thinking by studying its use in everyday life explanations.

CHAPTER FIVE

Magical Thinking and the Interpretation of Life Events

General Introduction

The two previous studies have showed that New Age participants have a set of particular motivational and cognitive characteristics which set them apart from religious and non-religious people. The fundamental cognitive characteristic entails an abstract sense of connectedness between all things which, in the previous studies, has been found in association with global holistic self-concepts and life narratives of empowerment. The holistic sense of connectedness present in the New Age is very similar to the loose type of associative style found for magical thinking in recent experimental studies (Brugger and Graves, 1997; 1998). There is also evidence showing that magical thinking can be used as a coping strategy to maintain or regain control (Keinan, 1994). The present chapter takes a closer look at the New Age sense of holism and connectedness by considering magical thinking, how it may be used to interpret life events and what functions it may fulfil in promoting a perception of personal control over the environment. Measures used included vignettes depicting everyday events which were coded for the presence of scientific, magical and religious attributions, and locus of control scales.

5.1 Magic – Old and New

Evidence from historical sources, as early as Greco-Roman Antiquity (Betz, 1987; Kee, 1986), and from anthropological studies of primitive societies (Middleton, 1987) and developmental psychology (Wooley, 1997), suggests that magical thinking is a particular mode of cognition which differs from scientific and religious thinking. More specifically, magical thinking has been defined as a form of human cognition, which involves (a) beliefs and associations that contradict current naturalistic scientific explanations; (b) principles of analogy and contagion by which an individual may achieve, through the use of thoughts, words or actions, specific physical effects in a manner not governed by the laws of ordinary transfer of energy or information; (c) cognitive and emotive functions of adaptation to the environment (Zusne and Jones, 1989; Nemeroff and Rozin, 2000). Jahoda (1969) and Vyse (1997) offer a survey of research on superstitious and magical thinking, from Freud and Skinner to more recent experiments. It has been found that magical thinking is also used by normal adults and that its frequency can be increased under circumstances of physical or psychological threat, as a way of coping with uncertainty (Keinan, 1994) – a suggestion that had already been put forward by Malinowski (1948) in his anthropological study of the Trobriand islanders.

Although research on contemporary forms of magic is scarce, there is a considerable anthropological literature focusing on pre-modern societies, in which different approaches to magic and its relationship to science and religion have been put forward. The symbolist approach, which today is favoured by most anthropologists, emphasises the functions performed by magic and religion in relation to the social order. Magic and

religion are seen as similar because they belong to a symbolic system of thought, while science pertains to a concrete domain. The literalist approach, on the other hand, has insisted on a more intellectualist interpretation, regarding magic as a rational process of analogy which, like science, tries to explain nature and to manipulate it (for a summary see Middleton, 1987; Cunnigham, 1999). In an analysis of Frazer's works, one of the early advocates of the literalist approach, Jarvie and Agassi (1970) have highlighted the rational character of magic and science, which sets them apart from religion:

...on Frazer's view belief in magic is nearer to belief in science than to belief in religion and it is less irrational than the latter. Frazer's criterion for rational belief is approximation to the coherence and predictive power of natural science. Religion gives the universe free will; magic (like science) views it as a predictable and manipulable system. (p. 175).

Following Frazer, Jarvie and Agassi (1970) emphasise the utilitarian, pragmatic character of magic and science. Whether merely physical-technical or psychological-emotional, they both serve an immediate purpose, while religion is mostly concerned with the moral domain. More recently, Lührman (1992) has stressed that magic is used in modern days because of the (1) belief in its science-like instrumental efficacy within the physical world and (2) the imaginative, emotional involvement associated with the seeking and identifying of patterns between events. Magic is then understood as allowing the individual to explain more than what the scientific theories allow for, while providing a way of emotional involvement with a reality interconnected by symbolic forces and invisible energies.

Probably due to an evolutionary bias in the history of science, which tends to look at magical ideas as an archaic form of thinking that was gradually replaced by scientific forms of reasoning (Harris, 1997), the study of magical explanations in the modern world has for the most part been restricted to the domains of psychopathology (e.g., Eckblad

and Chapman, 1983) and developmental psychology (e.g., Rosengren, Johnson, and Harris, 2000). It is true that such bias has been supported by historical evidence, which tracks the secularisation of modern societies and the receding of magical beliefs from the 17th century onwards (for a detailed analysis of the process in England, see Thomas, 1971). Nonetheless, the rise of the New Age as a new cultural trend of interest for a loose amalgam of magical and paranormal practices has proved that these beliefs are re-emerging and growing. As discussed in the previous chapters, a central New Age tenet is that of the existence of an intimate, though often veiled, connectedness between all things (e.g. the way an individual is connected at birth to a particular zodiacal sign) and a causality system ruled by non-material ideas, such as karma. These notions endow the individual with a closely-knit network of meanings that can be used to explain life events and justify failures or inadequacies (Campbell, 2001), through speculation about synchronicities, ‘past-lives’ and ‘soul mates’ (Melton, Clarke and Kelly, 1990).

Hanegraaff (2003) has analysed the modern psychologisation of magic, i.e. the presupposition that magic is ultimately based on the powers of the psyche and the use of psychological techniques to exalt one’s individual consciousness as a form of magic. Looking at it from a historical perspective, he contrasts the Renaissance occultists as “Christians who believed in the metaphysical existence of evil” with contemporary magicians who “tend to believe in science and psychology” (p. 369). Hanegraaff refers to Lévi-Bruhl’s (1926) notion of *participation* as ‘mystical causality’ – a category of perception in which the boundaries between object and subject are fluid – to help explain the particularity of magic as a causality system embedded in emotion and imagination, opposed to rational scientific thinking. In Chapter 2 this idea was discussed as a ‘motivational’ theory which posits the existence of two poles, one rational and the other emotional/imaginative. In its simplicity, this theory overlooks the close relationship

between these two factors and, in what concerns magical thinking, the cognitive functions it may serve to achieve a sense of control with consequences for the whole organism. Keinan (1994) has suggested that this sense of control could be achieved in two ways:

- (a) Magical thinking affords the individual a better understanding of what is happening to him or her in his or her environment, because it provides explanations for phenomena about which the individual lacks information or knowledge and in which he or she cannot find meaning. As a consequence, the individual's world becomes more meaningful, predictable and controllable.
- (b) By means of superstitious beliefs or magic rituals, the individual may generate solutions that increase his or her control over the sources of threat. (p.52)

It is possible that New Age beliefs, which are invested in a holistic sense of the world where everything is inter-connected, may be used by the individual as magical types of explanations for everyday events and that these will help him achieve a perception of control over the environment.

5.2 Explanations and the Search for Control

Attribution research has focused on people's explanations of life events and how different types of causality are invoked, as well as the motivational and cognitive functions they fulfil. The explanation of events generally happens not out of simple intellectual curiosity, but because understanding a causal relationship allows the individual to achieve control over the environment (Heider, 1958). This has been systematically verified in studies that show how people are led to influence and modify the way they explain events, in order to improve their sense of control, self-esteem, or self-presentation (for an overview see Hewstone, 1983).

Following the anthropological intellectualist approach, psychologists have usually attributed the survival of magical forms of thinking in the modern world to their explanatory power, the possibility of forcing the environment to fit a coherent causal pattern, thereby enhancing one's sense of control over it (Jahoda, 1969; Vyse, 1997; Zusne and Jones, 1989). Because no direct action is actually exercised over the environment, the process at stake should rather be called a form of secondary than primary control. While the latter process involves direct attempts to change the world so that it fits one's needs, secondary control refers to attempts to fit in with the world – to 'flow with the current' – by using a series of cognitive strategies that enhance the individual's sense of control (Rothbaum, Weisz, and Snyder, 1982). Magical thinking seems to occur more frequently in situations where the individual does not have the power to directly influence the environment and is faced with a situation of physical danger (Keinan, 1994). Furthermore, Keinan reported that a lower ability to accept ambiguous situations without feeling threatened was significantly correlated with magical thinking. In his celebrated study of Trobriand Islanders, Malinowski (1948) reported a similar pattern. Magical practices were reported to be more often employed when the islanders had to fish in the sea, which was a high risk activity, than when fishing in the calm lagoons. Malinowski also described how magic was used for specific, concrete problems while, in contrast, religion dealt with fundamental issues of human existence.

The psychological research conducted on religious and magical attributions tends to include both types of explanations under the same category, such as non-material beliefs pertaining to God, fate, luck and justice (Pepitone and Saffioti, 1997). Concerning religion, it has been systematically found that religious explanations are rarely used. Lupfer and colleagues (Lupfer, Brock, and DePaola, 1992; Lupfer, and Layman, 2000; Weeks and Lupfer, 1996) have reported that even when belonging to conservative

(Evangelical) Christian churches, people use naturalistic explanations much more often than religious ones. Generally, these studies have been unable to provide evidence supporting the hypothesis that the availability of religious explanations would increase and be more readily used than naturalistic attributions if the person were religious, as originally proposed by Spilka, Shaver and Kirkpatrick (1985).

Given that religion occupies a central part in the lives of American conservative Christians, Weeks and Lupfer (1996), attempted to show that while people may not make direct attributions to God, they would nonetheless consider God's indirect and distant influence on their lives. Their study included the use of vignettes with different types of situations. Participants were asked to identify the most important causes of the event (proximal cause) and, after that, were probed to identify 'the cause of the cause' they had previously given (distal cause). Their findings led them to suggest that "God's place in the causal chain would not be as an immediate cause, but rather as a prior cause, with more naturalistic agents being closer" (p. 358) and providing a more immediate and satisfactory explanation. However, it was also found that not only naturalistic but also non-religious supernatural attributions (e.g., fate, luck) were more often cited as proximal rather than distal occurrences. This seems to indicate that there is a common causal attribution process underlying supernatural and naturalistic explanations, which is dissimilar to that occurring in religious explanations.

Thus, the agency of God is looked upon, even by religious people, as so removed from the world that is seldom used as a close, proximal cause. Another study has shown that people who stress God as an omnipotent agent are less likely to see events as expressing his will, possibly because of seeing him as a distant majesty (Lalljee, Brown, and Hilton, 1990). The only instance in which religious people have been found to frequently use

God as an explanation to life events is in health or life threatening situations (Lowenthal and Cornwall, 1993). In a similar way to what Malinowski (1948) had observed for the Trobriand Islanders, religious explanations seem to occur only when facing a fundamental life/death event upon which control can no longer be exercised. But even in such cases, seeing God as a controlling agent has been shown to be unrelated to the reinforcement or relinquishing of personal control (Lowenthal and Cornwall, 1993).

In summary, the attribution research addressing the different uses of magical and religious explanations in life events, and how they might enhance one's sense of personal control, is scarce. Nonetheless, the available literature indirectly supports the anthropological approach which suggests that scientific and magical thinking are similar systems inasmuch as they both provide causal utilitarian explanations of how events occur in the world and the possibility of manipulation. On the other hand, religious attributions to God are less frequent and only used in fundamental life events. If, as attribution theory suggests, people use everyday explanations to achieve a sense of control over the environment, magical explanations – like scientific ones – may be able to achieve this function better than religious ones perhaps due to its broad belief system, which can be applied to all types of life circumstances, as well as its possibilities of manipulating the environment in non-physical ways through the mediation of 'energies' and 'entities'.

5.3 Study 3

Hanegraaff (2003) and Luhrmann (1992) have looked at how magical forms of thought and practice have been adapted to modernity, often based upon the loose use of

psychological techniques and concepts, thus providing a science-like theory of reality. In this, magic may entail a similar kind of causal process, but also provide explanations which science does not allow for. Religious influence, on the other hand, has been decreasing (for the British case see Gill, Hadaway, and Marler, 1998), and it seems that its explanatory power is more limited for everyday events. Thus, following from this, magical and scientific attributions should be more readily available in the interpretation of everyday events, than religious ones. It should also be expected that people using more magical and scientific explanations would have a higher sense of personal control than those using religious explanations. However, it should be noted that it is possible that people using magical explanations may be doing so to try to enhance a low sense of control.

This third study attempts to understand if New Age people's holistic-interconnected worldview would be present in everyday life through magical attributions. Further to this, this study investigates whether these magical attributions would allow the individual to achieve a form of (secondary) control over the environment. This was assessed through (1) the frequency of scientific, magical and religious attributions to life events and (2) its association with locus of control (LOC). According to the previous two studies and what has been reported of New Age beliefs (Hanegraaff, 1996), the New Age group would be expected to use more magical explanations than the other groups, and the Catholic group to report more religious explanations. Regarding one's sense of personal control, Heelas (1996) has proposed that New Age individuals have a high internal LOC – 'the self is the highest authority' –, which is opposed to the more external LOC of traditional religion with its monotheistic belief and hierarchical structure of mediation between the human and the divine.

5.3.1 Method

Procedure

Two measures were used in order to assess the type and frequency of attributions in daily life, and the type of personal control beliefs. The first measure consisted of seven vignettes with short descriptions of hypothetical situations to which participants were asked to provide a personal causal explanation (e.g. “You remember a friend whom you haven't seen or talked to for some months. Some moments later, the phone rings and it is that friend”). One of the vignettes (number 6) was constructed with the intention of eliciting religious attributions, by providing a specific religious background to the event (receiving a statue of the Virgin Mary from a friend). After each vignette participants were asked to write down a brief reply to the question: “How would I interpret this situation?” (see Appendix C for full description of vignettes). The second measure was Levenson’s (1974; 1981) Locus of Control (LOC) scales, with measures for Internal, Chance and Powerful Others control, plus 8 items for God Control (Welton, Adkins, Ingle and Dixon, 1996). Group homogeneity was assessed by the frequency of New Age practices and Traditional Religiosity (see Appendix A).

Participants

This study and the previous one were included in a single questionnaire. Thus, the details reported in chapter 4 for the characteristics of participants are the same as for the current study (see section 4.4.1 under the heading of ‘participants’).

Scoring Code

The vignettes were coded for types of attributions using the following categories:

Scientific – These attributions used a causality of physical processes according to the current scientific understanding.

Magical – These dealt with extra-sensorial processes (telepathy, premonition), and other concepts such as energy, synchronicity, and reincarnation.

Religious – These included attributions to God's agency, or to a metaphysical entity like Our Lady or the Holy Spirit.

Uncodable – This was used to classify the instances when no attributions were made.

This usually occurred when subjects described what actions they would conduct when faced with the event, instead of providing an explanation for it.

Reliability for all categories was calculated by having two researchers independently scoring 20% of the vignettes (480 vignettes). Each category was individually scored for reliability. A score of 1 was attributed if the category was present and 0 if not. Each category could be attributed only once per narrative, though more than one category could be present, as people did sometimes resort to more than one type of explanation. The proportion of agreement for each category of attributions was 0.95 for scientific and magical attributions, and 0.94 for religious and uncodable ones.

For the LOC scales, Cronbach's alpha for the Internal and Chance scales was 0.73, for Powerful Others 0.74 and for the God scale 0.95. The Powerful Others and Chance LOC scales were highly associated ($r = 0.46, p < .001$), and the God and Internal scales showed to be negatively correlated ($r = -0.32, p < .001$). No other significant correlations were found.

5.3.2 Results

Types of Attributions

Table 5.1 depicts the breakdown of the total attributions per group. While both Catholics and Non-Religious participants primarily made scientific attributions, the New Age group used more magical explanations. Catholics were shown to make twice as much magical as religious attributions.

Table 5.1: Frequencies of Types of Attributions per group

	Scientific	Magical	Religious	Uncodable	Total	N
New Age	127	217	15	58	417	52
Catholic	232	77	35	85	429	57
Non-Religious	315	27	3	42	387	54
<i>Total</i>	674	321	53	185	1233	163

To test for the difference between groups a between subjects MANOVA, with Post-hoc Bonferroni tests and with age and sex as covariates was conducted [$F(2, 156) = 23.78, p < 0.001$]. Non-Religious participants ($M = 5.96, SD = 1.54$) used more scientific attributions than the Catholic group ($M = 4.07, SD = 1.94$) and New Age participants ($M = 2.32, SD = 1.89$) used this type of attribution less frequently than both other groups [$F(2, 156) = 48.38, p < 0.001$]. On the other hand, New Age participants ($M = 4.20, SD =$ used more magical attributions than Catholic ($M = 1.35, SD = 1.43$) and Non-Religious ($M = 0.54, SD = 1.04$) people [$F(2, 156) = 74.50, p < 0.001$]. Finally, Catholics ($M = 0.61, SD = 0.82$) gave more religious interpretations than New Age ($M = .028, SD = 0.45$) and Non-Religious ($M = 0.06, SD = 0.23$) participants [$F(2, 156) = 12.99, p < 0.001$].

Table 5.2 reports the frequencies of types of attributions with the breakdown per vignette. Across the whole sample, scientific attributions were predominant and the religious type was the most infrequently used. Magical attributions were employed much more often than religious ones, and almost half as frequently as scientific ones.

Table 5.2: Frequencies of types of attributions per vignette

	Vignt.1	Vignt.2	Vignt.3	Vignt.4	Vignt.5	Vignt.6	Vignt.7	Total
Scientific	107	89	84	98	106	92	98	674
Magical	40	37	64	67	50	26	37	321
Religious	2	—	3	1	—	44	3	53
Uncodable	24	42	31	18	16	25	29	185

Overall, the events described in the vignettes did not elicit very different types of attributions, with the exception of the religious explanations in vignette 6, which had a clear religious setting. For this vignette, Catholics primarily made religious (N=27) and scientific (N=25) attributions, while New Agers gave more magical (N=21) replies, followed by religious ones (N=14). On the other hand, non-religious respondents predominantly gave scientific explanations (N=51). Religious attributions to this event tended to focus on the ‘miraculous’ nature of the event (‘I am being given a sign from God’). On the other hand, magical explanations described it as a manifestation of an energy form or ‘entity’:

(R. 145) I would interpret this as a manifestation of a higher consciousness, but not a “religious thing” per se.

The scientific attributions sought a causal rationale for the event but providing a materialist explanation:

(R. 59) I would be very, very concerned about my mental state and possibly my worldview. But I might put it down to a daydream. If it happened often I’d seek medical help.

Illustrations of the different types of attributions are reported below. Thus, for the first vignette, “You meet someone for the first time but that person seems extremely familiar to you, as if you had met somewhere before”, scientific interpretations such as the following were given:

(R. 1) I would think that perhaps I had seen them in a street/shop or perhaps on television.

(R. 3) I think I would just shrug it off because I’m no good at remembering names and faces.

(R. 60) I would ask myself who they reminded me of amongst my acquaintances.

(R. 76) Déjà-vu is a familiar experience. I suppose it arises from some activity in the brain.

Magical attributions, on the other hand, focused on a link of a non-material ‘energetic’ or reincarnation type:

(R. 112) Our souls have probably met before.

(R. 118) One of 2 possibilities: (1) I had known them in a past life. (2) We have similar/compatible energies or frequency of vibration so ‘resonate’ with each other giving a feeling of familiarity.

(R. 131) I would feel as if I was meant to meet or know this person – that I had something to learn from the situation, generally positive but it could be negative as well.

(R. 139) I would retrace my thoughts and try to remember why I have attracted this person right now. I would then analyse the conversation to determine whether this person has an answer to any of my current life quests.

In contrast with the scientific attributions, there was a self-referential and holistic aspect in the rationale of magical attributions, which depicted the individual involved with or connected to non-material forces and motives. Religious attributions, on the other hand, tended to simply focus on the figure and agency of God (e.g., God wanted me to meet this person and maybe he/she is in need). Illustrations from another vignette help provide a more clear differentiation between magical and religious explanations. For vignette 3 (“You remember a friend whom you haven’t seen or talked to for some months. Some moments later the phone rings and it’s that friend”), magical attributions such as these were given:

(R. 117) I conjured them up, or they were thinking of me. Either telepathy or synchronicity.

(R. 120) This happens to me almost daily – thoughts are living things.

(R. 134) There are no coincidences. This would simply confirm the immense energy in the unconscious and that all that is is one.

(R. 139) As this is my constant experience I know that my thoughts had been directed to my friend causing a thought form in her mind/body system, so it is inevitable that she called.

The type of non-material causes and influences called upon here express a form of interconnectedness between things, as well as the possibility of manipulating extrasensory forces. Religious attributions, in contrast, emphasise God's agency:

(R. 21) I would feel that God had something to do with it – in bringing us together again.

(R. 158) That there's a God and this God is good.

Locus of Control Scales

Table 5.3 shows the results for the LOC scales. To test for differences between groups a between subjects multivariate analysis of variance with Post-hoc Bonferroni tests and with age and sex as covariates was conducted [$F(2, 138) = 28.60, p < .001$]. The results reported in Table 5.3 show that the Non-Religious group had a higher Internal LOC than the other groups. On the other hand, Catholics scored higher than the New Age and non-religious respondents on God LOC and New Agers also had higher scores than non-religious people on this scale. There were no significant differences between groups for Chance LOC. Finally, New Age participants showed a significantly lower score for Powerful Others LOC than the other groups.

Table 5.3 Mean Scores for Locus of Control Scales per Group

	New Age		Catholic		Non-religious		Manova
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F
Internal	30.80	6.31	31.25	5.22	36.22 ^o	4.98	10.62**
Chance	22.12	6.86	23.73	5.69	23.39	5.31	0.79
Powerful Others	18.95 ⁻	6.77	22.73	5.41	22.63	5.01	5.51*
God	26.95 [~]	11.39	33.31 [^]	6.79	8.61	1.75	127.63**

N=142

* The mean difference between groups is significant, $p < 0.01$.

** The mean difference between groups is significant, $p < 0.001$.

^o The mean score is significantly higher for the Non Religious group than for the Catholic and New Age groups.

⁻ The mean score is significantly lower for the New Age Group than for the Catholic ($p < .01$) and Non Religious ($p < .05$) groups.

[~] The mean score is significantly higher for the New Age than for the Non-Religious group.

[^] The mean score is significantly higher for the Catholic than for the New Age and Non-Religious groups.

Correlations were calculated between the types of attributions and the LOC scales (see table 5.4). Scientific attributions were found to be positively correlated with Internal and Powerful Others LOC and negatively correlated with God LOC. Magical attributions showed an almost exact inverse pattern of associations, with significant negative correlations for Internal and Powerful Others LOC, and positive correlations with God LOC. Religious attributions, on the other hand, presented no significant correlation with Internal, Powerful Others and Chance LOC, but only with God LOC. Both magical and religious attributions were negatively correlated with Internal LOC.

Table 5.4. Pearson Correlation Coefficient between LOC Scales and Attributions

	Scientific	Magical	Religious
Internal LOC	0.192*	-0.179*	-0.147
Chance LOC	0.056	-0.111	0.001
P. Others LOC	0.268**	-0.395***	-0.008
God LOC	-0.453***	0.333***	0.408***

N = 147

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

5.3.3 Discussion

Participants involved in New Age practices were found to make frequent use of magical attributions in life events and to use this kind of explanation more often than the scientific kind. This suggests that they use a network of magical meanings in their lives in a similar way that others resort to a scientific framework. On the other hand, religious interpretations were generally seldom used, and even Catholics would more often refer to magical rather than religious explanations. In fact, only when confronted with an episode of a distinctive religious connotation would half of the practising Catholic respondents use a religious, rather than a scientific, interpretation. Following from the previous study which looked at autobiographical life stories, these results confirm the presence of a particular type of cognition in New Age individuals, which involves a sense of non-material interconnectedness, as well as the presence of 'energies' or 'forces', 'entities' and extrasensory perceptions and powers. This type of magical cognition expresses itself in a complex causal chain and differs from religious attributions which concentrate on a single cause.

For the LOC scales, non-religious individuals had the higher Internal LOC and there were no differences between the New Age and Catholic group. However, the New Age group had a lower Powerful Others LOC than both other groups, which attests to a higher disbelief in the possibility of others controlling one's life than Catholics and non-religious people. Although Catholics had shown infrequent religious attributions in the vignettes, they reported a higher belief in God's control than in any other type of LOC. The high results for the New Age group in the God LOC scale were equally unexpected, for their belief system is usually at odds with the concept of 'God' as used in the scale –

it is however probable that they understood the word 'God' in a different way than Catholics did. Non-religious participants had a higher score for Internal LOC than Catholics and New Age individuals. A possible interpretation for this difference is that both Catholic and New Age belief systems emphasise the influence of non-material factors in life, while the secular individual is left to his own physical resources.

The lack of significant correlations between religious attributions and Internal, Powerful Others, and Chance LOC supports the idea that religion, as an explanatory system that helps people to achieve control, works differently from science and magic; on the other hand, both scientific and magical attributions were significantly correlated with Internal and Powerful Others LOC. However, if magical and scientific explanations may provide a more efficient sense of control over the environment, it would be expected that they present a similar pattern of correlations with the LOC, but the opposite happened.

Scientific attributions were positively correlated with Internal and Powerful Others LOC scales, while the opposite pattern of correlations was reported for magical attributions.

This difference may have happened due to the particularities of magical thinking and the LOC scales. Although magical interpretations of the world stress the individual's agency, they also rely on a sense of holistic connectedness with other non-material forces. Thus, the way in which the items of the LOC scale are formulated may be at odds with the sense of connectedness present in magical explanations, by emphasising an individual agency set apart from the open system of influences presupposed by magical thinking.

This assumption is supported by results from the first study, where New Age individuals were shown to emphasise individualist values and self-concepts, similarly to a group of secularised participants, while at the same time stressing an abstract holistic sense of self-identity. Tentatively, it is proposed that because of this holistic-connectedness characteristic of magic, a sense of control may be achieved via the association of the

individual self – and its actions – with non-material forces. This would explain the negative correlation with Internal and Powerful Others LOC and its inverse relationship with the results for scientific attributions.

This study has showed the general predominance of magical over religious attributions in these life events and how New Age people, in contrast with the other groups, use them more frequently than scientific materialist explanations. It was also established that non-religious participants had a higher Internal LOC and that scientific attributions were associated with an internal LOC. The lack of significant correlations between religious attributions and the LOC scales suggests that religious interpretations are unrelated to or do not influence one's perception of control. On the other hand, results for the New Age group on Internal LOC were lower than expected and the pattern of correlations with magical attributions was opposite to that of scientific interpretations. Although a tentative explanation has been given, proposing that control is achieved via non-material forces or entities – which may be controlled by the individual – it is not clear how to explain the results for the Internal LOC. One other way of interpreting these results is by considering that New Age and religious people have a low sense of internal control and that they use magical and religious beliefs to try to enhance their sense of control – but as to whether this works it is unclear.

In the introduction to this chapter, the scarcity of research concerning magical and religious attributions was pointed out. On the other hand, the existent anthropological writings concerning pre-modern societies have seldom been extrapolated into the modern world, where magic has for some time been regarded as a vanishing form of superstitious thought and behaviour. Nonetheless, there have been attempts to explain the survival of magic by stressing its ability to bring meaning, connection, and a sense of

prediction and control to people's lives, whilst a mechanistic scientific view of nature leaves no place for values and purpose (Nemeroff and Rozin, 2000). Magical rationalisations would thus provide the individual with a possibility of unifying the domains of facts and values in one's life (Ashworth, 1980). The cognitive functions performed by magical thinking today seem to be very much the same as those reported in other times and places. Thus, Thomas (1971) has explained how magic and religion were used in different occasions and with diverse aims for "a prayer had no certainty of success and would not be granted if God chose not to concede it. A spell, on the other hand, never need go wrong unless some detail of ritual observance had been omitted or a rival magician had been practising stronger counter-magic" (p. 46). It is possible that although the modes by which magic is expressed and performed may culturally differ, there may be a universal cognitive disposition underlying its different expressions. Adding to this, there is also a motivational characteristic in magical practices and beliefs: its utilitarian and private character, opposed to the communal goals of religion, has been witnessed in the context of pre-modern societies (Hill, 1987) and in contemporary magical groups (Luhrman, 1992).

The present study complements the exploration of the pattern of holistic-individualism undertaken in the first 2 studies by looking at instances of magical attributions in everyday life and perceptions of control. In particular, it has substantiated the hypothesis of a particular cognitive-motivational pattern present in New Age participants, which though presenting a set of unique cultural characteristics, seems to be part of a human disposition that is universally present in magical rites and beliefs. Having established the link between the New Age and magical thinking, the last study will explore New Age practices and beliefs in relation to personality traits and cognitive dispositions.

CHAPTER SIX

Personality and Cognitive Predictors of New Age Practices and Beliefs

General Introduction

The previous studies have uncovered a set of psychological characteristics in the New Age population, including the use of abstract self-concepts, a stress on individualist and universalism values, perceiving oneself as an agent connected with impersonal forces and energies which empower the individual, and the rationalisation of negative events in a positive light by framing them under a set of optimistic (magical) beliefs. Finally, the previous study reported an unusual high frequency of magical attributions in New Age participants and further related New Age beliefs with forms of magical thinking reported by anthropologists and historians. The present chapter reports the last study of this thesis, which attempted to explore the cognitive underpinnings and personality correlates of New Age beliefs and practices.

6.1 Magical Thinking and Schizotypy

The array of magical and paranormal beliefs present in the everyday explanations of New Age individuals is illustrative of their concern with the existence of an intimate connectedness between all things (visible and invisible). Concepts like karma (fate), or the idea of synchronicity (Jung, 1952/1972), are employed as a common cognitive strategy, which allows the individual to establish a virtually unending network of

connections. Thus, it is possible to explain practically any trivial event as if filled with rare significance. The New Age motto that ‘nothing happens by chance’ is taken quite literally, as it leads the individual to cognitively seek a hidden magical significance behind daily events. Whilst these beliefs, like other paranormal ones such as telepathy, are not alien to traditional religiosity, they have tended to be de-emphasised, as the focus is laid on submission to the divine: ‘God knows best’. However, for the New Age, we are all gods and active creators of reality. Such differences could be understood as no more than a sort of metaphysical disagreement; however, the studies carried out so far seem to indicate otherwise. The high frequency of magical attributions is suggestive that New Age people, more than just sharing a set of beliefs, possess a personality and cognitive disposition, which makes them particularly prone to search for meaningful connections between seemingly distant and unrelated objects and events. The personality traits instantly associated with magical thinking usually refer to psychosis, a personality dimension with several components. Claridge (2001) has summarised the 4 main components of psychosis, the first two of which correspond to its ‘positive’ or active symptoms:

- . One of these components concerns the disposition to unusual perceptual experiences and other cognitive experiences – such as hallucinations and magical, or superstitious, belief and interpretation of events.
- . The second, also cognitive, covers more disorganised forms of thinking, such as the tendency for thoughts to become derailed in states of anxiety.
- . A third component – mapping on to ‘negative’ psychotic symptoms (or signs of absence of behaviours) – describes introverted, rather schizoid, features, associated with a deficiency in the ability to feel pleasure from social and physical stimulation (anhedonia).
- . Finally, ‘impulsive nonconformity’ refers, as the label implies, to unstable mood and behaviour and the tendency to break rules or adopt unconventional attitudes. (p. 94)

Different understandings of psychosis range from considering it as a form of schizophrenia or madness, with clear neurobiological indicators, to a personality

dimension. The idea of a psychotic or schizoid personality, as a mild variant of the illness or a cluster of ‘odd’ temperamental traits was first proposed by Bleuler (1911) and developed by Eysenck (1952; Eysenck and Eysenck, 1976), who first addressed it as a dimension of personality variation – psychoticism. Most of the subsequent research was carried out under the rubric of schizotypy for which two main models have been proposed. The quasi-dimensional view of schizotypy originates in the medical tradition and considers schizotypy and normality to be discontinuous, emphasise its genetic basis and treat it as part of a ‘schizophrenia spectrum’ of psychotic disease. The other model proposes a fully dimensional perspective of schizotypy and considers that psychotic traits are not necessarily pathological but represent personality variation. Claridge and collaborators (1997) are the most important proponents of the latter model and have examined how in a range of studies, normal subjects show the same cognitive indicators as found in clinical psychotics. Particularly relevant to the present thesis is Jackson’s (1996) research of spiritual experiences and his proposal that a common schizotypal trait underlies both benign spiritual and psychotic experiences. In his study, both groups of clinical psychotics and of normal schizotypal people reported a high frequency of numinous experiences – though not of the ‘higher’ form of mystical experience. Claridge (2001) has also considered the example of spiritual experiences which, like creativity, are an example of a ‘healthy’ psychoticism, i.e. a form of schizotypal personality which lies on the healthy side of the psychotic continuum. He also considers that the multidimensional nature of psychoticism involves several processes involving affect and cognition, and that one of its key features is a “supersensitivity of perception, thinking and feeling” (p. 105).

Both models of schizotypy share a concern in understanding its genetic and neuropsychological correlates. There is strong evidence indicating a prevalence of schizotypy personality disorder among first-degree relatives of schizophrenics, and schizotypal subjects display a number of the biological/neuropsychological markers for schizophrenia, such as eye-tracking impairment, abnormalities on evoked potentials, and attentional deficits (Lencz, Raine, Benishay, Mills, and Bird, 1995). The American Psychiatric Association has classified Schizotypal Personality Disorder as an Axis II disorder, differentiating it from major disorders such as schizophrenia. Nonetheless, its classification focuses on clinical symptoms rather than on the idea of a personality continuum. Table 6.1 below presents the criteria that are used to diagnose Schizotypal Personality Disorder.

Table 6.1. DSM-IV-TR (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) diagnostic criteria for Schizotypal Personality Disorder

At least five of the following:

- (1) ideas of reference (excluding delusions of reference);
 - (2) odd beliefs or magical thinking that influences behaviour and is inconsistent with subcultural norms (e.g., superstitiousness, belief in clairvoyance, telepathy, or “sixth sense”; in children and adolescents, bizarre fantasies or preoccupations);
 - (3) unusual perceptual experience, including bodily illusions;
 - (4) odd thinking and speech (e.g., vague, circumstantial, metaphorical, overelaborate, or stereotyped);
 - (5) suspiciousness or paranoid ideation;
 - (6) inappropriate or constricted affect;
 - (7) behaviour or appearance that is odd, eccentric, or peculiar;
 - (8) lack of close friends or confidants other than first-degree relatives;
 - (9) excessive social anxiety that does not diminish with familiarity and tends to be associated with paranoid fears rather than negative judgements about self.
-

Claridge and Rawlings (reported in Claridge and Broks, 1984), used the DSM-III diagnostic criteria of Schizotypal Personality Disorder to construct a scale which measured schizotypy as a personality continuum. The Schizotypal Personality Scale (STA), with 37 items, was later subjected to psychometric analysis with a sample of 420 adults, and 3 robust factors identified as magical ideation, unusual perceptual experiences and paranoid ideation and suspiciousness were uncovered (Hewitt and Claridge, 1989). Studies using this and a more recent scale (O-Life) have provided support for the fully dimensional model of schizotypy (Claridge, 1997). As a continuum of personality, schizotypy is characterised by particular styles of perception and associative thinking which, at the extreme ends of the continuum, may lead to aberrant mentation and mental illness but also to exceptional creativity (Claridge, 2001).

A wide range of studies, correlating the STA with cognitive tasks of negative and subliminal priming, have reported that highly schizotypal subjects have difficulty in suppressing irrelevant material from conscious awareness (Williams and Bleech, 1997) and show a 'leaking' of preconscious activation (Evans, 1997). In this latter experiment Evans (1997) reported that individuals scoring high on the STA showed an enhanced preconscious activation in subliminal priming tasks. In these tasks, the subject is presented with a visual stimulus, which she is not able to consciously report and the subliminal effects of this stimulus are then recorded upon another conscious stimulus. The results are then measured in an indirect way by looking at the facilitation or inhibition effects. This led Evans (1997) to propose – following from previous research on schizophrenia (see Frith, 1979) – that schizotypal traits are related to the 'leaking' of preconscious activations, which normally need to be suppressed, into current awareness. In another set of studies, Williams and Beech (1997) reported that subjects high on the

STA showed a facilitation effect in filtering out information in negative priming tasks. Negative priming refers to the delay in responding that occurs in response to a target stimulus that was actively ignored on a previous trial. These results led them to suggest that schizotypal subjects can use distracting information to actively enhance later processing. Furthermore, the authors relate this facilitating effect of irrelevant material, which normally should have been suppressed, to the occurrence of hallucinations through the intrusion of 'irrelevant' information into consciousness. These studies showing a particular cognitive disposition associated with schizotypy do not stand alone. Lencz and colleagues (1995), in a summary of neuropsychological research, have similarly concluded that most studies indicate schizotypy to be associated with a decreased inhibition in the contents of consciousness.

One other often employed scale in the measurement of schizotypy is Eckblad and Chapman's (1983) magical ideation scale, which taps magical and paranormal ideas and experiences. Brugger and colleagues have correlated the Magical Ideation scale with a series of tasks and indices, including olfactory perception, EEG, and semantic priming. In these experiments, they have reported positive correlations between magical ideation and left temporal lobe dysfunction (Mohr, Rökrenbach, Laska, Brugger, 2001), a loosening or disinhibition of semantic network functioning (Pizzagalli, Lehmann, Brugger, 2001), and an overactivation of the right hemisphere (Pizzagalli, Lehmann, Gianotti, Koenig, Tanaka, Wackermann, Brugger, 2000).

6.2 Cognitive Looseness and Thin Boundaries

The cognitive mechanism associated with pre-conscious 'leaking' or 'decreased inhibition' of perceptions into conscious awareness, has been referred to as a process of cognitive looseness. Brugger and colleagues have reported that people high on magical thinking (MT) and paranormal beliefs were able to make stronger semantic associations between remotely connected stimuli (Brugger and Graves, 1998; Gianotti, Mohr, Pizzagalli, Lehmann, Brugger, 2001; Mohr, Graves, Gianotti, Pizzagalli, Brugger, 2001) and to see more meaningful patterns in a visual display of random dots (Brugger, Regard, Landis, Cook, Krebs, Niederberger, 1993). In the latter article, they argue that such a cognitive disposition, which leads the individual to make close associations between random events, can also account for the emergence of magical and paranormal beliefs. Such a cognitive mechanism is associated with the prevalence of schizotypal personality traits and might also be correlated with the high engagement in MT by New Age individuals.

A number of related concepts have been put forward to try to explain this mechanism which leads to uncommon perceptions and beliefs. Thalbourne and Delin (1999) have proposed the notion of transliminality referring to individual differences in the extent to which ideas and affects are able to cross the threshold of conscious awareness. They report that people high on transliminality tend to have a better dream recall, to have a greater number of spiritual experiences, and to believe in the paranormal. Earlier, Deikman (1966) had talked about a process of de-automatization of the ordered structures of perception and cognition, underlying mystical experiences. More recently, Claridge (2001) quotes Anthony's (1987) concept of 'skinlessness', referring to a supersensitivity of perception, thinking, and feeling.

The notion of looseness, though accounting for the cognitive process that might underlie MT and schizotypy, leaves out an affective or emotional character to which these concepts are referring, and which play a central role in the New Age individual's psychology. In contrast with traditional religion, which tends to devalue the strong display of sentiments, the New Age emphasises emotional self-expression and personal experience of 'expanded states of being'. This leads to experimenting with techniques conducive to altered states of consciousness, in which the boundaries between the outer and inner self, the rational and intuitive levels, the physical and spiritual worlds, are claimed to be bridged. Rather than being pure intellectual notions, the New Age idea of connectedness and holism are taken in a very real physical-emotional sense (e.g. a physical illness is typically understood to be the reflection of an emotional or psychological imbalance).

In this context, Hartmann's (1991) proposal of a dimension of personality related to thickness-thinness of boundaries is particularly appealing, as it provides a junction between cognitive looseness and another more emotional aspect of the disposition to uncommon beliefs and experiences. Several types of boundary are considered to exist *between* the individual and the environment, including body and interpersonal ones, and *within*, such as those related to thoughts and feelings, and states of awareness and sleep. A person with thin boundaries would be characterised as someone who tends to blend thoughts and feelings, to make fluid associations between events, to be hypersensitive in terms of affect, particularly susceptible to daydreaming and fantasy, and to report experiencing unusual experiences such as clairvoyance. Hartmann's (1991) questionnaire comprises perceptual, cognitive, affective and interpersonal factors, accounting for a variety of personal characteristics such as vivid imagery, feelings of synaesthesia,

fluctuating identity, fragility, and isolation. Hartmann, Harrison, and Zborowski (2001) have reviewed a set of studies conducted using the boundaries questionnaire, where thin boundaries were shown to correlate with 'transliminality', hypnotisability and suggestibility, insecure attachment and openness to experience. People with thin boundaries have been found amongst art students, persons reporting unusual mystical experiences, and persons with a diagnosis of Borderline and/or Schizotypal Personality Disorder.

Hartmann (1991) summarises the distinction between thick-thin boundaries as the difference between insulation and connectedness. This sense of connectedness is of a cognitive and affective kind but does not extend into the interpersonal domain, as people with thin boundaries typically present difficulties in feeling part of a group. This characterisation quite adequately describes New Age individuals, whose sense of magical interconnection is a heuristic for everyday life, while their practices do not oblige them to engage in the type of group membership characteristic of traditional religiosity.

6.3 Study 4

The purpose of the current study was to examine the relationship between involvement in New Age practices and beliefs and certain aspects of personality and cognitive functioning. Magical thinking and unusual perceptual experiences have been reported to be fundamental components of schizotypal personality traits (Mason, Claridge, and Williams, 1997). The process underlying these components may also have an affective component related to a particular hypersensitivity and fluidity between thoughts and feelings, and states of consciousness. It was then hypothesised that adherence to New

Age practices and beliefs would be associated with schizotypy, cognitive looseness and thin boundaries. A combination of personality questionnaire measures and experimental tasks were used to assess this. Following from the previous studies, differences between the New Age and a traditional Christian orientation were also expected.

6.3.1 Method

Participants

In contrast with the previous studies where particular groups were sought, this study used a normal population. This was so because of the more controlled and experimental nature of the study, which required participants to come into the Department of Experimental Psychology, but also in order to provide a more straightforward generalisation of the results.

Ninety-nine subjects were recruited through subject panels in the Oxford University Departments of Experimental Psychology and Economics, and through public advertisements. All subjects were native English speakers and had no history of psychiatric or neurological disease. Each subject was paid £3, plus travelling expenses, for participation in the study. Fifty-four per cent of the participants were students, thirty two percent were employed, and the remainder were retired.

There were 56 female and 43 male participants. The average age was 38.2 (s.d. 21.1), ranging from 17 to 79. The mean age for females was 35.9 (s.d. 20.5) and for males 41.3 (s.d. 21.6).

Materials

Test materials consisted of religiosity measures for New Age Practices (NAP), New Age Orientation (NAO) and Traditional Religiosity. Personality questionnaires comprised the STA and magical ideation (MI) as measures of schizotypy, and scales for neuroticism, and boundaries. Two experimental tasks that measured cognitive looseness by the use of a visual and semantic association test were also carried out.

Questionnaire Measures

1. Religiosity Scales

New Age Orientation (NAO). This 22-item scale developed by Granqvist and Hagekull (2001), focuses primarily on New Age beliefs and attitudes, such as paranormal phenomena, Karma and reincarnation, interest in “alternative” treatments, religious syncretism and holism. Participants were asked to rate each statement on a 6 point scale, 1 indicating ‘Strongly Disagree’ and 6 ‘Strongly Agree’. Examples of items are: “The whole cosmos is an unbroken, living whole, that the modern man has lost contact with”, “I believe that a person’s deeds are stored in his or her karma”, “Spirituality to me is above all realising my true nature or becoming one with the cosmos”.

The alpha reliability for this scale in the sample tested was 0.92.

New Age Practices had an alpha reliability of 0.74 and *Traditional Religiosity* had an alpha of 0.91. These scales have been used in the previous studies and its description can be found in Appendix A. Because of the correlational design of this study, results for these scales are reported below and not in the Appendix.

2. Personality Scales

STA. This 37 item scale for the measurement of schizotypy was developed by Claridge and Rawlings (see Claridge and Broks, 1984), and modelled on the DSM-III criteria for Schizotypal Personality Disorder. Examples of items are: “Do you believe in telepathy?”, “Do you feel it safer to trust nobody?” and “Are you very hurt by criticism?”.

The alpha reliability for this scale in the sample tested was 0.83.

Magical ideation (MI). This 30 items scale developed by Eckblad and Chapman (1983) asks about interpretations of personal experiences rather than mere beliefs (e.g., precognition, reincarnation, telepathy, spirit influences). The scale was originally designed as an index of schizotypy and in a 10 year follow-up study it has proved to be a reliable indicator of psychosis-proneness (Chapman, Chapman, and Kwapil, 1995). Although this scale refers mostly to a factor of magical-paranormal beliefs/experiences, Eckblad and Chapman (1983) report that it shares about one half of its variance with a perceptual aberration scale. Other studies (e.g., Brugger et al, 1993) have decomposed the scale and used only the items measuring paranormal experiences (e.g., telepathy, premonition). Examples of items are: “I have had the momentarily feeling that I might not be human”, “I have sometimes been fearful of stepping on sidewalk cracks”, “If reincarnation were true, it would explain some unusual experiences I have had”.

The alpha reliability for this scale in the sample tested was 0.82.

Neuroticism (N). Eysenck and Eysenck’s (1991) EPQ-R short scale with 12 items was used. This scale is frequently employed to measure emotional reactivity, anxiety and susceptibility to negative mood. In this study, it was also used to control for possible response bias in the visual experimental measure, as high anxiety might account for

participants' performance in this task. The shorter, rather than the full scale version, was used to reduce the total length of time of the experimental procedure. Examples of items are: "Are you an irritable person?", "Are you a worrier?", "Do you often feel lonely?".

The alpha reliability for this scale in the sample tested was 0.82.

Boundaries. The scale developed by Hartmann (1991) consists of 138 statements that are rated along a 5 point scale, zero indicating 'no, not at all, not at all true of me' and four 'yes, definitely, very true of me'. A higher score indicates thinner boundaries. Examples of items are: "I am very sensitive to other people's feelings", "I am easily hurt", "I feel unsure of who I am at times".

The alpha reliability for this scale in the sample tested was 0.92.

Experimental Measures

Word Task. One hundred and one animal-fruit/fruit-animal pairs (e.g., dragon-mango, pear-rat) from a list of randomly paired words of fruits and animals, taken from Brugger and Graves (1998), were used. Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they found these words associated in their own minds, on a six-point scale, 1 indicating 'not at all associated' and 6 'very closely associated'. This procedure had been previously used in association with the magical ideation scale, for which moderately significant correlations had been reported with remotely associated pairs of words (Brugger and Graves, 1998; Mohr, Graves, Gianotti, Pizzagalli, and Brugger, 2001).

Visual Task. This consisted of a random display of 100 dots changing each 4500 milliseconds being shown on a screen to participants, for a period of 10 minutes. The procedure took place in a dimly lit room and all responses were tape recorded for scoring. Participants were told that they would be looking at changing patterns of dots, some of which were random and some of which were programmed to show something. They were then instructed to describe whenever they saw something recognisable (e.g., a figure or a scene). This procedure was used for the first time by Jakes and Hemsley (1986), in a study of psychosis and hallucinatory predisposition and later adapted to study delusional perceptions and belief in extrasensory perception (Brugger, Regard, Landis, Cook, Krebs, and Niederberger, 1993). For this experiment, we used the same scoring code as in Jakes and Hemsley's (1986) article, taken from Zuckerman's (1969) review of sensory deprivation studies and types of visual hallucinations. A two-fold categorisation in simple and complex types of visual patterns was used. Simple types consisted of reports of simple geometric shapes (e.g., circles, squares, lines) or letters and numbers. Complex types referred to meaningful objects or integrated/animated scenes (e.g., static or moving people and animals, objects and landscapes). Zuckerman (1969) reports that expectancy or set influences only simple types of patterns, and Jakes et al. (1986) found that only complex patterns are correlated with a measure of hallucinatory predisposition. Thus, report of complex, rather than simple, visual patterns is the most reliable index of a cognitive disposition to unusual perceptions and looseness of associations.

Procedure

Each subject was individually tested in a room at the Department of Experimental Psychology. The experiment took about 50 minutes to be completed.

6.3.2 Results

Questionnaire Measures

Table 6.2 presents the means and standard deviations of scores on questionnaire measures, for both sexes. Females scored significantly higher on all scales, except Boundaries. Gender differences on the religiosity scales suggest that women are keener adherents to New Age practices and beliefs than men, and also show to be more active participants in Traditional Religiosity. There were no significant age differences for sex.

Table 6.2. Means and standard deviations of scales, and t-values (N=97)

	Total		Female		Male		<i>t</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>s.d.</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>s.d.</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>s.d.</i>	
New Age							
Practices	1.5	0.5	1.59	0.48	1.33	0.40	2.80**
New Age							
Orientation	2.6	0.8	2.79	0.79	2.36	0.79	2.67**
Traditional							
Religiosity	3.0	1.8	3.31	1.81	2.59	1.67	2.05*
STA	14.1	6.2	15.16	5.99	12.65	6.30	2.02*
Magical							
Ideation	7.6	6.2	8.50	4.77	6.37	4.73	2.21*
Neuroticism	4.9	3.2	5.45	3.05	4.16	3.28	2.01*
Boundaries	260.9	45.7	261.91	44.93	259.7	47.23	0.24
Age	38.2	21.1	35.9	20.5	41.3	21.6	0.21

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Logarithmic transformation was applied to the NAP and age variables to correct for a skewed distribution, and outliers were deleted. After correction, Pearson correlations were calculated between all questionnaire measures and age (see table 6.3). The New Age scales were highly correlated with each other and both showed a very similar pattern of associations with the personality measures. New Age practices and beliefs were strongly

correlated with MI, thin boundaries, and the STA. No significant association with N was found.

In contrast, Traditional Religiosity showed no significant associations with any of the personality measures. A weak correlation with the NAO was reported, which may be attributed to an overlapping of the New Age with some beliefs of a religious superstitious nature, concerning the existence of special spiritual places, fate, premonitions and contact with the dead. The NAO scale also presented a weakly significant correlation with age, which did not occur for NAP.

Table 6.3. Pearson correlation coefficient between scales and age ($N = 99$).

	New Age Practices	New Age Orientation	Traditional Religiosity	STA	Magical Ideation	Neurot.	Boundaries	Age
New Age Practices	—	0.54**	0.15	0.29**	0.42**	0.13	0.34**	0.09
New Age Orientation		—	0.24*	0.28*	0.42**	0.14	0.20*	0.22*
Traditional Religiosity			—	0.05	0.08	-0.02	0.01	0.06
STA				—	0.74**	0.62**	0.40**	-0.51**
Magical Ideation					—	0.38**	0.47**	-0.43**
Neuroticism						—	0.08	-0.37**
Boundaries							—	-0.43**
Age								—

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

The STA showed weaker correlations than MI for both New Age scales. In order to explore the reasons for this, the STA was divided into three scales, following Hewitt and

Claridge's (1989) analysis in which they report 3 factors. These factors were divided into three measures: Magical thinking with 9 items ($\alpha = .53$), unusual perceptual experiences with 10 items ($\alpha = .63$), and paranoid ideation with 8 items ($\alpha = .79$). Pearson correlation results showed a significant association between magical thinking and NAP ($r = .35$) and NAO ($r = .49$). On the other hand, unusual perceptual experiences and paranoid ideation failed to correlate significantly with either of the New Age scales. However, as two of the factor scales showed lower alphas than would be expected the validity of these results must be taken with caution.

Additionally, the STA, MI, Boundaries and New Age scales were checked for overlap of items, in particular those concerning magical-religious beliefs/experiences, such as telepathy, premonition, reincarnation and contact with the dead. These items were eliminated from the total scores in order to verify their overall importance to the results. Elimination of the overlapping items did not affect the high correlations between MI, the STA and Boundaries. The New Age scales were equally strongly correlated with each other ($r = .56$) and the association between NAP and the personality measures was not affected. However, the NAO showed a moderate decrease in correlating with MI ($r = .24$) and the STA ($r = .14$), though for Boundaries the association was not weaker than the one reported before ($r = .24$). Overall, this indicates that the measures used do not owe the strength of their association merely to a similarity of items, but more probably to a common factor underlying seemingly unrelated items.

Experimental Tasks

Table 6.4 presents the descriptive statistics for the experimental visual task. These variables were subsequently subjected to logarithmic and square root transformations for normalisation of distributions.

Table 6.4. Means and Standard Deviations of Experimental Visual Task ($N = 99$)

	Mean	SD
Total Simple reports	2.4	3.9
Number of different simple reports	1.9	2.9
Latency of first Simple report (sec)*	169.5	176.8
Total Complex reports	20	20.5
Number of different complex reports	16	15.8
Latency of first complex report (sec)**	73.8	120.6

* $N = 50$; ** $N = 84$

‘Total simple reports’ and ‘total complex reports’ refer to the absolute number of patterns visualised by participants. The number of different simple and complex reports account for only the original visualised patterns (and not the repetitions). Participants showed a higher frequency of complex than simple reports. They also had a shorter latency time for complex reports. The lower N for simple reports and their latency times are the consequence of only 50 subjects reporting simple visual patterns.

The Word Task ($M=1.8$, $S.D. = 0.7$) presented a very low mean score, which means that respondents generally found the pairs of words remotely associated (the rating was from 1 to 6, 1 being a remote association).

Table 6.5 presents the correlations between the experimental visual task and the other measures. While the indices of simple patterns generally failed to achieve a significant association, all personality measures with the exception of N were moderately to strongly correlated with frequency of report and latency time of complex visual patterns. A

significant, though weaker association occurred for NAP, but not for the NAO scale.

Finally, the negative correlation between age and the report of complex reports indicates that younger people tend to see more complex visual patterns in a random display of dots.

Table 6.5. Pearson correlation coefficients between the experimental tasks, questionnaire measures and age ($N = 99$)

	New Age Practices	New Age Orientation	Trad. Relig.	STA	Magical Ideation	Neurot.	Boundaries	Age
Simple Patterns								
Total simple reports	0.16	0.18	-0.04	0.03	0.18	-0.19	0.20	-0.03
Number of different Simple reports	0.19	0.17	-0.04	0.09	0.22*	-0.14	0.24*	-0.08
Latency of first simple Report	-0.18	-0.12	0.01	-0.07	0.05	0.04	-0.07	-0.01
Complex Patterns								
Total complex reports	0.29**	0.18	0.09	0.38**	0.45**	0.10	0.35**	-0.32**
Number of different Complex reports	0.25**	0.18	0.04	0.39**	0.45**	0.11	0.36**	-0.29**
Latency of first Complex report	-0.24*	-0.15	0.16	-0.28*	-0.31**	0.04	-0.30**	0.12

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

The word task failed to reveal any significant correlations with the New Age scales but it showed a significant correlation with Magical Ideation ($r = .20, p < .05$) and with Boundaries ($r = .33, p < .001$). It also showed a significant negative correlation with age ($r = -.33, p < .001$). Finally, correlations between the two experimental tasks revealed that there were two indices of the visual task significantly associated with the word task: ‘total complex reports’ ($r = .29, p < .01$) and ‘number of different complex reports’ ($r = .29, p < .01$).

Regression Models

As reported in the previous section, New Age scales showed significant correlations with all personality measures, except N. NAP was also associated with report and latency of complex patterns. To identify the best predictors of New Age practices and beliefs multiple regression analyses were carried out. The stepwise method was used with NAP and NAO as the dependent variable, and the STA, MI, Boundaries, N, age and sex, as independent variables. For NAP, the results for the most significant model emerging are reported on table 6.6.

Table 6.6: Regression Model for New Age Practices

Predictor Variable	Beta	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
Magical Ideation	0.33	3.12	0.002
Sex	-0.25	2.77	0.007
Boundaries	0.27	2.56	0.012
Age	0.20	2.06	0.042
Adjusted R ² = 0.25			

MI, sex, boundaries and age were the most significant predictors of NAP. The same statistical procedure was used for the New Age Orientation scale. A similar model emerged (see table 6.7), though more powerful than for the other scale.

N was not a significant predictor in either of the models. For NAO, if MI was excluded from the independent variables, the STA reached significance ($t = 4.11, p < 0.001$).

However, the resulting model was weaker (adjusted R² = 0.34) than the one reported in Table 6.7. Overall, MI and thin boundaries are the best individual differences predictors

for New Age practices and beliefs. Sex and age were also found to be significant predictors.

Table 6.7. Regression Model for New Age Orientation

Predictor Variable	Beta	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
Magical Ideation	0.529	5.71	< 0.001
Age	0.571	6.41	< 0.001
Sex	-0.214	2.71	0.008
Boundaries	0.270	2.14	0.012
Adjusted R ² = 0.42			

Further analysis was conducted for the indices of the experimental visual task showing significant correlations with the majority of the questionnaire measures. Latency time, ‘total’ and ‘number of different’ complex reports were used as dependent variables, in separate stepwise regression analyses, and all questionnaire measures, plus sex and age, were included as independent variables. For all three analyses MI emerged as the only significant predictor. For both ‘total complex reports’ ($t = 4.97, p < 0.001$) and ‘number of different complex reports’ ($t = 4.98, p < 0.001$), the MI scale showed a reasonable goodness-of-fit (adjusted R² = 0.20). However, for the ‘latency’ index the model was much weaker ($t = -2.92, p < 0.01$; adjusted R² Square = 0.08).

A similar analysis was conducted for the word task, having the questionnaires measures and the visual task indices as dependent variables. Using stepwise regression, the only significant predictor that emerged was Boundaries ($t = 3.43, p = 0.01$) but the resulting model was weak (adjusted R² = 0.10).

6.3.3 Discussion

The results of this study indicate that New Age practices and beliefs are associated with schizotypal personality traits, particularly concerning magical ideation. Multiple regression analysis revealed that magical ideation was a strong predictor of adherence to the New Age. The STA was strongly correlated with magical ideation ($r = 0.74$), but its association with the New Age scales was weaker, and so was its predictive power in a multiple regression model, compared with magical ideation. The differences between these two schizotypy measures regarding New Age adherence can be attributed to the multiple factorial nature of the STA, and that it is the magical thinking factor, rather than paranoid ideation and unusual perceptual experiences, which is more strongly correlated with the New Age scales. Otherwise, the STA and magical ideation measures present a very similar pattern of correlations with age, boundaries and the experimental task. They also behave similarly regarding sex, as women score significantly higher than men in both scales.

This gender difference for schizotypy was also found for New Age adherence. Women practice New Age spirituality more often and have more New Age beliefs and interests than men. That women are generally more religious than men has been widely established (Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, and Gorsuch, 1996) and it is also indicated in this study as women score higher on the Traditional Religiosity scale. On the other hand, sex and age were shown to be significant predictors of New Age adherence. This finding, which demographically circumscribes New Age individuals to a particular population, is supported by a previous large-scale study (Rose, 1996), where New Agers were found to consist mostly (70%) of middle aged women.

The results from the experimental visual task generally mirror those of Jakes and Hemsley's (1986) original study¹, where no significant associations were found between simple reports and personality measures, but frequency and latency of complex reports were shown to correlate with psychoticism². In their study, seeing complex reports was also significantly correlated with a measure of hallucinatory predisposition. In the present study, both schizotypy scales and boundaries were associated with complex reports but only the NAP scale showed a significant correlation with these reports. As a measure of a behavioural nature, this scale offers a more reliable link between the practice of New Age techniques and a particular cognitive style, than the simple endorsement of a set of attitudes and beliefs, as measured by the NAO scale. On the other hand, the word association task revealed no significant association with the New Age scales and only a weak correlation with one of the schizotypy measures. The difference between the results for these two experimental scales, both of which intended to assess cognitive looseness, is not clear. However, the multiple regression results showed that MI was a predictor for seeing complex patterns in the visual task, and that Boundaries was a predictor for making closer associations between remotely related words. These results suggest that these measures may actually be tapping somewhat different cognitive processes. As both measures have been seldom used, more research needs to be conducted for clarification on this matter.

¹ The two studies show some differences in the descriptive statistics. Participants in the current study report a much higher frequency of complex than simple patterns, whilst in the original experiment the opposite is described. This may be due to differences in the experimental procedure, concerning the number of dots per display and the exposure time. Such supposition however cannot be verified because this was not reported in Jakes and Hemsley's (1984) paper. In contrast with their results, no significant correlation between N and the total number of complex reports was found in this study, which might indicate that reports for this index are not necessarily affected by a higher internal arousal, as they had suggested.

² It should be noted that the psychoticism scale is different from the STA and MI measures of schizotypy, in that it directly addresses impulsivity, a characteristic which may interfere with the report of visual patterns (i.e., people with low impulsivity may see a visual pattern but not report it as often as an individual with high impulsivity).

Further to this, multiple regression analyses showed that magical ideation is also the most important predictor for New Age practices and beliefs. To fully understand the particular schizotypal profile of the New Age individual, one must consider the coexistence of a hallucinatory and delusional *perceptual* factor, which the magical ideation scale also taps into (Mason, Claridge and Williams, 1996), with another *ideational* factor comprising magical and paranormal experiences/beliefs. Williams (1994) has used cluster analysis to look at the multidimensional nature of schizotypy and the existence of different combinations of schizotypal traits. She refers to a particular cluster of schizotypal people who are relatively high on magical ideation, along with a low level of physical and social anhedonia, suggesting that these individuals experience primarily ‘positive’ aspects of schizotypy – ideational and perceptual disturbances.

Although this cluster generally describes the schizotypal profile suggested by the present results, still one must consider the specificity and overwhelming centrality of the magical ideation factor for the New Age adherents. Comparing a group of believers in the paranormal, with schizotypal and schizophrenic subjects, Williams and Irwin (1991) have reported that there is a distinct cognitive style for believers in the paranormal. In particular, they argue that while in the schizotypal and schizophrenic groups participants tended to attribute randomness and chance a great role in their lives, believers in the paranormal framed their concepts in terms of fate (karma) and personal choice and responsibility.

For the New Age, the particularities of the cognitive style, and personality traits of its adherents are made clearer by the results of the Boundaries scale. Thin boundaries were strongly correlated with both schizotypy measures and were a significant predictor of New Age adherence in multiple regression analysis. The thin boundaries construct

accounts for some characteristics of the New Age spirituality, such as the sense of 'connectedness' and 'holism' as described in the first study in relation to holistic individualism, which is a pattern of individualism characterised by an emphasis in values of self-enhancement and abstract-universal self-concepts. The particular emotional hypersensitivity and cognitive looseness, which characterises people with thin boundaries, may account for unusual self-concepts, such as 'I am a bridge' or 'I am many souls'. In the first study, New Age participants also reported a lower frequency of social self-concepts, characterised by community and family self-descriptions, than traditional religious people.

Hartmann's (1991) description of the individual with thin boundaries, includes a sense of social alienation, of not belonging to any particular group, a particularly associative thinking style, but most importantly an emotional vulnerability or hypersensitivity. In New Age practices and beliefs one finds explicit reference to the development of one's emotional sensitivity, in a 'holistic' and expansive way so that the individual is led to experience how 'everything is connected'. Visualisation and free association techniques are often used, graphic symbols are employed to 'unleash' unconscious capacities, paranormal and channelling faculties are trained, and rituals are devised to ward off negative influences.

The emotional hypersensitivity measured by thin boundaries provides a valuable clue to the profile of the New Age individual. Like the visual task, it seems to tap into a basic process rather than mere beliefs. In contrast with William and Irvine's (1991) assessment of paranormal believers as having a particular cognitive style which differentiates them from schizotypal people, the results of the current study suggest that New Age individuals' magical beliefs and attributions possess a cognitive disposition that is

characteristic of schizotypal personality. Adding to the correlations with two schizotypy measures, the results on the visual task and the Boundaries scale are strong indicators of the presence of underlying structures which may dispose the individual to unusual perceptions and ideas.

None of this, however, is meant to pathologize the New Age individual. As advocated by Claridge and collaborators' (1997) fully dimensional model of schizotypy, the latter is a personality trait subject to individual variation, where psychosis would only be one of the outcomes of this dimension – one pathological and the other healthy. Commenting on spiritual experience, which is at the heart of the New Age ideology, Claridge (2001) has argued that it is an exemplary case, like that of creativity with its style of high associative thinking, where psychoticism has a perfectly healthy outcome. Peters (2001) summarising the research done with members of New Religious Movements, like Druids and Hare Krishna, and comparing them to Christians, non-religious people, and deluded patients, concludes that the members from these non-traditional religious groups are at the intersection of the continuum between 'normal' and psychotic or deluded individuals.

Results show that traditional religiosity was unrelated both to the personality measures and the experimental tasks. A possible interpretation for the different results between New Age practices and beliefs and traditional religiosity is based on the often reported negative association between religiosity and psychoticism, suggesting that Christian religious people would be more tender-minded, conformist and readily conditioned (Francis, 1993). Thus, traditional religious people would be understood to be more socially conformist than those individuals taking part in 'alternative' religious activities. On the other hand, another group of people (consisting mostly of women) may be drawn to New Age practices and beliefs because of a personality and cognitive disposition to

magical ideation and unusual perceptual experiences. After all, the New Age seems particularly apt to frame these ideas and experiences into a meaningful belief system, while traditional religiosity has often been suspicious of personal claims to experiences and ideas that did not fit into the established creed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusions and Implications

General Summary

Traditional religious practices and beliefs have been declining for the past century, while other forms of religiosity – sometimes labelled by sociologists as ‘spiritual but non-religious’ or ‘un-churched’ – have slowly become more visible. The most popularised form of this new religiosity is a set of heterodox practices and beliefs stemming from the countercultural sixties which puts together alternative therapies, Oriental techniques, with psychological concepts and Quantum physics theories to be used for one’s own individual ‘spiritual journey of healing and transformation’. While sociologists and anthropologists have been debating the nature and characteristics of New Age practices and beliefs, divided as to whether it represents a ‘return of the sacred’ or an advanced form of secularism, psychologists have mostly remained absent from this debate.

The New Age claims to be a mystical movement, putting together the perennial core of all religions for the purpose of individual spiritual self-development. This thesis started by reviewing previous literature on the New Age. Some of the central themes of concern are its relation to modernity and to alternative esoteric forms of knowledge which are opposed to mainstream religion, as well as the social and psychological implications of its modern individualistic and universalistic self-transcendent aims. The studies undertaken in this thesis have attempted to contribute to the study of the New Age by using a psychological framework that addressed the motivational, cognitive and personality

implications of adherence to New Age practices and beliefs, by comparing New Age participants or a New Age orientation with a traditional form of Western religion and a purely secularised perspective.

A wide range of psychological measures were used including individualism/collectivism and values scales, analysis of autobiographical life stories, types of causal attributions to life events, personality measures and experimental tasks. The first study showed that New Age individuals emphasised more individualistic values than Catholics, but still differed from Non-Religious individuals in that they stressed more self-transcendence values and abstract holistic self-concepts. The second study found that New Age individuals focused more on agency than on communion themes in their description of 'high point' life events, in contrast to both traditional religious and non-religious participants. This study confirmed the individualistic motivations of New Age people and further showed how its holistic optimistic ideology was present in their stories of empowerment and in the positive rationalisation of negative affect. The third study reported New Age participants to make more magical than naturalistic attributions, in contrast with the other groups. This study also attempted to distinguish between magical and religious forms of thinking and to justify the use of magical thought for its pragmatic capability of endowing the individual with a sense of control over the environment. Some parallels were also drawn between the New Age magical beliefs and anthropological and historical accounts of magic, pointing out the similar cognitive pattern. The fourth and last study, which used a general population, uncovered a significant correlation between the adherence to New Age practices and schizotypy, thin mental and emotional boundaries, magical ideation and a loose cognitive-perceptual style. This last study also found that women and people with a disposition towards magical

ideation and thin boundaries were more likely to adhere to New Age practices and beliefs.

This thesis has contributed to a better understanding of an emerging system of beliefs and practices that has achieved a wide popularity in the contemporary world. It also hoped to serve as an incentive to further the psychological exploration of the nature and implications of adherence to new forms of religiosity and magic, as well as the need to study religion from a multidimensional perspective which takes into account beliefs, practices and a range of motivational, cognitive and personality variables. However, its limitations should also be considered. The content analysis carried out in the study of autobiographical events can not fully account for the complexity of these narratives, even with the use of a further scoring system for types of affect in the ‘substantial change’ life stories. Likewise, the elicitation of types of attributions through vignettes served the purpose of establishing the frequency of naturalistic, magical and religious explanations, but did not allow for a clear understanding of the way in which these attributions may involve somewhat different forms of cognition, particularly in their systems of causality. Further to this, the Locus of Control results did not show the expected high internal control for New Age individuals, as expected, and it is unclear whether these individuals are usually lower on control than non-religious people. Another important limitation concerns the lack of a more direct assessment of the emotional correlates of New Age practices and beliefs. Although study 2 touched upon it by looking at types of affect and study 4 reported an association with emotional hypersensitivity, there is the need to study this aspect in more detail – especially if one considers the importance the New Age ideology attributes to emotional expression, and the association between individualism and a stronger emphasis on one’s internal attributes (Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

After having summarised the main findings of this thesis and having considered some limitations, its implications will now be discussed.

7.1 The New Age: A Kind of Magic?

After a lengthy rational effort to study the New Age, it is appropriate to be reminded of the more holistic mindset promoted by the New Age, by quoting from one of its British leaders:

“I wake up and wash. I light a candle and then meditate. I walk to work aware of the contours of the Earth beneath the concrete of the city. I greet each situation as an event in my education. I am aware of the energy of the people I meet and the invisible dance between us. I seek to hold myself grounded and loving, and yet be genuine and empowered” (Bloom, 1991: 221).

In a few sentences this author touches upon central notions of the New Age ideology: awareness, energy, education and empowerment. The study of the psychological implications of this worldview carried out in this thesis allow us to help refine our way of looking at the New Age, regarding both the (indigenous) claims of its mystical nature and its academic characterisation.

The New Age Holistic Individual

The first two studies of this thesis allowed us to go beyond both the conceptualisation of the New Age individual as someone purely hedonistic or a consumer of ‘esoteric’ goods (Bruce, 2000), and as someone who is simply espousing attitudes of ‘moral individualism’ (Houtman and Mascini, 2002). The New Age individual was found to espouse a hybrid form of individualism, which was called ‘holistic’ because of its association with

universalism values and abstract global self-concepts. Thus, although the type of individualistic motivations found in the New Age shares fundamental characteristics with a purely individualistic secularised outlook, which emphasises values of self-direction, stimulation and hedonism, nevertheless, the New Age individualism fosters values of universalism more than Catholics and non-religious people. At the same time, the New Age individual also de-emphasises competitive forms of individualism – thus being closer to what Bellah et al. (1996) called the expressive type of individualism. This type of individualism is illustrated by the New Age stress on processes of self-discovery, on finding one's uniqueness and deeper or true self. The holistic component of this individualism of self-discovery, particularly salient in the highly abstract self-concepts in which the individual tends to see him or herself as a process, a metaphor or part of a universal force, helps us understand the New Age type of individualism in a new light. The New Age holistic individual is more than a narcissistic agent, absorbed in self-contemplation; he or she is always *connected* to subtle forces, entities or processes of transformation. The second study shows this holistic character in the narratives of empowerment which are simultaneously centred upon the person but reflect an individual which rather than being isolated is linked to non-material forces or entities. This holistic component has primarily to do with a type of associative cognitive process which does not bear the same connotation of hierarchical transcendence that may be found in traditional religion. In this way, the several dimensions of being (body and spirit) and realms of manifestation – vegetal, animal, human, divine – can indeed be visualised as a circle within which all the elements coexist in an equalitarian basis, as depicted by Woodhead and Heelas (2000). A similar type of holism has been observed in pre-modern collectivist groups (Shweder and Bourne, 1982) and its association with a secularised type of individualism represents a new social phenomenon.

Whilst addressing the debate on the 'selfish' versus the 'transforming and transcendent' character of the New Age, this thesis has attempted to provide a neutral characterisation of the psychological motivations and cognitive processes associated with New Age practices and beliefs. In terms of values, New Age individuals show to be high both on self-enhancing and self-transcendent motivations. However, the data from the first two studies also shows that the New Age holism associates the individual with abstract forces rather than a concrete collective (e.g., fewer social self-concepts and lower communion themes). The last study provides an important element to further step away from the moralistic debate and understand the holistic individualist profile of the New Age as a cognitive-emotive style, related to thin mental and emotional boundaries. The person with thin boundaries is at once particularly sensitive, associative, imaginative, prone to experience unusual perceptual experiences, and more likely to not be part of a group and to be emotionally fragile. This type of profile is not exclusive of New Age people. Similarly, it is possible to conceive that holistic individualism is a construct which may be gaining social prominence, particularly in the sphere of activities where there is a concern for the global environment (e.g., ecological activism), or in health care occupations where the whole well-being of the individual is addressed (for the case of nurses, see Hedges and Beckford, 2000). Finally, it is important to take into account that there is a variety of people taking part in New Age activities, some of them more likely to emphasise the holistic abstract style and universalistic values, while others are more individualistic, even in a particularly hedonistic way.

The New Age as a Modern Kind of Magic

The New Age emphasis on individualistic values (self-direction, stimulation and hedonism) is characteristic of modern secularised societies. Taking into account that the

New Age emerged in historically Protestant countries (Britain and the USA), the New Age form of individualism is more likely to find its roots in the Protestant emphasis on the privacy and autonomy of the self, the valuing of religious feelings and experiences, and the subsequent introduction of Romantic ideas of individual uniqueness (Lukes, 1973), than in an ancient esoteric Western tradition. After all, the similarities between New Age ideas and traditions such as Neoplatonism cannot cloud the overwhelming differences. In this sense, Plotinus' maxim 'Strive to bring back the god in yourselves to the Divine in the universe' (Henry, 1962) when contrasted with the New Age motto – 'Find the god in yourself' – highlights the New Age impulse towards self-discovery as an empowering self-referential process. This also represents a main difference with the more traditional forms of religiosity, which orient the individual towards a community and a higher theological principle than that of the individual's worth. However, there is more to the New Age than a simple reshaping of individualism with an 'esoteric' or magic garb. Its holism, defined as an abstract way of attempting to draw and see connections between things and events, and to seek empowerment through association with non-material forces or entities, reflects a universal cognitive disposition towards magical ideation and unusual perceptions.

What are the possible reasons for the re-emergence of magic in the modern world, in the form of New Age practices and beliefs? The first thing to note is that what is called a re-emergence may be an overstatement. Jahoda (1969) and Vyse (1997) have documented how magical and superstitious beliefs have never been eradicated and Hanegraaff (1996) has described the plethora of magical movements which, if anything, have only grown in number since the Renaissance. Undoubtedly, magical beliefs can be culturally emphasised at certain times and places and it is possible that magical thinking today may help bring meaning and a sense of prediction and control into people's lives – especially when

religion has lost its power as a provider of meaning and science is only concerned with facts (Ashworth, 1980). However, this thesis suggests that the engagement in New Age practices and beliefs cannot be explained by a general societal framework alone. Regarding societal influences, the New Age is today a widely available choice in most urban settings and in contrast to church-based religiosity emphasises a non-communal form of ideology, and a dislike for hierarchical group structures/goals and interpersonal competition. Still, this does not explain why certain people are drawn to the New Age and not other religious or counter-cultural secularised movements. This question may be partly answered by looking at the characteristics of New Age participants. Heelas's (1996) remark that the New Age attracted people who are half-way converted – i.e. individuals who are attracted and disposed to belief in its tenets because their own values and assumptions are close to what the New Age offers – is particularly insightful for a psychological enquiry. This thesis has showed that apart from a demographic profile which makes middle aged women more prone to adhere to the New Age, these individuals have a personality and cognitive disposition towards magical ideation, unusual perceptual experiences and an emotional hypersensitivity. These characteristics are not mere social-cultural constructions; in fact, recent experimental evidence has showed important neuropsychological correlates of magical ideation, which indicate its biological basis (Brugger et al, 1993; 1997; 1998; Pizzagalli, 2000; Mohr, 2001). On the other hand, the type of individualistic values emphasised by the New Age, its own scientism which puts together science-like notions with magical ideas, are culturally construed. Bruce (2001) has summarised his ideas on the fall of traditional religious and the rise of the New Age in the following terms:

If we wish to identify a model in our days of what religion beyond the sects will look like in fifty years' time, we should look not at the liberal Christian denominations which are doomed, but at the world of New Age spirituality: a world in which individuals select from a global cafeteria ideas, rituals and therapies that appeal to them. (p. 100)

But if the New Age is a magical belief system entailing particular psychological characteristics which are more salient in some individuals, its modern appeal is not enough to understand how a person may become more actively involved in its practices and belief system. If the scenario drawn by Bruce became a reality, even then the evidence from the studies reported above suggests that there would be people more easily drawn to New Age magical practices and beliefs than others by virtue of personality and cognitive dispositions.

The Making of a New Ager

The research presented in this thesis has followed the criterion of sampling New Age individuals by reference to their active engagement in New Age practices. The final study also used a more general scale of New Age Orientation, with specific beliefs and attitudes, which was found to be highly correlated with the scale of New Age Practices. But what is/are the processes involved in the ‘making of a New Ager’? What draws people to its practices and ideology? The research undertaken for this thesis has uncovered several variables which are associated with New Age practices and beliefs. It is likely that a combination of a holistic-individualist motivational pattern with personality and cognitive dispositions to magical ideation, unusual experiences and emotional hypersensitivity will make an individual prone to adopt New Age practices and beliefs. This, however, is not deterministic. After all, the data from these studies does not allow for a detailed causal model of New Age ‘conversion’. In other words, it cannot be totally ruled out whether involvement with the New Age may be the main cause of the psychological pattern observed. On the other hand, an individual with a disposition to magical thinking and schizotypy personality traits need not hold New Age beliefs or engage in New Age practices – although a person with such characteristics would have a

higher probability of becoming involved in the New Age. As Lurhman (1992) found in her ethnographic study, it is only after some time of involvement with magical practices and beliefs that the individual starts rationalising everyday events as meaningful and connected to supernatural powers and influences. Contrary to the New Age claim that it is the experience which guides the belief, she did not find that people abruptly started adopting magical beliefs as the result of a sudden transcendental experience. However, referring to her own participation, after several months of frequent involvement with magical beliefs and practices, she found herself to be able to start thinking magically and even to have hallucinatory-like experiences:

“I kept a dream diary to record my dreams, and my dreams became vivid, filled with magical ideas and symbolism, often mythlike; far from a tapestry of the day’s events. By the end of the first year I read magical novels avidly in the way that one should read magical novels, with an uncritical child-like absorption in the story. In the midst of a novel on Arthurian Britain I woke early one morning to see six druids beckoning to me from the window. This was not a dream, but a hypnopompic vision. I saw the druids as I see my desk. And while the momentary vision frightened me, it also pleased me deeply, because it taught me experientially what I had learnt intellectually...” (p. 319).

Similarly, engagement in New Age practices and beliefs would involve a process of learning of a set of techniques and of integrating a belief system. Future research should address more explicitly this learning process and look at other variables that might influence the adherence to New Age practices and beliefs, particularly health related issues, such as stress or life threatening events.

Hanegraaff (1996) has argued that the New Age is a form of cultural criticism which adopts a more intuitive, holistic and anti-reductionist approach to life. People would then be drawn to the New Age because as a system it addresses the emotional and mystical side of human nature. It is indeed very probable that what draws people to the New Age has less to do with a conscious rational choice of adhering to a counter-cultural

worldview but with psychological dispositions which, alongside the cultural dissemination of New Age practices and beliefs, lead the individual into its loose network. This view does not exclude the possibility that a person might voluntarily – perhaps out of intellectual curiosity – approach the New Age and be psychologically ‘transformed’ by its practices and beliefs. However, given the stability of personality traits and cognitive dispositions, and taking into account the particular gender and age characteristics of the New Age, this is unlikely. Considering these characteristics it is much more probable that involvement in the New Age will lead to a reinforcement of pre-existing psychological dispositions.

The Consequences of New Age Practices and Beliefs

New Age individuals consider themselves to be positively transformed by New Age practices and beliefs (Rose, 1996). Very little of the data gathered in this thesis can be used to directly support or oppose this statement. Nonetheless, it is possible to provide some suggestions on this matter. In the previous section it was argued that it is less likely for a psychological transformation to occur in virtue of adhesion to New Age practices and beliefs, than for reinforcement of certain personality and cognitive dispositions. The results on the motivational correlates of New Age practices and beliefs show that the New Age individual is generally ruled by motivations of an individualistic, non-communal and universalistic type, which look primarily at connecting the individual to abstract forces and processes. Thus, if a transformation happened – leading to the adoption of harmony and universalism values – it would most likely occur within the private individual sphere, involving abstract magical forces rather than other people. The association with thin mental and emotional boundaries should also be considered as to whether the hypersensitivity and social withdrawal (difficulties in feeling part of a group)

which characterise this construct may not be another factor in drawing people towards private magical practices rather than communal religion. Future research should attempt to study if New Age practices may be promoting a sense of social withdrawal. It may be that even practices which involve a group will lead the person only into particular 'protected' types of social interaction, because of its magical framework.

Still, one might consider that the central point of the New Age ideology is not about an overt but an inner 'spiritual' transforming experience. No attempt was made in this thesis to specifically focus on religious or spiritual experience, but previous research on schizotypy and spiritual experiences has been carried out. Looking at a sample of individuals who report a high frequency of spiritual experiences and a high schizotypal trait, Jackson (1996) clarifies that the reported spiritual experiences were not 'higher' forms of mystical experience (encompassing feelings of profound meaning, insight, well-being and unity) but reflected instead extra-sensory perceptions, and feelings of being in an altered state of consciousness. Another kind of ontological distinction addressing the differences between spiritual and psychological levels of experience has been drawn in the philosophy of religion and it has been argued that the New Age ideas confuse these two levels of being (Silva, 1997). The general difficulties in addressing spiritual experiences and studying its psychological correlates are not made any easier by the New Age subjective and private definition of such experiences.

Finally, the contrast with the traditional religious group has to be considered. Kemp (2004) has suggested that the "New Age is a different form of religion or spirituality compared to Christianity, just as Christianity is a different form of religion compared to Buddhism or other religions" (p. 99); this bold statement has proved to be true for this

thesis in its first proposition. New Age practices and beliefs are not only different as a set of rituals and ideas but are associated with a set of psychological characteristics which contrast with traditional religiosity. This contrast was firmly established in the first two studies where Catholics emphasised more collectivist values, a hierarchical structure of group goals, more social based self-concepts and a balance between agency and communion motives. The third and fourth studies further substantiated the difference between the New Age cognitive magical ideation and the traditional religious group's prominent use of scientific attributions, as well as the lack of significant correlations with personality and cognitive indicators. On the other hand, the type of motivational and cognitive pattern underlying the New Age suggests that this is a magical system of practices and beliefs, similar to that of pre-modern societies. Although the distinction between religion and magic is today regarded among anthropologists as ethnocentric (see Cunningham, 1999), this thesis has provided a strong claim in its favour. This distinction is autonomous from the positivistic notion of magic as a stage of human evolution prior to that of science and religion. It does, nonetheless, point towards a differentiation which focuses on cognitive functioning and has motivational and emotional implications. Last but not least, it should not be overlooked that magical thinking is associated with and usually involves irrational superstitious behaviours (Jahoda, 1969), illusions of control (Vyse, 1997) and errors of judgement (Brugger and Graves, 1997). Further research addressing the psychological differences between magic and religion is needed. This thesis used a contrast group of Catholics but it cannot be asserted whether the results would be the same if other traditional religious samples would have been used instead. The psychological understanding of religion has been mostly limited to Christianity and only recently has there been research suggesting similar motivational patterns for other religions (Saroglou and Galand, 2004; Schwartz and Huisman, 1995). Contrary to Kemp's (2004) relativistic stance on the New Age as a different form of religion, this

thesis suggests that future research should consider the existence of religion and magic as different systems of non-material beliefs, each presenting its own set of psychological features.

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