The Rise of the New World Religions

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Summary

The background from which "new religions" arise appears to be a loss of world-orientation, that is, an understanding of what to hold on to, to rely upon. Since it was once present, there is a turn to the past to find the sense of reality one's predecessors were guided by. The elements sought for seem to be rooted in the world of the initiate, which, when they are syncretistically combined, give content to many arcane learning-ancient religion movements from the 5th century BCE to today.

Loss of World-Orientation

A problem well worth consideration within human studies, particularly in the history of religions, is how there could have arisen a number of so-called "new religions" over the last two-and-a-half millennia that have great similarities but very little historical connection with each other. This essay proposes a solution to this problem. Several times in the course of the history of the societies of the West,[1] there has occurred, among some segments of these societies, a slippage or loss of the world-orientation which had provided one's forefathers a state of adequacy between themselves and their circumstances. Loss of orientation means a state of passive release of a hold one has had on reality—a letting go that may be coupled with a certain revulsion of certain ways of dealing with reality—in which one experiences increasing bewilderment, even feels chaos as impending. William Butler Yeats (who was very deeply involved in several occult movements) describes this experience in the familiar lines from his poem "The Second Coming":

> Things fall apart. The center cannot hold.
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, …
> and everywhere The ceremony of innocence is drowned.[2]

Such a loss of orientation results in a new perception of the land of one's birth as an alien abode, a strange land. A person experiences something like an "unaccountable movement of the boundaries," a "forgetting of the location of the graves of the ancestors." One has lost one's place in a homeland and is left only with the disturbing feeling that a world whose form one does not quite remember is hiding in the shrubbery, under the masks and costumes of its people, behind the facades of their houses, beyond those hills. Gone is the universe with which a person can feel a sense of kinship, the order in which one has one's place,[3] and, as this happens the universe loses its moral character and becomes indifferent to one's aspirations. One suffers the lot of an exile who is lonely, unprotected, uncomprehending in a situation that seems at times full of danger.

The weakening of a society's world-orientation has been concomitant with the weakening of its religion's power to inform the members of that society concerning what they may hold by, rely on, guide themselves by. This is true even when "religion" continues as one factor in a person's life—indeed, the effective sign of the faltering of a religion is when it becomes one among other parts of the culture of a society.

As it no longer enlightens its adherents about the meaning of their world, a religion then becomes just a formal institution of behavior and belief.

Some members of society may then adopt an extreme position of support for certain present

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expressions of their religious tradition by which they tie their hopes completely to the world as it is and cannot understand how others can live otherwise, how "credit" can be established under any other conditions. They have nowhere else to turn that they can see except to anarchy—an indication, perhaps, of how close they are to such anarchy themselves. It is their religion's ability to supply certain stimuli for their emotions, the feeling of danger avoided, of personal security obtained, which is most important to them.

However, other persons have already despaired of the present. It seems to such a person that those who adhere to the traditional religion now have new gods, or rather false gods, and the real gods have gone away. The real gods for one thus, are precisely the gods who must be sought. The individual's experience of the world's strangeness is a reflection of one's religious estrangement, a feeling of impending misfortune or even threat of destruction has its roots in one's sense of the absence of the real gods. True religion becomes for one then a way of seeking the real gods—a way of "salvation."

The rise of certain new religious movements in the West, and today also in Korea and Japan, is to be accounted for then in terms of a need for the security of a world made meaningful by religion for those who no longer find the traditional religion of their society viable. They are responses, not to the experience of disorientation directly, but rather to the weakening of a traditional religion as the source of orientation within society, for they seek the solution to this problem in a substitute religion.

Turn to the Past

From one's experience of homelessness and exile, there arises an anguish, and a homesickness for a world one has never known. When persons are no longer sure of their ideas, when they do not know what to hope for, work for, or expect in the world, when they can no longer identify present and future, then there may be a turn to the past[4]—when, it is supposed, the meaning of things and the right ways of relating to them were all known by sages or ancestors or gods. Yet this past seems "hidden," to be a secret. One feels that he will be freed from one's bounds to this alien world if one just knew… what one is sure was known by the great men of the past and still is known by a few custodians of this secret knowledge of one's own day.

One is like an orphan who, on discovering one's condition, wants to have a home of one's own and roots, a position in a system of social relationships in which one will be instructed or guided by those superior in knowledge and age who know the "way." Because one does not know anything about oneself except that one needs to be someone important to someone and to belong somewhere, to have a status-role in a society which extends even to the powers of the universe, one seeks a domestication of reality but, as might an orphan, through the composing of a fantastic household.

Because this past religious interpretation of the world seems to be hidden, to be a secret, I shall refer to the attempts to recover it as the ancient learning—arcane religion movements. From this hopeful turn (that nevertheless borders on melancholia) towards a religious past with which one is not himself acquainted, and which in this its seeming occult character acquires the form of mystery, comes one's imaginative invention of a new past. But one is not, must not be, in this original. One finds for oneself a connection with the past by borrowing syncretistically from religious expressions whose origins are distant in time.[5] These, however, may be partially cloaked in the garb of the latest form of learning or a more pure and "original" expression of the religion of the majority of members of one's society.

From whence comes the intimation of a "lost past" which guides one's choice of the sort of things which are to be borrowed? This comes, it seems to me, in addition to folklore and tales preserved by rural populations, such as is found in Ireland or Southeastern Europe, from a subculture which is transmitted in part to children through the way adults sometimes talk to them (e.g., babies are found under cabbages or a stork brought them, the boogeyman or ghosts or goblins will get you if you don't watch out, etc.) and the stories ("fairy-tales") adults tell them, and in part through the lore of older children (a penny

in your shoe will bring you luck, and so will crossing your fingers, etc.). According to Iona and Peter Opie, famous for their studies of folklore, children "remain tradition's warmest friends," and their lore changes very little from generation to generation, for instance, Roman childrens lore being almost identical with that of today's children.

Children's beliefs fall into a definite pattern, the dominant motive of which, Opie and Opie say, is a concern with the things that they think will bring good luck or bad.[6] These beliefs and their attendant practices, along with much folklore, have their roots, apparently, in the way reality appears within a past religious orientation, perhaps beginning with the world-picture of hunting based societies. It certainly existed within some of the food-producing heroic societies of Southeastern Europe and persisted in similar societies in Northern Europe through the period of the Middle Ages. This religious world-picture is, in my opinion, the "forgotten" or "lost past" which these disoriented and "homeless" persons seek to recover.

World of the Initiate

The world then was viewed in the light of some form of the ceremony of initiation. This ceremony is an orientating act-metaphor of such societies through which the "marks" are set by which the members of these societies "take their bearings" and learn what to rely on, what one can direct or guide oneself by, and through which a given society's range of activities are thereafter located.

Initiatory ceremonies are the usual means by which a change in social status is affected. This may be the transition from childhood into adulthood, entrance into secret societies or professions, or even into full membership into one's social class, caste, or society. There is also the initiation of the shaman which, though it still involves one's social status, is much more individualistic than these. In general, initiation involves a body of ceremonies and oral teachings through which the initiate becomes a different being: it is viewed as natural for things to be transformed into other things, as when warriors become bears, wolves, or persons undergo a change of sex, social status, and so on.

The initiation of the child into the society of adults may well serve here as a paradigm. It is a time when the child learns the lore and traditions of his society, learns his position in the real, that is, the adult world. In this process, the initiate often undergoes physical tests and ordeals such as circumcision or scarification, the knocking out of a tooth or cutting off of a finger joint, and even experiences of sheer terror. However, the end result is that he thereby comes into a new form of social life not shared by the uninitiated.

As birth installs a person in a world, moving from one social world to another is often interpreted by primitive peoples as a process of rebirth. The majority of initiatory ordeals, Mircea Eliade says in his renowned study of initiation, imply a ritual death and new birth,[7] but one returns to life under a new form. That is, one thereby assumes a superior mode of being patterned on a model revealed by ancestors or heroes or gods and previously known only to those—one's elders—who were initiated earlier.

The initiate gains a history—a sacred history—of which one was before not only in ignorance but to which one's life had not the least conscious connection. Although others around one, one's elders, knew it and existed through it. To the initiated adult, it appears that one has lived in two worlds and understands how as a child, beings belonging to another world appeared simultaneously in one's own.

Corresponding to the plurality of age groupings, or rather, divisions of social status, there are two or more divisions of being which are recognized, and the crossing of whose boundaries is given to the initiated. Beings may exist successively or even simultaneously in them. Human beings passage from one to another is viewed as dependent upon knowledge received from those (shamans, mages, masters, etc.) already "in the know" and attended by diverse difficulties and perils.

These different regions of being are given spatial location in some societies in terms of an upper world (sky) and lower world (earth). However, in others, the "other" world is located down the river, or across or even under the sea.

In the former case, passage to an upper world may be afforded by a tall rock or mountain, a tree, or even the center pole of a tent. Sometimes a subterranean world (hell, hades, etc.) is added producing the familiar three-storied universe.

The other regions of being are in many ways analogous to that of the sensuously perceivable, although greater power and authority belongs to beings inhabiting these other regions. From the "other" world animal "spirits" are released to replenish the game, for a new living being is given, not made. To that "other" world go the "spirits" of the community's dead—whose needs there, it seems, are much the same, to judge by the presence of food and other useful articles included in their graves.

… reality is viewed as comprised of two or more worlds. They are arranged hierarchically according to degrees of enlightenment, the world in which a person finds himself being the lowest, but with communication and movement from world to world being possible. A person may enter these other worlds by obtaining knowledge—often ecstatically—of worlds, gods, and self.

It is in connection with this plurality of regions of being that we ought also to place beliefs in omens and talismans. Alongside causes—which primitive peoples have understood quite well—must be put harmful or helpful influences, that is, a form of authority related to status. In some primitive societies, the rite of manhood is the ordeal by which a boy demonstrates his ability to win one or more of those "wild" powers to his service by showing that he can survive in the wilderness, or by obtaining a "vision," meeting a "spirit," and so on. The ordeal of the shaman ought also to be remembered in this connection.

This view of the things that human beings meet with in the world pre-supposes (and in the domestication of animals and plants it is demonstrated) that they are relatable to and indeed relate to human beings, that they understand, sympathize (or the contrary) and communicate with persons. When this view is combined with the view of a plurality of regions of being, these affairs can be seen as manifestations in this world of the "spiritual" powers of the "other" world. "Spirits" then can mean either invisible beings or familiar natural or manufactured material beings (e.g., plants, animals, snakes, birds, or portions of these, and stones, axes, spears, pipes, etc.) which also have an existence in another, often human form, in an alternative region of being. Note that in "fairy tales" this older world-picture is preserved: beasts are "spirits" (talking animals), and sometimes spirits take human or semi-human forms, such as, the pooka, centaur, mermaid, and so forth.

Shamanism, which is a development within this initiatory interpretation of reality that is comprised of two or more regions of being, deserves special mention here. The shaman is the one who knows of the way from one region of being to another, but as this way can be entered only by dying, he is the man who can "die" and "return to life" many times. He is initiated either in solitude or by elder shamans— ordeals which are usually experienced as death by dismemberment and rebirth. Through his initiation, the shaman learns the techniques of dying and returning to life (that is, of falling into an ecstatic trance and awakening), what to do when this occurs, and how to orient himself in the unknown regions which he enters during his ecstasy.

The shaman learns the road to the villages of the dead, the dangers to avoid as he climbs the World Tree into the different heavens above to meet the gods, the location of the hole by which he may descend into the underworld, the methods of winning the favor of the "mistress of animals" who dwells below the sea and so on. The shaman is the one who understands the mysteries of life and death. Further, he develops forms of music, poetry, and art to express all this.

Because of his ability to transcend the region of being in which his bodily existence is found, the shaman can act like a "spirit" himself. He is said to become invisible, turn himself into an animal,

see ghosts and spirits, perceive things at a great distance and foretell the future, He can also defend the community against demons—that is, "unfavorable spirits"—and all those powers of evil which cause diseases, sterility, scarcity, and disasters of all sorts.

Recovery of the World of the Initiate

Keeping the above description of a premodern religious world-picture in mind, let us now turn to a brief examination of the interpretation of man and the world present in various ancient learning/arcane religion movements.

The first such religious movement to arise, so far as can now be determined, was Orphism in Ionia in the sixth century BCE. Orphism caught up the existing myths and practices of a Dionysian cult that were combined with shamanistic rites borrowed from Thrace and Phrygia. Initiation into the Orphic cult taught persons how to escape from a bodily, worldly existence—an existence that appeared to them (in very un-Greek manner)[8] as a prison that bound the divine being present in the human soul to a chain of rebirths. The agricultural mystery religions, such as those of Demeter and Cybele, the cults of the grain and yearly vegetation cycle, are in later Hellenistic times joined to similar concerns for the spiritual destiny of the individual, in contrast, and even conflict with the older family and public cults. Christianity perhaps owed its first success outside Palestine to its being taken for an Oriental mystery religion like these.

Successors to the mystery religions were the Gnostics of the first four centuries CE. Gnosticism is concerned with eliminating the ignorance by which a person's present existence is bound to this world. It seeks to teach persons about the divine nature of the soul (a "spark of light," a part of the pleroma), its fall into an alien world, its imprisonment in the body, and its redemption through their messenger who brings the saving knowledge of its divine origin and destiny. This history of the soul is told through many different and fantastic stories, elements of which are borrowed from various sources such as the Greek, Syrian and Egyptian mysteries, Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism.

In the Middle Ages, this interpretation of the world was renewed by movements of diverse character. For example, there was the Catharian heresy of the 12th century. Perhaps this was a response to a weakening of an indigenous world-view through the spread of a more Roman version of Christianity through those peoples who had hitherto little understanding of basic Christian doctrines. In most of Europe up to the high Middle Ages, Christianity tended to be translated into pagan terms instead of paganism being replaced by Christianity. What appealed to most people was not the theological significance of its doctrines but the magical power of its rites and relics. Catharism took the form of a gnostic like version of Christianity that viewed the human soul as an imprisoned angelic being. It drew upon the ideas of Bogomilism, a Manichean sect still surviving then in Eastern Europe.

Another example was the growth of alchemy, in which certain initiatory patterns have been preserved but applied to experimentation with material substances, that were said to suffer, die and be reborn or transmuted to a new mode of being. However, what occurs externally is repeated within the soul of the experimenter, whose experiments end with his own complete regeneration[9] as a higher, godlike being. Gaining control over the material beings, he thus gains control, too, over his soul and its destiny.

Mention here should also be made of the establishment of esoteric societies belonging to more modern times, such as the Rosicrucian Order, which arose early in the 17th century. These esoteric societies set the pattern for many imitators to follow, including the late 19th century Theosophical Society, for whom the realization of the essential identity of the human self and the divine was the ultimate goal of life.

Arcane Learning/Ancient Religion Movements Today

Today there are a considerable number of occult sects, secret societies, hermetic or spiritualistic movements, and New Age cults, all seeking an alternative reality, which often takes Manichean forms. Such movements as Scientology, Eckankar, and the UFO cults teach that

men need to know how to relate to higher planes of reality that the messengers or masters bring. This knowledge will raise men to new spiritual heights, help them overcome those forces that are opposed to human good, resolve the conflicts they experience in this world, and confer upon them superhuman abilities.

Spokesmen for this religious world-picture are also to be found within contemporary Christianity. There is, for example, Hal Lindsey, whose views present another and (as they draw upon traditional apocalyptic themes) still different version of this way of seeing reality. Lindsey describes himself as a messenger bringing to the present generation the knowledge of the future as revealed to the great seers of the past— the prophets of Israel. By accepting this message one is initiated into "Christ's fraternity" and can begin to understand some of the secrets of God, namely, that one will be changed and be freed from the limitations of this bodily existence: hunger, aging, pain, and indeed one will be transferred from this world—which is going from bad to worse—to a better one.[10]

Not many of these groups practice initiation ceremonies ("initiation" is often reduced to reading a book or listening to tapes or videos), but obtaining the traditional benefits of initiation would seem to be their almost exclusive function. They offer persons access to "mysteries" in the seemingly well-founded belief that, this is what people are interested in,[11]as Paul Twitchell of the Eckankar movement said.

This quest is not limited to religious or religion-like movements. A comprehensive attitude that one adopts toward man and the world in general, such as the anti-Semitism of the present century, may also be an expression of such an interpretation of reality.[12] Further, certain aspects of drug use today may constitute a kind of "cult of experience," an active search for a mystical reunion with an ultimate source of meaning through the intense personal experience of an alternative reality,[13] which sometimes explicitly appeals to shamanistic practices.

In the movements described above, the world as viewed in the light of patterns of initiation, or at least, a similar one, appeals to those still seeking in religion a source of orientation in the face of a world that has grown alien, even if the rites themselves have not always survived as such.

However, these ancient learning/arcane religion movements, display a negativity which was not characteristic of the world-view of the past that these, in their different ways, strive to recover. There is a rejection of the accepted interpretation of the world, that is, of the world of the majority of the members of a given society. The present world is viewed as a false world, a "veil-world" concealing the true world—but a "veil" that has not always been in existence. For the truth, it is believed, has been manifest in the past. This idea of a veil drawn over the true world implies a forgetting, a mistake, or a conspiracy to be overcome, but nothing is implied about what lies behind the veil.

Hence, there is an uncritical willingness to believe in a world that may have little or no relation to the rest of one's society. One pretends to oneself that one is convinced of this or that. One wraps oneself up in doctrines which fill the lack of genuine conviction.[14] One is sure it must be so just because it cannot be so (that is, by the accepted convictions of one's society) for one has an unshakable sense of bewilderment. Thus, almost any fantastic story containing certain elements will be believed, and sometimes more than one story at the same time without regard to their coherence. This will to believe does not produce a fanatic but a faddist, and supports a tendency to move from one cult to another—but one is sure each new belief is the answer.

The beliefs of the members of these movements are as such, the beliefs of a minority. Individuals look for help from other sources than the established religion and this world's leadership, which seem to them incapable of solving their problems or even to be part of those forces in the cosmos opposed to their solution. The sense of one's alienness, the awakened "homesickness" of the individual becomes the source of a feeling of superiority, of power, and a secret life, which distinguishes one from those who belong to this world.[15] Following from this alienated sense of reality, there are various dualisms to be overcome: body versus spirit; ignorance versus knowledge; weakness versus power; the false versus the true world; a fallen

versus a pure existence; a merely human destiny versus a divine destiny; and so on. But what has a positive significance for members of these movements? First of all, reality is conceived of as being concerned with persons and their activities. What happens anywhere in reality affects human beings, and vice versa. This reality is viewed as comprised of two or more worlds. They are arranged hierarchically according to degrees of enlightenment, the world in which a person finds himself being the lowest, but with communication and movement from world to world being possible. A person may enter these other worlds by obtaining knowledge—often ecstatically—of worlds, gods, and self.

Secondly, the quest for "salvation" in these ancient learning/arcane religion movements has led to the disclosure of a new god: the "self." The roots of this belief in the self are to be found in the turn of one's interest towards oneself, one's past, in the feeling that one is orphan in an alien household, and also in the experience of the shaman who can act as a spirit, transcending the world to which he is bound by bodily existence.

Many myths have been told about this god that deal with such matters as its source, its present condition, its search for its identity, and its realization of its destiny. Their common theme is expressed in vastly differing symbols. However, the theme is always recognizable: to know oneself and to be nothing but this self-knower is the supernatural vocation of the self. One must seek release from the confining/obscuring plane of a bodily, worldly existence that inhibits/opposes such self-knowledge, and being so freed and knowing oneself to be a part of another world, one will rise to a spiritual plane of existence where one has a godlike status. In general, one may say that one is viewed as acquiring superhuman powers. This transformation is made possible by the medium of a messenger or master who brings to the requisite knowledge for one's advancement and elevation.

The shaman's initiation and spirit journey probably forms the remote background for the myths of the "self." Theses myths retain some spiritual or godly attributes for man while going on to explain why these are not apparent at present.

Though the various ancient learning/arcane religion movements have not themselves the form of a genuinely historical tradition, each being a syncretistically produced "tradition" invented by those lacking an effective religious tradition, this new god has gained a continuing and increasingly wider acceptance extending far beyond its original religious setting, and in our time has come to be a subject investigated in philosophy, literature, and psycho-analytic theory.

Note: This newly edited article was reprinted from the Spring 2007 issue of *†he Esoteric Quarterly.*

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1 Taoism in China seems to represent a parallel but independent and the only ancient nonwestern development like that which is described in this essay.

2 W. B. Yeats, "The Second Coming," in *The Variorium Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats* (New York: MacMillan, 1957), 402.

3 H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 49. 323.

4 R. Harper, *Nostalgia* (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1966), 27.

5 In Europe and America this has in the past meant borrowing materials form the Near East and from India—the sources of the "older" religions. Cf. R. Ellwood, *Religions and Spiritual Groups in Modern America* (EngleWood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 217-218.

6 I. Opie and P. Opie, *Lore and Language of School Children* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 2, 210.

7 M. Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), xii.

8 Cf. D. Lee, *Freedom and Culture* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1959), "View of the Self in Greek Culture."

9 M. Eliade, *Rite and Symbols of Initiation*, 123-124.

10 H. Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondernvan, 1970, 17, 19, 137, 139, 141, 178-179.

11 J. Godwin, *Occult America* (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1972), 120.

12 J.P. Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* (New York: Schocken Books, 1948), 17, 70.

13 Cf. K. Keniston, "Drugs and the Meaning of Life," in *Philosophy for a New Generation*, second edition, ed. by Bierman and Gould (New York: MacMillan and Co, 1973). Also, I.

Gotz, *Psychedelic Teacher* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 28, 33.

14 J. Ortega y Gasset, *Man and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1958), p. 86. 15. H. Jonas, The Gnostic Religion, 50.

15 H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 50.