"Old Age" Religion Meets the New Age in Middle Age:
On Angels, Authorities, Aliens, and Artists

Joseph M. Felser
On a recent trip to Sebago Lake in Maine, I happened to glance at a copy of the local Casco Bay Weekly during a break from swimming, and came across an amusing or, depending on your point of view, disturbing interview with a pair of spiritual seekers who go by the names of Rick and Song. No last names for these folks, reports interviewer Amanda Onion: they don't believe in such things. Rick and Song, who say they're "not from much of anywhere," were passing through the Portland area on a self-described spiritual mission: they claim they are "chosen vehicles" who spend their days in search of other members of a spiritual elite, numbering less than fifty altogether.

It seems that, eighteen years ago, Rick and Song discovered that aliens from UFOs had implanted devices in their bodies which enable them to visit "the Kingdom of Heaven," which, according to Song, "is a very real place," or, in Rick's words, "a physical level of existence" far above our own in every way—in terms of knowledge, power, goodness. Rick says that, compared to our own human level, this superior level stands to us as we stand to the family dog. UFOs are basically cosmic jitney buses whose function is to shuttle the elect back and forth on their heavenly visitations. In general, then, Rick and Song see their basic mission as one of warning people away from Lucifer, who is busy "programming the population to worship sex above everything else." Song says that, for the chosen elite, sex is "absolutely" out, while Rick adds that a lot of other behavior is out as well, including irritability, frustration, and anger.

To Ms. Onion, this seemed to suggest that Rick and Song might be opposed to emotions altogether, but Song denied this, adding that one should "love God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind." When asked if they thought of themselves as angels, however, Rick demurred, and explained that "'angels' is a real religious type of a word. And we don't like to use that word because it conjures up images of Michelangelo and all this flowery stuff that we don't relate to at all."

But all this doesn't quite add up.

Take, for example, Rick's evident dismay regarding the use of a "religious" vocabulary. His reaction hardly squares with his other comments, or with Song's pronouncements. Stripped of the patina of Ufology, their utterances obviously express classical Christian themes and doctrines, including the notion of a predestined elect; the belief in heaven as a physical place; the celebration of the virtue of obedience; the association of sexuality and desire for autonomy with evil; and the personification of evil in the form of the Devil. Song's panegyric to the love of God is precisely Leviticus 6:5, word for word. Rick's disdain for Renaissance angels is itself instructive, for it suggests that what is in play here is a specific form of Christianity that has traditionally been inhospitable to the trappings of Catholicism, namely the conservative branch of Protestantism that is alternately referred to as "fundamentalist" or "evangelical."

Such groups are in fact quite strongly in evidence in southern Maine. On a visit to a local lobster shack, I was reading the placemat, which advertised local businesses, and noticed that a nearby used car dealer had included the message "Jesus is Lord" in his ad. But in the end it matters little whether Rick and Song represent the vanguard of a calculated, if thinly disguised, evangelical outreach to naive and unwary new agers, or whether they are merely quirky freelancers, having a fine time with their own little oddball concoction, a mulligan stew of Ufology and conservative Christianity. What matters most is that

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Joseph Felser, Ph.D., teaches at the College of Staten Island/CUNY. He is currently working on a book which is an extension of ideas introduced in a previous essay in The Quest ("The New Religious Consciousness," Summer 1995).

"Of Chance and Chess," ©1992 Irene Beiknap
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there may well be something in the new age movement itself that is conducive to this type of appeal. What could this possibly be?

As famed ufologist Jacques Vallee warned years ago in his devastating examination of UFO cults, *Messengers of Deception* (1979), all too many of the so-called “new” religious movements are infected at deep levels with the age-old theme of salvation from higher powers and surrender to the will of earthly authorities who claim not only to represent their heavenly hosts, but also to incarnate their superior wisdom. Fifteen years after Jonestown, two years after Waco, there are still plenty of gurus around who require devotees to practice total self-surrender as the only means of establishing a correct relationship to the sacred dimension—even as well-known former adherents of various spiritual masters come forward to repudiate their mentors. Yet, the new age was supposed to be—well, new and improved, offering a different kind of spirituality, better than the traditional Brand X world religions, with their tendencies toward literalism and the fostering of in-group/out-group psychologies. What so on earth—or in heaven’s name—happened to the new age? Are we merely confronting the eternal problem of the imperfection of the human being? Is the cynic really a wise man or woman? Or has the new age lost its bearings at some specific point along the way? The late Joseph Campbell loved to repeat a little saying about a middle-aged achiever who found out, when he got to the top of the ladder he’d been climbing, that it had been placed against the wrong wall. Has the new age made such an error somewhere along the line? In other words, are we to think of this as a special historical problem, or rather as a mere instance of a timeless, universal pattern of human nature? And what, if anything, is at stake in choosing between these different approaches?

Most dichotomies are ultimately silly when actually insisted upon as final, and the one I have presented is no exception. There unquestionably is some truth in the view that wherever the spiritual aspiration abides, the temptations of power and escapism will be omnipresent. But this truism doesn’t really go very far in explaining this specific case of how a movement which truly began, I believe, in an extended affirmation of the individual’s experience over and against the authorities of a nihilistic, mechanistic, materialistic science and a repressive patriarchal religious tradition, could lapse into the kind of slovenly attitude which finds itself vulnerable to—or at least the tempting target of—the entreaties of a Rick and Song.

Let me put it this way: a principle that can be invoked to explain just about everything doesn’t really tell us much about anything. Perhaps more to the point, the emphasis on the human nature angle short-circuits any attempt to solve or even come to grips with the problem in a mature way. Instead it invites passivity, thus feeding into the mindset which says that our only recourse is to hope that our inherently sinful nature can be redeemed from the outside by something other, larger, greater, and infinitely higher on the cosmic ladder than poor, unworthy us.

What we need, then, is a clue to how we might go about writing the kind of narrative

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*Most people don’t want to be challenged or provoked or steeped in uncertainty; they want reassurance, comfort, stability.*

Such occurred, for example, with Andrew Harvey, longtime devotee of Mother Meera, who declared in an interview with Michael Toms that the traditional master-pupil relationships tend to foster infantilism in the pupil and corruption in the master. “I actually think that, with a very few exceptions,” said Harvey, “the master business, the guru business, is about to be over, because many scandals are about to break. We’re going to see just how very unscrupulous or half-conscious or unconscious people have manipulated our need for perfection and belonging, in ways that have only reinforced their own power.”

To which the cynic might say in response, “So, what else is new?” Most people don’t want to be challenged or provoked or steeped in uncertainty; they want reassurance, comfort, stability, order, relief from the burdens of self-responsibility. In short, they want a cosmic daddy or mommy. Didn’t Freud say that this longing is the origin of the religious impulse? What did you really expect now? Miracles?
history of the new age in which certain, doubt-
less embarrassing, developments (e.g., Rick and
Song) are not simply dismissed as anomalies and
thereby marginalized, but rather are exhibited as
intelligible, though not necessarily inevitable,
outcomes of some features of new age thinking.
We need to own what’s ours and accept our re-
sponsibilities.

I was mulling over this problem when I
came across a passage in The God of Jane: A Psy-
chic Manifesto (1981), a book by Jane Roberts
that I had read nearly fifteen years ago, and in a
flash I thought I’d discovered my clue. She wrote:

We’d become exteriorized to an alarming degree . . .
acting as if we were, indeed, science’s living . . .[but]
mindless survival machines. Or we acted as if we were
god’s sinful creatures, tainted with evil since birth. Our
thoughts became so identified with exterior organiza-
tions that we’d invested them with parts of ourselves,
then lost sight of those portions. We stopped asking the
important questions for ourselves. Instead we turned
over the questions to science or religion, and largely
accepted their prepackaged answers and views.3

Roberts herself, out of her own experience,
strongly resisted this prepackaging and what she
refers to here in general as the error of “exterior-
ization” when it came to her own unremitting in-
quiry into the nature of her “adventures in con-
sciousness,” especially in regard to the question of
the nature and identity of Seth, her “trance
personality.” She refused to give in to the tem-
ptation to settle for any sort of oversimplifica-
tion, whether of the psychological sort (Seth as
symptomatic of the pathology of multiple per-
sonality or of the religious variety (Seth as in-
dependent “spirit”—either evil demon-deceiver or
good guardian angel). Nor did she long put up
with the efforts of academic parapsychology (with
its attachment to the methodological canons of
mechanistic/materialistic science) to turn her into
a mere object; an ongoing experiment, an addi-
tional source of potentially useful data. Roberts’s
indefatigable inquiries—like F. W. H. Myers be-
fore her—virtually forced us to rethink and re-
experience the nature of human personality and
consciousness itself.

But the pull of exteriorization is strong in-
deed, perhaps for the present inexorable. For the
apparent inability of the new age to break deci-
sively with the religious and scientific past is
evidenced by its seemingly unavoidable recourse
to the outdated vocabularies of Euclidian geom-

etry and Newtonian mechanics. Many of the lan-
guages of the new age are replete with special
metaphors (“inside/outside,” “higher/lower,”
“above/below,” etc.) and the idea of causal de-
terminism. Even some of the most common phrases—
e.g., out-of-body experiences, near-
death experiences—encourage us to think in
terms of pairs of opposites whose ultimate con-
ceptual basis is a view of the universe as a field
of essentially separate, externally-related entities,
acting and reacting on each other like the pro-
verbial colliding billiard balls used to illustrate the
Newtonian model.

Yet when such figures of speech are applied
to the question of our relationship to the spiritual
principle of the world, they unavoidably suggest
and imply the existence of varying kinds and de-
gres of distance—ontological, moral, and psy-
chological—between human and divine nature.
That is to say, they are connotative of our essen-
tial estrangement from the sacred dimension.
Furthermore, as Gary Zukav has observed, the tacit introduction of the notion of a spiritual hierarchy is linked to an underlying feeling of powerlessness. Power in this sense, he notes, means the ability to control that which is perceived or experienced as external to the self—the environment and other beings—and this entails that power, like a pie, is a commodity that can be divided into only so many pieces. Moreover, in this case, that commodity must be distributed in an unequal fashion; for in order for anyone to exercise control over, there must be others who lack this ability. This means that feelings of fear, helplessness, and resentment are endemic to such a system, and therefore are available for exploitation. This in turn reflects a certain scale of values:

When power is seen as external, the hierarchies of our social, economic, and political structures, as well as the hierarchies of the universe, appear as indicators of who has power and who does not. Those at the top appear to have the most power and, therefore, to be the most powerful and the least vulnerable. Those at the bottom appear to be the least powerful, and, therefore, to be the least valuable and the most vulnerable. From this perception, the general is more valuable than the private, the executive is more valuable than the chauffeur, and the divine is more valuable than the worshiper. We fear to transgress our parents, our bosses, and our God. All perceptions of lesser and greater personal value result from the perception of power as external.4

Now, please note: I most emphatically am not calling into question the clearly mysterious, wondrous, and awesome character of the experiences that many people are now courageous enough to publicly report. I do not for a moment doubt that events regularly occur which defy explanation in terms of the concepts and categories of mechanistic/materialistic science.

I myself am well-satisfied that I have had experiences (of a fairly undramatic sort) of phenomena which are typically classified by parapsychologists under the headings of telepathy, clairvoyance, and precognition. Rather, my primary concern is with meaning. That is to say, what I am asking here is that we pay painstakingly close attention to the act of interpreting such experiences, especially when so much old scientific and/or religious baggage is being brought aboard. "Angel" is such a term.

Although the biblical traditions in general and Christianity in particular, especially Catholicism, certainly didn't invent the idea of angels, it is nevertheless essentially within the type of cosmic hierarchy embraced in the theistic scheme of a "great chain of being" that angels find their natural home. The metaphysical and emotional need for angelic intermediaries arises only in the conceptual space and painful experience of distance between the human "I" and the divine "Thou." Indeed, the reappropriation of the angelic idea by medieval Christianity demonstrates just how far removed from his worshipers the Christ, the one true mediator, had even by that time become. On the other hand, the angel is also the symbolic upholder of this very same division.

Whenever I happen across another angel book, television show, or trinket, I am inevitably reminded of one of Joseph Campbell's favorite angel stories. It seems that during World War II, as part of the inevitable process of demonizing the enemy, an American newspaper had published a photo of one of the terrifyingly fierce dog guardians of a Buddhist temple in Nara, Japan. Beneath the picture was a caption which identified the guard as a deity revered by the Japanese. Campbell thought this was a bit of projection on our part, for it is not they, he thought, but rather we who worship such a god:

That [gate guardian in the Buddhist temple] is a symbol of your own fear and holding to your ego, which is what's keeping you out of the Garden, where the Buddha sits under the tree [of Eternal life, the Bo Tree], and

The need for angels arises only in the experience of distance between the human “I” and the divine “Thou.”

I think that the conceptual connections drawn by Zukav between the notions of external power, hierarchy, and alienation go far in explaining, for example, the current almost obsessive (and no doubt, in part, market-driven) preoccupation with "angels" by many members of the new age—a point, incidentally, picked up on by Amanda Onion, the reporter who interviewed Rick and Song, when she asked if they thought of themselves in angelic terms.
his right hand says, "Don't be afraid of those guys. Come through."

It suddenly dawned on me that our [theistie] God was apparently that guardian at the gate because he has put the guardians [the cherubim with the flaming sword revolving between them] at the gate and told us that they're emphatically there and we mustn't go through.

...So our religion is basically a religion of exile.

So if the eradication of this sense of exile from the sacred (along with the outright repudiation of any assumption of such an estrangement) was perhaps one of the original driving forces of the new age, then the increasing fascination with which the idea and image of the angel is held by many self-described new agers is symptomatic of a much deeper failure of the movement to live up to its own revolutionary ideals. Of course, the same thing might be said of virtually every "successful" revolution in human history. Yet this sort of blanket response lands us right back in the cynic's territorial enclave. Is there then, any way to be more specific about the nature of this particular failure? What, exactly, went wrong? And how hopeful can we be that this error might be corrected?

In a sense yet to be specified, I think the answer is: nothing has gone wrong, really. Sudden growth spurts often leave children without proper attire, and I think something analogous happened to the new age. But for the moment I wish to return to my earlier point concerning the tendency to lapse back into outworn modes of conceiving the world and interpreting our experiences. For it is all well and good to emphasize at the level of theory the primacy of personal experience over external authorities, as the new age does; but if in practice the only available vocabularies for expressing those experiences have built-in structures which induce the sort of alienated, hierarchical thinking of which Zukav has so eloquently written, or what Roberts calls the process of "exteriorization," then the co-opting of the spiritual revolution is inevitable.

Happily, however, this is not the case—and the mere mention of Zukav's name should provide the necessary reminder. For as David Spangler (surely one of those who deserve the title of new age founder) has emphasized, the "spiritual geometry" of the new age, insofar as it is derived from twentieth and twenty-first century science, will "emphasize process, relationship, interconnectedness, and co-creativity." In an essay that should be required reading for everyone associated with the new age, he writes:

"Old age" spirituality generally operated using some simple images based on the Sun/Earth relationship and the principle of ladders—of ascending and descending forces and hierarchies. This is because they were everyday accessible images. What I might call New Age spirituality and, I should say, mysticism in general, operates in a manner best described metaphorically with more complex geometries of interpenetrating lattices and quantum dynamics. It is a holographic geometry in which the whole is the part and vice versa, and the creative center is everywhere.

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The only modification I would make to Spangler's thesis is the one I have already suggested, i.e., that in addition to pre-Copernican cosmologies, the popular imagination (even of the adherents of the new age) is also essentially informed by the model of the universe wrought by Kepler, Galileo, Newton, Descartes, and others.

The outline of the problem should now be fairly clear. The late physicist David Bohm and others have given us tremendously exciting and important new conceptual systems for thinking about the universe in which we live. But as philosopher and theoretist of the paranormal Colin Wilson has written somewhere, the vast majority of us do not easily inhabit the rarefied atmosphere in which such high-level abstractions live and move and have their being; most of us do not come naturally to this kind of cognition. We are forever trying to bridge the gap between the picture and the word.

(In my own case, for example, whenever I sit down to write an essay or prepare a lecture, my first inklings are not exactly verbal in form. I get instead a kind of crude picture in my mind's eye of an outline in which the relationships between the various sentences have a certain overall "feel" to it—almost an aesthetic experience. This is hard
to describe, but the general point should be tolerably clear.)

To put it another way, what we really need is the equivalent of what, as Wilson observes, Daniel Defoe did for the eighteenth century imagination:

In the history of European culture, *Robinson Crusoe* is perhaps the most important single event since Thespis invented the Greek drama in the sixth century B.C. Like the drama, it was a kind of magic carpet, making human beings aware that life is not "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short," that the material reality around us is not the only reality. . . . When a man can explore a desert island without leaving his armchair, when he can charge into battle without risking his life, when he can cross Africa—in company with Defoe's Captain Singleton—without fatigue or thirst, then he also begins to experience a new courage to face his own problems. More: he begins to experience a desire to explore the unknown. Defoe enabled his middle-class reader to share the excitement of Columbus and Magellan, of Galileo and Newton. He revealed that human beings do not have to be limited by the narrowness of their physical experience.8

By making readily available at an internal level the freedom and intensity of thought that had been achieved through the more specialized theoretical enterprises of modern science, as well as by the practical hero-deeds of those bold conquerors of the planet who were inspired by the new assertiveness in the face of old systems and authorities, Defoe and the other novelists provided not merely a readily-available, appropriate image-base for thought, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the sense of new possibilities for viewing the world. What we require today, then, is not so much a new vocabulary of images—for the tendency of such images to crystallize into patterns is, as Spangler points out, contrary to the true "spiritual geometry" of the new age, which resists every such fossilization—but rather, an expanded power of image-production. This, I think, is what Wilson, Campbell, Spangler, and Roberts have each, in their own way, been arguing for some time. Our artists must fight their way out of their postmodern cul-de-sacs and their obsessions with nihilism, deconstructionism, didactic social commentary, and the like, so that our tardy collective imagination can catch up with those speedy giants of thought like Bohm.

In *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (1981), Bohm himself offered the image (not much more than an illustration, really, but an intriguing one nonetheless) of a fish in an aquarium being captured by two video cameras, each hooked up to a separate television monitor, with one camera positioned in front of the tank and the other at the left side. What one sees simultaneously on each screen appears to be a different image, which somehow correlates with the other—as if two separate fish are swimming in their own distinctive ways, yet in oddly corresponding movements, like an exquisite dance of two partners, in which the movements of each may be said to be the cause of those of the other:

Of course, we know that the two images do not refer to independently existent though interacting actualities (in which, for example, one image could be said to "cause" related changes in the other). Rather, they both refer to a single actuality, which is the common ground of both (and this explains the correlation of the images without the assumption that they causally affect each other). This actuality is of higher dimensionality than are the separate images on the screens; or, to put it

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differently, the images on the screens are two-dimen-
sonal projections (or facets) of a three-dimensional re-
ality. In some sense this three-dimensional reality holds
these two-dimensional projections within it. Yet, since
these projections exist only as abstractions, the three
dimensional reality is neither of these, but rather it is
something else, something of a nature beyond both.9

Thus the TV monitors symbolize the observed,
explicate order of our everyday experience of sepa-
rate, causally-related things located in space and
time, while our direct perception of the single fish
in the tank represents the underlying dynamic
unity of the implicate or holonomic order. How-
ever, note that Bohm himself cannot refrain from
employing language properly belonging to the ex-
plicate order (higher, within) in order to refer to
the implicate level. Perhaps, then, the ultimate
view of his illustration lies in what could be read
as Bohm’s unconscious metaphor: the transition
from the Piscean Age of the two fish swimming in
opposite directions to the Aquarian Age, in which
the duo come to be understood and experienced
as merely two aspects of the same underlying
reality.

Others besides Bohm have similarly seen
the need for a new approach to some old images
and practices. In talking about his own work with
subtle energy systems, Richard Moss, the physi-
cian-turned-mystic, introduces the image of the
spiral (borrowed from Brugh Joy), whose pattern
he follows in contacting the chakras of the indi-
vidual:

I consider the Spiral orientation a unique way to
approach the subtle energies of the chakras primarily
because it takes the emphasis away from the conven-
tional understanding of Kundalini as a movement from
below to above and then down. In fact, in my experi-
ence, the energy awakened everywhere at once and
followed no particular pattern. Furthermore, as I regard
the awakening process, it is far more valid to think in
spherical terms than in the linear and hierarchical terms
common to the older traditions. The movement from
the heart downward and upward in an ever-widening
spiral can also be visualized as a sphere of conscious-
ness expanding from the heart.10

Even before I came across the work of Brugh Joy
and Moss, I myself had used the three-dimen-
sional spiral image as a metaphor for a revised
account of Campbell’s view of the spiritual hero,
which he had originally presented in The Hero
with a Thousand Faces (1949) using the image
of a two-dimensional circle, punctuated by points
representing the linear, sequentially-ordered stages of “departure,” “fulfillment,” and “return”;
whereas I had argued that the essence of the new
religious hero is a sense of the infinitely open-
edended process of self-inquiry, in which there is
no final fulfillment or definable destination.11

In any case, however, the spiral itself is only
a single image, and moreover one which has its
own rich history of associations in the older tradi-
tions. After all, the Kundalini serpent itself is a
kind of spiral. So we mustn’t become complacent,
putting too many experiential eggs in this one
metaphorical basket. In fact, Moss himself occa-
sionally lapses into what I regard as “old age” re-
ligious attitudes—as, for example, he does when
he offers general praise for the virtue of obe-
dience to spiritual superiors as an expression of the
recognition “that there is something fundamen-
tally wiser than we can know,”12 and in particular
praises the great mystic Padre Pio’s compliance
with the orders of his church hierarchy to cease
from leading mass and hearing confession. Here
I would agree with Harvey in regarding this kind
of relationship as ultimately destructive of both
the spiritual potential of the human species and
the emotional maturity of the individual.

So what can the rest of us do in the meant-
time, as we wait for our great artists to catch up
with our great physicists and our great mystics?
How can we insulate the most valuable achieve-
ments of the new age from the kind of rot which
leads people to yearn for angelic intervention or a
cosmic lift from one of Rick and Song’s heaven-
bound UFOs?

One thing we can do to keep our spiritual
bearings is to exercise a ruthless attention to the
language that we use to describe and understand
our various experiences. We need to become more
acutely aware of the meaning of what we say, so
that we do not unknowingly foster the very habits
of mind and heart that we wish to break. We must
especially beware the pitfalls of literalism and
exteriorization (and these are not unconnected).
Nor are self-awareness and self-examination nec-
essarily destructive of the immediacy of experi-
ence—at least when these skills are practiced by
one who genuinely respects all sides of her or his
nature. What we need, in short, is not only to be-
come more self-consciously philosophical in our
approach (for it is philosophy that has histori-
cally been concerned with meaning), but also to
embody in our ongoing spiritual work the very

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reverence for wholeness of being that we claim to embrace at the level of our metaphysical theories.

In other words, let’s practice what we preach.

Notes:
12. Moss, 192.