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## **Astrology's Role in New Age Culture: A Research Note**

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**Abstract.** The practice of, or belief in, astrology is generally considered a central feature of modern New Age culture. Research conducted by Stuart Rose in the 1990s contradicted this assumption. This paper does not argue that astrology is a New Age discipline, but challenges Rose's methodology and his reasons for arguing that it is not New Age. The paper reports on research relying on two other measures by used Rose to argue that astrology can be New Age but does not have to be New Age.

That modern astrology is essentially a New Age discipline is assumed by most external commentators whether evangelical, historical or sociological.<sup>1</sup> Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead saw the introduction of astrology classes

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<sup>1</sup> For evangelical Christian views of astrology as New Age see Peter Anderson, *Satan's Snare: The influence of the occult* (Welwyn, Hertfordshire: Evangelical Press, 1988), p. 39; Walter Martin, *The New Age Cult* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1989), p. 15; J. Yutaka Amano and Norman L. Geisler, *The Infiltration of the New Age* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1989), pp. 32–33; Michael Cole, Jim Graham, Tony Highton and David Lewis, *What is the New Age?* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1990), p. 6; Elliot Miller, *A Crash Course on the New Age Movement* (Eastbourne: Monarch Publications, 1990), p. 19; John P. Newport, *The New Age Movement and the Biblical Worldview: Conflict and Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans, 1998), p. 8. For historical views see Patrick Curry, *A Confusion of Prophets: Victorian and Edwardian Astrology* (London: Collins and Brown, 1992), p. 161. For sociological see John A. Saliba, *Perspectives on New Religious Movements* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995), p. 23; Steve Bruce, *Religion in Modern Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 105; Robin Gill, *Churchgoing and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 50–51, 81, 135.

in the English Town of Kendal in 1985 as evidence for the emergence of a spiritual revolution (code for New Age) there.<sup>2</sup> Michael York pointed out both that astrology's philosophical roots are classical, yet that it is the 'lingua franca' of New Age movement, which 'establishes itself on astrological nuance, metaphor and interpretation'.<sup>3</sup> Patrick Curry argued that astrological notions of history may be central to both the psychological discourse of New Age culture and the historical prophecy of the New Age as a future epoch, even if it competes within the New Age market place with myriad other routes to self-awareness.<sup>4</sup> Stuart Sutcliffe, meanwhile, acknowledged astrology's significance as the popular wing of the occult and esoteric revival of the early twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> There are two issues, though. The first is whether modern astrology is, in its nature, New Age, while the second is the extent to which it is central to New Age culture, whether or not it is itself New Age in character. As I argue elsewhere, a description of astrology as 'New Age' may appropriate in some circumstances, although not in others.<sup>6</sup> In this paper, though, I am concerned with perceptions and behaviour rather than questions of astrology's inherent nature.

One of the few academics to question astrology's role in New Age culture was Stuart Rose.<sup>7</sup> There is uncertainty about what actually constitutes New

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2 Paul Heelas, Linda Woodhead, Benjamin Seel, Karin Tusting and Bron Szerszynski, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 43.

3 Michael York, *Historical Dictionary of New Age Movements* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2003), pp. 25–26.

4 Curry, *Confusion*, p. 161.

5 Stuart Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age: A history of spiritual practices* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 28, 36–37.

6 Nicholas Campion, *Astrology and Popular Religion in the Modern West* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

7 Stuart Rose, *Transforming the World: An Examination of the roles played by Spirituality and Healing in the New Age Movement* (PhD thesis, Department of Religious Studies, Lancaster University, 1996).

Age activity: Michael York concluded that 'Even the concept of a New Age is vague'.<sup>8</sup> However, I have employed Rose's descriptors of New Age behaviour. Rose attempted to convert the frequency with which readers of the magazine *Kindred Spirit* had different kinds of New Age reading or consultation into a measure of the extent any particular activity might be considered New Age. Without either defining the time period or distinguishing different types of reading, Rose found that 3% of his sample had an 'astrological or psychical reading' frequently, 7% regularly, 76% occasionally, 4% never and 10% failed to answer. He concluded from this figure that, although the most common sort of reading for a New Ager to have was astrological, the frequency was low. Rose then argued that 'the influence of divinatory arts [in which he included astrology] in the New Age is not particularly significant'.<sup>9</sup> This conclusion, as far as astrology is concerned, was based not on the percentage who had received a reading (908, or 70%), but on the frequency. However, he did not ask how frequently it would be reasonable to have an astrological consultation. Rose believed that New Agers would visit an astrologer as frequently, say, as they might consult a homeopath or tarot reader.

In order to check Rose's assumption I asked astrologers (defined as delegates at astrology conferences) about the frequency with which they obtained horoscope readings. My hypothesis was that, as such people are classed intense or serious believers by Bauer and Durant, and Paulik and Buse, they should be most likely to have regular consultations.<sup>10</sup> I issued

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8 Michael York, *The Emerging Network: A Sociology of the New Age and Neo-Pagan Movements* (London: Rowan and Littlefield, 1995), p. 22; See also George Chrystides, *Exploring New Religions* (London: Cassell 1999), p. 315.

9 Rose, *Transforming the World*, p. 3.

10 John Bauer and Martin Durant, 'British Public Perceptions of Astrology: An Approach from the Sociology of Knowledge', *Culture and Cosmos*, Vol. 1, no. 1 (1997): pp. 55–72; Kurt Pawlik, and Lothar Buse, 'Self-Attribution as a Moderator Variable in Differential Psychology: Replication and Interpretation of Eysenck's Astrology/Personality Correlations', *Correlation*, November, Vol. 4, no. 2 (1984): pp.14–30.

questionnaires at the Astrological Association Conference of Great Britain (AA) in Plymouth in August 1999 and the United Astrology Congress (UAC) in Orlando, Florida, in July 2002. My results are difficult to compare to Rose's because his time periods are not defined: there is no indication, for example, as to whether his 'twice a year' may imply 'frequently' or 'regularly', while once a year is equivalent to 'regularly' or 'occasionally'. However, my results indicate that, 31% of delegates at the 1999 AA conference had never had a professional astrology reading, considerably more than Rose's figure. Only 53% of delegates at the AA conference had had more than one professional astrology consultation. That a higher percentage of Rose's sample of New Agers had had an astrological reading than delegates to an astrology conference suggests that conclusions may not be drawn about the importance of astrology from such a question. In addition I checked these figures in my interviews, asking how many of those who visit astrologers for readings might be regular. The number is quite small. For example, Ronnie Dreyer, a highly respected New York-based astrologer, told me that only 25% of her clients are repeat visits, and that for such clients, a 'regular' consultation may be no more frequent than annual.<sup>11</sup> Rose's conclusion that astrology plays little part in New Age practice cannot, therefore, be sustained on the basis of the figures he presents.

**Table 1. Astrologers and Frequency of Astrological Readings**

Number of readings	AA	UAC
Never	31 (19.4%)	15 (9.9%)
1	33 (33.2%)	19 (12.5%)
2	28 (17.6%)	16 (10.5%)
3	17 (10.7%)	15 (9.9%)
4	14 (8.8%)	14 (9.2%)
5	5 (3.1%)	14 (9.2%)
6	8 (5%)	13 (8.6%)
7	2 (1.2%)	3 (2%)
8	4 (2.5%)	3 (2%)
9	0	4 (2.6%)
10	4 (2.5%)	7 (4.6%)
More than 10	14 (8.8%)	37 (24.3%)

<sup>11</sup> Interview, Ronnie Dreyer, 17 June 1999.

The figure of 9.9% at the UAC conference who had never had an astrology reading is lower than at the AA but still high considering that all the respondents had made the effort to attend an astrology conference, and so could be assumed to be enthusiastic about the subject. It is also clear that, if 'regularly' in Rose's terms might be considered to be one a year, the regularity of Dreyer's repeat visits, the figures suggest that the majority of delegates at both UAC and AA have readings less than regularly. In addition, the number of astrologers who have never had a reading shed further doubt on those measures of belief in astrology which are based on a linear scale of activity, from reading sun columns to having a professional reading to studying astrology. Receiving professional astrological consultations is not a necessary part of either interest in, or intense engagement with, astrology.

#### **Astrologers and New Age Practices**

To broaden the investigation I examined astrologers' engagement in what Stuart Rose identified as New Age Practices (Table 2). Rose had provided a list of thirty-one activities, involvement in any one of which might be evidence of New Age identity. I compressed the list to the following fifteen for space reasons. Rose asked his respondents if they had been involved in such practices in the past or were currently still involved: involvement indicated, in his measure, engagement in New Age culture. I simplified Rose's inquiry by asking about involvement, regardless of whether such involvement was in the past or the present. If Rose's figures set a standard for the levels of involvement in New Age activities amongst readers of a New Age magazine (*Kindred Spirit*) that indicate affiliation with New Age culture, then my figures should provide a measure for New Age affiliation amongst astrologers. In each case the AA and UAC figures are comparable to, or higher than, Rose's figures, indicating that, in Rose's methodology, astrologers have a deeper New Age identity than *Kindred Spirit* readers.

**Table 2. Astrologers and New Age Activities**

	Rose 'ever' %	Rose 'currently' %	AA	UAC
Acupuncture	57	15	94 (59.1%)	91 (59.9%)
Channelling/Clairvoyance	9	18	100 (62.8%)	91 (59.9%)
Crystals	71	32	78 (49%)	92 (60.5%)
Earth Mysteries	43	16	40 (25.1%)	42 (27.6%)
Ethical investing	18	10	29 (18.2%)	40 (26.5%)
Green politics	45	13	54 (34%)	55 (36.2%)
Healing workshops	67	26	91 (57.2%)	107 (70.4%)
Herbalism	57	20	76 (47.8%)	102 (67%)
Homeopathy	39	28	98 (61.6%)	106 (69.7%)
Hypnotherapy	39	8	54 (34%)	63 (41.4%)
Past Life Therapy	39	8	32 (35.2%)	68 (44.7%)
Psychotherapy/counselling	42	13	101 (63.5%)	106 (69.7%)
Shaman/Pagan Rituals	35	15	43 (27%)	63 (41.4%)
Veganism	14	4	11 (6.9%)	24 (15.8%)
Vegetarianism	71	39	81 (50.9%)	78 (51.3%)

### The Consequences of Astrology

Rose provided a third means of assessing the impact of New Age activities, inviting respondents to assess the change in their mood after encountering New Age ideas and practices, offering a range of options from 'more pleasurable' to 'more fulfilled' (see Table 3).<sup>12</sup> Whereas Rose asked his sample how they felt after experiencing New Age activities, I asked respondents how astrology had affected their lives. I found a very close match between the AA and UAC figures. In each sample 'meaningful' is the top choice, followed by 'spiritual' and 'self-empowered', though in a

<sup>12</sup> Rose, *Transforming the World*, p. 369.

different order. Meaning is a slippery term. Mark Bauerlein's description of meaning as 'whatever consequences or behaviours follow from believing in this or that idea', only serves to illustrate how easy it is to get lost on a maze of words when we have these discussions, for he seems to imply that meaning implies action and follows belief.<sup>13</sup> I prefer simplicity and define it as whatever significance is derived from any event, personal encounter or set of ideas, whether individual or collective. That said, though, as we have found, astrologers place a high value on the acquisition of personal meaning as a benefit of astrology. This is attested by both personal testimony and academic literature. The astrologer Jane Ridder-Patrick told me that 'If I have any belief in relation to astrology it is that life is meaningful and purposeful, and that astrology has a part to play in illuminating this meaning and purpose'.<sup>14</sup> And according to Mircea Eliade, 'the discovery that your life is related to astral phenomena does confer a new meaning on your existence'.<sup>15</sup> The emphasis on meaning in my results accords with previous research. In her 1962 study Marcia Moore found that the largest number of her sample of astrologers, 75 or 30%, claimed that their interest in astrology was motivated by the desire to gain 'a better understanding of myself and others'.<sup>16</sup>

The following six options are then ranked in almost the same order, with only pleasurable and happier changing places. This again shows consistency between the British and American samples. It also points to the pursuit of meaning as astrology's principal purpose, with self-empowerment and

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13 Bauerlein, Mark, *The Pragmatic Mind: Explorations in the Psychology of Belief* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 1.

14 Jane Ridder-Patrick, personal communication, 8 December 2000.

15 Mircea Eliade, *Occultism, Witchcraft and Cultural Fashions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 61.

16 Marcia Moore, *Astrology Today: A Socio-Psychological Survey*, Astrological Research Associates Research Bulletin no. 2 (New York: Lucis Publishing Company, 1960), p. 91.



greater spirituality coming close behind. The prominence of self-empowerment points to astrology's strongly activist role as a means of developing freedom of choice. Rose's results are similar. Spiritual and meaningful were top of his list, fulfilled was fourth and playful last. In other words, astrology generates very similar subjective consequences as does involvement in New Age activities. This in itself tells us nothing about astrology in relation to other practices: surely we need comparisons with other groups—ballroom dancers, perhaps, or gardeners, or athletes. However, it is clear that a significant number of astrologers claim that astrology rendered them more spiritual and self-empowered and make their existence more meaningful. Again, though, while this may indicate a dominant New Age, discourse, we have to pay attention to the numbers (between 12 and 25% who do *not* find that astrology makes life more meaningful, or the 41–46% who do not feel more spiritual. There is also then, clearly, a persistent non-New Age conversation within astrology. Astrology, therefore *can* be New Age, but it does not *have* to be.

**Table 3. Consequences of Astrology**

State of Mind after experiencing New Age activities (Rose) or astrology (Campion, AA, UAC)	Rose %	AA	UAC
More pleasurable	47	46 (28.9%)	56 (36.8%)
More spiritual	82	86 (54%)	105 (69.1%)
More responsible	58	54 (34%)	65 (42.7%)
More self-empowered	71	100 (62.2%)	107 (70.4%)
More playful	37	27 (17%)	32 (21%)
Happier	72	47 (29.5%)	52 (34.2%)
More healed	66	61 (38.4%)	68 (44.2%)
More meaningful	80	140 (88%)	113 (74.3%)
More fulfilled	71	78 (49%)	85 (55.9%)