

# **The esoteric roots of pseudo-therapies and healing cults**

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## **1. From public health to contemporary spirituality**

In recent years, various European countries have seen a rapid growth in group or personal healing offers, which we can easily locate in the spiritual nebula known as New Age. Normally, the first entities that have raised the alarm about this phenomenon have been the associations dedicated to reporting on sects and helping their victims, due to the sectarian nature that pseudo-therapies tend to have. But the problem has acquired such large dimensions that even public administrations have had to act. In some places, such as Spain, governments have promoted plans to fight against pseudo-therapies, but usually the real consequences of these plans are much less than the intentions shown at the beginning.

The objective of this paper is to show why pseudo-therapies are not a simple public health problem that can be combated and solved from the common legal and criminal parameters for crimes against health or against consumers, and for ordinary fraud. It is a dangerous variant of the current sectarian phenomenon that we cannot understand without taking into account all the ideological and doctrinal background that is at its bases. As I have already said, we are talking about New Age or holistic spirituality, the most widespread and diffuse form of contemporary esotericism.

Before continuing, I want to clarify that, although some authors point to older roots of pseudo-therapies (I am referring especially to the Hippocratic medicine of ancient Greece, traditional Chinese medicine and traditional Indian medicine or Ayurveda), their use in the West and, above all, its popularity is due precisely to its incorporation into the broad doctrinal spectrum of the New Age, where everything that seems closest to nature and less mediated by technology is assumed.

## **2. Currents of the New Age behind the pseudo-therapies**

It is certainly difficult to define the New Age, due to its eclectic, confusing and changing nature. Françoise Champion coined the expression “Mystical-Esoteric Nebula” (Champion 1994). And we can take as valid the classic definition of the sociologist Peter B. Clarke: “New Age is an umbrella term applied to a vast array of groups, communities, and networks that are engaged in the process

of a transformation of consciousness that will give rise to the Age of Aquarius, the period of history when the Sun will be in the sign of Aquarius at the Spring equinox. For some New Age practitioners this has already happened; for others it is still some three hundred years off” (Clarke 2006, 401). According to the same author, “alternative and/or complementary medicine is part of the bedrock of the New Age culture” (Clarke 2006, 404).

As Marilyn Ferguson explained in *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, the book published in 1980 that serves as the New Age programmatic manifesto, central to this way of thinking and praxis is paradigm shift. Its protagonists would be “conspirators who seek power only to disperse it, [...] activists [...] challenging the establishment from within” (Ferguson 1981, 23). The author talks about a transformation of consciousness on a personal and social level that was taking place in various areas. We are going to see two of them that have a lot to do with the subject of health and disease and that, together with two other elements, serve as important theoretical bases for the pseudo-therapies that we know today.

### ***2.1. Mystical vision of science***

One of the areas that Marilyn Ferguson points out is scientific research, and that is why she titles a chapter like this: “Liberating Knowledge: News from the Frontiers of Science” (Ferguson 1981, 145). Indeed: in the new world of the New Age there are no borders or divisions between the universal and the particular, between the big and the small, between the physical and the mental, between the material and the spiritual. There is talk of a “holonymic vision of reality” (Berzosa 1998, 56), according to which everything is united and interrelated, in a kind of monistic or pantheistic perspective, and in which the human being is a microcosm in which the macrocosm is reflected. Here authors stand out such as the physicist Fritjof Capra (b. 1939), the biologist Rupert Sheldrake (b. 1943) or the doctor James Lovelock (1919-2022), inventor of the “Gaia hypothesis”.

### ***2.2. The new psychologies***

The New Age movement has brought with it new “evolutions” of psychology that move away from scientific evidence in relation to the study of the mind and human behavior. The most representative form is the so-called Transpersonal Psychology, which seeks to integrate the spiritual and transcendent aspects of the human being, and which gives great importance to altered states of consciousness, sometimes with the aim of achieving healing. Stanislav Grof (b. 1931) is considered the father of this current, who spent more than a decade at the Esalen Institute (California) and has studied the effects of LSD in what he calls “holotropic states”.

### ***2.3. Holistic health and personal growth***

Connected to the previous point is everything related to personal growth, which has brought the postulates of these new psychologies to the field of popular self-help. Here it is common to find an uncritical acceptance of any holistic or integrative vision of medicine and health, which is proposed as an alternative to the traditional Western vision that, according to them, would look at the person as a being divided into compartments, without taking into account its entirety. As Marilyn Ferguson explains, “if we respond to the message of pain or disease, the demand for adaptation, we can break

through to a new level of wellness” (Ferguson 1981, 242). That wellness or well-being is a key concept, and it includes everything. That is why in the New Age there is talk of healing more than curing. Here we could also include, halfway between personal growth and holistic health, the “methods of human potential”, techniques that offer to develop the person's abilities to the maximum.

#### ***2.4. The channeling phenomenon***

Finally, I want to review a fundamental section of the New Age that might seem far removed from what we are dealing with here today, but which is basic to understanding some of the pseudo-therapies that concern us the most: channeling. With this name we refer to the revelation of a message from another dimension through a person (the channel) who receives it by telepathy, automatic writing, trance or any other altered state of consciousness. The source of that hidden or supernatural wisdom can be a god, an angel, an alien, an ascended master... or the sensitive person can access an etheric file with data only accessible to a few (the so-called Akashic Records). One of the most popular channeled books today is *A Course in Miracles*, “channeled” by Helen Schucman between 1965 and 1972. Among other things, she teaches that diseases don’t really exist.

### **3. The basic contemporary roots**

Although many people think that the New Age is a phenomenon that suddenly appeared in the 20th century, the truth is that everything we have seen so far has its roots in the 18th and 19th centuries, precisely in the historical period that has determined the contemporary culture since the Enlightenment.

#### ***3.1. From idealism to New Thought***

We cannot understand the emergence of the New Age without taking into account, first of all, the philosopher Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), who after a vital phase as a scientific researcher became a seer who claimed to receive messages from angels (and his visions and books were attacked by Kant). Among many other things, contemporary esotericism owes him its formulation of the correspondence theory, based on the ancient hermetic principle: “as above, so below”. The second main author is the doctor Franz Mesmer (1734-1815), who proposed the theory of animal magnetism, according to which there is a “universal magnetic fluid”, whose imbalance in the human body would cause diseases, and for this reason he claimed to cure with magnets. In addition, according to him, the stars influence human health (medical astrology). He was an essential predecessor of spiritualism.

The next step, already late in the 19th century, is that of the current known as New Thought, initiated by figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Phineas Parkhurst Quimby (1802-1866) and Emma Curtis Hopkins (1853-1925). Based on mesmerism and transcendentalism, these authors argued that there is a universal mind, an impersonal energy that is also found within the human being and that makes us capable of healing. On these theoretical bases, not only has spiritual healing

been practiced, but both the so-called “law of attraction” and positive thinking have been elaborated, which is nothing more than a magical vision of reality, since the person would attract the positive or the negative according to the character of your thoughts. This also includes health and illness. A more “religious” version is also part of this current: Christian Science, founded by Mary Baker Eddy (1821-1910).

### ***3.2. The Theosophical Society***

But, without a doubt, the most influential movement in contemporary esotericism, and therefore also in the New Age, is the Theosophical Society, founded by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891). An example is found in the *New Age Almanac*, which begins its “New Age Chronology” in 1875, the year the Theosophical Society was formed (Melton – Clark – Kelly 1991, xi). Of Masonic affiliation, Blavatsky and her closest collaborators proposed their “wisdom of the divine” (according to the etymology of Theosophy), obtained from the “ascended masters” of the Great White Brotherhood and with an important influence of the Eastern worldview (Hindu and Buddhist), both in its terminology and in its vision of the human being and of the entire reality. The person would have divine nature and therefore power to heal. From the Theosophical point of view, “the roots of disease lie deep in the mental and emotional nature of man” (Hodson 1925, 3-4), and “ill-health may be ascribed to an interference with the flow of the life through the subtle as well as the physical bodies” (Hodson 1925, 5).

### ***3.3. The Anthroposophical Society***

Among the many derivations and schisms of the theosophical movement, the Anthroposophical Society, founded in 1913 by the hitherto leader of the German theosophists, Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), which stands out due to the importance it has had and continues to have worldwide, he wanted to reorient the esoteric doctrines towards a more Western and Christian version. Steiner’s theoretical proposal ranges from religion to banking, through pedagogy, agriculture, art, music, politics... and medicine. Indeed, one of its most outstanding branches is anthroposophical medicine, which they consider “an extension of conventional medicine” that takes into account the spiritual nature of the human being. Illnesses can be caused by vital events that affect both the body and the soul and spirit of the individual, and can even be due to previous reincarnations. This system rejects vaccines and distrusts medicines, which is why it habitually prescribes natural compounds. It has clinics, doctors and associations in 80 countries.

## **4. Conclusions**

After this quick and concentrated historical review, I think it is very clear that pseudo-therapies are not a circumstantial phenomenon or that they arose by chance. It is the current embodiment of a process that has been taking place over the last three centuries and that has given rise to the so-called New Age. This is not a simple cultural fad, but the most important example of esotericism accepted in Western societies. The culture based on Judeo-Christian values and principles was

experiencing a progressive secularization, which made possible scientific advances and a consideration of health and disease from the parameters of scientific rationality. In this context, esoteric thought has been the humus that has given rise to the various pseudoscientific proposals that concern us today.

On many occasions we directly find sectarian groups that practice pseudo-therapies. This is an easy phenomenon to identify. But it is not so easy to define other currents, which sometimes do not form groups as such, but affect their victims as if they were in a sect. In this area, we could highlight four main lines:

- Emotional origin of the disease: a multitude of groups, individual gurus, books... propose an understanding of diseases as a bodily response or symptom to an emotional, mental or spiritual imbalance. The reality of the psychosomatic is taken and twisted here to mix it with esoteric elements that we have seen, giving rise to proposals such as Biological Decoding, Bioneuroemotion, Emotional Liberation, etc.

- Energy healing: Reiki and many other techniques propose comprehensive healing through the transmission of spiritual energy by the imposition of hands or other forms. All this brings with it a doctrinal and ritual initiation by masters and based on levels, which chronifies and expands the catalog of healers and, with it, the danger of creating new sects based on these techniques.

- Some pseudo-psychological techniques are spreading not only in New Age circles, but also among accredited mental health professionals, who, by integrating proposals such as Family Constellations or Gestalt Therapy into their work, abandon the channels of the evidence-based psychology to tread the slippery paths of confusingly spiritual orientation, which carries with it a clear sectarian risk.

- Finally, we must not forget that after some relaxation and meditation techniques widely used in the West after decades of application supposedly stripped of all metaphysical elements (I am referring specifically to yoga, of Hindu origin, and mindfulness, of Buddhist origin), We often find true “New Age salads” where the most varied elements are mixed. Because after the physical and mental exercise, a veiled indoctrination is being included that can lead the person to an unintended change in life. Not everything that develops around yoga and mindfulness is sectarian, of course, but there is a certain risk that must be taken into account.

And finally, as always, the most opposed to cults is freedom. And for there to be freedom of decision and discernment, knowledge is necessary. I hope that this small and tight contribution serves to better understand the historical and doctrinal background of pseudo therapies, to know how to face their challenges at a social, political, family and personal level. Thank you so much.