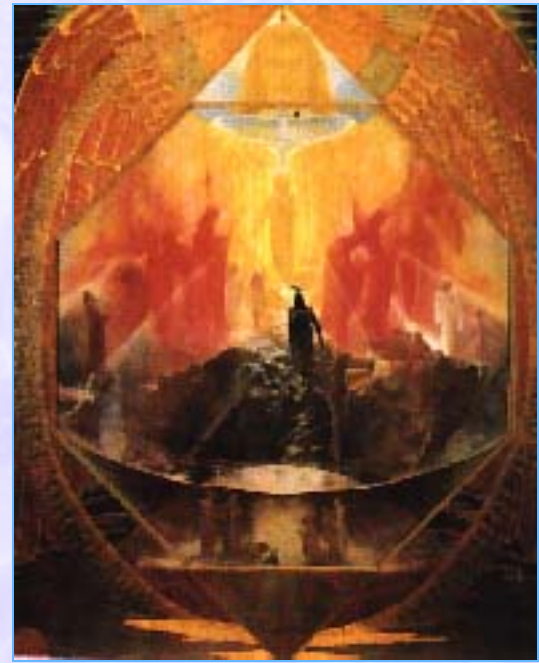


# The roots of the NEW AGE

## PART TWO



### The oriental renaissance of the 18th century

The philosophers of the 18th century were disenchanted with the state of civilization they saw around them. Praise of another culture became popular. China was one of them. *Chinoiserie* appeared on furniture and porcelain. Operas and plays had Chinese themes. Some even considered the wisdom of Confucius superior to the tenets of Christianity.

The fascination with the Orient reached its peak during Romanticism (1790-1815). Western scholars had begun to study Sanskrit in the 17th century. But it was not until the 19th century that translations of Indian scriptures became available in the West.

French scholars took the lead. Along with Sanskrit (1785) other languages were deciphered: Pahlavi in 1793, cuneiforms in 1803, hieroglyphs in 1822, and Avestan in 1832. The path was now paved to the treasures of Eastern thought. Authentic texts of Buddhism were discovered by Hodgson in 1821 while living in Nepal. He obtained 400 Sanskrit and Tibetan volumes. A Pali grammar was published in 1826 by Burnouf and Lassen.

A young Hungarian, Csoma de Koros, went so far as to enter monastic life in Tibet in 1850. Prinsep deciphered inscriptions of Ashoko between 1834 and 1837.

The study of Islam and the Far East was well on its way. Authorities in Semitic, Indic and Chinese published its literature. Translations of pre-Islamic writers, Persian poets and mystics, along with Chinese poetry were printed one after the other.

For the first time Oriental religious philosophy became generally accessible. It led to a veritable *Oriental Renaissance*. The philosophy and way of thought contained in the Eastern scriptures astounded the Western cultural elite towards the middle of the 19th century and influenced such philosophers and writers as Schopenhauer, Goethe, Heine, Nietzsche, Shelley, Emerson, Baudelaire and de Balzac.

A greater respect grew for Eastern religions now that their great works appeared in print. In 1784 Wilkins published the *Bhagavad Gita*. Translations of the Rig Veda, Mahabharata, Upanishads, Vishnu Purana

and Lotus sutra followed, along with an "Introduction à l'Histoire du Bouddhisme Indien" by Burnouf. The spiritual approach of the re-discovered religions was felt as a relief from the prevalent Christian dogmatism. The idea emerged of the unity behind all religions.

## Spiritualism

In the wake of change of values some spiritual movements gained a fresh following. When in 1848 Marx began his "Kommunistisch Manifest" with : "A ghost wanders through Europe", spooks made a stir in Hydesville (N.Y., U.S.A.). Daughters of the Fox family managed to communicate with the spirit of a dead man by means of raps. The press saw to it that these events became nationwide news.

Belief that spirits of the deceased can be seen and communicated with is of course as old as mankind.

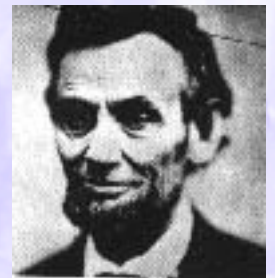


*Mesmer hypnotizes somnabule*

In the early part of the nineteenth century (*Mesmerism*) had already paved the way for **Spiritualism**. Its healing method through "animal magnetism" and work with trance-induced states was seen as another proof that mind could rule matter. Spirit involvement in healing was implied. Some of these ideas found their way in the *New Thought* and *Christian Science* movements.

Spiritualism came in the wake of the inventions of the telegraph and telephone that made it possible to send messages over long distances. It was presumed that communication with the dead - nowadays called *channeling* - might be discovered soon. The sensational reports of the Fox family communicating with the dead made holding seances at home a popular pastime.

Even president Lincoln (photo) had contact with mediums and took part in seances. At the European courts the situation was no less different. The spiritualistic movement was under way, claiming millions of believers.



## Theosophy

It was **Madame H.P.Blavatsky** (HPB for insiders) who forged the European esoteric tradition, Spiritualism and the Oriental Renaissance into one coherent system that took on aspects of a religion. She provided it with a secret doctrine, a martyr (herself), a mysterious origin and finally, but not in the least, she gave it the form of a (semi-religious) fraternity. She claimed to have received from Masters of Wisdom a key to the mysteries long kept secret from mankind. This *White Brotherhood* - these pioneers

of mankind - were thought to reincarnate at all times to enlighten mankind with their advanced ideals and culture.



*H.P. Blavatsky and her masters Morya, Koot Hoomi and Prince Ragoczy*

Thus she presented a remarkable and revolutionary concept of life in the universe. At the same time she gave man a new purpose of living based on Indian concepts of *karma* and *reincarnation*. It stressed man's responsibility and advocated high moral principles.

In spite of ridicule these ideas and approach made a deep impression on late nineteenth century's society and is still the foundation of the *New Age* movement.

Yet, without her being aware of it, HPB's philosophy was imbued with the spirit of the age. In her system the intellect could unriddle the mysteries of the universe. Her motto "There is no religion higher than truth" was aimed more at intellectual exploration, than intuitive insights gathered through meditation and contemplation as was the case with mystical theosophy (without capital!) of former ages. In all fairness it should be said that in later years Theosophy stressed the importance of development of intuitive insight through the practice of Eastern disciplines such as Raja yoga and meditation.

Of the original purpose of the *Theosophical Society* when it was founded in 1875, "the study of ancient and modern religions, philosophies and sciences", little remained. Instead it became an exploration of the views of Mme Blavatsky on this subject. These were strengthened to a great extent by her claim that she was guided by Masters. These great men with their extraordinary powers purportedly communicated with her telepathically as well as in "precipitated" letters, which came to her in mysterious ways. At first she received them from the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor in Egypt. Later they came from the White Brotherhood in far away Tibet.

Proof of existence of such Mahatma's, as portrayed by her, has never been found. However, there is a case for acquaintances of HPB, with spiritual qualities less than alleged, having stood model for them. (See "The Masters Revealed", below).

HPB' view of life appears to have been strongly influenced by Maçonic tradition she came in contact with in childhood and from members of lodges, especially in Cairo and Paris before she moved to the U.S.A. The Mahatma Letters have the appearance of psychic communications, and are strongly influenced by her personal circumstances.

This in itself should not detract from their value. After all parts of the Old Testament fall in the same category.

We owe it to HPB that she gave mankind a grand vision of the universe as opposed to the corset of the narrow-minded dogmatic outlook of Christianity at the time. It was generally believed then that creation took place some six thousand years ago. She countered by postulating that it was billions of years ago and that mankind lived for millions of years on Earth. She introduced also the concept of a holistic universe. The popularity of present-day ideas of *reincarnation* and *karma* - now household words - can be traced back to her.



*Annie Besant*

At the time that she was hounded by scandalous rumours she found a worthy successor in *Annie Besant* (see photo) in 1889. A woman of extraordinary talents and a great orator. Historian Arthur Nethercott writes: "During her eighty-five years Annie Besant lived many lives, some of them so incredible that it seems impossible they were lived at all." Besides giving fresh impetus to Theosophy, she was also to give India back its respect for its own culture. She was a powerful force in the campaign for Indian Home Rule before Gandhi and later Nehru took over.

### Krishnamurti

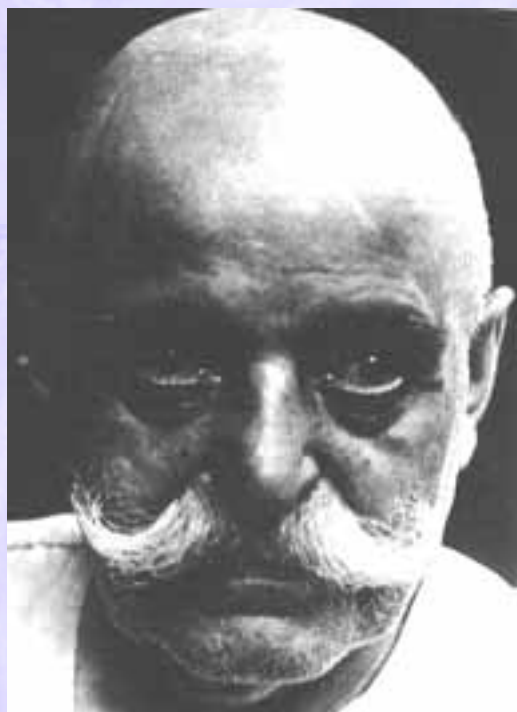
She is also known to have taken care of the education of a very special Indian boy *Jiddu Krishnamurti* (see photo Saanen 1967 © author). Son of an Indian Theosophist, Jiddu's gift was discovered by Annie Besant's



*Krishnamurti*

closest colleague C.W. Leadbeater in 1909. To her dismay after reaching maturity he became to advocate quite a different approach to life than Theosophists did. His disbanding the *Order of the Star in the East*, especially founded for him, in 1929 came as a blow to the Theosophical Movement. It had already been plagued by split-ups. Theosophy became after the thirties a shadow of the former mind-swaying movement. Its role was taken over by others.

### The Fourth Way



One of them was founded by *George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff* (photo). The life-history of this spiritual teacher is as much shrouded in mystery as that of Mme. Blavatsky. In fact they had many similarities. It is assumed that he was born in Alexandropol (Repl. of Armenia), around the time that the Theosophical Society was formed in 1875, from a Greek father and an Armenian mother. Gurdjieff claimed that as a young man he had travelled extensively. He had even reached Tibet in 1902, much like HPB. Again some believed that he was a Tsarist agent. In his book *Meetings with Remarkable Men* Gurdjieff describes his quest for Hidden Masters of Wisdom, which took him to Egypt (like HPB) and thence to Central Asia and Northern India.

His later training and teachings were the gist of the instruction he

*Gurdjieff*

said to have received from various masters in esoteric schools.

They are a departure from the Theosophic tradition. Yet, as most teachings do in order to catch on, they breath the changed spirit of the era.

Gurdjieff's instructions were aimed at the harmonious development of the supposed centres in man. It came at a time that Freud's psychology was being discovered.

When Russian ballet, notably that of *Diaghilev* made a great impact in the West, Gurdjieff introduced his revolutionary form of ballet.

So Gurdjieff's system took advantage of fads and fancies of his lifetime.

A noted Russian author *Peter Damien Ouspensky* (see photo), who had departed from Theosophical thought and had explored the time dimension in his book *The Fourth Dimension*, met Gurdjieff in 1912 in Moscow. Gurdjieff was to present his ballet there. Ouspensky became impressed immediately by the mysterious figure, but never trusted him completely either.

In *In Search of the Miraculous* Ouspensky gave an account of the unusual training and adventures they went through at the time of the Russian revolution. Finally in 1919 both of them arrived in Europe and settled in France and Great Britain respectively. By that time they had grown apart and initiated their own schools.

Gurdjieff established the *Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man* in chateau du Prieuré des Basses-Loges, France, in 1922. It became notorious for its harsh treatment of followers. This Gurdjieff considered necessary. He termed it *voluntary conscious suffering*, essential for his devotees, who were still asleep, to wake up to reality. More of such training centres would follow by rival Gurdjieff followers. One of them being *John G. Bennett* who was to introduce *Subud* to the West in 1957.



*Ouspensky*

## New Age - a rediscovery

What became known as the New Age movement injected new life into almost forgotten traditions at a time that Christian faith had lost its meaning for the younger generation.

New Age's greatest growth has been in the United States. This is not surprising, as it was based on already existent, but dormant, religious/philosophical movements which had come to a head in the nineteenth century.

As we have seen Oriental religion and the European occult traditions had made a great impact on the intellectual elite of America in the nineteenth century . The second president *John Adams*(1767-1848) is known for his fascination with Oriental thought. He was a voracious reader of the translations of Eastern religious works.

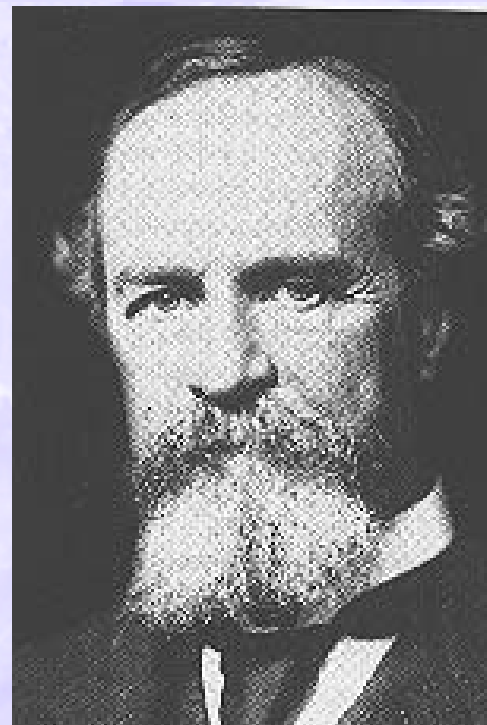
The leaders who stood at the cradle of the birth of the nation were influenced by Masonic, Spiritualistic and Rosicrucian thought. "A New Order of the Age begins" proclaims the reverse side of the Great Seal of the United States.



Eight signatories of the Declaration of Independence were Freemasons, amongst whom *Benjamin Franklin* (see image) and *George Washington*, as were sixteen subsequent presidents.

Prominent American writers, who became known as the *Transcendentalists*, were deeply influenced by Eastern thought. *Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1803-1882) was one of the great admirers of Oriental religious classics, notably the *Bhagavad Gita*. His secretary, *Henry David Thoreau* wrote *Walden*, a source of inspiration for hippies a century later.

One of the foremost American psychologists of the time *William James* (see photo) (1842-1910) called for a serious study of paranormal phenomena. He played a leading part in the foundation in 1885 of the *American Society for Psychological Research*. His [The Varieties of Religious Experience](#) has become a companion for later generations.



*William James*

A noteworthy event was the *Parliament of Religions* held in Chicago in 1893. It was the first time that a platform of this kind had been organized. Before an audience of four thousand people leaders of the great religions presented their views on life. One of the results was a greater appreciation for Oriental religions, who were well-represented. *Swami Vivekenanda* expounded inner Hinduism; *Soyen Shaku*, abbot of a Japanese Rinzai monastery: Zen-Buddhism. *Anagarika Dharmapala* established after the congress an American branch of the Maha Bodhi Society, the first Buddhist society in the West.

This was merely the beginning of a flow of Eastern teachings and guru's to effect Western thinking.

At the same time the Western esoteric tradition also found a following in new schools, movements and cults. Too numerous to go into here presently.

New Age was primarily a movement amongst the younger generation in the late sixties that demanded to play a greater part in all aspects of society. Through the use of mind-expanding drugs a greater reality was being unfolded to them that called for other explanations than traditional religion could give. Its concepts of God and Love were too narrow to accommodate the overwhelming experiences they had on their trips. Transcendence, self-realisation, yoga, meditation, all part of existing traditions, were being rediscovered and practised.

Originally it had been given the name: the *Age of Aquarius* to signify the new era of spiritual enfoldment as foretold in *astrology*.

In the early seventies, when the movement was well on its way, the name *New Age* was adopted. Of course it was a term with whiskers on. Gurdjieff follower *A.R. Orage* had already founded a magazine, partly funded by George Bernard Shaw, by the name of *New Age* in 1906.

As might be expected *New Age* unleashed counter-forces from the side of fundamentalist Christian

denominations. Especially after Marilyn Ferguson wrote in her book *The Aquarian Conspiracy* that the fraternity dedicated to this philosophy constituted a worldwide network. Dedicated persons would recognize each other in a few minutes without secret signs, but merely by a short exchange of ideas. This was seen as a sort of Satanic conspiracy. Especially people who followed so-called occult practices came under suspicion.

New Age has not traveled to the end of the road yet. It is reaching a stage of maturity in which wheat is being separated from the corn. Yet, it still comprises a broad spectrum of activities from the commercial rip-off to unselfish dedication to serve mankind spiritually. Many do not wish to be associated with the name because it reminds them of the turbulence associated with the uprising of the younger generation in the late sixties and the lamentable drug excrescences.

One may pray that the movement will sustain its original purity and raise high the spirit of new generations, giving it an immense vista of life and a purpose to live for.

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Meanwhile read on the psychological processes that are at work in spiritual movements by clicking at [On the psychology of spiritual movements](#)

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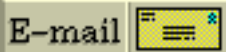
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