The roots of the

NEW AGE

PART ONE

The New Age movement is hardly novel! Its philosophy is rooted in ancient traditions, often based on mystical experiences, each within a different context.

Anthropologically, there have always been (wo)men within "primitive" societies who were looked upon as possessing special knowledge and power. Medicine men, or shamans, had undergone a spontaneous catharsis, or were initiated and felt called upon to maintain contact with the spirit world for the clan.

When communities became more complex and organized there was little place for these loners. Society began to specialize, people realized and felt drawn to form groups, guilds, or societies, to ensure continuance and growing perfection. Contact with the spirit world was given into the hands of organized religion, which also provided an established answer to questions about the unknown and the Highest Power.

People who felt endowed with special powers could hardly adapt themselves to the corset of established faith. They went underground. Yet they endeavoured to contact kindred spirits and pupils willing to follow in their footsteps to pass on the work.

Esoteric tradition became handed down in spiritual groups, communes, or fraternities. Their mutual devotion resulted in a high degree of perfection comparable to the guilds of craftsmen. In their mystical experiences they beheld a spiritual reality that could hardly be reconciled with the dogmatic representation given by the churches. When passing on their experiences, they had to exercise extreme caution, lest being accused of heresy. Yet knowledgeable minds would understand their veiled writings, symbolic representations, or even gestures.
In spite of all hindrances and opposition, hidden (occult) spiritual tradition reached unknown shores! One of them being Europe, where interest in ancient traditions was revived at various times.

Interest in these traditions alternated. After periods of decline, often as a result of cultural and political conditions, a growing need for revival of old almost forgotten values followed. The occult tradition seems so tremendously powerful that it cannot be suppressed. It develops in cycles of flourishing and decline - each renaissance with a fresh approach, adapted to the spirit of the times.

Renewed interest in these spiritual, religious and magical traditions had a tremendous impact on the minds of man. The latest revival in a popularized form is that of the New Age movement in the late sixties. The following is a brief sketch of its origins, divided in the following chapters:

- **Grecian mysteries and philosophy**
- **Gnosticism**
- **Jewish mysticism and the Kabbalah**
- **Alchemy**
- **The Renaissance**
- **Freemasonry**
- **The Rosicrucians**
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**Part two:**
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- **Spiritualism**
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- **The Fourth Way**
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**European traditions**

**Grecian mysteries and philosophy**

The 7th to 5th centuries B.C. are characterized by a remarkable global birth of religio-philosophical ways of thought of astounding profundness: Lao-tse and Kung-Fu-tse (Confucius) in China, Buddha and Mahavira in India, Zarathustra in Persia, the prophets in Palestine and the philosophers of Greece. An attempt was undertaken by all these great sages to transcend the old myths and superstitions of their time and present an in-depth approach. An abstract, mystical way of seeing and experiencing reality was being paved.

Some of these wisdom traditions became embodied in Greek culture. Western European man came into contact with their ideas through contacts with the Middle East and in particular translations of Greek
philosophical works into Latin. The Greeks set them also on the trail of Egyptian culture and religion. Knowledge about this great civilisation came to the Occident indirectly however in its Greek version. Actual contact with Egypt did not exist.

The Greeks, in their syncretistic turn of mind, absorbed in their philosophy the essence of religious traditions that reached them from other cultures through trade or wars. Egyptian initiation rites, Thracian Orphic mysteries and other ritual and cult practices were amongst the many that were adopted readily.

God Hermes Trismegistus (=thrice great) was considered by them to be identical with the ancient Egyptian God of wisdom Thoth. Modern research has shown, however, that the Egyptian magical and mystical works attributed to Hermes were written in the second and third centuries A.D. These ideas became known as the Hermetic philosophy. Its most important work is the Corpus Hermeticum, a compilation of fifteen texts on astrology, alchemy, theosophy and theurgy.

**Gnosticism**

In the first centuries of our era a wild variety of Christian sects, being off-shoots of Jewish belief, sprung up. The Christian faith had absorbed mythical speculations of other religions of the region in the course of time.

The various Gnostic sects played an important part in early Christianity. Their influence and tradition was suppressed when faith became fused with the ruling power. Not only took the Roman Empire the life of one of the Jewish messiahs, also his faith became the basis of a state religion to add to the glory of emperor Constantine in the 4th century.

Gnosticism remained a source of inspiration, however, for the few who knew of its ideas, which were kept secret. At the centre was the belief that the seen and unseen world is the manifestation of the One Divine Being. Gnostic texts concern the fall of man from the divine to the material world. The spark of divine light imprisoned in man is to be set free so that it may return to the Kingdom of God.

Gnosticism reached the Western world through Egypt. The neo-platonic Gnostic school of Alexandria became its centre in the first centuries A.D. Its thought influenced many heretical West-European sects, such as the Kathars in the Middle Ages, who were fiercely persecuted, and mystics as Jacob Boehme (1575-1624).

These Middle Eastern traditions reached Europe in the eighth and ninth centuries A.D.. Baghdad had become the great intellectual centre by then. Scientific and philosophical studies were disseminated through the Moorish emirate of Cordoba, Spain. The universities of Granada and Saragossa made translations available of the great Greek classical works from Arabic into Latin.

**Jewish mysticism and the Kaballah**

Another tradition that reached the Occident was that of Jewish mysticism. Their esoteric doctrine the 'Kaballah' (meaning: tradition) appeared in Jewish mystic circles in Spain and Southern France in the 12th century. Its oldest part, the Sefer Jetsira, was written between the third and sixth century.

According to this belief God gave a second revelation to Moses together with the Law. It explained the secret meaning of the Law. This revelation is said to have been passed on down the ages by initiates. Cabalist studies in the Hebrew scriptures developed in a theosophical mystique and sometimes in a sort
of unintended religious magic.

Shortly before the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 Pico della Mirandola in Florence conceived a Christian version of the Cabala. He associated the Cabalistic truths with those of Greek Hermeticism. Thus an amalgam was introduced between the tradition attributed to the Greek Hermes Trismegistus and Jewish mysticism purportedly descending from Moses.

Alchemy

The name 'alchemy' is derived from the Arabic el-kimya, Khem being the name for Egypt where it was practised even before the Christian era. It blended with the magic and mysticism of the legendary Greek Hermes Trismegistos which became known as the Hermetic philosophy.

In the fourth century A.D. alchemy evolved to its historical form. Its tradition reached Europe through Muslim alchemists in Spain in the twelfth century.

Mediaeval Alchemy contained Gnostic elements. In its popularized form it is considered the art of mutation of metals. Yet, it went deeper than that. It issued from the assumption that matter is alive and may grow. With the right rituals matter could be influenced to transmute into higher forms.

Under the cover of semi-scientific experiments its practitioners followed a secret tradition. Thus, in its mystical sense alchemy was not a search for the philosopher's stone, the transmutation of metals into gold. Its deeper aspect was the search for purification of the soul, the mystical transmutation of the mind necessary for obtaining direct divine knowledge.

There were genuine and false alchemists in medieval times. Amongst them were noblemen and common people, clergymen and laymen, Jews and Christians, scientists and simple artisans, philosophers and illiterates, doctors and magicians, in short from all classes of society. They wandered through Europe from one place to another. They felt themselves cosmopolitans and as such held close relationships with one another. They had their secret societies, with signs and passwords. It was an oral tradition principally, from ear to ear - mouth to mouth. All that was written down was disguised in order to give the impression that it concerned chemical experiments only.

In spite of their being persecuted more and more they kept practising their art secretly. Nevertheless their ideas had an indirect influence on society.

One of the leading exponents of alchemy became the Swiss Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, called Paracelsus (1493-1541)

The Renaissance

The Renaissance movement of the 15th and 16th centuries was born out of a disenchantment with the Mediaeval philosophical and theological way of thinking. A return to the source of knowledge of the distant past was being advocated.
Although the Renaissance movement is usually known for its influence on art and literature, in recent years it is realized that it was also accompanied by a renewed interest in the study of old occult Neoplatonic and Hermetic traditions.

Around 1450 a Platonic Academy was founded in Florence. In 1471 a Latin translation of the recently rediscovered Greek *Corpus Hermeticum* (see above) appeared. The translation aroused renewed interest in the Hermetic philosophy of the Greeks and went through many editions.

The magical mystery religion of ancient Egypt, being the oldest civilization one had any knowledge of, exercised a great fascination over the Renaissance men. The mysterious hieroglyphs were considered to be symbols of hidden knowledge revealed by God to men that could not be passed on in words. Symbols and gestures became means of conveying truths and values. The cosmos was seen as an organic unity. It was peopled by a hierarchy of spirits which exercised all kinds of influences and sympathies. The practice of magic became a holy quest, a search for knowledge, not through the intellect, but by revelation to the pure in mind.

**Freemasonry**

The influence of the fresh interest in wisdom traditions in the wake of the Italian Renaissance movement also found its expression in Freemasonry, which became organized in lodges around 1600 in Scotland.

Modern Freemasonry springs from the Medieval stonemasons who wandered from one town to the other looking for assignments to build a church, or even a cathedral, which required enormous skill, intellectual and organizational talents. Guilds were set up in order to guard the secrets of their craft.

The prestige of the architects, whose edifices were an object of great admiration, was high. Being a member of the guild was considered a privilege and had to be earned. Members recognized each other not only by passwords, but also by their devotion and philosophy which was laid down in the so called *Old Charges*. The earliest version of this credo of the Freemasons, dates back to 1400. Later versions circulated in the 16th century.

The Old Charges embody the Hermetic quest for the lost wisdom of the ancients. The Freemasons placed emphasis on morality and the study of geometry.

Ancient Egyptian knowledge and the masters behind the great architectural design of the lost Temple of
biblical king Solomon were in high esteem and a source of inspiration for the development of masonic creativity.

Masons felt also akin to the revered building guilds of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome. The amazing architectural skill of the ancient builders was attributed to supernatural powers. With great devotion their treatises on geometry and mathematics were being studied when they became available.

These craftsmen belonged to the "operative" side of Freemasonry. Later members of the upper classes were admitted as well to Masonic lodges. Their pursuit of occult and spiritual sciences, may have been responsible for the development of a "speculative" side.

The aspiration of Freemasons for more freedom of thought, political and religious reform, made it paramount that the activities were conducted in utmost secrecy. Eventually the "operative" elements would disappear.

In Scotland William Schaw (1550 - 1602) is considered to be the brain behind the re-organisation of the mason guild. In Great Britain Elias Ahmole (1617-1692) was the forerunner. In the diary of this astrologer is a record of his initiation in 1646 into Freemasonry, which already counted many members then, none of them being stonemason by profession by that time.

The Rosicrucians

Associated with these traditions is the Rosicrucian movement which appeared in the seventeenth century. They should not be mistaken for the modern Rosicrucian groups, which have no direct connection with the ancient movement.

At the basis of their emergence is the publication in 1614 of a pamphlet, named *Fama* (see image) (of the Fraternity of the Meritorious Order of the Rosy Cross) addressed to the learned in general and the governors of Europe. Its author is presumably Johann Valentin Andraea (1586-1654), a young German Lutheran pastor. It purported to be a message from certain adepts concerned for the condition of mankind. In truth it is thought that its source was a brotherhood of disappointed Lutherans who were not satisfied with the results of hundred years of Reformation.

In the *Fama* it was proposed that all learned men throughout the world should join forces towards the establishment of a synthesis of science. Behind this effort stood allegedly an illuminated brotherhood - the children of light, who had been initiated in the mysteries of the Grand Order. This "Brüderschaft der Theosophen" was said to be founded by Christian Rosencreutz (1378-1484), who had become an initiate during his travels in the Middle East in the fifteenth century. He founded a brotherhood which was supposed to have operated in secret ever since.

The pamphlets of the Order of the Rosy Cross were probably inspired by Hermetic and Neo-Platonic
scriptures which circulated at the time. *The Faerie Queene* of Neoplatonist Edmund Spenser, and published in 1590 concerns an English knight 'Red Cross'. The Rosicrucian philosophy also contained elements found in alchemistic writings such as the conception: "As above, so below" - signifying that man mirrors the whole universe. Other ideas are reminiscent of those of the great alchemist *Paracelsus* *(see photo)*

The Rosicrucian manifesto created quite a stir in European circles. Although many applied for initiation there are no records of the brotherhood having survived long. By 1623 the German Rosicrucian movement was crushed under the weight of the Counter-Reformation led by the Jesuits. The occult Renaissance had come to an end. The tide of witch-hunts had begun.

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**The Age of Enlightenment**

The grip of fundamentalist Christianity weakened in the course of the following decades. The weltanschauung of European man was ever broadening out. The world seas were being explored and contact made with other cultures. The increasing population in an expanding and more demanding society called for inventive skills. European civilization struck root. Man of genius contributed to its culture. Exploring nature with an intelligent mind became a coveted pursuit. A new kind of philosophy emerged, distinct from the Christian world-view of medieval theologians.

The Age of Enlightenment can be said to have begun in 1687 by the publication of Isaac Newton's; *Philosophiae naturalis principia mathematica* (Mathemetical Principles of Natural philosophy). It was the basis of exploring nature in an objective manner. The best minds dedicated themselves to this critical pursuit: Galilei, Robert Boyle, René Descartes, Francis Bacon. Diderot began publishing instalments of his famous *Encyclopédie* in 1751. Alchemy was still considered a scientific pursuit and is being described in the encyclopedia in quite favourable terms.

The idea of freedom of thought emerged. Holland attracted many persecuted Jewish, Huguenot and other refugees for its liberal religious views. Spinoza in Amsterdam contributed to biblical scholarship. For the first time critical notes were placed behind biblical texts. Stripping the Bible of its holy mystery had become common place by the 18th century. Critical deism attacked and downgraded conventional Christianity. Voltaire, Rousseau, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin are rated among the deists.

The esoteric tradition had less to fear now. Its followers dedicated themselves to exploring that what had not been explained as yet. Their views were widely current. Newton displayed a great interest in alchemy and other occult sciences.

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**End of part One**

[Click here for PART TWO](http://www.xs4all.nl/~wichm/newage3.html)

Containing:

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*Spiritualism*
Theosophy
Krishnamurti
The Fourth Way
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Literature and links

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