

# New Religious Movements, Modern Esoteric Movements, and Integral Consciousness

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**Abstract:** Sensibilities toward Eastern thought in the West, fostered in large part through the growth of new religious movements, align with the elements of Western esoteric teachings which have appeared in many guises throughout the history of the West and are reemerging in our time. Understanding these sensibilities and their alignment can deepen our appreciation of the foundations of integral consciousness.

**Key Words:** Esotericism, Integral Consciousness, New Religious Movements.

## Introduction

The religious landscape is changing and we are in a particularly advantageous place from which to view these alterations. Not only is California the site of more new religious movements than elsewhere in this country (and perhaps the world), but the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) offers fertile soil and is a veritable greenhouse for change in consciousness. I have studied new religions in America since 1970 and have recently begun to examine esotericism throughout history in the West. I suggest that these two impulses, new religious movements and esoteric movements, may offer insights into our understanding of integral consciousness.

## Personal Standpoint

In the early 1970s, when I began to study the sociology of new religions, the larger field of sociology of religion was declining. Many sociologists were predicting that the field of sociology of religion would cease to exist, since the dominant theory of the day was the secularization hypothesis that modern societies would find religion less and less important over time as rational thought and scientific progress would move us away from belief and superstition. The last forty years demonstrate that these predictions were erroneous. We have a burgeoning of religion and

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huge shifts in religious affiliations. Reports of the demise of the sociology of religion were premature and overstated. The sociology of religion is needed more than ever to understand why these changes in religious phenomena are occurring.

## **The Religious Landscape in the United States**

A quick overview of religious affiliations in the U.S. demonstrates what Americans have always known that religion matters. In the traditional religions of this country (Judaism, Roman Catholicism, and Protestantism) conservative groups are growing and liberal groups are declining in membership. In the world of Protestantism, liberal denominations (such as Episcopal and Methodist) are declining, while conservative denominations (such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and other evangelical churches) are growing. Eastern religious beliefs and practices, particularly those of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Sikhism, and Jainism, are proliferating in the larger culture, even if formal membership grows only slightly or not at all. Today, almost everyone in this society knows the meanings of religious concepts from the East, such as karma and reincarnation. But only two generations ago, few Americans knew these concepts, or the basics of astrology, Tarot, or the I-Ching.

### **New Religious Movements**

The breadth of belief and practice demonstrated in new religious movements in this country is immense. Of particular interest to us are the ancient traditions from the East that appeared in abundance after the Asian Exclusion Act was repealed in 1965. The U.S. saw many teachers from Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism, Taoism, and Sufism appear and attract devotees to Eastern beliefs and practices. Interestingly, some of the oldest religious traditions on earth are classified sociologically as "new religions" in the U.S. because they entered the mainstream culture in the last 100 or so years. There has also been a reclaiming (some would say a revitalization) of indigenous spirituality centered around pagan thought and practice, goddess spirituality, and renewed connection to nature through shamanism and entheogens.

Other movements, such as Scientology, Christian Science, UFO groups, and channelers claim to unite religion and science and to use empirical methods to bolster faith and a spiritual cosmology. New Age groups combine these distinctive threads into innovative forms that seem to demonstrate endless permutations. Even newer are the growing fundamentalist movements in the major world religions, including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and even Hinduism.

This brief sketch of the panoply of new religious impulses is cursory, but telling. What we see is a growing eclecticism among those who accept liberal versions of traditional religions. It is not uncommon to find individuals who simultaneously study Kaballah, attend an Episcopal church, go to Buddhist retreats, visit shamans in Peru, have Tarot readings, practice yoga, and meditate. This movement toward eclecticism and the privatizing of religion has long been noted by scholars of religion. In the 60's, Thomas Luckmann (1967) called this form of spirituality "the invisible religion"; in the 70's Aghananda Bharati (1976, p. 11) referred to the "aloha-amigo" syndrome, which he described as "pathological eclecticism"; and in the 80's, Robert Bellah (1985) coined the term "Sheilaism". Each term refers to the assertion that religion is essentially a

private matter to be constructed idiosyncratically and that no particular constraint is placed on individuals by a historic church or religious community.

Bellah (1986) found in the 1980s that 80% of Americans agreed with the statement: “an individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any churches or synagogues”(p. 2). When such privatism combines with eclecticism, we see a ‘make your own’ religion, as each person can pick and choose what he or she prefers from the smorgasbord of beliefs and practices that is openly available. Among some, the ability ‘to make your own’ religion has also become valorized under the term “spirituality”, as distinct from religion. Others define the eclecticism of the smorgasbord as pathological; especially if, as most traditions assert, one must go deeply into one tradition to benefit from its wisdom and transformative promise.

Also new, but in opposition to this sampling at the smorgasbord of belief and practice, is an entrenchment in various traditions in order to preserve what is considered a “pure” but threatened religious tradition, usually to a depth of conservatism and rejection of interfaith dialogue that supersedes any previous stage in the tradition. This phenomenon includes the growing fundamentalisms in several world religions, a decidedly important trend—but not part of our consideration here—because the fundamentalist impulse of exclusivism runs counter to the impulse toward integral consciousness.

## **Esotericism**

Esotericism, broadly understood as the hidden side of any institutionalized religious tradition, has many definitions. For our purposes, we emphasize the personal struggle for progressive elucidation at multiple levels of reality. Esotericism involves submitting oneself to a conscious and transcendent reality that is contacted within the self. It is a psychological enterprise that includes both the sacred and the profane in a quest for self-knowledge, which does not depend upon acceptance of any system of belief or morality. Although the site of transformation is the psyche, esotericism relies on communities of practice and teachers to provide conditions for transformation. Thus, the esoteric enterprise cannot be completely privatized. Esotericism involves a way of engagement quite distinct from institutionalized or exoteric religion.

Exoteric religion contrasts with esotericism in that traditional exoteric religion in the West defines the human condition as one of sin and the goal of life as salvation—this is particularly true of Christianity. The means to salvation include belief, faith, and doctrinal orthodoxy. We even refer to individuals who practice a religion as ‘believers’. Western exoteric religion is dualistic, dividing morality into good and bad elements and cosmology into the creator and the created. Exoteric religion involves membership in an institution (e.g. church, synagogue, or mosque) that promotes practices and rituals derived from faith and belief.

Esotericism, on the other hand, defines the human condition as one of ignorance and fragmentation and the goal of life as gnosis, evolution, and transformation, with different degrees of emphasis on these goals in various traditions. The means to transformation include inquiry, self-observation, knowledge, and integration of the parts of the self into a whole. Esoteric religion is non-dual, emphasizing universalistic themes; members can be in all faiths. Instead of membership in a religious institution, esotericists belong to schools and follow a teaching rather

than a belief system. Their practice is more akin to an exploratory inquiry than a faith-based orthodoxy. Instead of being a “believer,” an esotericist is more properly termed a ‘student.’<sup>2</sup>

What does the shift from exoteric religious belief to new religions and esotericism signal? The answer is multi-faceted and requires considerable explanation. I point here to only a few themes that are salient for our consideration because these themes also participate in what we identify as integral consciousness.

## **How New Religions and Esotericism Contribute to Integral Consciousness**

The search begins as a yearning for authenticity. We are not as we can be and in our fragmented and conflicted state, we are not whole. We are able to be greater and are called to be greater than we are. We sense a personal obligation to search for a change in our state of being. Some impulse calls for a rebellion against the unresolved compartmentalization and contradictions in modern society, in all of its manifestations—religion, family, education, science, ethics, art, etc. In a quest for wholeness, many attempts are made, sometimes misguided, to grapple with the ethical and metaphysical relativism that defines our age.

A mechanistic model of the universe no longer suffices. We learn from indigenous, pagan, and Eastern traditions that the universe is not inanimate, but rather conscious and that the universe constitutes a teaching in itself. Nature is thus living and conscious and we participate in its unity, not as separate entities, but as fractals of a whole. We learn that study of our psychology and study of the cosmos are mutually reinforcing. In fact, one learns about oneself through knowledge of the workings of the larger cosmos. We begin to see relationships and identity between the microcosm and the macrocosm. Individual healing reflects cosmic principles, as in the alchemical axiom ‘as above, so below’.

Although acutely aware of the many differences among us, we recognize a universalizing principle that rises above sectarianism to affirm that all humans are in a common struggle for liberation from the bondage of conditioning. In recognition that we can be liberated only after intense study of ourselves, we have an impulse to unite with others in an effort, a work, to make more of ourselves and our communities than we can even comprehend at this point. A local exemplar of this impulse is the Cultural Integration Fellowship<sup>3</sup> in San Francisco founded by Haridas Chaudhuri. In our intent to transform self and society, we find that our efforts need to be trans-religious, trans-cultural, and trans-gender. Frithjof Schuon (1984) refers to the transcendent unity of religions; Robert Bellah (1986) asserts that “the religious heritage of the human species is one”(p.3). Somehow we reckon that we are deeply interdependent.

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<sup>2</sup> Western esoteric movements have existed much like an underground stream throughout Western history, surfacing in distinct places and times, but with similar principles and practices. A few examples to illustrate the breadth of esotericism include: Essenes, Greek Mystery Cults, Pythagoreanism, Kaballah, Sufism, Theosophy, Freemasonry, Anthroposophy, Rosicrucianism, Alchemy, Hermeticism, and groups following specific teachers such as Jacob Boehme, Rene Guenon, G.I. Gurdjieff, and Adyashanti.

<sup>3</sup> for more information see: <http://www.culturalintegrationfellowship.org/>

Part of the universalizing principle is a rejection of partisan, sectarian religious tenets that have been integral to the American worldview. The traditional civil religion that saw America as God's new Israel and as the exemplar of absolute good is suffering a crisis of legitimacy. As is the Protestant Ethic—also known as the American Success Ethic—which defines poverty as disreputable and justifies accumulation of wealth. In place of these divisive belief systems that justify social and cultural hegemony without a trace of self-criticism, we find an ethic of community arising in a number of new religious forms. We recognize a dimension of humanity that the modern secular world denies and we acknowledge a quest for direct experience of this dimension, variously referred to as the divine, the sacred, the transcendent, the mysterious, the participatory. In reaction to the emotional blandness of the modern world, an impulse arises to integrate body, mind, spirit, and emotions. Wholeness requires that we honor the teachings of the past through myth and story and discover a sacred dimension to humanity that calls for expression.

Similarly, the impulse toward integral consciousness originates from a higher level of ourselves, a level that is 'esoteric', hidden or inaccessible to us because we habitually identify with a surface consciousness that is fragmented, isolated and alone. How do we search for this authenticity, this integrity of being? One fundamental esoteric principle is that we are not alone, that there exists a locus of conscious energy that calls to us and speaks to us through the diversity of forms we call 'art', 'religion' and even 'science', provided we know how to listen with a more whole, integral self. What we have not understood and what is problematic is that the attention we bring to these areas of interest is always insufficient because it is always the same fragmented attention we occupy daily in our ordinary state. Attention is not theoretical but so long as it evades itself, allows itself to become absorbed in its various momentary interests to the exclusion of its integral potential, we necessarily suffer the consequences of a fragmented and incomplete existence.

All of these impulses constitute a desire for a religion or a teaching that makes a difference in our everyday lives. It is not enough to be a nominal participant in a faith-based institution. Spending one hour on Sunday morning in church, going to High Holy Days each year or observing Namas each day does not satisfy the urge to change one's state of being. To change, to transform, to transmute, to integrate, to individuate are processes that require more than nominal allegiance. They require diligence and energy.

I conclude by citing Jacob Needleman, "What we find in these movements is the hope of a worldview for modern people, a sense of the wholeness and purposiveness of reality within which individual human beings are called to discover their own natural place, bringing with them everything of their minds, hearts, and instincts. This impulse has the virtue of joining the inner life of each person in all its possible levels to the world of nature and beyond, even to the Highest" (Faivre and Needleman, 1995, pp. xxiv-xxv).

In these ways, the deeper aspects of the new religious phenomena represent the reemergence of esotericism in our time and contribute to the foundations of integral consciousness.

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