

Canada's (Post) "New Age" Spiritual Centers and the Impact of the Internet in the  
Context of Digital Religion

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## **Abstract**

As a phenomenon that has had overwhelming social, cultural and political influence, the internet has become so embedded in our lives that it is difficult to imagine how we communicated or accessed information before its invention. It is not surprising, then, that the web is also a very active religious environment with religious and spiritual groups using it extensively to proclaim their beliefs and to be in contact with their followers. In a macro sense, web-based religion is any online activity, from the simple dissemination of information about a religious group or church to full web-based religious practice. It can be understood as occurring along a spectrum from “religion online” at one end to “online religion” at the other. First developed by Christopher Helland and further refined by Lorne Dawson, “religion online” means the use of the internet as a means of providing essential information about, or by, religious groups, movements, and traditions. At the other end of the spectrum, “online religion” sees the internet as a space that permits the practice of religion or ritual, or worship. In other words, rather than use their web browsers to simply search for information, religious followers use the web as an integral part of their religious lives (Helland, 2000; Dawson, 2005).

However, a new term has entered the academic vocabulary and is being applied to online/offline religious praxis and that is “Digital Religion.” This latest definition brings a broader meaning to online/offline religion because it accepts the reality that current religious practice co-exists in an online and an offline world simultaneously and the rapid growth of digital technology has included religious or spiritual movements.

This dissertation focuses on three New Age spiritual groups in Canada (English Canada only): the Universal Oneness Spiritual Center<sup>1</sup> in Toronto, Ontario, the Centre for Spiritual Living in Calgary, Alberta and Unity Vancouver in Vancouver B.C., and reviews how these three groups use the internet in their everyday activities such as ritual, prayer and meditation and compares and contrasts the pros and cons of online and offline New Age spirituality, paying particular attention to issues of social, cultural and geographical differentiation in the light of Digital Religion.

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<sup>1</sup> I have elected to use the American spelling of Center in most cases since two of the groups use this spelling in their names. However Calgary calls itself a Centre, so where I am referencing Calgary Centre I have used the English spelling.

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## Preface

It is important from the beginning to be clear what we mean by the “New Age Movement.” Since there is neither a central governing body nor a central church per se, there is no universally published doctrine that succinctly describes the beliefs and philosophy of New Age. As the name implies, the movement is focused on time, not geography or founder. The accepted view is that it refers to the transition, in Astrological terms, from the Piscean Age into the Aquarian Age, which is occurring in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This dawning of a New Age coincides, more or less, with the turning over of the Mayan Calendar in 2012, which, according to Daniel Pinchback,<sup>2</sup> *2012: The Return of Quetzalcoatl*, also heralds the beginning of a new age that will change the world.

In New Age scholarship, such as the work of James R. Lewis<sup>3</sup> and J. Gordon Melton,<sup>4</sup> it is recognized as a commonplace that New Age is in fact not new, but rather a revival of ancient teachings and practices. New Age has become an umbrella term<sup>5</sup> to capture these alternatives to traditional Western spirituality that are served up to

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Pinchbeck is an American author and writer. He is the author of *Breaking Open the Head: A Psychedelic Journey into the Heart of Contemporary Shamanism* (Broadway Books, 2002), *2012: The Return of Quetzalcoatl* (Tarcher/Penguin, 2006), and *Notes from the Edge Times* (Tarcher/Penguin, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> James R. Lewis is an American scholar in religious studies specializing in new religious movements, Astrology and New Age; currently he is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Tromso (Norwegian University) and Honorary Senior Research Fellow at the University of Wales, Lampeter.

<sup>4</sup> John Gordon Melton is an American religious scholar who was the founding director of the institute for the study of American Religion and is currently the Distinguished Professor of American Religious History with the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.

<sup>5</sup> “A term that names diverse spiritual, social, and political beliefs and practices that promote personal and societal change through spiritual information.” Crowley Karlyn, *Feminism's New Age: Gender, Appropriation, and Afterlife of Essentialism*. ” SUNY Press, 2011.

individuals in a modern format that “clients” select from in order to model their personal journeys of “self-enlightenment” (Crowley, 2011: 2). However, Lewis and Melton also point out that many New Agers no longer identify themselves as such, because of the negative association of some of the movement’s practices (such as crystal healing<sup>6</sup> and channeling<sup>7</sup>).

The New Age Movement in general often takes on much of the culture of the place in which it is located, in Europe and non-Western countries for example, the New Age Movement was heavily influenced by established local pagan practices, whereas in North America the movement has been heavily influenced by the New Thought movement. In Ireland it has been shaped by the local Pagan traditions (Cosgrove, Olivia, Cox, Laurence, Kuhling, Carmen, Mulholland, Peter); in Japan the movement combined Shinto and Buddhist traditions (Maham Muzamil) and in South America and Africa New Age incorporated indigenous occult and metaphysical traditions (Rosalind I.J Hackett). In this dissertation I would like to discuss specific communities within the context of the global, international New Age community. Are there similarities between the beliefs and practices espoused by the Universal Oneness United Faith Canada in Toronto (UOUFC) the Centre for Spiritual Living in Calgary (CSL), and the Unity Vancouver (UV), Vancouver and the beliefs and ritual practices characterizing the international New Age

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<sup>6</sup> Crystal healing is a pseudoscientific alternative medicine technique that employs stones and crystals. Adherents of the technique claim that these have healing powers, although there is no scientific basis for this claim. In one method, the practitioner places crystals around the body in an attempt to construct an energy grid, which is purported to surround the client with healing energy.

<sup>7</sup> Channeling is the act or practice of serving as a medium through which is spirit guide purportedly communicates with living persons.

Movement in general and specific communities within it? What specific beliefs and practices seem particular to the UOUFC, CSL and UV?

I am limiting my field of study to English Canada and have excluded the Maritime Provinces, largely because the small groups to be found there do not participate or exist in an online space; since the topic of my research is the examination of New Age communities in both online and offline environments these groups do not meet my criteria. I look at different New Age groups in Toronto, Calgary, and Vancouver; New Age groups tend to flourish in such major cities, which offer such key resources as New Age bookstores, salons and Meetup groups.

Another significant part of my work is to analyze the impact of the internet on the three groups that are the subject of my dissertation. As a phenomenon that has had overwhelming social, cultural and political influence, the internet has become so embedded in our lives that it is difficult to imagine what we did before its invention, how we communicated with one another or how we did our work without instant access to information from all over the world. From banking online to online dating, social networking to entertainment, most of us would be lost without access to the web at our fingertips, and the rapid growth of digital technology even allows us to do all of this through a smart phone. It is not surprising, then, that the web is also a very active religious environment. Like many organizations, religious and spiritual groups use the internet extensively to proclaim their beliefs and to be in contact with their followers.

In a macro sense, web-based religion is any online activity, from the simple dissemination of information about a religious group or church to full web-based religious practice. It can be understood as occurring along a spectrum from “religion

online” at one end to “online religion” at the other. First developed by Christopher Helland<sup>8</sup> and further refined by Lorne L. Dawson,<sup>9</sup> religion online means the use of the internet as a means of providing essential information about, or by, religious groups, movements, and traditions. Religious groups, including small, local congregations and large, established religious organizations utilize websites to communicate with members through newsletters or e-mail, and to promote themselves to potential members through social media and advertising, and occasionally it can be used to correct misleading or incorrect information (Helland, 2000; Dawson, 2005).

At the other end of the spectrum, online religion sees the internet as a space that permits the practice of religion, ritual, or worship. In other words, rather than use their web browsers to simply search for information, religious followers use the web as an integral part of their religious lives. The web can become a lecture hall for scripture study; video conferencing software permits religious practitioners, who could be in different countries, to come together in worship, discussion, or communal ritual. In fact, some religious groups have moved exclusively online. The more current term of “Digital Religion”<sup>10</sup> seems better suited to describing the convergence of religion and the internet, since it understands that religion occurs simultaneously offline and online and recognizes

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<sup>8</sup> Christopher Helland is Associate Professor in Sociology of Religion at Dalhousie University, Nova Scotia, Canada. His research focuses upon religion in contemporary culture from a sociological perspective. His primary work examines the impact of the internet and World Wide Web on a variety of religious traditions and practices.

<sup>9</sup> Lorne L. Dawson is a Canadian scholar of the sociology of religion who has written about new religious movements, the brainwashing controversy, and religion and the internet. His work is now focused on religious terrorism and the process of radicalization, especially with regard to domestic terrorists. Currently he is a Full Professor in the Department of Sociology and Legal Studies and the Department of Religious Studies at Waterloo University, Ontario, Canada.

<sup>10</sup> Digital Religion as a sub-discipline of religious studies, which will be described in greater detail later in the second chapter as a part of the theoretical framework.

that advances in technology have contributed to online religious practice; the proliferation of live video conferencing has encouraged “Skype-type”<sup>11</sup> virtual meetings and increased bandwidth and download speed allow for faster, higher resolution streaming of live group activities. One of the aims then of my dissertation is to determine how New Age groups use the internet and to ascertain the benefits that these groups may derive from an online presence in comparison to offline. What do they offer online that is not achievable offline?

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<sup>11</sup> Skype is a telecommunications application that specializes in providing video chat and voice calls between computers, tablets, mobile devices, the Xbox One console, and smart-watches via the Internet. Skype also provides instant messaging services. Users may transmit text, video, audio and images. First released in August 2003, Skype was created by the Swede Niklas Zennström and the Dane Janus Friis, in cooperation with Ahti Heinla, Priit Kasesalu, and Jaan Tallinn, Estonians.

## **Chapter Outline.**

### **Chapter One: History and Development.**

In this first chapter I will explore the history of the early New Age Movement beginning with its nascent form in the early twentieth centuries, influenced by early thinkers such as Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815), George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff (1872? – 1949) and Madame Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891) who introduced the world to Eastern spiritual traditions and other esoteric ideas. I will then continue by looking at the impact of the New Thought Movement in North America and of such luminaries in the new fields of psychiatry and psychology as Carl Jung (1875 – 1961) and Abraham Maslow (1908 – 1970). I will also examine the influence of the “counter-culture,” post-war feminism and the new voice of the working classes on the New Age Movement, a collective rejection of old established traditions including religion, in favour of new approaches to spirituality. These new approaches were based on a communal worldview, initially, whereby the spiritual experience was shared, but in the latter half of the twentieth century, the post-modern influence caused New Age to become an individual practice focusing on self-improvement and self-actualization.

I will examine the expansion of New Age from a well-established movement in Great Britain to North America and across the globe to become a worldwide phenomenon. In the third segment I will review the definitions of New Age, its teachings, concepts and philosophy and the move to include local indigenous traditions as well as Eastern philosophies and rituals. In the final segment I will examine how the once pseudo-religious movement became secularized and spread globally. It is because the New Age Movement was not rooted in dogma or theology, or for that matter locked into

the teachings of a single leader, that it was able to adapt and re-invent itself to suit changing taste, all the time offering up a broad menu of spiritual options to allow followers to pick and choose their own paths to self-awareness and salvation, and the emphasis on personal choice has remained at the core of the movement.

## Chapter Two: Research, Methods and Theories.

My principal published sources are the three websites of the groups I have researched in Toronto, Calgary and Vancouver and the data gleaned from these websites are incorporated with the data I gathered from the interviews. Since these groups are relatively new in Canada there is little written about them, so I also needed to review archival information and photography. However my main source of information was interviews with the founders, leaders and members of the groups to complement and augment the online information.

For the purposes of this dissertation, as a methodology or a system to analyze the three New Age organizations that are the subject of this study, I will be using the analytical model introduced by Ninian Smart and further developed by Jamie S. Scott. Steven J. Sutcliffe<sup>12</sup> (2013) has asserted in his work that looks at the history of the research, that the study of New Age can be divided into three distinct waves. The “first wave” consisted of high-level analyses of the “content and boundaries” of the movement (Steyn 1994; York 1995; Heelas 1996) then moved into a “second wave” that studied particular beliefs and practices in greater depth and context. This wave has resulted in valuable histories and details of several New Age practices: Courtney Bender<sup>13</sup> (2007) for example who examined American *reincarnation*; Judith Macpherson<sup>14</sup> (2008) who reviewed *Reiki* healing in Scotland and Gilhus (2012) on speaking with angels in

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<sup>12</sup> Steven J. Sutcliffe is a senior lecturer in the Study of Religion at the University of Edinburgh. His primary interests are on contemporary Spiritualism, non-religion, 2012 millennialism, Buddhism in Scotland and contemporary Gnostic movements.

<sup>13</sup> Courtney Bender is Associate Professor in the Department of Religion and Sociology at Columbia University, USA.

<sup>14</sup> Judith MacPherson is an independent researcher; she has lectured on healing, women and power at the University of Stirling, UK and has held a position as an Associate Lecturer at The Open University, UK.

Norway. The second wave of research into New Age does suggest that there is a risk that the scholarship may drift away from religious theory, but this possibility has prompted a “third wave” of study that looks to describe all the theoretical possibilities of New Age for general studies of religion.

Since the mid-1990s there have also been several waves of research into online religion, or what is now termed “Digital Religion.” The initial wave was devoted to exploring the potential effects of the technology on society: the internet was either going to liberate the world to finally define the “global village” or it was an apocalyptic dystopia that would isolate people and destroy society. This wave was more visionary than factual, based on researchers’ own experiences and chance encounters with online religious practice, and was more an exploration of the internet’s possibilities than of Digital Religion. The second wave of research began in 2002 and now the scholarship turned to a more analytical approach in identifying online communities and their structures; the internet had become familiar and commonplace but the impact on religion was unknown, so this wave was less about visioning the future of Digital Religion and more about discovery and definition of online religious experience.

The third wave differed from the earlier waves because of the advent of Web 2.0, which signaled easier use of the internet through the development of interactive Social Media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and user content generated sites such as YouTube and Second Life. In the third wave, scholars continued to explore questions of identity and community, but also looked closely at such questions as authority, user generated content and convergence.

### **Chapter Three: Universal Oneness United Faith Canada.**

Chapter Three of this study will cover the Toronto based New Age Group, Universal Oneness United Faith Canada (UOUFC) Spiritual Center, the smallest and youngest of the three groups that were studied and it will be reviewed contextually within the global phenomenon of New Age. The chapter will also cover the group's connection to the local community, reviewed in the setting of Toronto's multi-cultural climate and Scott and Smart's seven-dimensional model will be utilized to analyze UOUFC as an organization devoted to helping its members to find greater self-awareness. Beginning with the founders, David and Alex Gellman, this chapter will also look at the history and development of the group, its online and offline presence in light of Digital Religion and its use of digital technologies. This study was shaped and informed by a detailed analysis of the center's website and the semi-structured interviews with the founders and members of the group.

UOUFC is unaffiliated and therefore does not have to report to a parent organization, nor does it have to follow a prescribed philosophy or doctrine, but is able to chart its own spiritual path, determined largely by its founders, which is markedly different from the groups in Calgary and Vancouver. The groups I studied in those cities are contractually bound to their large parent organizations in the United States with little opportunity to make many changes to the structure, operation and teachings. This chapter will also evaluate the difference in scale between UOUFC and the other groups and how this difference factors in the practice and nature of UOUFC.

#### **Chapter Four: Centre for Spiritual Living.**

The spiritual group I chose to study in Calgary, the Calgary Centre for Spiritual Living (CSL), is the biggest New Age Group in Calgary, and an affiliated member of the Centers for Spiritual Living, a global spiritual organization located in Golden, Colorado. The Calgary center closely mirrors the United States parent in its operations and spiritual practice, so the American parent organization and its global corporation will be analyzed in order to better understand why Calgary functions the way it does. Beginning with the founders, history and development of CSL, its governance and management of the global members, the online and offline presence of the parent organization will also be evaluated.

Following a review of the history and development of the local branch, Calgary CSL's relationship to its United States parent will be examined as well as the similarities and differences prompted by local influences. Calgary's online and offline presence and use of technologies and the extensive interviews with leaders and members will be analyzed in detail, to determine if CSL Calgary reflects the local culture and demographics or that of its United States parent. The Scott and Smart seven-dimensional model will be employed to determine if CSL functions like, and serves a similar purpose to established religious traditions in the lives of its members. Calgary's structure is very different from that of UOUFC and this will be evaluated to see if the scale and size of the center together with its American parentage changes the nature and practices of CSL compared to a smaller, independent group such as UOUFC.

## **Chapter Five: Unity Spiritual Centre One God, Many Paths.**

Unity Vancouver is the final New Age group to be examined and it is the largest of the three groups in this study. Unity Vancouver is part of a parent organization in the United States, called simply Unity and it is also a member of Unity Canada. Unity United States and its headquarters in Unity Village, Missouri, will be reviewed incorporating archival photographs and illustrations that demonstrate its history and development over a number of years, eventually becoming the large, hierarchical global religious organization with a worldwide publishing and education enterprise that it is today. Its online and offline presence and use of digital technologies will be examined closely, as will its business model and governance, culture and demographics and its influence on a global scale. Unity Canada is an association of all Unity groups in Canada and acts as an administrative link to Unity United States. All Canadian groups and leadership must be members of Unity Canada.

Unity Vancouver, its founders, history and development, its structure and relationship to the United States parent and global organization will be reviewed and analyzed as will the culture, to see if it reflects local differences when compared to its United States parent. This group will be analyzed using the Scott and Smart seven-dimensional model to see how well the group responds to the model. Vancouver's performance in an online space and the influence of its parent organization in the online environment will also be carefully evaluated.

## **Chapter Six: Afterward.**

In this Afterword, I will contrast and compare the three Canadian groups using the seven-dimensional model and based on the findings of this analysis I will determine whether the members of UOUFC, CSL and UV view their groups in a similar way, as do members of established religious traditions. I will analyze the impact of the internet on these groups, and questioned that if it is not being utilized as fully as some of the leaders felt it should be to deliver a complete “package” of spiritual fare, what can be accomplished in an online environment compared to offline? What are the advantages of doing religion online versus offline? It is useful therefore to conduct a closer examination of the benefits and drawbacks of doing religion online (see fig. 2). From a purely pragmatic point of view, the online space offers convenience; once the basic hardware and software have been acquired, everyone can participate in any available activity they choose without the need to travel, leave the comfort of their home.

Other benefits of doing religion online can be captured in the idea of safety and anonymity. For those who may feel unwelcome in a physical space, or prefer to practice their religion in private, online allows them to do so. Gender, race and sexual orientation are all irrelevant in the online space and for those for whom this may be an issue in the “real” world, it ceases to be so online.

If then New Age is alive and thriving, where does its future lie? In an analysis of current manifestations of New Age I identified five primary directions that it has taken in recent years indicating the direction it may take in the future. The first, and the most traditional expression of the movement, is the quasi “church-like” form of service and delivery that includes scheduled activities such as weekly “celebrations” and learning

groups as well as social gatherings. The second direction can be seen in the more informal type of spiritual practices, closer to the original New Age practices in its coming-of-age years in the sixties and seventies. The third direction that New Age is taking can be found in the retail world and consists of several sub-categories. While these enterprises are clearly “for profit” businesses, shifting the movement from its sacred origins into a thoroughly secular environment, they have always played a significant role in the life of the New Age. The fourth direction for New Age we can readily identify is the place that it has found among many of the Hollywood elite and the fifth direction that New Age spirituality has taken, and perhaps its most significant, is the inclusion of New Age techniques into traditional forms of psychotherapy.

## Chapter One.

### Introduction: The New Age Movement.

#### 1.1 History and Development.

Before I turn to the specific spiritual centers that are the subjects of my study, it is necessary to understand the origins and development of the New Age Movement in order to comprehend its contemporary stage, particularly in relation to the internet and technology. The general consensus is that the New Age Movement took flight in the 1960s and 1970s, fueled by the counter-cultural ethos that developed following the Second World War. Wouter Jacobus Hanegraaff<sup>15</sup> argues that the New Age Movement is essentially postmodern, moving beyond the contemporary fixation on rational, scientific technological explanations of the world and rejecting the dogmatic Christian mainstream in favour of a theology that is personal, eclectic, and emphasizes mysticism and *reincarnation* (Hanegraaff, 86). Melton suggests that the New Age Movement is simply a continuation of an existing tradition rather than a radical new movement (Melton, 18). In fact, New Age does draw from several early movements such as the 19<sup>th</sup> century Theosophical movement, founded by Madame Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891) and Colonel Henry Steele Olcott (1832-1907). The Theosophy movement originated in Europe, but Madame Blavatsky moved to North America to continue her work. Her books *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) were sources of religious inspiration and truth and Theosophists introduced such concepts as *karma*,<sup>16</sup> astral

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<sup>15</sup> Wouter Jacobus Hanegraaff is Professor of History of Hermetic Philosophy and currently affiliated with the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. He served as the first President of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE) from 2005 to 2013.

<sup>16</sup> *Karma* (car-ma, Sanskrit: कर्म) is a word meaning the result of a person's actions as well as the actions themselves. It is a term about the cycle of cause and effect. According to the theory of

bodies,<sup>17</sup> *reincarnation*,<sup>18</sup> “ascended masters,”<sup>19</sup> *gurus*<sup>20</sup> and invisible Himalayan Kingdoms to the Western World from Asian religious traditions. The Theosophical Movement’s goal was to unite all those searching for faith under what they called a single “brotherhood of humanity” committed to free religious exploration. The principle concept that the New Age Movement took from the Theosophists was *reincarnation*. The idea that multiple *reincarnations* or past lives could progressively contribute to an individual’s self-awareness was one that the New Age adopted as a major underlying belief (Drury, 2004: 20-27).

Three other original thinkers from the seventeenth, eighteenth and twentieth centuries also played important roles in the early development of New Age. Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815) was a major forerunner of the New Age Movement. Best known for his contribution to the development of hypnotherapy, he also practiced a healing technique through the transmission of “animal magnetism” to his patients, by passing his hands, or iron rods or wands that he had personally magnetized, over them, an idea that can be seen in some forms of spiritual healing. For Mesmer the natural flow of energy in

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*Karma*, what happens to a person happens because they caused it with their actions. It is an important part of many religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism.

<sup>17</sup> Astral body is a subtle body posited by many philosophers, intermediate between the intelligent soul and the mental body, composed of a subtle material. The concept ultimately derives from the philosophy of Plato: it is related to an astral plane, which consists of the planetary heavens of Astrology. The term was adopted by nineteenth-century Theosophists and neo-Rosicrucians.

<sup>18</sup> *Reincarnation* is the philosophical or religious concept that an aspect of a living being starts a new life in a different physical body or form after each biological death. It is also called rebirth or transmigration, and is a part of the *Samsara* doctrine of cyclic existence. It is a central tenet of all major Indian religions, namely Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism.

<sup>19</sup> In the Ascended Master Teachings, Ascended Masters are believed to be spiritually enlightened beings who in past incarnations were ordinary humans, but who have undergone a series of spiritual transformations originally called *initiations*. Both “Mahatma” and “Ascended Master” are terms used in the Ascended Master Teachings. Ascended Master is based on the Theosophical concept of the Mahatma or *Master of the Ancient Wisdom*.

<sup>20</sup> *Guru* (गुरु) is a Sanskrit term that connotes someone who is a teacher, guide, expert, or master of certain knowledge or field.

the body equated with health and vitality. A blockage in the flow of energy in the body led to disease and ill-health (Drury, 2004: 16-20).

The work of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), a Swedish scientist, philosopher, and theologian who used a form of meditative trance to enter varying states of consciousness, and would startle his servants by engaging in conversations with spirit-beings who were visible only to him, also had a significant influence on the early New Age movement. In his voluminous mystical works, Swedenborg describes a universe in which everything emanates from the One God, or Creator who sustains the universe through the spiritual sun – the primal source of love and knowledge, which has its counterpart in the natural sun, whose light and warmth sustain Nature. He calls this symbolic relationship between spiritual and natural forms “correspondences.” He also believed that most people have two good spirits and two evil spirits. Today these spirits are more likely to be referred to as opposing forces within the subconscious mind. In other words, every human being is subject to potent forces beyond the scope of normal ego-based awareness (Lewis, 1995: 21-24).

George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff (1872? – 1949) was born in Turkey and roamed Central Asia and the Mediterranean as a young man in a group that called itself “Seekers of Truth.” From these beginnings and over time Gurdjieff formed his philosophy and theories, and although complex and difficult, certain main themes in his teachings can be summarized. He believed that we are all capable of achieving the enlightened state he called “objective consciousness,” but most of us do not know this because we are “prisoners” in our everyday lives. He regarded the “Work” as a method of self-development that could help individuals liberate themselves from the heavy burden

imposed by the universe itself. Gurdjieff's theories can be considered an early version of self-help practices and his concept of the "Work" is reflected in such New Age practices as encounter groups and Gestalt therapy<sup>21</sup> or the Erhard Seminars Training (EST) founded by Werner Erhard in California in 1971 (Drury, 2004: 27-35).

Another root in the history of New Age was a movement known as New Thought. New Thought was a group that broke away from the Christian Science Church in the 1880s and spread throughout North America and Britain. Founded by Emma Curtis Hopkins (1849-1925),<sup>22</sup> the movement believes that the mind can in fact change the world because the world is essentially spiritual not physical. New Thought teaches spiritual self-development and emphasizes healing, spiritual growth and material success. These ideas of self-awareness and spiritual self-improvement were ideas that were readily adopted by the New Age (Zeller, 1998: 117). In later chapters I will demonstrate how New Thought has influenced New Age in the context of my case studies.

Additionally, an important early historical starting point for New Age was Spiritualism, whose leader was Andrew Jackson Davis (1826-1910).<sup>23</sup> This force too began and grew in the nineteenth century and aimed to prove life after death through direct communication with the spirits of the dead. Spiritualism not only espoused dialogue with departed loved ones but also communication with the spirits of great

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<sup>21</sup> Gestalt therapy was developed by Fritz Perls, Laura Perls and Paul Goodman in the 1940s and 1950s, and first was described in the 1951 book *Gestalt Therapy*. It is an existential/experiential form of psychotherapy that emphasizes personal responsibility, and that focuses upon the individual's experience in the present moment.

<sup>22</sup> Emma Curtis Hopkins was an American spiritual author and leader. She was involved in organizing the New Thought movement and was a primary theologian, teacher, writer, feminist, mystic and prophet based in the Christian Science Theological Seminary of Chicago.

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Jackson Davis (1826 – 1910) was an American Spiritualist, born in Blooming Grove, New York.

teachers and spiritual leaders. It is from this communication that the common New Age practice of “channeling” derived (Zeller, 122). Not only did these movements provide knowledge and learning for the New Age Movement, they also supplied its earliest adherents. New Age speakers often spoke at New Thought and Theosophy centers.

So what exactly sparked the development of the New Age Movement in the 1960s and 1970s? Secularization<sup>24</sup> had set the stage for New Religious Movements (NRM) in the West, even globally, and had given rise to the birth of many new “churches” throughout the twentieth century. After World War II, the gradual secularization of society witnessed earlier in the century had become increasingly more common. In the 1940s, the modernist avant-garde movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century found new popular expression in the “Beat Generation” (to become later the more marketable “Beatniks”), led by such literary luminaries as Allen Ginsberg<sup>25</sup> and Jack Kerouak<sup>26</sup> (Charters, 120). They represented post-war youth of New York City of the time, who were disillusioned by the war and the materialism that followed it. Kerouak, reflecting this disillusionment and the quest for something more meaningful, refers to the Beat Generation as “characters of a special spirituality” and defines beat thus:

[I]t is because I am Beat, that is, I believe in beatitude and that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son to it... Who knows, but that the universe is not one vast sea of compassion actually, the veritable holy honey, beneath all

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<sup>24</sup> I will be examining the theories of secularization and globalization in relation to NRMs in greater detail at the end of this sub-chapter.

<sup>25</sup> Irwin Allen Ginsberg (1926 – 1997) was an American poet, philosopher, and writer. He is considered to be one of the leading figures of both the Beat Generation during the 1950s and the counter-culture that soon followed.

<sup>26</sup> Jack Kerouac (1922 – 1969) was an American novelist and poet of French-Canadian descent. He is considered a literary iconoclast and, alongside William S. Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg, a pioneer of the Beat Generation.

this show of personality and cruelty (Cottrell, 2015: 54)?

The war had disillusioned many, particularly the unimagined cruelty of the Holocaust and the mass destruction of the nuclear weapons used on Nagasaki and Hiroshima that signaled the real possibility of the end of the world. Yet the war had also opened up new horizons for others, particularly in Europe and the United States. In searching to find meaning and to break the bonds of a society dominated by a rigid system of class and gender definitions, both the working classes and women were breaking new ground, especially in relation to the elites of the United States of America's economically irresistible "military-industrial complex," to use celebrated Dwight D. Eisenhower's<sup>27</sup> 1961 phrase.

Moreover, World War II had exposed a generation of women as well as the working classes to economic independence and freedom. Fueled by worldwide growth, this newfound economic reality gave clout to cohorts of society that had previously been voiceless and that now demanded to have themselves reflected in the cultural landscape. We see this phenomenon in the advent of "kitchen sink" drama<sup>28</sup> in the United Kingdom and the poetry, literature and art of the Beatniks in the United States, all looking to find deeper meaning than that reflected in contemporary society. The second half of the

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<sup>27</sup> Dwight David Eisenhower (1890 – 1968) was an American Army general and statesman who served as the 34<sup>th</sup> president of the United States from 1953 to 1961.

<sup>28</sup> Kitchen sink drama is a British Cultural movement that developed in the late 1950s and early 1960s in theatre, art, novels, film and television plays, whose protagonists usually could be described as "angry young men" who were disillusioned with modern society. It used a style of social realism, which depicted the domestic situations of working class Britons, living in cramped rented accommodation and spending their off-hours drinking in grimy pubs, to explore controversial social and political issues ranging from abortion to homelessness. The harsh, realistic style contrasted sharply with the escapism of the previous generation's so-called "well-made plays."

twentieth century saw wave after wave of new, popular social and political movements led by generations of disenchanted youth who were completely dissatisfied with their parents' values and ethics and wanted to revolutionize society by turning away from the material in search of greater meaning and spirituality. The Beatniks quickly gave way to the counter-culture movement of the 1960s, a movement that rejected everything the previous generation represented and was motivated by and dedicated to protests against the Vietnam War and racism and endorsements of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll.

Perhaps the most familiar counter-culture group was the "Hippies," who favoured the use of hallucinogenic drugs such as LSD<sup>29</sup> and Magic Mushrooms<sup>30</sup> to seek greater self-awareness. Music, psychedelic rock in particular, was the energy that kept the movement motivated, and, together with drugs, fueled the "trips" that were an essential ingredient in the magical, mystical "Hippie" world, often demonstrated very publicly in the quasi-religious or spiritual ecstasy of music festivals, culminating in the famous Woodstock Festival and the equally infamous Altamont Festival, both held in 1969. The drug-culture was led by such luminaries as the British author Aldous Huxley (1894 – 1963) and Harvard psychologist Timothy Leary (1920 – 1996). Huxley was born in England and spent the first half of his life there and in Europe before moving to America in 1937. Huxley was known as a humanist, pacifist and satirist, and his works include the celebrated dystopian novel, *Brave New World*, (originally published in 1932) in which he

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<sup>29</sup> LSD - Lysergic acid diethylamide, also known as acid, is a psychedelic drug known for its psychological effects, which may include altered awareness of one's surroundings, perceptions, and feelings as well as sensations and images that seem real though they are not. It is used mainly as a recreational drug and for spiritual reasons. LSD is typically either swallowed or held under the tongue, it could also be injected.

<sup>30</sup> "Magic mushroom," also known as a "psychedelic mushroom," is one of a polyphyletic group of mushrooms that contain any of various psychedelic compounds including psilocybin, psilocin, and baeocystin.

focuses on the dehumanizing aspects of scientific progress and mass production. In the United States, Huxley became interested in psychical research and mysticism which eventually led to his experimentation with mescaline and psychedelic drugs such as LSD, and his writing *The Doors of Perception* and *Heaven and Hell* (originally published in 1954), which describe his experiences with these substances. He also had a keen interest in the Vedanta Society of Southern California.<sup>31</sup> Leary was born in the United States and rose to notoriety for his experiments with hallucinogenic drugs at Harvard. He too moved to California, where he developed his theory of the eight-circuit model of consciousness. The four highest levels of consciousness, Leary theorized, could be reached through techniques such as *yoga*<sup>32</sup> and meditation<sup>33</sup> or mind-altering drugs.<sup>34</sup> Leary expressed this theory in *Exo-Psychology* (1977). Both Huxley and Leary became heroes to the counter-culturists (Cottrell, 2015, 78-89).

Witness, too, the late twentieth century yearning for all things spiritual in the incredible growth in religious or pseudo-religious cults which also captured the counter-cultural imagination and sent many of those disillusioned with mainstream culture into groups that could provide the spiritual experience they were seeking. Diverse groups offering such experience included the Church of Scientology, founded in 1952 by L. Ron Hubbard and incorporated in 1953 in New Jersey. Hubbard claimed that through its

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<sup>31</sup> The Vedanta Society of Southern California, with its headquarters in Hollywood was founded in 1930 by Swami Prabhavananda. The society is a branch of the Ramakrishna Order, and maintains sub-centers in Pasadena, Santa Barbara, San Diego, and Trabuco Canyon.

<sup>32</sup> *Yoga* is a Hindu system of philosophy aiming at the mystical union of the self with the Supreme Being in a state of complete awareness and tranquility through certain physical and mental exercises.

<sup>33</sup> Meditation can be defined as a practice where an individual focuses his or her mind on a particular object, thought or activity to achieve a mentally clear and emotionally calm state.

<sup>34</sup> A psychoactive drug, psychopharmaceutical, or psychotropic is a chemical substance that changes brain function and results in alterations in perception, mood, consciousness or behaviour.

practices a person could achieve greater spiritual awareness; the Rajneeshpuram, a commune in Oregon in the 1980s that ran afoul of the law; and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness,<sup>35</sup> formed to promote the practice of *bhakti yoga*<sup>36</sup> across the globe. Even extreme cults managed to attract young people who were searching for something with more spiritual meaning than their everyday lives could offer them. Such cults included the Peoples Temple of Jim Jones, begun in Indiana in the 1950s and culminating in the mass suicide of 900 members in Guyana in 1978; the Branch Davidians, an offshoot of the Seventh Day Adventist Church, which began in 1930 and ended with the Waco siege in 1993; and Heaven's Gate, a UFO religion doomsday cult founded by Marshall Applewhite in San Diego in 1970 and also culminating in a mass suicide in 1997. In addition the pop-culture of the day drew upon the mysticism of India. Most notably, the massively influential British band, The Beatles, incorporated Indian musical traditions into their own work, especially the sitar of Ravi Shankar (1956)<sup>37</sup> and sought greater spiritual awareness from retreats at *ashrams*<sup>38</sup> in India (Drury, 2004: 32-35). Within this historical context of collective yearning for a true meaning to life and a purposeful approach to living, New Age offered a virtual smorgasbord of Eastern and Western metaphysics, religions, self-help and holistic health, with the intent of providing

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<sup>35</sup> The International Society for Krishna Consciousness, known colloquially as the Hare Krishna movement or Hare Krishnas, is a Gaudiya Vaishnava Hindu religious organisation. ISKCON was founded in 1966 in New York City by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada who is worshipped by followers as *Guru* and Spiritual master.

<sup>36</sup> *Bhakti yoga*, also called Bhakti marga, is a spiritual path or spiritual practice within Hinduism focused on loving devotion towards a personal god. It is one of the paths in the spiritual practices of Hindus, others being Jnana yoga and *Karma* yoga.

<sup>37</sup> Ravi Shankar (1920 – 2012) born Rabindra Shankar Chowdhury, his name often preceded by the title Pandit and “Sitar maestro” was an Indian musician and a composer of Hindustani classical music.

<sup>38</sup> Ashram (Sanskrit: आश्रम) is a spiritual hermitage or a monastery in Indian religions.

“a spirituality without borders or confining dogmas” (Drury, 39).

## 1.2 Late twentieth century influences on the Movement and the New Age worldwide.

While the New Age Movement had its roots in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through the works of esotericists such as Swedenborg, Mesmer, Gurdjieff, and Blavatsky, it did not gain real momentum until the 1960s, when the counter-culture was in full flight. In 1962, we see an important embodiment of this trend with the founding of the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, by Michael Murphy and Dick Price. These psychologists attended Stanford University in the 1940s and 1950s, though not together, to examine Eastern and Western philosophies in workshops. Their vision was to establish a forum beyond the normal restraints of academia and avoid the dogmatism that can sometimes stem from a single idea promoted by a charismatic leader. To quote one of its founders, Michael Murphy, (Chairman Emeritus, Esalen Board of Trustees):

Esalen Institute exists to promote the harmonious development of the whole person. It is a learning organization dedicated to continual exploration of the human potential, and resists religious, scientific and other dogmas. It fosters theory, practice, research, and institution-building to facilitate personal and social transformation and, to that end, sponsors seminars for the general public; invitational conferences; research programs; residences for artists, scholars, scientists and religious teachers; work-study programs; and semi-autonomous projects (Truet, 23).

Some of the courses it offered in its early years included topics such as Gestalt therapy, Encounter Groups, and self-awareness. Counter-culture *gurus* Huxley and Leary were

contributors and the prominent humanistic psychologist, Abraham Maslow (1908 – 1970),<sup>39</sup> was an important figure at the institute (Kripal and Shuck, 2).

On the other side of the Atlantic, another community began at around the same time as Esalen in the Moray area of Scotland that eventually became known as the Findhorn Trust. Created by Peter Caddy,<sup>40</sup> Eileen Caddy<sup>41</sup> and Dorothy Maclean,<sup>42</sup> the Trust began as a spiritual center dedicated to the “Christ within” to follow God’s guidance. The founders were influenced by a mix of Christian mysticism,<sup>43</sup> Theosophy, Sufi mysticism<sup>44</sup> and Rosicrucian teaching.<sup>45</sup> The Trust went on to become a residential spiritual education center and eco-village a tangible demonstration of the links between the spiritual, social, ecological and economic aspects of life. While not as academically oriented as Esalen, Findhorn espouses the values of self-awareness, self-improvement, ecology and spirituality that are fundamental to New Age (Chryssides, 2001).

Abraham Maslow, an important contributor to the Esalen Institute in the early years, was a co-founder of the Human Potential Movement, described by Carl Raschke,

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<sup>39</sup> Abraham Harold Maslow (1908 – 1970) was an American psychologist who was best known for creating Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, a theory of psychological health predicated on fulfilling innate human needs in priority, culminating in self-actualization.

<sup>40</sup> Peter Caddy was a British caterer, hotelier, and with his wife Eileen Caddy and their friend Dorothy Maclean, co-founder of the Findhorn Foundation community.

<sup>41</sup> Eileen Caddy (1917 – 2006) was a spiritual teacher and new age author, best known as one of the founders of the Findhorn Foundation community at the Findhorn Eco-village, near the village of Findhorn, Moray Firth, in Northeast Scotland.

<sup>42</sup> Dorothy Maclean is a writer and educator on spiritual subjects who was one of the original three adults at what is now the Findhorn Foundation in Northeast Scotland.

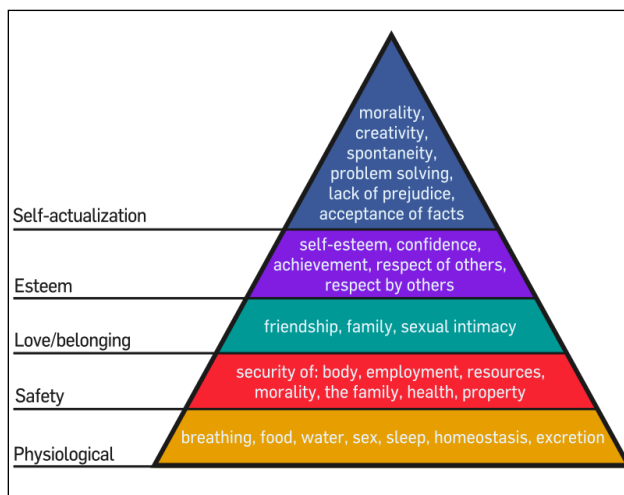
<sup>43</sup> Christian mysticism refers to the development of mystical practices and theory within Christianity. It has often been connected to mystical theology, especially in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christianity.

<sup>44</sup> Sufi mysticism endeavoured to produce a personal experience of the divine through mystic and ascetic discipline. The term Sufi appears to be derived from the Arabic word “suf” meaning “wool” in the sense of “cloak,” referring to the simple cloaks the original Sufis wore.

<sup>45</sup> The Rosicrucians are an international organization, especially the Ancient Mystic Order Rosae Crucis and the Rosicrucian Order, devoted to the study of ancient mystical, philosophical, and religious doctrines and concerned with the application of these doctrines to modern life.

Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Denver, as a form of “psychoreligiosity” that “makes use of psychological principles and techniques as surrogates for traditional beliefs and practices. It aims to fulfill and gratify inner personal longings for identity and meaning” (Kripal, 2007: 43-48). Maslow’s theories were popularly called “self-actualization” or a person’s individual power to grow and change in the present and to achieve self-fulfillment, as described in his famous theory of the hierarchy of needs (see Illus. 1). Maslow believed in a “peak experience,” a transcendent moment of self-actualization characterized by feelings of joy, wholeness and fulfillment. Many of the practices employed at Esalen were used to enable a person to achieve self-actualization.

(Illus. 1. Abraham Maslow’s Self-Actualization Chart)



Carl Jung’s (1875 – 1961)<sup>46</sup> work in psychoanalysis, like Maslow’s work in the Human Potential Movement, also contributed significantly to the New Age Movement, which

<sup>46</sup> Carl Gustav Jung (1875 – 1961) was a Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who founded analytical psychology. His work has been influential not only in psychiatry but also in anthropology, archaeology, literature, philosophy, and religious studies.

can be seen in its acceptance of Jung's theories of synchronicity, or "meaningful coincidence," as Jung also calls it. An example of synchronicity as a form of spiritual guidance can be seen in James Redfield's popular New Age adventure story *The Celestine Prophecy* (1994), which involves the sequential discovery by its protagonist of a series of nine key insights, of which synchronicity is the first (Kripal, 2007: 11-28). Another typical instance of the New Age use of synchronicity is Wayne Dyer's *You'll see it When you Believe It* (1993), where we find in Chapter 6, titled "Synchronicity," statements such as the following: "Acknowledgement of synchronicity in our lives nurtures our divine connection to the invisible, formless world. It allows us to begin the awakening process and to see that we can use our ability to think and be thought, to reshape and redirect our entire lives" (ibid.: 210).

New Age's recent history sees a converging of like-minded groups into one loose confederation brought together through publications, conventions and conferences. The *New Age* magazine (see illus. 2) began publishing in 1971 and since then many other national and regional publications have formed to bring together a shared vision of what New Age represents and offer a marketplace for New Age products and texts that promote alternative healing methods, Asian meditation, *yoga*, channeling, development of psychic powers and so on. In addition to the New Age periodicals two books served to popularize New Age. Both these books were purportedly "channeled" or written by a spirit through the body and mind of the temporal authors: Jane Roberts, *The Seth Material*. Roberts is an American author, poet and spirit medium who claimed she had "channeled" a personality who called himself "Seth" and described himself as an "energy personality essence no longer focused in physical reality." Roberts also wrote other

books, which focused on developing the inner self and the transformation of the world through personal enlightenment. Helen Schucman (1909 – 1981), an American clinical and research psychologist from New York City and a professor of medical psychology at Columbia University, “wrote” *A Course in Miracles* in 1975. This book, which she scribed with the help of a colleague, William Thetford, she claimed was given to her by an inner voice she identified as Jesus.

(Illus. 2. The New Age Magazine, 1971)



As a result of these popular publications, books and periodicals, the movement gained momentum in the 1980s. Then in 1984, Shirley MacLaine, a popular movie star, published her book *Out on a Limb*, followed by a television series in 1987 with the same title, which detailed her own spiritual journey and *reincarnations* in previous lives. For many people, this was the first time they had been exposed to the concept of

*reincarnation* by a non-academic, Western celebrity, which brought the topic of *reincarnation* into the mainstream, to be discussed on popular television talk shows. Also in 1987 a phenomenon occurred called the “Harmonic Convergence” (an unusual alignment of eight planets – Earth, Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Saturn, and Uranus), which the New Age claimed was an Astrological signal for the beginning of a New Age of peace for the world and society. These events were perhaps the manifestations that announced the arrival of the New Age as a movement on the world stage.

While the events and circumstances that have been referred to were primarily North American or British, the New Age Movement is not unique to those areas. Europe, Africa and Asia are all home to the movement, and in many ways, the religious landscape of those continents made New Age progression there easier than in the West, which is hardly surprising since many of the practices cultivated by New Agers are derived from traditional Asian healing techniques. In fact, in many non-Western cultures, the New Age Movement did not reject the predominant religion but drew from it and adopted many of its practices. It can also be said that while some members of the Hindu religion in India accepted New Age philosophy (since many of the beliefs were indigenous), there was some reluctance to accepting North American instructors. In many cases, this reluctance resulted in a local leadership emerging to adopt and adapt North American material and start their own New Age Movements.

In Europe, however, the New Age Movement developed its own unique flavour. In the beginning, New Age practice looked very much like its American counterpart, even to the extent of using American materials in non-English speaking countries. One

example in Italy is the Damanhur community, near Turin, which remained true to its European social democratic heritage and combined New Age beliefs with communal living and environmentalism. Unlike the American model, which encourages individual self-development to bring about change in the world, the Damanhur's sought to change individuals through collective awareness and social development (Zeller, 8).

Japan represents another distinctive outgrowth of the New Age Movement. It had already experienced the emerging of new, alternative religions before the arrival of the North American Mission in the 1970s and 1980s. The Japanese movements combined Shinto<sup>47</sup> and Buddhist traditions with New Age thought to develop a blend of ancient and modern unique to Japan. For example, the infamous Aum Shinrikyo new religion founded by Shoko Asahara in 1986 did precisely this, combining traditional Japanese spiritual tradition with Hindu *yogic* practices, Tibetan Buddhism and American end-of-the-world visionaries, to follow the same basic principles of transformation and healing that we have seen in the Western New Age Movement. Its ultimate demise in the 1995 Tokyo subway gas attacks is hardly representative of the Japanese New Age Movement, but its blending of non-Japanese religious traditions with Japanese Buddhism is and demonstrates how the New Age Movement transformed itself in its global expansion (Maham, 291).

In Africa and South America too, we see a melding of Western New Age thinking with Indigenous Occult and Metaphysical traditions. Rosalind I. J. Hackett<sup>48</sup> remarks that

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<sup>47</sup> Shinto (神道 Shintō), or *kami-no-michi* (among other names) is the traditional religion of Japan that focuses on ritual practices to be carried out diligently in order to establish a connection between present-day Japan and its ancient past.

<sup>48</sup> Rosalind I. J. Hackett has been teaching in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville since 1986, and is an adjunct Professor in Anthropology and faculty associate at the Howard H. Baker, Jr. Center for Public Policy.

there is a substantial New Age subculture in Nigeria and that the traditional African beliefs in *reincarnation* and the spirit world were fertile ground for New Age developments (Hackett, 56). Similarly in South America, the traditional creole religions of Candomblé and Umbanda, and Amerindian religions were ideal for the development of the New Age Movement. Candomblé and Umbanda are Afro-Brazilian religions with Animist beliefs, now mixed with Catholicism that was brought to South America by the African practitioners during the slave trade.

So, it can be safely said that in the twenty-first century the New Age Movement is a global phenomenon,<sup>49</sup> which easily assimilates into the local or national culture, adapting and co-opting indigenous traditional religions and practices. On the other hand, because New Age does not have central organizations, it is truly a movement that is more covert than overt. Similarly, because there is no core dogma or textual guide, the practices and rituals can be selected and discarded at will, according to personal “taste,” so that the movement becomes acceptable to many different audiences and can appeal to virtually all tastes. In particular, in North America, New Age healing practices, self-awareness materials and vegetarianism have all become mainstream although their followers would likely not refer to themselves as New Age.

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<sup>49</sup> The subject of globalization and its impact on The New Age will be discussed in sub-chapter 1.4.

### **1.3 Defining the New Age.**

What, then, defines more specifically the New Age Movement? Since there is neither a central governing body nor a central church per se, there is no universally published doctrine that succinctly describes the beliefs and philosophy of New Age. What are its general beliefs and philosophy? What is its theology? First, where does the name come from? What is the age that the name refers to? As the name implies, the movement is focused on time, not geography or a founder. The accepted view of New Age scholars such as Lewis, Melton and others is that it refers to the transition, in Astrological terms, from the Piscean Age into the Aquarian Age, which is occurring in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Astronomers recognized the shifting position of the sun at the spring equinox relative to other constellations, and over the past 2,000 years the equinox point has gradually moved out of the constellation of Pisces into that of Aquarius. This phenomenon is due to gravitational forces but Astrologers ascribe much greater meaning to it, speaking of its potential to affect culture and history throughout the world. The New Age Movement readily accepted Astrology within its worldview and interpreted The Piscean Age as filled with “darkness, hierarchy, conflict and rigid religious and scientific structures” (Drury, 76). They see the shifting to the New Age as positive – an age filled with “peace, harmony, love and holism” (Kumar, 26). This dawning of a New Age coincides, more or less, with the turning over of the Mayan Calendar in 2012, which, according to Daniel Pinchbeck, *2012: The Return of Quetzalcoatl*, also heralds the beginning of a new age that will change the world.

While there is no single theology or dogma that characterizes New Age, there are certain characteristics that are common to those who practice it. The movement

universally rejects the monotheism of Judaism and “Western Christianity,” and therefore by extension of Islam, in favour of the “goodness” that is within the individual. The overriding belief is that while God does not exist as an entity, each one of us possesses the power of God within; it is within us where we will find God. All New Age practitioners see the divine as part of all living things, leading them to emphasize self-improvement and self-awareness in order to “develop the god aspect within oneself” (Lewis, 184). It is also why many practitioners devote energy to environmental issues, since they believe that God is in all living things (Pantheism<sup>50</sup>).

Virtually all New Agers have a fascination with the occult and mysticism. The occult is concerned with uncovering secret knowledge, and when that secret knowledge leads to self-development and understanding, New Agers develop shared interests with the occultists. New Age texts often focus on such topics as lost continents like Atlantis<sup>51</sup> and Lemuria,<sup>52</sup> psychic powers, the mystical function of crystals and the hidden

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<sup>50</sup> Pantheism is the belief that reality is identical with divinity, or that all-things compose an all-encompassing, immanent god. Pantheist belief does not recognize a distinct personal anthropomorphic god and instead characterizes a broad range of doctrines differing in forms of relationships between reality and divinity. Pantheistic concepts date back thousands of years, and pantheistic elements have been identified in various religious traditions. The term *pantheism* was coined by mathematician Joseph Raphson in 1697 and has since been used to describe the beliefs of a variety of people and organizations. Pantheism was popularized in Western culture as a theology and philosophy based on the work of the seventeenth century philosopher Baruch Spinoza, particularly his book *Ethics*.

<sup>51</sup> Atlantis (Ancient Greek: Ἀτλαντὶς νῆσος, “island of Atlas”) is a fictional island mentioned within an allegory on the hubris of nations in Plato’s works *Timaeus* and *Critias*, where it represents the antagonist naval power that besieges “Ancient Athens”, the pseudo-historic embodiment of Plato’s ideal state in *The Republic*.

<sup>52</sup> Lemuria is the name of a hypothetical “lost land” variously located in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, as postulated by a now-discredited 19th-century scientific theory. The idea was then adopted by the occultists of the time and consequently has been incorporated into pop culture. Some Tamil writers have associated it with Kumari Kandam, a mythical lost continent with an ancient Tamil civilization located south of present-day India in the Indian Ocean.

knowledge of such secret societies as Freemasonry,<sup>53</sup> the Rosicrucians and Knights Templar.<sup>54</sup> New Agers also draw from mystical figures in established religions, such as the Christian mystic Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179), the Sufi poet Rumi (1207-1273) or the Jewish Kabbalist Isaac Luria (1534-1572). Lately, New Agers have shown more interest in the shamanistic traditions of Native North Americans (Villoldo, 2000: 32-45).

The primary goal of the New Age Movement is to reach a future new age where everyone can achieve personal fulfillment. This goal is met on an individual by individual basis, so New Age participants generally espouse a worldview which is focused on the individual, and which, not coincidentally, reflects the values of a generation that Thomas Wolfe<sup>55</sup> called the “me generation” (*Mauve Gloves, Madmen, Clutter & Vine. A collection of essays.*) The worldview also reflects a North American obsession with individual accomplishment and success. It also is in opposition to the counter-culture from which it emerged, which was committed to communal solutions to individual empowerment and growth and ultimately world peace and harmony. Many of the tools and aids that are available to New Agers, therefore, are designed to help individuals in their quest for personal development and self-improvement. Tools such as *yoga*, channeling, aura-reading and crystals are all designed to help practitioners “reach the goal, evolving over many lifetimes, of achieving greater and greater awareness of their divine natures” (Miller, 1989: 163).

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<sup>53</sup> Freemasonry is a fraternal organization that originated from a loose organization of medieval stonemasons. Today it is an international order established for mutual help and fellowship and holds elaborate and secret ceremonies.

<sup>54</sup> The Knights Templar was an order of knights founded about 1118 to protect pilgrims in the Holy Land during the Second Crusade and was suppressed in 1312.

<sup>55</sup> Thomas Kennerly Wolfe Jr. is an American author and journalist, best known for his association with and influence in stimulating the New Journalism literary movement, in which literary techniques are used extensively.

Also fundamental to the New Age Movement is the belief in *reincarnation*. New Age participants generally believe in the continuation of the individual after death, together with an upbeat view of death as the means to enter the next life, and therefore just another step on the path to complete self-awareness. The New Age concept of *reincarnation* stems both from Hinduism and Buddhism, and it was the Theosophical Movement that introduced the concept to the West (Gomes, 1995). This concept suggests that the individual *reincarnates* him or herself according to spiritual need, with the objective of evolving from a lower state of spiritual awareness to a higher one. The idea that one can learn and improve from previous incarnations has led to the practice of past-life regressions and past-life therapies that supposedly bring not only wisdom and knowledge but also control over oneself. The therapy, it is claimed, can even help overcome present psychological or even physical conditions by confronting what perhaps was the cause in previous lifetimes. The New Age focus on repeated incarnations on earth differs somewhat from the Buddhist concept of *nirvana*, and reflects the movement's understanding that "salvation," so to speak, belongs on earth, not in another dimension or place. This quest for self-awareness and self-fulfillment on earth is borne out by the many techniques the movement offers designed to achieve happiness, health, material wealth and business and personal success in this world. Many of the leaders of the movement not only offer individual self-help workshops or seminars, but also offer them as business solutions to workplace problems as well (Lewis, 1999: 8).

The New Age Movement has also adopted the belief in *karma*: it is *karma* that governs the morality and ethics of New Agers. *Karma* is another concept introduced to the West by the Theosophical Movement (Taimni, 1991: 17). Within the New Age

Movement, adherents look to *karma* to explain why the human experience of the world is the way it is. Simply put, negative actions and thoughts lead to bad *karma* and positive actions and thoughts lead to good *karma*. It is the cause and effect of every human experience. New Agers seek to build up good *karma*, unlike Hindu or Buddhist practitioners, who try to minimize the effects of *karma*. New Agers believe they are thus creating a personal, positive experience of the world. The more good *karma* you acquire, the better your experience of this life and future lives. *Karma* is also used to understand why people suffer and why evil exists. New Agers believe that humans create their own suffering, but that such experiences help us to grow spiritually. In this way, suffering has a meaning and allows New Agers to understand that all life experiences are meaningful (Goldberg, 2002: 82). *Karma*, then, is an underlying natural law and explains how a person's actions and thoughts can influence their lives. People who are motivated by hate or fear create a world of hate and fear for themselves; by contrast, those who are moved by love and peace live in a world that exhibits those qualities. And for New Age practitioners, *karma* is built up by following the ideals of self-development through the nurturing of interpersonal loving relations among partners, families, friends and one's fellow human beings in general. This holistic view of life includes the cultivation of a sense of joy and happiness in the material, intellectual, spiritual, and transcendent realms.

The underlying principle that governs New Age ethics is individual autonomy, the one ethical absolute espoused by the movement – if each person is divine, the final authority for ethical decisions rests within that person who is then free to act in harmony with their own values. As Shirley MacLaine explains it “Free will is simply the enactment of the realization you are God, a realization that you are divine: free will is

making everything accessible to you” (Groothuis, 26). As a result, ethical choices cannot be judged by others, New Agers must tolerate all viewpoints since those viewpoints are reflective of someone’s inner truth. Marilyn Ferguson believes that once we reach the higher consciousness of the New Age, “There is less certainty about what is right for others. With an awareness of multiple realities, we lose our dogmatic attachment to a single point of view.” In other words, ethics and morality are relative.

The rituals and religious practices that the New Age follows are focused on this overarching dedication to reaching self-awareness and achieving a heaven on earth. These rituals and religious practices include channeling, Astrology,<sup>56</sup> *Reiki*,<sup>57</sup> *yoga*, or shamanism,<sup>58</sup> and they are intended to heal the mind, body, spirit or the earth itself. Many of these rituals and religious practices can involve individuals or groups, since New Age does not differentiate between the efficacies of private or public “devotions.” The Japanese healing technique of *Reiki*, for example, engages and manipulates invisible energy fields both to heal the body and to increase spiritual awareness. Other techniques include *yoga* and meditation. Channeling is another ritual spiritual practice, which can be accomplished through individual or group effort and can offer individual guidance or impart ancient knowledge or wisdom on topics such as life after death, ancient cultures or ethic. Likewise shamanism is a growing ritualistic approach in New Age, whereby the

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<sup>56</sup> Astrology is the study of the positions and aspects of celestial bodies in the belief that they have influence on the course of natural earthly occurrences and human affairs.

<sup>57</sup> *Reiki* (靈気, /'reiki:/) is a form of alternative medicine called energy healing. *Reiki* practitioners use a technique called *palm healing* or *hands-on healing* through which a “universal energy” is said to be transferred through the palms of the practitioner to the patient in order to encourage emotional or physical healing.

<sup>58</sup> Shamanism is the religion of certain indigenous people, based on the belief that the world is pervaded by good and evil spirits who can be influenced or controlled only by the shamans.

religious practices of Native Americans, Mesoamericans and South American Indians as well as Australian aboriginal and African indigenous traditions are employed to introduce the practitioners to spirits and the spirit world, generally through a form of trance.<sup>59</sup>

Trances may be induced through fasting, meditation, sweat lodges<sup>60</sup> or hallucinogenic plants during which individuals seek greater spiritual awareness and development.

Much of the daily ritual of New Agers is taken up with reading. They value a wide variety of texts, from classic religious sources like the Jewish and Christian Bibles or Hindu and Buddhists scriptures to New Age books or periodicals that deal with the New Age rituals. Many of these New Age texts, the authors claim, have been channeled, and some have even become popular with a broader audience. For many New Agers who are not affiliated with any organization, the literature is their main connection to the New Age Movement. Other daily practices include following healthy diets through

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<sup>59</sup> Trance (medical definition) is a sleep-like altered state of consciousness (as of deep hypnosis) usually characterized by partly suspended animation with diminished or absent sensory and motor activity and subsequent lack of recall; a state of profound abstraction or absorption.

<sup>60</sup> A sweat lodge is a low profile hut, typically dome-shaped or oblong, and made with natural materials. The structure is the *lodge*, and the ceremony performed within the structure may be called a purification ceremony or simply a sweat. Traditionally the structure is simple, constructed of saplings covered with blankets and sometimes animal skins. Originally, it was only used by some of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, but with the rise of pan-Indianism, numerous nations that did not originally have the sweat lodge ceremony have adopted it. This has been controversial.

vegetarianism,<sup>61</sup> macrobiotics<sup>62</sup> and raw foods,<sup>63</sup> as well as the use of candles, incense,<sup>64</sup> music and crystals to create a harmonic and peaceful environment in which to live. Eclecticism, therefore, is what best describes the New Age approach to rituals and religious practices.

Religious leadership is provided through authors or teachers who specialize in particular disciplines, and it is to these individuals, rather than to a single individual, that a New Age practitioner turns when in need of instruction or help to achieve the goals of self-awareness and spiritual growth. William Sims Bainbridge<sup>65</sup> and Rodney William Stark<sup>66</sup> refer to New Age as a “client cult” (Bainbridge and Stark, 26) where spiritual seekers or “clients” work with teachers or “providers.” Frequently this connection is also a business association in that the leader derives his or her income from the exchange and

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<sup>61</sup> Vegetarianism is the practice of abstaining from the consumption of meat, and may also include abstention from by-products of animal slaughter. The earliest record of vegetarianism comes from Indus Valley Civilization as early as the seventh century BCE, inculcating tolerance towards all living beings.

<sup>62</sup> Macrobiotic diet - brown rice and other whole grains such as barley, millet, oats, quinoa, spelt, rye, and teff are considered by macrobiotics to be the foods in which yin and yang are closest to being in balance. Therefore, lists of macrobiotic foods that determine a food as yin or yang generally compare them to whole grains.

<sup>63</sup> Raw foodism (or following a raw food diet) is the dietary practice of eating only, or mostly, uncooked, unprocessed foods. Depending on the philosophy, or type of lifestyle and results desired, raw food diets may include a selection of fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, eggs, fish, meat, and dairy products. Contemporary raw food diets were first developed in Switzerland by Maximilian Bircher-Benner (1867 – 1939).

<sup>64</sup> Incense is an aromatic biotic material, which releases fragrant smoke when burned. The term refers to the material itself, rather than to the aroma that it produces. Incense is used for aesthetic reasons, and in therapy, meditation, and ceremony.

<sup>65</sup> William Sims Bainbridge is an American sociologist who currently resides in Virginia. He is co-director of Cyber-Human Systems at the National Science Foundation. He is most well-known for his work on the sociology of religion and recently has published work studying the sociology of video gaming.

<sup>66</sup> Rodney William Stark is an American sociologist of religion who was a long time professor of sociology and of comparative religion at the University of Washington; currently he is the Professor of the Social Sciences at Baylor University, co-director of the university’s institute for studies of religion, and founding editor of the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*.

the “client” pays for the service. The result is that a New Ager does not have a single relationship with a rabbi, priest or pastor, as in the traditional monotheistic religions, but multiple relationships with several “subject matter experts” and these relationships can be “real” or “virtual” through texts or websites. In rare instances, these experts become national figures, and reach out to their followers through popular television programs or through books and lectures. Bainbridge and Stark refer to this organizational structure as an “Audience cult” (ibid, 28). Sometimes such New Age figures adopt conventional clerical models to style themselves as religious leaders and guides. This clerical status provides a kind of legitimacy for their organizations, allowing them to seek licenses to perform such traditional clerical roles as marriages and funerals. Indeed, scholars like Melton, Lewis, Massimo Introvigne,<sup>67</sup> Sutcliffe and others refer to such organizations as New Age churches. There are many instances of New Age organizations that style themselves as “churches,” for example: The Heart Consciousness Church in California; The New Age Church in St. John’s Newfoundland; the New Age St. James Church in London, England; and the New Age Community Church in Arizona. However, even as clerics, these teachers are unlikely to serve a fixed congregation since, as we have seen, New Age practitioners seek out many teachers in their journey to spiritual awareness and healing.

Having spoken about the lack of central organization, it is important to note that within the New Age Movement there are distinct subcultures with distinctly different

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<sup>67</sup> Massimo Introvigne is an Italian sociologist and intellectual property consultant. He is the founder and managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions, an international network of scholars who study New Religious Movements.

approaches. Benjamin Zeller<sup>68</sup> refers to them as “New Age New Religious Movements.” One of the better known of these newer movements is associated with J.Z. Knight,<sup>69</sup> a professional channeler who heads Ramtha’s School of Enlightenment (Zeller, 24). Ramtha is an ancient extra-terrestrial warrior who channels himself through Knight to deliver messages of self-empowerment and self-development. These channeled messages have grown into a global commercial enterprise of self-help books,<sup>70</sup> seminars<sup>71</sup> and counseling sessions<sup>72</sup> as well as alternative healing approaches.<sup>73</sup> Another distinct source of NRMs is Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs). Among the better known are the Raelians, Heaven’s Gate (San Diego, 1997), Aetherius Society (United Kingdom, 1995) and Unarius Academy of Science (California, 1954). While most New Agers place great value on alternative science, the UFO religions place it at their epicenters. For example, the Raelians explain Christ’s resurrection as a form of cloning, and while the UFO religions tend to look to science to transform themselves and society, rejecting wider New Age practices as unscientific, they do practice channeling to achieve their goals.

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<sup>68</sup> Benjamin E. Zeller is Assistant Professor of Religion at Lake Forest College, a private liberal arts college in the Chicago suburbs. He focuses on religious currents that are new or alternative, including new religions, the religious engagement with science, and the quasi-religious relationship people have with food.

<sup>69</sup> Judy Zebra “JZ” Knight is an American New Age teacher and author known for her purported channelling of a spiritual entity named Ramtha.

<sup>70</sup> Covey, R. Stephen, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change*. New York: Free Press, 2004. Print.

<sup>71</sup> The New Age Seminars with Michel Montecrossa and Mirakali as well as other participants from Mirapuri take place five times a year, in February, April, August, October and November. They are part of the Sri Aurobindo University activities in Mirapuri, Italy. <http://www.newage-seminars.com>

<sup>72</sup> Cadman, Steve, *New Age Infiltration and Conquest of Professional Counseling*. This seminar was originally given at an NACSW Conference in 1989 (North American Association of Christians in Social Work).

<sup>73</sup> Pelletier, Kenneth, *The Best Alternative Medicine*. New York: Fireside Publisher, 2002.

Another distinct subgroup within the New Age Movement is the “schools of healing techniques.” Practitioners of *Reiki*, for example, have positioned themselves away from the New Age Movement in an effort to practice their healing arts in non-New Age environments. That said, *Reiki* does have many of the qualities associated with New Age, such as past-life regression therapy,<sup>74</sup> self-empowerment<sup>75</sup> and world transformation (Brinkman, 2012). Other groups that have tried to shed the New Age mantle are traditional herbalists<sup>76</sup> and homeopaths, who wish to broaden their “marketplace” beyond the New Age, even though the bulk of their “clients” are likely New Age practitioners.

Since there are no conventional churches or organizations for the New Age Movement, it is virtually impossible to determine how many people belong to it. Figures from Statistics Canada, for example, indicate that in 2001 there were 1,503 followers of New Age, up from 1,200 in 1991 and the latest number is 2,230 (2011). However, this figure is likely quite meaningless because, since there are no churches, and no central organizations with memberships, individuals would probably not identify themselves as belonging to the New Age Movement. Perhaps a better way to look at how popular the New Age philosophy has become is to find a proxy, and look at statistics that might give some indication of the relative popularity of the New Age Movement. For example,

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<sup>74</sup> Past life regression therapy is a technique that uses hypnosis to recover what practitioners believe are memories of past lives or incarnations, though others regard them as fantasies or delusions or a type of confabulation.

<sup>75</sup> Self-empowerment refers to measures designed to increase the degree of autonomy and self-determination in people and in communities in order to enable them to represent their interests in a responsible and self-determined way, acting on their own authority. It is the process of becoming stronger and more confident, especially in controlling one's life and claiming one's rights.

<sup>76</sup> Traditional Herbalists are part of the traditional medicine, which comprises medical aspects of traditional knowledge that developed over generations within various societies before the era of modern medicine.

*Gallup Poll statistics* suggest that one out of five Americans believes in *reincarnation*, (Lewis, 4) a fundamental concept of the New Age. Similarly, in the United Kingdom thirty to thirty-five percent of the British population believes in *reincarnation* (Crabtree, 2012). Another study suggests that forty percent of Americans believe in spirits or ghosts, thirty-four percent believe in UFOs and a quarter believes in Astrology and witchcraft (Shermer, 24).

Virtually every bookstore in North America carries a large New Age selection, as well as most music stores. Today there are many specialized New Age stores, and a host of New Age professionals offering services ranging from palm reading<sup>77</sup> to past-life regressions. Add to this the plethora of self-help books in 2019, Amazon alone lists over 820,000 titles, up from 212,000 titles in 2011 and self-improvement lectures, the multitude of *yoga* studios that have cropped up in recent years in North America, and the specialty clothing stores like Lululemon<sup>78</sup> that supply *yoga* fashions, and it is clear that in no small way the New Age Movement has embedded itself into middle-class, contemporary culture. Even to a casual observer, comparing *yoga* classes ranks with chatter about fashion, film and organic food at the office cooler or the Starbucks coffee-shop counter. In one sense, then, and at a fundamental level, the New Age Movement has begun to change the world one person at a time by associating itself indelibly with the values of a generation in which it came of age. It has not conquered through war or

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<sup>77</sup> Palmistry or chiromancy, is the claim of characterization and foretelling the future through the study of the palm, also known as palm reading or chiromancy. The practice is found all over the world, with numerous cultural variations. Those who practice chiromancy are generally called *palmists*, *hand readers*, *hand analysts*, or *chirologists*.

<sup>78</sup> Lululemon Athletica Inc., styled as Lululemon Athletica, is a Canadian athletic apparel retailer. It is a self-described yoga-inspired athletic apparel company for women and men. The company was founded in 1998 by Chip Wilson in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

traditional evangelism, nor through hysterical conversion or coercion, but by capitalizing on a desire possessed by many individuals to extract the most out of life. From the material to the spiritual, from the emotional to the intellectual, it addresses itself to the self-development of the “whole person,” or in Maslow’s terms, “self-actualization.”

#### **1.4. Secularization, Globalization and New Age.**

No discussion about NRMs, and particularly New Age, can take place without a thorough review of the development of secularization and globalization, because these two phenomena create the environment in which NRMs can flourish: freedom of choice; the increasing importance of individualism versus community; and privatization and the growth of international marketing and new technologies, which facilitate the transfer of ideas from country to country, often with little respect for local, regional or even national cultural differences. Secularization separates religion from the state and draws our attention to local contexts, giving autonomy to individual institutions, while globalization unifies and looks at religion on a global scale, shrinking the values of society towards the absolute, the universal.

As far as secularization is concerned, there are many scholarly views about its cause and effect. Some commentators consider that secularization means the death knell of religion, and this development will eventually result in the degradation and elimination of religion. Others support the opinion that secularization is one of the variations of religion, and will not disappear because they see in secularization elements that ensure the appearance of new expressions of religious life and, in fact, might even increase its influence (Dalferth, 2009; Moberg, 2014; Wilson, 1966). According to some scholars, secularization has caused a decline in the controls that morals place on society (Blumberg, 2009), while for others it was a means of giving society free choice and in this way it helped to speed up the development of society (Stark, 1986; Bainbridge, 1986; Berger, 1990; Casanova, 2001; Habermas, 2007).

This environment has created more opportunities for choice, so that religion in the

contemporary context no longer has only a geographical connotation and is not only linked to a territory as it used to be. Religion for individuals is not a destiny anymore, but a choice among other choices they make every day, which is a mark of a capitalist system that promotes choice in all things in order to expand markets. Like other goods, religion is commodified, offering multiple choices and consumers may choose among many religious options. In addition, states foster this approach, since they, too, benefit from such a system (Marx, 1867; Weber, 2002; Durkheim, 1972).

There are other approaches to secularization. Karel Dobbelaere,<sup>79</sup> for example, has attempted to understand the phenomenon synthetically. In his opinion there are three dimensions to this process: the elimination of religion from social life; essential changes in religious education implemented with the influence of contemporary life; and the diminishing of religious influence on an individual, that is, the lessening of faith and the weakening of religious activities (Dobbelaere, 2004). By contrast, other scholars of secularization argue that we have moved beyond the paradigm of secularization into post-secularization (Habermas, 2007; Dalferth, 2009; Moberg, 2014 and others), at least in the West. Such commentators propose that, if secularization separates religion from the state, as we suggested earlier, post-secularization offers a dialogue and peaceful coexistence between faith and reason.

Looking at secularization from a slightly different perspective, Robert Neely Bellah (1927 – 2013)<sup>80</sup> proposed, in his scheme of religious evolution, that religion is

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<sup>79</sup> Karel Dobbelaere is a Belgian educator and noted sociologist of religion. Dobbelaere is an Emeritus Professor of the University of Antwerp and the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium.

<sup>80</sup> Robert Neely Bellah was an American sociologist, and the Elliott Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. He was internationally known for his work related to the sociology of religion.

becoming more and more personal. In other words, an individual uses his or her “right” to make a “free” choice of his or her own belief. According to Bellah, along with the development of social organization, religion undergoes evolution with a positive result, and in his opinion, religion is capable of changing existing norms and values and strengthening existing social structures. For Bellah, this strengthening was beneficial to the progressive development of society. Thus religious evolution has a great effect on the social development of society (Bellah, 333-352).

By contrast, according to Peter Ludwig Berger,<sup>81</sup> secularization is a general social tendency. Studying the specifics of secularization in the United States, he concluded that there is a hidden process of secularization underway when the activity of the Church is becoming more worldly. In other words, the centre of gravity of religious life is being shifted from ritual that is based on belief to social activities: teaching, assistance of socially disadvantaged people etc. Berger defines secularization as “a process when cultural sectors and society are separated from the domination of religious institutions and symbol” (Berger, 37). The majority of researchers, in addition to Berger, agrees with the process of secularization and considers that this kind of social development establishes a dominant model of the modern history of humankind. Scientists often debate the precise nature of secularization, its causes and perspectives. Thanks to Berger we have models for understanding this process.

For Berger, in the North American context, a regular individual, i.e. “a person from the street” has become more and more indifferent towards religion, and his or her

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<sup>81</sup> Peter Ludwig Berger, an Austrian-born American sociologist and Protestant theologian, became known for his work in the sociology of knowledge, the sociology of religion, study of modernization, and theoretical contributions to sociological theory.

everyday life does not depend on the Church. An individual postpones for “another time” his or her obligations that exist in a relationship with the Church and sometimes they are forgotten altogether. In Berger’s opinion, religion has less and less influence on familial life and risks becoming some kind of old-fashioned ideal. According to him secularization appeared at the outset of industrial society and he directly links it to the creation and functioning of an industrial economy. Secularization appeared in the seventeenth century, when the political and economic spheres of society became free from the grip of religion and religious systems became subject to the process of adapting to new social structures. According to Berger, religion should accommodate two realities: privatization and a competitive religious marketplace.

Religion, therefore, becomes subject to choice and it is considered a private business, to be left to individual preference. Faith and practice are no longer universal and as a result, the objectives of religion are significantly shaken. Religion should adapt itself to the new realities of pluralism and privatization and the processes of privatization and secularization are in progress simultaneously. Most important is that in the nineteenth century, choosing a religion became completely voluntary, especially in North America. A market has now appeared in which to make such a choice. In Berger’s terms, this means that religious tradition that was imposed on an individual in the past should now be acquired as in a market. Religion is sold to a consumer who is not obliged to buy it and religious institutions become marketing agencies; religious traditions turn into articles of consumption.

Berger believes that the changes that happened in the social arrangements of basic religious organizations are far reaching in terms of their structure and ideology for

Western religions. In order to be competitive in this religious market, religions must rationalize their efforts. Similar to other institutions, religious organizations must become more and more bureaucratic. The result of such bureaucratization is that religious groups are becoming similar to each other in terms of their forms and functioning. In addition, small organizations try to find channels of communication and make agreements with other organizations in order to gain a foothold in the marketplace and stabilize it. This situation can be seen in the shift away from denominationalism<sup>82</sup> at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. Berger sees the continuation of this process in a strong ecumenical movement<sup>83</sup> and in the creation of numerous American Christian denominations after the Second World War (Berger, 42).

The religious product became subject to a process of homogenization. If we borrow from economic theory, under market conditions the product would be subject to standardization, but with differences. Every organization tries to create a “market leader” for a consumer who is in the “driver’s seat” and by developing and maintaining a

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<sup>82</sup> Scholars of the phenomenon of denominationalism, like Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch and others, developed the term to account for the variety of faiths in the United States. Because of its associations with religious pluralism, denominationalism also implies ecclesiastical disestablishment and religious freedom, in the sense that no particular religious body receives the endorsement of or financial support from the government. Prior to the last quarter of the twentieth century, the concept was usually a Protestant term that referred to a cooperative spirit among the largest Protestant denominations in the United States. But after 1970, as those denominations lost members and influence, and as public institutions began to reflect the United States’ religious diversity, denominationalism expanded to include all faiths, even those for whom the idea may be foreign. Denominationalism Today, Hughes, Philip in *Pointers: Bulletin of the Christian Research Association*. Volume 29, Issue 1, March 2019.

<sup>83</sup> Ecumenism 1910 World Missionary Conference is the birthplace of the ecumenical movement and refers to efforts by Christians of different Church traditions to develop closer relationships and better understandings. It can also be defined more broadly: “a movement that promotes worldwide unity among all religions through greater cooperation.”  
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/ecumenism>

mechanism of competition, the consumer will continue to minimize any real distinction between religions. In terms of substance and style, the product conforms to the dictates within the market; in other words within certain boundaries, for example, religions that focus on issues defining social life, like sexual problems, marriage, upbringing of children, family norms, well-being and personal growth and so forth, are more likely to be successful in the modern world because they fulfill the needs of the congregant, or, in marketing terms, the customer.

Religions offer products that recognize secularization in developed countries, for example, new technologies such as satellite/cable TV, computers, tablets, smartphones, internet and social media that the new religions are able to exploit to promote their particular brand. Either they are able to make accommodations for a new situation, play the pluralistic game, and adapt to time changes and produce product according to consumer demand, or they can refuse to compete in the religious marketplace, limit themselves to existing socio-religious structures and continue with their mission. For the majority, the reality of religions is probably between these two extremes. Some NRMs (e.g. The International Society for Krishna Consciousness) refused to place themselves in a new secular order, because they did not accept the new circumstances. Others, such as Scientology, developed new methods of accommodation and they reconfigured the religious marketplace. Some groups incline towards becoming more radical and even totalitarian in imposing demands, while others are more flexible in their requirements, and they are more oriented towards consumers.

In Berger's opinion, over time, religion becomes more like a psychotherapy program than a theology for the salvation of souls. According to Berger, contemporary

industrialized society destroys traditional religious institutions and inculcates secularism, pluralism and the freedom to choose one's own beliefs. In this regard, the dynamic of choice has influenced the development of contemporary society. There are complications in social-political relations, changes in media, the process of urbanization, and changes of life style. Berger could not hide his concern about these changes. His work *The Sacred Canopy* represents a manifesto about the end of religion. In his opinion, secularization is hostile towards religion and causes a great danger to the stability of society and he believes secularization is the process of excluding religion from scientific, rational reasoning and ethics.<sup>84</sup>

Secularization exists, of course, in the sense that Berger proposes, but Stark and Bainbridge propose their own explanations of secularization (Stark and Bainbridge, 39). They consider that secularization constitutes a permanent component of "religious economy" and is not a unique attribute of the modern world. The process of secularization is part of the dynamics of the religious economy, which is a process of self-restriction that does not bring an end to religion; on the contrary it creates a renewal of it. The expansion of a scientific and rational vision of the world eliminates the magic from religion and forces dominant traditional religions to distance themselves from their traditional principles. Existential questions still remain, by which religion used to satisfy society in the past but Stark and Bainbridge remark that among all existing denominations many propose different points of view because of widely different answers to these questions of existence. Those religions reached the point where they can no longer offer what used to represent the essence of religion: they are offering little to

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<sup>84</sup> Berger has since subverted the thesis proposed in *The Sacred Canopy* with a new theory in the book *Many Altars of Modernity*, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

comfort the disadvantaged, the dying, the poor and those who want to understand the meaning of existence.

In such circumstances, when faith weakens and spirituality dies, all that is left is empty formalities disassociated from real human experience. There are two socio-religious answers to this situation: these are renaissance and innovation. Stark and Bainbridge associate the phenomenon of religious renaissance with what sociologists call “sects.” As for innovation, it is associated with the creation of “cults.” Sects are inclined to split from leading traditions and try to rebuild, as they call it, “the beginning of religious tradition.” Cults, by contrast, represent an unconventional image of establishing religious expression. Stark and Bainbridge repeat often that Christianity, Islam and Buddhism started their history as cults, they confirm that there was an unprecedented degradation of such liberal protestant denominations as the Anglican and Episcopal, Presbyterian, Methodist, Congregationalist and Lutheran in terms of their expansion and social influence during the 1960s and 1970s. For quite a long period of time this degradation was a leading factor in North America in the background of religious leftists.

The theories of Berger and Stark and Bainbridge create the basis for the context of understanding NRMs and they try in this way to explain the essential nature of the new religions and knowledge of their theories enables us to analyze the social and cultural significance of the New Age; the authority of traditional religious institutions diminished, and new religions offered a different product that met the needs and wants of the individual rather than the community. As Stark and Bainbridge speculate, an increase in NRMs is a sign of the changing of the guard rather than the end of religion (Stark and Bainbridge, 127). The theory of secularization that is founded on the idea that modernity

causes a decline of religion, has for a time served as a paradigm for the study of religion. Berger, however, believes a new paradigm is needed, based on the phenomenon of pluralism (Berger, 2014). He proposes that the new paradigm should be capable of dealing with two pluralisms: the co-existence of different religions and the co-existence of religious and secular institutions. This co-existence occurs both in individuals and society, and while pluralism may challenge religion it has not resulted in its demise. Berger argues that with some exceptions, notably in Europe and among some international intellectuals, the world is as religious as ever, and in places more so (ibid., 2014).

Besides the growth of secularization, Lorne Dawson explains the growth of NRMs in the context of globalization, referring to globalization in three distinct ways: the condition of contemporary social life; the way people understand their social life; and a way of theorizing about contemporary social life. He tries to define the role of NRMs in the process of globalization, arguing that in the main, the concept of globalization merely reconfigures our present understanding of the possible significance of NRMs as conceived conditions of “modernity.” Almost all studies of contemporary NRMs implicitly comment on their possible cultural significance. To better understand this movement, according to Dawson, we should acknowledge three themes:

- Changes in value
- Changes in social structure
- Changes in the role and character of religious institutions (i.e. secularization).

(Dawson, 24-28)

Globalization, and religion within the context of globalization, is not new but rather a

reinterpretation of colonialism (Beyer, 2006). Formerly it was the state that invaded and colonized territory by force, providing new sources of revenue and taking with it the state religion and imposing it on an alien culture. In turn, participants in this colonized culture might tacitly accept the new religion, but frequently adapt it, sometimes in secret, to meet their own values and cultural exigencies. In the modern context of globalization it is commerce rather than the state (albeit with state approval and sponsorship), which leads and shapes globalization to expand markets. Even though corporations may at times act like a religion, this behavior is a secular exercise, designed to increase revenue without the heavy cost burden of colonization. In so doing, corporations export cultural values and it is these new values that are exploited by NRMs. For example, the concept that the customer is always right, a marketing concept developed in North America to give the consumer a sense of control. But, unlike state colonizers, corporations are prepared to adapt to local culture and custom, examples of which are that beer is sold in McDonalds in many European countries, and beef burgers are not sold in India, where all life is sacred in the Hindu religion. The NRMs are also prepared to adapt to local cultures: the Pentecostal church, for example, does not proscribe alcohol consumption in Georgia, where wine is fundamental to cultural traditions of hospitality.

Sometimes it is unclear what is religious and what is not in a context of NRMs, and this fuzziness raises the issue of the boundaries of religion and the boundaries between religions. For example, such religious groups as the New Age and the new spirituality escape the boundary of what is defined as religion, since in many cases they involve neither social movement nor system nor institutions, as do the more traditional religions (Arweck, 2013). What is religious and what is not in a context of New Age is

hard to define. If secularization deals with the separation of religion from civil institutions, what can be said about some of the NRMs that behave like secular corporations, offering workshops on leadership and self-actualization to non-religious organizations, moving from the religious to the secular, thus entering public space (Rupert, 1992)?

Some NRMs even operate and behave like modern businesses or international companies in the global marketplace and thus have a significant stake in the financial and commercial networks of the international economy. In this respect, they are, of course, no different from other religions. David Chidester<sup>85</sup> points out that multi-national corporations conduct their own cross-cultural businesses like religions, with their own creed and corporate values (Chidester, 2001), which could also apply to NRMs, but in reverse order: they are religious organizations that behave in many ways like corporations. In fact, NRMs, including New Age, often compete with structures and institutions in the secular world, because their goal is not merely to meet the religious needs of individuals but to encompass a holistic human experience and become an integral part of life.

When NRMs are examined in the global context, some of them extend their ambitions to encompass the whole world. Because they offer pluralistic solutions that are appropriate for contemporary individuals, they view their social orders as blueprints for society in general and their particular brand of redemption as critical to humankind as a

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<sup>85</sup> David Chidester is Professor of Religious Studies and director of the Institute for Comparative Religion in South Africa at the University of Cape Town. He is the author and editor of more than twenty books, including the award-winning *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in South Africa*.

whole. However, just like other corporate structures in the global market place, NRMs need to contend with the local conditions just as much as they wish to apply global solutions. While they operate with a universal structure that is easily transferable from one cultural context to another, NRMs still have to become accepted members of the host country, which means they must deal with, and adapt to, different nationalities, regional preferences and specific local environments. Thus the New Age Movement, in order to be viable, can be very flexible in adapting to local culture and conditions.

## **1.5 Conclusion.**

In this first chapter I have explored the history of the early New Age Movement and its nascent form in the early twentieth centuries, influenced by early thinkers such as Swedenborg, Mesmer, Gurdjieff and Blavatskaya who introduced the world to Eastern spiritual traditions and other esoteric ideas, then through the impact of the New Thought Movement in North America and such luminaries in the new fields of psychiatry and psychology as Jung and Maslow. These early contributors had enormous influence on institutions such as Esalen and Findhorn. I also examined the impact of the counter-culture and post-war feminism and the new voice of the working classes on New Age, all of which rejected old traditions in favour of new approaches to spirituality, focused initially on a communal view but quickly developing into self-improvement or self-actualization.

I examined the expansion of New Age from a well-established movement in Great Britain to North America and across the globe to become a worldwide phenomenon. In the third segment I reviewed the definitions of New Age, its teachings, concepts and philosophy and adoption of local indigenous traditions as well as Eastern philosophies and rituals. Most importantly, I looked at the concept that is fundamental to New Age and that is the ability to pick and choose as an individual a road to salvation that is uniquely personal.

In the final segment I examined how the once pseudo religious movement became secularized and spread globally. By its definition, secularization separates religion from the state and draws attention to local contexts, giving autonomy to individual institutions, whereas globalization unifies and looks at religion on a global scale, focusing the values

of society towards the absolute, the universal. In some respects, this summarizes the New Age Movement's historical path.

It is because the New Age Movement was not rooted in dogma or theology, or for that matter locked into the teachings of a single leader, that it was able to adapt and reinvent itself to suit changing taste, all the time offering up a broad menu of spiritual options to allow followers to pick and choose their own paths to self-awareness and salvation, and this has always been the fundamental basis of the movement; so while its outward appearance may have changed radically, the various iterations of the movement have always remained true to its original ideals.

## **Chapter Two: Research, Methods and Theories.**

### **2.1 Methods for the Study of New Age in Canada.**

My principal published sources are the three websites of each group that I have researched:

Toronto: <http://www.uoufc.org>

Calgary: <http://calgarvesl.org>

Vancouver: <http://www.unityofvancouver.org>

The data collected from these websites are incorporated with the data I gathered from interviews. Since they are relatively new groups, at least in Canada, almost nothing is written about them, especially from an academic point of view, which necessitated field studies in order to examine these religious groups in depth through observation, interviews and photography (archival).<sup>86</sup> After collecting information from all available sources on the internet and carefully studying their web sites, blogs and social media, my main task was to conduct individual interviews with the founders or leaders of the groups and with members, to complement and augment information gathered online.

I used Skype video calls and telephone calls to conduct the interviews. Since this is not a quantitative study, the interviews are a semi-structured series of open-ended questions asked individually of founder(s), leader(s) and members. In order to cover a broad cross section of followers, I sought out not only paid employees including the ministers, or founders in the case of Toronto, but also members who are active participants in the functioning of the organizations, and, where possible, diversity representing race, gender and sexual orientation. The interviews were free-flowing

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<sup>86</sup> Black and white photos were collected from the Science of Mind Library and Archives' official website - <http://www.scienceofmindarchives.org>

allowing the participants to elaborate on their thoughts at some length without the restriction of a formal questionnaire. Interview times ranged from 45 minutes to 1 1/2 hours and I developed a series of questions to assist with consistency and also to provoke response; the following are the questions that I posed:

1. Why are you part of this group? What does it give you that another religious group cannot?
2. Is your religious group influenced by the local culture? If yes, how is it influenced?
3. Do you think that when we move religion to another culture/environment/city that the culture changes/influences religion or does religion change/influence the culture?
4. How do you use technology in relation to your spiritual life?
5. Do you practice religion online?
6. How do you practice religion online?
7. Why do you practice religion in the way you do rather than practice religion in the traditional way, that is, offline?
8. Why do you think there is a need to practice religion online? What are the advantages and disadvantages of doing religion online?
9. What can be accomplished online that cannot be accomplished offline and vice versa?
10. Do you see your group as having moved completely online? If yes, why, and if not, why not?

When we turn to a review of NRMs, one of the main problems facing anyone

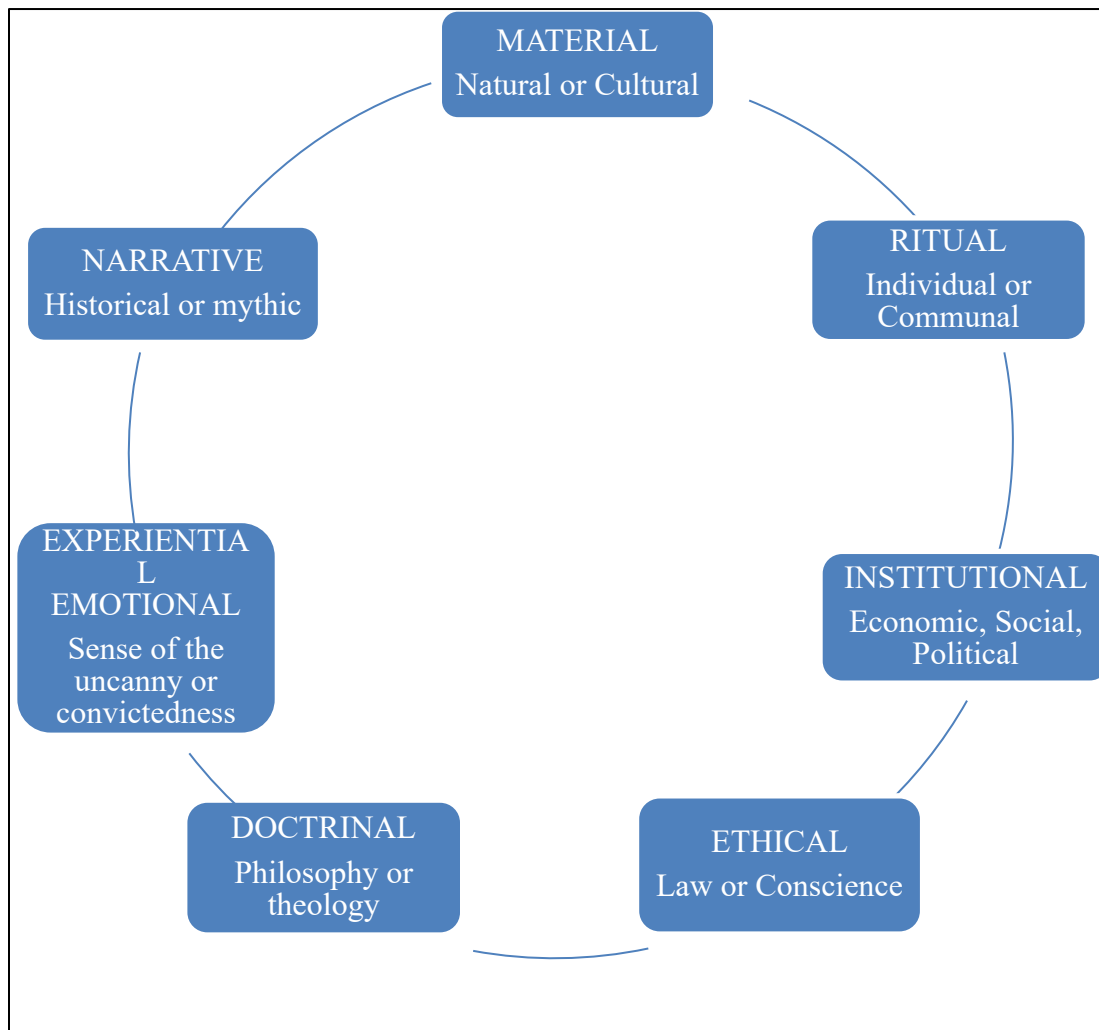
who wishes to make a judgment about the religious nature of NRMs is finding an adequate definition of religion. Many different definitions of religion exist each reflecting either a scholarly or a dogmatic bias depending on the presuppositions of the person making the definition. Religion clearly contains intellectual, ritual, social and ethical elements, bound together by an explicit or implicit belief in the reality of an unseen world, whether this belief is expressed in super naturalistic or idealistic terms. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926 – 2006) offered a well-known definition of religion a “a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (Geertz, 1973: 89). Scholars frequently use the term “religious” to describe the outward display of a personal experience of the sacred or holy, through myths, rituals or institutions; or as Ninian Smart (1927 – 2001),<sup>87</sup> founder of the first Religious Studies Department in England and one of the world’s leading authorities in the field of religious studies, described it: “A set of institutionalized rituals identified with a tradition and expressing and/or evoking sacral sentiments directed at a divine or trans-divine focus seen in the context of the human phenomenological environment and at least partially describe by myths or by myths and doctrines” (Smart: 1999: 13).

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<sup>87</sup> Ninian Smart’s model was first introduced to academia in his book, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World’s Beliefs*, published at University of California Press, on June 29, 1999.

For the purposes of this project, as a methodology or a system to analyze the New Age Movement I will be using the analytical model introduced by Ninian Smart and further developed by Jamie S. Scott.<sup>88</sup> (see fig. 1)

(Fig. 1. Analytical Model)



They read the phenomenon of the religious in terms of interrelated social and cultural dimensions or aspects. Smart examines the world's religious belief systems from the point of view of the common dimensions that are found in the major religions of the

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<sup>88</sup> Jamie S. Scott is a Canadian scholar affiliated with York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada. His research interest focuses on World Religions in Canada, Literature and Geography, Religion and Geography, Religion and Popular Culture.

world including Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, African and other belief systems. His goal is to clearly present the theory and practice of religion, and He uses phenomenology to describe “the experiences and intentions of religious participants,” or “What religious acts mean to the actors” (Smart, 1999: 17). His research led him to conclude that there were seven dimensions, or recurring characteristics of religions:

1. Doctrinal
2. Ritual
3. Narrative
4. Experiential/Emotional
5. Ethical/Logical
6. Social/Political
7. Material

Smart analyses the complete picture of spiritual life, through “grammar of symbols, and the modes and forms in which religion manifests itself” (18). He believes that all religions as well as secular belief systems develop philosophies or tenets for a variety of reasons and he incorporates these philosophies or tenets with other dimensions of religion because they help explain and justify the seven dimensions.

All religions reflect their practice through ritual that can include worship, meditation, pilgrimage, sacrifice, sacramental rites, rites of passage, and healing and in most religions ritual is a fundamental aspect of the religion because it is linked to all the other dimensions. Moreover, all religions have their narrative dimension; narratives are the stories of an unseen, sacred or divine world that are much more than simple history;

they tell of the founders or important figures of a religion, such as the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ or the narrative of the life, loves and mystical powers of Krishna and the temptations and enlightenment that are features of the life of Buddha. The ethical dimension carries the codes of behaviours that the followers adhere to, either from a written law or left to conscience. On the experiential or emotional dimension, certain experiences of the founder may be very important in the history of the development of the particular religion, for example the enlightenment of the Buddha and his absolute resistance against the temptations of Mara; the visions of Mohammed; the mystical experience of Arjuna given by Krishna of the Bhagavat Gita and the conversion of St. Paul, with interpretation of the meanings of these experiences ascribed by each religion. In addition there are feelings and emotions that result from religious experiences as well as rituals. Smart says: “so much of religious practice is soaked in emotions. Without them, the practice would be insincere, mechanical, merely external, not really worth undertaking” (Smart, 1999: 35).

Together with philosophy, narrative, ritual and emotional qualities, a religious tradition incorporates ethical or legal values that could constitute the central core of religious practice. For example, “The Torah as a set of injunctions is central to Orthodox Judaism; the Shari’a is integral to Islam; Buddhism affirms the four great virtues (brahmaviharas); Confucianism lays down the desired attitudes of the gentleman: and so on. In modern nation states certain norms of civil behavior tend to be prescribed in schools.” Smart also suggests there is a social component to religion, which establishes the organizational structure of the religion. In his words: “Any tradition will manifest itself in society, either as a separate organization with priests and other religious

specialists (gurus, lawyer, pastors, rabbis, imams, shamans and so on),” and “These experts, functionaries, charismatic figures and holy persons exhibit in their differing ways many of the models of religious expressions.” Another important dimension found in common by all religions is the material, expressed in “Christian chapels and cathedrals, Muslim mosques, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, and Jewish temples; religious icons, paintings, statues, scriptures, books, and pulpits” (Smart, 1999: 67-69).

Scott’s contribution to the model was to introduce a new dimension – institutional – which is an important dimension when considering the governance of religions. Traditional religious formations are structured with a rigid hierarchy, whereas NRMs favour a more horizontal form of leadership. Scott combined this dimension with Smart’s social and political dimension. Although none of the institutions I examine think of themselves as practicing “religion,” preferring instead the term “spiritual” as in “spiritual center” to avoid the encumbrance of all that is associated with the term religion,<sup>89</sup> this emic perspective can be validated through the lens of the Scott and Smart model. To argue that the New Age groups I have selected to focus on are “good” religions or “bad” religions, “true” religions or “false” religions, are theological questions, which are not the concern of my work. Rather I want to present this phenomenon and the impact it has on society from a socio-cultural perspective, looking at it from the perspective of the divisions covered in the analytical model. I have dedicated a separate chapter to each of the three groups beginning in Toronto with Universal Oneness United Faith Canada, followed by the Centre for Spiritual Living in Calgary and Unity Spiritual Center in Vancouver.

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<sup>89</sup> The question of religion in relation to the three centers I am looking at will be analyzed in greater detail in the last chapter of this dissertation.

## 2.2 Literature Review of New Age Scholarship.

Before we delve into the three New Age groups in detail, I want to review New Age scholarship from many different jurisdictions that has helped to inform my project; scholars have looked at the phenomenon of New Age from socio-cultural and religious studies perspectives and from both global and local contexts. Hans Sebald (1987)<sup>90</sup> was the first to publish a paper on the New Age phenomenon (“Channeling: Believe It or Not,” in *Phoenix Skeptics News* vol. 1, no. 3, November/December 1987, pp. 2-4) followed by the publication of Lewis and Melton’s seminal edited volume *Perspectives on the New Age* (1992) that legitimized scholarship in the field of New Age religions, and from here research into the New Age phenomenon steadily increased. In 1995, Christoph Bochinger<sup>91</sup> published his study on New Age in Germany titled “*New Age*” und moderne Religion. *Religionswissenschaftliche Perspektiven* followed by Michael York’s<sup>92</sup> sociological study in 1995 and Richard Kyle’s work that focused on *The New Age Movement in American Culture* (1995). The following year, Paul Heelas<sup>93</sup> published his study of the movement in Britain and was the first to raise the question of its relationship with business; in the same year Hanegraaff published *New Age Religion and Western*

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<sup>90</sup> Hans Sebald (1929 – 2002) was Professor of Sociology at Arizona State University. He taught courses in the sociology of youth and social psychology, but was perhaps best known for his work on witchcraft.

<sup>91</sup> Christophe Bochinger is Professor for the Study of Religion at the University of Bayreuth. He is also the vice dean of the Faculty of Cultural Studies at Bayreuth, the executive head of the Institute for the Study of Religion, and the chairman of the German Association for the Study of Religions.

<sup>92</sup> Michael York is a UK-based American Religious Studies scholar who specializes in the study of pre-Christian European religion and its relation to contemporary Paganism.

<sup>93</sup> Paul Lauchlan Faux Heelas is a British sociologist and anthropologist. He is noted for work in the field of spirituality, religion and modernity, with special reference to New Age spiritualities of life.

*Culture*, that Olav Hammer<sup>94</sup> described as having: “a well-deserved reputation as the standard reference work of the New Age” (Hammer, 2012: 13). Like most of these early works, Hanegraaff analyzed the New Age literature for his work rather than analyze the practice or people.

The definition of New Age is quite contentious and contemporary scholarship reflects more of the differences in definition than agreement about what constitutes New Age spirituality. In the 27 years since Lewis and Melton’s work, the field of New Age Studies has still not formulated clear and comprehensive research questions. The thorniest of the questions is how to set boundaries for New Age within a broad cultural landscape. It is important to review Sutcliffe and Ingvild Saelid Gilhus’s<sup>95</sup> arguments on the progress of academic research into the New Age phenomenon, since they raise significant questions about the incompatibility of New Age spirituality within the traditional definitions of religion in religious studies. Sutcliffe (2013) has asserted in his work that looks at the history of the research, that the study of New Age developed from a “first wave” of high level analyses of the “content and boundaries” of the movement (Steyn 1994; York 1995; Heelas 1996) into a “second wave” that studied particular beliefs and practices in greater depth and context. This wave has resulted in valuable histories and details of several New Age practices: Courtney Bender<sup>96</sup> (2007) for example

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<sup>94</sup> Olav Hammer is a Swedish professor at the University of Southern Denmark in Odense working in the field of history of religion.

<sup>95</sup> Ingvild Saelid Gilhus is Professor of Study of Religion at the Department of Archaeology, History and Cultural Studies at the University of Bergen, Norway. She works in the areas of religion in late antiquity and new religious movements.

<sup>96</sup> Courtney Bender is Associate Professor in the Department of Religion and Sociology at Columbia University, USA.

who examined in detail American *reincarnation*; Judith Macpherson<sup>97</sup> (2008) who reviewed *Reiki* healing in Scotland and Gilhus (2012) on speaking with angels in Norway. The wave has also encouraged local and regional differences: Adam Possamai<sup>98</sup> (2005) on the travels of non-traditional spiritual “seekers” in Melbourne, Australia; Matthew Wood<sup>99</sup> (2009) on the dynamics of social class in small groups that were adapting occult practices in the East Midlands of England; and Peter Mulholland<sup>100</sup> (2011) on the psychological benefits of New Age beliefs in the post-boom economy reality of Ireland.

The micro-level studies that have been spawned during this second wave of research have left a number of rich New Age studies that reveal how New Age has reacted with the dominant culture in various countries, particularly in Scandinavia, North America and Australia, but also in Asian countries such as Taiwan and Japan. This research will undoubtedly grow as scholars outside of Religious Studies look at New Age practices. For example, Andrew Ross<sup>101</sup> (1991) examined New Age healthcare in cultural studies in North America by considering the more informal new age science. Guy Redden<sup>102</sup> (2002, 2011) in Australia looked at spiritual empowerment New Age created

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<sup>97</sup> Judith MacPherson is an independent researcher; she has lectured on healing, women and power at the University of Stirling, UK and has held a position as an Associate Lecturer at The Open University, UK.

<sup>98</sup> Adam Possamai is a sociologist and novelist born in Belgium and living in Australia. He is Professor in Sociology and the Director of Research in the School of Social Sciences and Psychology at Western Sydney University, New South Wales, Australia.

<sup>99</sup> Matthew R. Wood is Associate Professor at the University of Sheffield, England.

<sup>100</sup> Peter Mulholland (Independent Scholar) holds a PhD in anthropology from NUIM and specialises in the study of Irish religiosity.

<sup>101</sup> Andrew Ross is Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis at New York University, and a social activist and analyst.

<sup>102</sup> Guy Redden is Senior Lecturer in Gender and Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney. His research revolves around the intersections of culture and economy. He has published on a wide range of topics including alternative markets, the mediation of work and consumption and cultural property.

in everyday life and Ruth Barcan<sup>103</sup> (2011) studied why complementary healing practices were on the increase in today's technology driven culture.

The second wave of research into New Age does suggest that there is a risk that the scholarship may drift away from religious theory, but this possibility has prompted a "third wave" of study that looks to describe all of the theoretical possibilities of New Age for general studies of religion. Firstly, there is an opportunity to look at New Age from a macro level as it relates to specific theories of religion, such as analyzing New Age practices in the context of unorthodox folk religions often found in Christian churches. Secondly, it is worth taking a closer look at the relationship between the New Age and the spiritual discourses that are found in various disciplines and spaces: theological, healthcare, well-being, leisure, psychotherapy, and social work. Spirituality has become almost synonymous with wellbeing, a contemporary expression for stress reduction, but very little is understood empirically about this transformation. Thirdly, a closer examination is needed of the apparent appeal of New Age spirituality to an almost exclusively white middle class cohort, with little affinity with working and labourer classes. Kimberley Lau<sup>104</sup> (2000), Jeremy Carrette<sup>105</sup> and Richard King<sup>106</sup> (2005) all raise

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<sup>103</sup> Ruth Barcan is Associate Professor at the Department of Gender and Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney, Australia.

<sup>104</sup> Kimberley J. Lau is Associate Professor at the Department of English Literature and Women's Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz, USA. Her research interests are Feminist Theory and Gender Studies; Embodiment, Affect, and Identity; Fairy tales, Folklore, and Fantasy; Virtual Worlds; Popular Culture; Discourse Analysis and Ethnographic Methods.

<sup>105</sup> Jeremy Carrette is Professor of Philosophy, Religion and Culture at the University of Kent, the UK's European University. His research interest is in the area of religion, globalization and international institutions, with particular focus on the United Nations; he also works across aspects of psychoanalysis and philosophy of religion.

<sup>106</sup> Richard King is Professor of Buddhist and Asian Studies at the University of Kent, the UK's European University. His research explores interdisciplinary issues in the intersection between religious studies, philosophy, postcolonial studies, the comparative study of mysticism and spirituality and the study of Asia.

relevant issues about the effect of neo-liberal economics on culture, but unfortunately do not arrive at consensus as to their effects, as Paul Heelas (2008) among others has demonstrated.

It is also unfortunate that in spite of rigorous scholarship in the three waves of studies, New Age spirituality has usually been viewed as an unimportant phenomenon in the overall study of religion. There are likely many reasons for this, but Tomoko Masuzawa<sup>107</sup> (2005) in *The Invention of World Religions, or How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* and Timothy Fitzgerald<sup>108</sup> (2007) in his work, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories* posited that one reason might be that the world religions archetype, dominated by Christianity, is a powerful force in the study of religion. Thus as Wood (2007) argues in his article, *Possession, Power, and the New Age: Ambiguities of Authority in Neoliberal Societies* the model for a religion positions it as an institution that has a long history and a clearly defined authority, a paradigm that New Age spirituality does not fit into easily, because of its lack of central authority, its secular approach to spirituality and its democratic organizational structures, in other words, New Age generally is a “de-institutionalized religion.” Peter Beyer<sup>109</sup> in *Religions in Global Society* understands this problem of contemporary religious definition, and clearly points out how new age spiritualities are ill-served by the world religions model (Beyer, 2006). Many modern religions, including those that are institutionalized are complex structures, as

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<sup>107</sup> Tomoko Masuzawa is Professor of History and Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan, USA.

<sup>108</sup> Timothy Fitzgerald is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Stirling, Scotland.

<sup>109</sup> Peter Beyer is Professor in the Department of Classics and Religious Studies at the University of Ottawa, Canada. His fields of interest are in Sociology of Religion, Religion and Globalization, Religion in Contemporary Canada and Religion and Immigration.

Hugh Urban<sup>110</sup> notes in reference to the Church of Scientology; it is “an extremely complex multi-faceted transnational organization” (Urban, 2011: 131).

This conflict can also be seen in the relationship between the religious and the secular in which religion is usually perceived as the opposite of secular and absolute, and in some way more authentic simply because it is free from other influences. The New Age is in fact completely opposite to this “purity of religion” idea because it is a blend of practices that relate not only to spirituality but also to health, wellbeing, mindfulness and relaxation and this amalgamation of the religious and the secular does not fit with the historical forms of religious scholarship.

The inherent problems with this historical construct has long been recognized by scholars who have argued for a more fluid approach to religious studies since religion undergoes the same stresses and influences as culture: globalization, pluralization, late capitalism and mediatization that can be clearly seen in New Age spirituality. Courtney Bender argues: “the secularization and restriction of religion into the sphere of the religious – a central narrative in the history of sociology – suggests that any religious activity, action, or purpose that is located outside of the religious institutional fields is the work of individuals rather than produced within the discourse, practices or structures of nonreligious fields” (Bender, 2012: 45). She continues: “rethinking the ways that religious (or what we have herein been calling the spiritual) is not only *lived* but *produced* within nonreligious sectors may suggest numerous settings that actively contribute to the complicated stories of...religious history” (ibid: 53). Bender’s work

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<sup>110</sup> Hugh Urban is a Professor in the Department of Religious Studies and Comparative Studies at Ohio State University, USA.

focuses on the United States but Dick Houtman<sup>111</sup> claims that “this sociological orthodoxy is not much more than an institutional intellectual misconstruction” and recommends “a radical sociologization of research into New Age and spirituality” to “document how precisely spirituality is socially constructed, transmitted and reinforced” (Houtman, 2011: 53). By contrast, Meredith B. McGuire<sup>112</sup> in her book *Lived Religion. Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* uses the term “lived religion” to describe religion that does not fit the model of an institutionalized one, but rather one that its practitioners follow, as in New Age spirituality. Viewed from this broader perspective, New Age deserves to be called a “lived religion” in the modern context, reflecting insights into different religious practices within a secular world.

It is interesting to observe that scholars continue to use the term “New Age.” Towards the end of the 1980s the term “New Age” was already becoming less common, and in 2000 Melton presented a conference paper<sup>113</sup> in which he suggested that since he was not aware of anyone using the term “New Age” to describe his or her religious practices, the “New Age” had died.<sup>114</sup> By 2001, Hammer also concluded that the term had been dropped because of pejorative associations, but noted that it had not been replaced by other terminology from which he suggested that any sense of collectivity was

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<sup>111</sup> Dick Houtman is Senior Full Professor at the Department of Sociology of Culture and Religion at the University of Leuven, Belgium. His study focuses on how culture and meaning have since the 1960s escaped their former institutional entrapments, entailing critiques of the latter as obstructing and concealing that which really matters.

<sup>112</sup> Meredith B. McGuire is Professor of Sociology and Anthropology at Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas, now retired. She is the former president of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and the Association for the Sociology of Religion. She is also a specialist in environmental sociology and in sociology of health and illness.

<sup>113</sup> J. Gordon Melton presented his paper, “New Age Transformed” at the conference on “New Age in the Old World” held at the Institut Oecumenique de Bossey, Celigny, Switzerland, July 17-21, 2000.

<sup>114</sup> “New Age in the Old World” – an international conference held at the Institut Oecumenique de Bossey, Celigny, Switzerland in 1994.

being lost. However others had differing views; Daren Kemp<sup>115</sup> declared in 2003 that “New Age is very much alive,” and Hammer himself stated, “the New Age Movement may be on the wane, but the wider New Age religiosity... shows no sign of disappearing.” Sara MacKian<sup>116</sup> suggested that the New Age Movement had been superseded by a “New Age sentiment,” a broader and less rigidly defined conceptualization that had become popular in Western culture, influenced no doubt by such high profile followers as Nancy Reagan, who consulted an Astrologer; Princess Diana who visited spiritualists and the Norwegian Princess Martha Louise who began a school to communicate with angels. This stage of the development of New Age was increasingly secular and business-like, frequently marketed under the guise of self-help publications generally referred to as improving “Mind, Body, Spirit.” Urban argued in 2015 that New Age spirituality was in fact growing in the United States, stating that “[a]ccording to many recent surveys of religious affiliation, the ‘spiritual but not religious’ category is one of the fastest growing trends in American culture, so the New Age attitude of spiritual individualism and eclecticism may well be an increasingly visible one in the decades to come.”

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<sup>115</sup> Daren Kemp is editor of the Journal of Alternative Spiritualities and New Age Studies ([www.ASANAS.org.uk](http://www.ASANAS.org.uk)) with Marion Bowman (Open University). He is the editor of Handbook of New Age with James R Lewis, and author of New Age: A Guide and The Christaquarians. Dr Kemp lectures widely, including recently at the London School of Economics and Edinburgh University, and by invitation in Tokyo and Hungary. His academic interests focus on alternative spiritual movements, anomalous experiences, and their interaction with mainstream society, especially law and business.

<sup>116</sup> Sara MacKian is a Senior Lecturer in Health and Well-being at The Open University, UK with a research interest in how people cope with the complex life challenges thrown their way. She completed her PhD with the University of Aberystwyth in 1995 where she explored people's experiences of living with the long-term condition M.E.

George D. Chryssides<sup>117</sup> noted that while the term “New Age” may no longer have currency, the New Age by whatever name it is known is “still alive and active” in the twenty-first century. The values the movement encompassed have even found their way into mainstream politics. For example Mark Ivor Satin’s<sup>118</sup> book *Radical Middle* (2004) which was directed to the liberal faction in the United States, and York (2005), identified “key New Age spokespeople” such as William Bloom,<sup>119</sup> Satish Kumar<sup>120</sup> and Starhawk<sup>121</sup> who were making linkages between spirituality and environmental issues; Stephen Dinan, a former instructor at the Esalen Institute published *Sacred America, Sacred World* in 2016 that led to an interview with *Psychology Today*<sup>122</sup> which had called the book a “manifesto for our country’s evolution that is both political and deeply spiritual.” Another example of New Age entering mainstream politics was New Age author Marianne Williamson running for a seat in the United States House of Representatives in 2013, claiming that her form of spirituality was what American

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<sup>117</sup> George D. Chryssides has taught at several British universities, a head of religious studies at the University of Wolverhampton in 2001. He is currently honorary research fellow in contemporary religion at York St. John University and the University of Birmingham, UK.

<sup>118</sup> Mark Ivor Satin is an American political theorist, author, and newsletter publisher. He is best known for contributing to the development and dissemination of three political perspectives – neopacifism in the 1960s, New Age politics in the 1970s and 1980s, and radical centrism in the 1990s and 2000s.

<sup>119</sup> William Bloom is a British educator and author in the field of holistic development. He is a modern Western mystic and considered by many to be Britain’s leading and most experienced mind-body-spirit teacher.

<sup>120</sup> Satish Kumar is an Indian activist and editor. He has been a Jain monk, nuclear disarmament advocate, pacifist, and is the current editor of *Resurgence & Ecologist* magazine.

<sup>121</sup> Starhawk is an American writer, teacher and activist. She is known as a theorist of feminist Neo-paganism and ecofeminism. She is a columnist for *Beliefnet.com* and for “On Faith,” the *Newsweek/Washington Post* online forum on religion.

<sup>122</sup> *Psychology Today* is a magazine published every two months in the United States. Founded in 1967 by Nicolas Charney (PhD), its intent is to make psychology literature more accessible to the general public. The magazine focuses on behaviour and covers a range of topics including psychology, neuroscience, relationships, sexuality, parenting, health (including from the perspective of alternative medicine), work, and the psychological aspects of current affairs.

politics needed, “America has swerved from its ethical center.” She did not succeed in her attempt but did garner 13% of the vote.

Some academicians, notably Sarah Pike,<sup>123</sup> have drawn connections between the New Age Movement and Paganism or Neo-Paganism; the two movements have sometimes been confused or conflated, especially when it came to criticism from a Christian perspective. Pike claims there is “significant overlap” between the two (Pike, 2006) while Aidan A. Kelly<sup>124</sup> believes that Paganism “parallels the New Age Movement in some ways, differs sharply from it in others, and overlaps it in some minor ways” (Kelly, 2008), and other scholars recognize them as distinct phenomena that have some elements in common. Hanegraaff, for example, suggested that many contemporary Pagan practices were not part of the New Age, however, other forms of Paganism could be identified as New Age (Hanegraaff, 2001). Christopher Hugh Partridge<sup>125</sup> (2006), on the other hand, in his work *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture*, suggests that Paganism and New Age are separate versions of the culture of the occult that overlap occasionally.

Differences between the two have been noted: New Age is forward looking, seeking self-improvement and awareness, unlike Paganism, that looks to the past for guidance. On another level, New Age recognizes that all religions have value and are basically looking for the same outcomes whereas Paganism sees enormous differences

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<sup>123</sup> Sarah Pike is a Professor of Comparative Religion at California State University, USA. Her training is in religion in America and her research and teaching blend ethnographic and historical methods and materials with an ongoing interest in media and popular culture.

<sup>124</sup> Aidan A. Kelly is an American academic, poet and influential figure in the Neo-Pagan religion of Wicca.

<sup>125</sup> Christopher Hugh Partridge is an author, editor, professor at Lancaster University, and founding Co-director of the Centre for the Study of Religion and Popular Culture.

between monotheistic religions and polytheistic and animist theologies. New Age tends to a more optimistic spirituality but Paganism recognizes both life and death including the darker side of the natural world. Both movements have found fault with each other leading to criticism from both (Pike, 2006).

### 2.3 Literature Review of Digital Religion.

The development of computer technologies and the internet as a new medium has had, and continues to have, a profound impact on religious activity and this has provided new challenges to scholars of religion. This is especially pertinent in the context of New Age, which is intrinsically complex and diverse; the intrusion of technology serves to add more layers of complexity, which scholars must acknowledge and deal with. In his definition of Digital Religion, Gregory Price Grieve<sup>126</sup> describes three characteristics that define it. The first and most evident is that Digital Religion exists only because of the media on which it lives. Digital Media, no longer new, and rapidly replacing such analog media carriers as print and film, has taken over in the fields of communication, entertainment, commerce and manufacturing because it is faster, easier, cheaper and more reliable than its analog forebears and for religion it offers three distinct differences compared to analog religion: interactivity, instant connections via the internet and its means of dissemination (Grieve, 2014). Interaction can mean simply posing a question and receiving an answer in real time or as esoteric as conducting online “*puja*,”<sup>127</sup> or Hindu ceremonial worship, such as “*arti*” in which light from lamps is offered to deities ([www.rudraksha-ratna.com/shivapuja.htm](http://www.rudraksha-ratna.com/shivapuja.htm)). Instant connection is provided through hyperlinks to other websites, such as the *Hypertext Bible* that uses hyperlinks to link users to other locations in the text or even other versions of the Bible ([---

<sup>126</sup> Gregory Price Grieve is Associate Professor of Religious Studies and the Director of Network for Interdisciplinary and Collaborative Scholarship at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, USA.](http://www.public-</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)

<sup>127</sup> Puja or Pooja is a prayer ritual performed by Hindus of devotional worship to one or more deities, or to host and honour a guest, or one to spiritually celebrate an event. It may honour or celebrate the presence of special guest, or their memories after they die.

[domain-content.com/books/bible](http://domain-content.com/books/bible)). Dissemination simply refers to how commonplace digital media have become in modern society, such as the iPhone application that allows Muslims to determine the exact time at which to perform *adhan* (Muslim prayer) and in which direction to face, no matter where the user is located in the world ([www.iphoneislam.com](http://www.iphoneislam.com)).

Digital technology has so imprinted itself on society that it is indelibly linked with the economics, culture and politics of the world, and is seen as a positive and revolutionary development that will solve every problem through innovation and inventiveness, as envisioned by Esther Dyson, author of *Cyberspace and the American Dream: A Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age*, “Digital media will lead to the creation of a new civilization, founded on eternal truths of the American Idea” (Dyson, 1994: 34). It is in this almost messianic worldview of an “ideology of technology” that Digital Religion finds itself and the same forces through which technology drives the rest of society influence it, and it is no longer just a “New Media” for communicating, but a new vision. Brenda Basher<sup>128</sup> writes somewhat dramatically in *Give Me That Online Religion*: “much as a printing press sparked a radical transformation of society and culture in the sixteenth century, the computer and computer-mediated communication are electronically bulldozing the symbolic terrain of religion around the world” (Basher, 2004: 27-8). However, it is inevitable that the technology will cause ever-greater change in all religious activities, not only New Age, than heretofore experienced.

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<sup>128</sup> Brenda Basher is Assistant Professor of Religion at Mount Union College in Alliance, Ohio. She is also a co-chair of the Steering Committee of the New Religious Movement Group of the American Academy of Religion.

Grieve adds a third point to his argument, linked to the first two, and that is the pace at which technological development moves has resulted in what the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman<sup>129</sup> calls “liquid modernity.”<sup>130</sup> The speed of technology in this period of late capitalism and the resultant frequent change in the way that modern life is lived, leaves people in a state of uncertainty, constantly forced to change, adapt at an ever faster speed and Bauman argues that today we have moved from a “solid, hardware-focused era” to one he describes as “liquid modernity,” in which profound and constant change does not allow society time to comfortably situate itself (Bauman, 2000). Thus liquid modern life prevents the formation of rules and norms to cope with the new *modus vivendi*, partially because they will be outdated as soon as they are described and partly because people are busy learning to cope in a culture that is dominated by temporariness – precarious jobs instead of a long-term career, round the clock workplaces – create a world that is constantly shifting in which individuals must plan and move fast just to keep up.

It is within this environment, then, where traditional religious communities and institutions are disappearing, that people must seek out or invent new, more flexible forms of religious engagement. By their very nature these solutions are temporary and short lived and Grieve applies the computer programming term “workaround” to them -- a term that recognizes the temporary nature of the solution and implies that a more permanent answer will need to be found in the future. For example, meditation groups that can be accessed online can be seen as workarounds for a liquid modern life (Grieve and Heston, 2001). The meditation provides an opportunity for community religious

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<sup>129</sup> Zygmunt Bauman (1925 – 2017) was a Polish sociologist and philosopher.

<sup>130</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity, 2000.

practice and relief from the stress of modern life, but it does not eradicate the situation that caused the stress to begin with: there is little time or opportunity to meet in person and the loss of traditional religious institutions that is a fact of life in the period of late capitalism. In this way, Grieve argues, it could be claimed that Digital Religion has become a piecemeal means to tackle the anxieties and stresses created by a liquid modern life by embracing the technological ideology that contributed to the existence of those conditions in the first place (ibid.).

In the fast-paced world of digital technology and the corresponding speed of development in Digital Religion, it is to be expected that there have been several waves of research into Digital Religion beginning in the mid 1990s. The initial wave was devoted to exploring the potential effects of the technology on society. Depending on your point of view the internet was either going to liberate the world to finally define the “global village” or create an apocalyptic dystopia that would isolate people and destroy society. This wave was more visionary than factual, based on researchers’ own experiences and chance encounters with online religious practice, and was to a certain extent as much an exploration of the internet’s possibilities as it was of Digital Religion. As Stephen O’Leary<sup>131</sup> writes: “[The first wave was] to establish the credibility of the thesis that our conceptions of spirituality and the community are undergoing profound and permanent transformation in the era of computer-mediated-communication” (O’Leary, 1996: 782).

Sources from this wave can be loosely divided into popular literature and key academic articles. The three critical popular works are: Basher’s *Give Me That Online*

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<sup>131</sup> Stephen O’Leary is Associate Professor at Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California, USA.

*Religion*, which ascribes the same importance and transformative influence to the internet as to the invention of the printing press (Brasher, 2001); Margaret Wertheim's<sup>132</sup> *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*, in which she suggests that the internet is a repository for spiritual yearning (Wertheim, 1999); and Jeff Zaleski's *The Soul of Cyberspace: How New Technology is Changing Our Spiritual Lives*, in which the author examines online ritual and the role of the internet in the growth of humanity's interest in the spiritual (Zaleski, 1997). The most important scholarly articles appear in O'Leary's *Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communication Religion on Computer Networks*, which argues for a "transformation of religious beliefs and practices" (O'Leary, 1996: 783). O'Leary saw the internet as a transformative and liberating influence whereas Jay Kinney's *Net Worth? Religion, Cyberspace and The Future* predicted quite the opposite, that the internet sounded the death knell for users' inner spiritual life (Kinney, 1995).

The second wave of research can be identified as beginning in 2002 by which time the internet and World Wide Web (WWW) had become ingrained in the North American way of life and had become routine. Now the scholarship turned to a more analytical approach in identifying online communities and their structures; the internet had become familiar and commonplace but the impact on religion was unknown, so this wave was less about visioning the future of Digital Religion and more about discovery and definition of online religious experience. This wave began with Stewart M. Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark's<sup>133</sup> book, *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media*.

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<sup>132</sup> Margaret Wertheim is internationally noted science writer and commentator, originally from Australia, now she lives in Los Angeles. She has written extensively about science and society for magazines, television and radio.

<sup>133</sup> Lynn Schofield Clark is a media critic and scholar whose research focuses on media studies and film studies. She is Professor and Chair of the Department of Media, Film, and Journalism Studies at the University of Denver.

*Explorations in Media, Religion, and Culture* (Hoover and Clark, 2002); and included longitudinal studies by Campbell (Campbell, 2005). Dawson explored how people experienced religion online in his book, *Religion Online. Finding Faith on the Internet* (Dawson, 2004) and Morten T. Højsgaard<sup>134</sup> with Margit Warburg<sup>135</sup> in *Religion and Cyberspace* looked at online and offline connections (Højsgaard, 2005). Glenn Young<sup>136</sup> examined online practice in his article, *Reading and Praying Online: The Continuity of Religion Online and Online Religion in Internet Christianity* (Young, 2004), and Eileen Barker<sup>137</sup> in *New Religious Movements. Religions and Beliefs in Britain* reviewed how technology was actually being utilized (Barker, 2005). This wave questioned the earlier arguments regarding the apparent incongruity between online and offline religious practice.

Gary R. Bunt<sup>138</sup> questioned whether new online religious practice actually offers anything new or whether it merely reflects offline religious practice (Bunt 2004). In other words, does online religion just provide information about religion, supplementing the offline experience or does it offer an online religious practice experience that is uniquely different from the offline variety? Helland added to this argument by defining and distinguishing “online religion” (where religion is practiced online) and “religion online” (where religious information is provided but there is no interactivity) (Helland, 2000).

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<sup>134</sup> Morten T. Højsgaard is internet editor at *Kristeligt Dagblad (Christian Daily)* and external lecturer at the Department of History and Religions at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark.

<sup>135</sup> Margit Warburg is a Sociologist of Religion and Professor at the Department of History of Religions at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark.

<sup>136</sup> Glenn Young is Associate Professor at the Department of Religious Studies and English at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, USA.

<sup>137</sup> Eileen Vartan Barker is a Professor in Sociology, an emeritus member of the London School of Economics, UK, as well as a consultant at the Centre for the Study of Human Rights.

<sup>138</sup> Gary R. Bunt is a Professor in the Department of Theology, Religious Studies and Islamic Studies at the University of Wales, Lampeter, UK.

Between 2000 and 2005, several edited volumes and monographs were written examining the place of religion and the internet. Following the “second wave” is Jeffrey K. Hadden<sup>139</sup> (1937 – 2003) and Douglas Cowan’s *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises* (Hadden and Cowan, 2000), a first systematic study, and a second early work is Elena Larsen’s<sup>140</sup> *CyberFaith: How Americans Pursue Religion Online*. This is a report by the Pew Internet and American Life Project that set a baseline for many of the studies that followed. A summary of this report (Larsen, 2004) was published in the second wave’s first entirely academic work, Lorne Dawson and Douglas Cowan’s<sup>141</sup> *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet* (Dawson and Cowan, 2004). This volume introduces new scholars in the field of Digital Religion, and republishes earlier works such as O’Leary’s *Cyberspace as Sacred Space* and Charles Prebish’s work on *The Cybersangha: Buddhism on the Internet*. The last book is Morten Hojsgaard and Margit Warburg’s *Religion and Cyberspace*, which was developed from the 2001 International Conference on *Religion and Computer Mediated Communication*, held at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark (Højsgaard and Warburg, 2005). This important work looks at the critical questions raised in the second wave of scholarship, concerning religious authority, online religious identity and community, and the relationships between online and offline environments.

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<sup>139</sup> Jeffrey K. Hadden (1937 – 2003) was an American Professor of Sociology. He began his teaching career at Western Reserve University and then at the University of Virginia.

<sup>140</sup> Elena Larsen spent three years as a Research Fellow with the Pew Internet and American Life Project. She researched and published several reports on the intersection of the internet with religion and government in the lives of Americans.

<sup>141</sup> Douglas Edward Cowan is a Canadian academic in religious studies and the sociology of religion and currently holds a teaching position at Renison College, University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada.

During this same period, four important monographs were published that look at how the digital world had become routine. First, Gary Bunt's<sup>142</sup> *Islam in the Digital Age: E-Jihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environments* reviewed how the internet was used in the Arab world, specifically the emergence of "e-jihad," and the influence and authority of online "fatwas" (Bunt, 2003). Second, Heidi Campbell's<sup>143</sup> *Exploring Religious Community Online: We Are One in the Network* was the result of her research into how Christians have adopted digital media (Campbell, 2005). In addition to writing about these Christian groups, she developed a theory of how digital media help to develop online identities and communities. A third work is Cowan's *Cyberhenge: Modern Pagans on the Internet* that did not view the future possibilities of the internet for online practice positively (Cowan, 2005). The final monograph was Paolo Apolito's<sup>144</sup> *The Internet and the Madonna: Religious Visionary Experience on the Web*, which analyzed visions of the Virgin Mary on the internet (Apolito, 2005). He looked at how many users perceived the internet to be place of "transcendence and mystery," but concluded that the new media merely imitates the actual world and does not offer anything strikingly new; findings that are similar to many of the scholars of this second wave.

In 2005, Højsgaard and Warburg wrote, "the third wave of research on religion and cyberspace may be just around the corner" (Højsgaard and Warburg, 2005: 9). In predicting this third wave of scholarship in 2005, O'Leary argued that the future of the

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<sup>142</sup> Gary Bunt is Professor in Islamic Studies at the University of Wales, Trinity Saint David, Ireland.

<sup>143</sup> Heidi A. Campbell is an associate professor at the Department of Communication and an Affiliate Faculty in the Religious Studies Interdisciplinary Program at Texas A&M University.

<sup>144</sup> Paolo Apolito is a Professor at the Department of cultural Anthropology at the University of Salerno and at the University of Rome, Italy.

internet would be “catholic,” by which he meant that the online experience would include iconography, images, music and sound, if not taste and smell as well, and would not be limited to text (O’Leary, 2005). The third wave differed from the earlier waves because of the advent of Web 2.0, which signaled easier use through the development of interactive Social Media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and user content generated sites such as YouTube and Second Life.<sup>145</sup>

In the third wave of research on Digital Religion, scholars continued to explore questions of identity and community, but also looked closely at such questions as authority, user-generated content and convergence. It can be said that Campbell and Lövheim’s edited journal special issue on *Religion and the Internet: Considering the Online-Offline Connection* (2011), began this wave of study. This was complemented by an edited volume by Pauline Hope Cheong,<sup>146</sup> Peter Fisher-Nielsen,<sup>147</sup> Stefan Gelfgren<sup>148</sup> and Charles Ess,<sup>149</sup> titled *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture, Perspectives, Practices and Futures* (2012). The first published monograph was Gary R. Bunt’s *iMuslims: Rewriting the House of Islam*, which analyzed social networking sites to show

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<sup>145</sup> *Second Life* is an online virtual world, developed and owned by the San Francisco-based firm Linden Lab and launched on June 23, 2003.

<sup>146</sup> Pauline Hope Cheong is Associate Professor at the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication, Arizona State University. She has published widely on the social implications of communication technologies, including religious authority and community, and is the lead editor of *New Media and Intercultural Communication*.

<sup>147</sup> Peter Fischer-Nielsen (PhD, Aarhus University, Denmark) is Head of Communications at the Danish IT Company KirkeWeb. He has published articles on new media in relation to religion, Christianity and church, especially in the Nordic context and has been an editorial staff member at the influential website [www.religion.dk](http://www.religion.dk).

<sup>148</sup> Stefan Gelfgren is Associate Professor at HUMlab & Department of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies, Umeå University, Sweden. He has published mainly on the relation between social and religious changes from the sixteenth century until today.

<sup>149</sup> Charles Ess is Professor in the Information and Media Studies Department, Aarhus University, Denmark. He has published extensively in the areas of computer-mediated communication, Internet research ethics and information ethics with an emphasis on cross-cultural perspectives throughout.

how they had influenced Islam outside traditional authority. Bunt also explored how the internet influenced Islamic activism and radicalization, including jihad-oriented campaigns by al-Qaeda (Bunt, 2009). Campbell's *When Religion Meets New Media* looked at how different religious communities engaged with Digital Religion. She found that different groups had developed different strategies for dealing with the internet, depending on their religious-social histories, rather than simply welcoming or rejecting Digital Religion (Campbell, 2010). This work examined how practices in online and offline religion became integrated, so that Digital Religion became a way to explore how religion was transformed, and continues to be transformed and expressed in digital culture, and from this insight a significant part of this project will be drawn.

## 2.4 New Age and the Internet. Cyber Space as Sacred Space.

For the purposes of this study, “cyberspace” is defined as a particular electronic space associated with computer networks: it is technically a geographically unlimited, non-physical space that is independent of time, distance, and location in which transactions between people, between computers, and between people and computers take place. The internet does have limitations based on ability to access, availability of service and hardware (cables, servers and computers) (Hamelink, 2003: 10), although these limitations are diminishing as free internet access and smart phone proliferation grow. Certain web pages, such as the home page for a religious organization, could be considered sacred cyberspace, but the critical aspect of sacred cyberspace is the non-physical - and therefore potentially spiritual - properties of cyberspace. In *Cybergrace*, Jennifer Cobb<sup>150</sup> argues that the world of the spiritual and the world of cyberspace are deeply connected (Cobb, 1998: 24). This comment however reflects its early date, since today with the advent of incredible speed and social networks, the internet itself is merely a medium. Any characteristics regarding spirituality it can be argued stem from the users, not from the medium itself. According to Chip Morningstar<sup>151</sup> and F. Randal Farmer,<sup>152</sup> cyberspace is defined more by the interactions that take place within it than how it works. In their view, the internet is just another medium through which people communicate and whose primary distinguishing feature is the ability to provide a space

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<sup>150</sup> Jennifer Cobb has worked for 15 years as a high-technology consultant in the areas of public relations and marketing. She holds a B.A. from Amherst College and UC Berkeley and an MA in theological ethics from Union Theological Seminary.

<sup>151</sup> Chip Morningstar is an author, developer, programmer and designer of software systems, mainly for online entertainment and communication. He graduated from University of Michigan in 1981 with a Bachelor of Science in Computer Engineering.

<sup>152</sup> F. Randall Farmer is an American game developer, co-creator with Chip Morningstar of one of the first graphical online games, 1985's *Habitat*.

where multiple actors can interact and influence one another as they seek knowledge, relationships and richer experiences in this virtual world. For Dawson, the computer extends our spiritual experiences in profound ways (Dawson, 2005: 54).

New Age (the largest group among NRMs) thinkers have tended to pay more attention to time than space, a fact reflected in the name of the movement itself. However, the movement in many respects is connected to physical space as recognized by Melton:

[New Age] possesses a strong sense of a sacred geography that identifies certain spaces as more sacred than others. Those spaces include long-lost mythical continents, sites held as sacred to various world religions, and places that New Agers have recognized as special because of their believed levels of energy or association with the history of the New Age Movement itself (Melton, 1992: 16).

The word “cyberspace” is derived from the Greek word κυβερ (*kyber*), “to navigate,” so it literally means navigable space, and today generally refers simply to the connected world of computing; some people think of it as just the way that communication via computer networks takes place. This meaning increased in popularity in the 1990s as the internet and digital communications grew exponentially and the term became a catch-all for the many new ideas and concepts that were taking place. It has been called the biggest unregulated man-made space ever. The umbrella term under which cyberspace falls is “cybernetics” from the Greek κυβερνητική (*kybernētikē*) meaning steersman or pilot or rudder, and the term was first used by Norbert Wiener<sup>153</sup> to describe his work in electronic communications and control.

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<sup>153</sup> Norbert Wiener (1894 – 1964) was an American mathematician and philosopher. He was a professor of mathematics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The term “cyberspace” first appeared in the William Gibson’s<sup>154</sup> works of science fiction in the 1980s; first in his short story *Burning Chrome* in 1982 and later in his 1984 novel *Neuromancer*. The section from *Neuromancer* that is usually quoted in this context is the following:

Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding.

Cyberspace is where people can interact, share information or ideas, offer support, conduct business and have discourse on any topic, and occasionally these people have been called “cyberonauts.” There have also been references to the term “cyberethics” that supposedly provide a code of ethics for users to follow, but it has become far less certain today that the right to privacy, regarded as the most critical code in “cyberethics,” is being followed as rigorously as it could as evidenced by the recent legal actions against Facebook and Google<sup>155</sup> with the regard to sharing user data (e.g. Cambridge Analytica<sup>156</sup>).

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<sup>154</sup> William Ford Gibson is an American-Canadian speculative fiction writer and essayist widely credited with pioneering the science fiction subgenre known as cyberpunk.

<sup>155</sup> Google LLC is an American multinational technology company that specializes in Internet-related services and products. The company was founded in 1998 by Larry Page and Sergey Brin while they were Ph.D. students at Stanford University in California.

<sup>156</sup> Cambridge Analytica Ltd was a British political consulting firm, which combined data mining, data brokerage, and data analysis with strategic communication during the electoral processes. It started in 2013 and the company closed operations in 2018, although related firms still exist.

Don Slater<sup>157</sup> defines “cyberspace” as the “sense of a social setting that exists purely within a space of representation and communication ... it exists entirely within a computer space, distributed across increasingly complex and fluid networks.” Within academic circles, the term “cyberspace” became a synonym for the internet, and later the WWW during the 1990s. Author Bruce Sterling,<sup>158</sup> who popularized this meaning, credits John Perry Barlow<sup>159</sup> as the first to use it to refer to “the present-day nexus of computer and telecommunications networks.” Barlow describes it in his essay that announces the formation of the Electronic Frontier Foundation in 1990:

In this silent world, all conversation is typed. To enter it, one forsakes both body and place and becomes a thing of words alone. You can see what your neighbours are saying (or recently said), but not what either they or their physical surroundings look like. Town meetings are continuous and discussions rage on everything from sexual kinks to depreciation schedules.

Clearly, this essay is out of date now; I think it is safe to say that the language of the internet today is largely visual, not text-based. Advents such as Instagram, Facebook and YouTube all rely on user-developed visual content for their success. In the social space, the written word has been relegated to a supporting role.

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<sup>157</sup> Don Slater is an associate Professor in the department of sociology at the London School of Economics and Political Science; his work focuses on material culture and technologies in everyday life.

<sup>158</sup> Michael Bruce Sterling is an American science fiction author known for his novels and work on the *Mirrorshades* anthology. This work helped to define the cyberpunk genre, in fact he is one of the founders of the cyberpunk movement in science fiction, along with William Gibson, Rudy Rucker, John Shirley, Lewis Shiner and Pat Cadigan.

<sup>159</sup> John Perry Barlow (1947 – 2018) was an American poet and essayist, a cattle rancher, and a cyberlibertarian political activist who had been associated with both the Democratic and Republican parties.

While the term “cyberspace” is not a synonym for the internet, the term has been used frequently to describe things that only exist within this communication network, so that, for example, a website can be said, metaphorically, to “exist in cyberspace.” Or in other words, events are not occurring in the places where those participating or the servers they are using are physically located, but in cyberspace. Paul-Michel Foucault<sup>160</sup> used the term “heterotopias” to describe these spaces that are both physical and cerebral simultaneously. Cyberspace also refers to the flow of digital data across networked computers, which effectively is not “real” because the data cannot be located physically, yet the resulting effects of that data flow can be very real. But cyberspace is also the location of computer-mediated communication (CMC) where relationships and avatar-based relationships occur, which then raises questions of authenticity and the social pathology of internet use; what is real or virtual, what is the difference between “online” and “offline” versioning? With the advent and subsequent growth of social media, cyberspace is both a means of communication and a destination, and continues to contribute significantly to the social landscape and to irrevocably reshape society and culture.

As a result, New Age groups have gone beyond the physical to worship in a virtual space – the internet. Even though some members may well reject the internet because, for them, it is “unnatural” and does not provide a real-life experience, most agree that from the New Age perspective, the freedom of expression and exposure to many different points of view and practices is beneficial: exposure to these different

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<sup>160</sup> Paul-Michel Foucault (1926 – 1984) was a French philosopher, historian of ideas, social theorist, and literary critic. Foucault's theories primarily address the relationship between power and knowledge, and how they are used as a form of social control through societal institutions.

worldviews allows individuals to experience and to grow in new ways. Free of dogma, New Agers believe the individual's soul is capable of making the right judgment on new insights found in cyberspace; thus, they are seeking new experiences, new ideas that bring them closer towards the realization of full selfhood, for example, whereas New Agers would likely argue the followers of traditional religions are seeking reinforcement of their beliefs and connection to others who hold the same beliefs. The very interconnectedness of the internet even leads some followers of New Age into thinking of it as a sacred medium; they have such a strong affinity with digital technology that they experience cyberspace as even "more real" than the offline world. In other words, we can say we have moved from the Judeo-Christian concept of "vertical sacredness" to an NRM vision of "horizontal sacredness."

A critical debate that has continued for many years about NRMs generally, and the New Age Movement in particular, is whether a truly authentic online religious community can ever be constructed, and if it can, how would this community differ from its offline version? Although churches, temples, mosques, synagogues and covens all utilize the web to create sites that contain information about their physical places and to promote themselves, very few have chosen to create an online version to replace offline activity. For example, online pagan groups such as "Jaguar Moon Cybercoven" ([www.jaguarmoon.org](http://www.jaguarmoon.org)) may make an attempt to meet its members' needs online, but the physical Wiccan coven continues to function successfully. In spite of this example, the debate that has preoccupied scholars of the digital world is whether an authentic online community is even possible. In the beginning,<sup>161</sup> some scholars such as Joseph Lockard<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Joseph Lockard is Associate Professor at Arizona State University, affiliated with African and African American Studies and Jewish studies.

rejected the possibility, arguing that rather than encountering a new internet reality, the concept of a virtual community was “a new governing myth” (Lockard, 229) of the internet. Mark Slouka<sup>162</sup> (1995) and Clifford Stoll<sup>163</sup> (1999) agreed with Lockard, and suggested that computer-mediated interaction “assaults” and “undermines” authentic community.

In recent years however, some scholars have argued that in order to fully understand what is meant by community, internet based communities must be included in the analysis otherwise it will be incomplete (Cowan and Hadden, 2004). As Dawson argues, whatever form it takes or purports to take, “it is simply assumed too often that ‘community’ is present, without really specifying why or how.” Dawson asks: “how would we know that what we witness online is community? What criteria would we use to assess it? Do we accept that something is a community simply because those involved say that it is? Or, if we deny that some online group is a community, then what is it” (Dawson, 2004)? Responding to his own questions, and incorporating the work of several other scholars, Dawson proposed six identifiers of an online community that reflect a similar offline version:

1. Interactivity
2. Stability of membership
3. Stability of identity
4. ‘Netizenship’ and social control
5. Personal concern
6. Occurrence in a public space (79).

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<sup>162</sup> Mark Slouka is an American novelist and essayist.

<sup>163</sup> Clifford Paul Stoll is an American astronomer, author and teacher.

While in theory the final identifier could present the most problems, as, for example, with many contemporary pagan covens insisting on secrecy, generally, these identifiers offer a useful framework for analyzing the digital versions of New Age groups.

By contrast, Cowan (2007) theorizes that there are four categories that can be used to interpret the relationship of NRMs to the internet. These frameworks progress through a deepening examination of NRMs as responses to the “social conditions of modernity.” The first perspective links NRMs to “protests against modernity;” the second looks at NRMs as “forums for modern social experimentation;” the third viewpoint identifies NRMs with “the re-enchantment of the world;” and the fourth interprets NRMs as manifestations of the “dialectic of trust and risk” in late modernity. However, part of the experience of religion, and, if Emil Durkheim (1858 – 1917)<sup>164</sup> is correct, a foundational part of the experience of the sacred, is the sense of community.

Comprehensive research now suggests that fears that the internet would encourage antisocial behaviours were wrong. Rather, the internet is used most often to expand people’s social interactions and involvements. People use the internet as an extension of their social lives, not, usually, as a substitute or alternative. These findings then should benefit religion, including the New Age, but it must be remembered that the broader aspect of social life is now a social network (Network Society<sup>165</sup>) rather than physical

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<sup>164</sup> David Émile Durkheim (1858 – 1917) was a French sociologist. He formally established the academic discipline and—with Karl Marx and Max Weber—is commonly cited as the principal architect of modern social science.

<sup>165</sup> Network Society is the expression coined in 1991 related to the social, political, economical and cultural changes caused by the spread of networked, digital information and communication technologies. The intellectual origins of the idea can be traced back to the work of early social theorists such as George Simmel who analyzed the effect of modernization and industrial capitalism on complex patterns of affiliation, organization, production and experience.

community as is traditionally understood. The concept of a social network has implications for religious practice and the way religious organizations are structured and operate. As a significant support structure for today's networked society, the internet can play an important role in the adaptation of religion to the new social reality.

Anthony Giddens<sup>166</sup> argues that religion is “coming adrift from its conventional social moorings” (2004: 67), just as the way we used to develop our identities is also changing, due in large part to the shift away from a personal universe that was local and shaped by available influences. Increasingly, religious identity is constructed in an environment that is global in outlook. The internet offers one of the few forums for the construction of identity by means of the interpretation of highly personal yet global concerns, issues, and resources, although the interactions that ensue may not look like a stable community if religion continues to be identified with the congregational form of its expression over the last few centuries in the West. Giddens believes that congregations are modeled on the outdated romantic notion of life in the small towns of the past. But a “church” a terrestrial sacred space adapted to a networked society will look very different from its former expression, and the internet no doubt will play a significant role (84). Throughout human history and in most parts of the world, Giddens continues, religious praxis has not been about an exclusive membership in a specific institution such as a church, but rather religion is less constrained, and merges with many of the activities associated with other social institutions, and the internet may help recapture that possibility in the late-modern societies of the Western world, which in order to verify, means examining instances of religious or spiritual life in cyberspace (85-87).

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<sup>166</sup> Anthony Giddens is a British sociologist who is known for his theory of structuration and his holistic view of modern societies.

Four features of cyber-communication help to explain the readiness with which religious organizations have adopted the internet. First, as the internet is not confined by time and space, internet-based spirituality and religion suddenly have access to potential converts on a global scale, thus allowing traditional religious communities and NRMs alike to reach out to potential converts. In other words, the market for religion has become “de-territorialized”<sup>167</sup> and globalized. Second, the democratic nature of the internet and the ease with which websites can be created facilitates the creation of new faith communities, thereby increasing supply and choice in what was previously an oligopolistic market, which changes the nature and level of competitiveness in the religious marketplace. Third, the ubiquity of the internet in North America allows it to reach those individuals who may find it difficult to participate in traditional communal worship. People who want religious products or services but who have been excluded by traditional faith groups or who have chosen to exclude themselves from these religious communities can now access religious material remotely and, importantly, anonymously. Last, the Internet is convenient and enables people to easily access religious information, materials, and specific materials related to their own and others’ beliefs. The Pew Internet and American Life Project, a study conducted in 2001 in the United States by the Pew Research Center suggested that fully twenty five percent of all adult internet users had gone online in search of spiritual and religious material. This figure surpassed the number of cyber-users who had gambled, traded stocks, or participated in auctions online.

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<sup>167</sup> Deterritorialization is a concept created by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*. The term “deterritorialization” first occurs in French psychoanalytic theory to refer, broadly, to the fluid, dissipated and schizophrenic nature of human subjectivity in contemporary capitalist cultures (Deleuze & Guattari, 1972). Its most common use, however, has been in relation to the process of cultural globalization.

It is also important to recognize that sacred cyberspace, like its earthly counterparts, is used to recruit and convert individuals to become disciples for warring causes or bizarre cults. Dawson looks at the case of Heaven's Gate, a NRM that recruited its members via the Internet, and in 1997 incited 39 of them to commit mass suicide (Dawson, 2005). A more recent example is that of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which has successfully used the Internet to proselytize and recruit with deadly results. But looking at sacred space in another way, reflecting on the different mode of worship in the Temple versus the Synagogue, physical space has become less relevant today where the sacredness is borne by the message. After all, a message can be delivered equally well, and in some respects can be delivered more effectively via the internet, which has no physical boundaries and no temporal limitations. Thus Mircea Eliade's (1907 – 1986)<sup>168</sup> comments on the revelation of sacred space cease to be relevant to NRMs. Similarly, physical pilgrimage is unnecessary when arguably a similar experience can be derived from a virtual one. Developed by IRALTA FILMS S.L. in 2016, for instance, the application "Camino de Santiago 360°" epitomizes this phenomenon. The company says: "Through this app you can be a Pilgrim and discover the cultural, historical and human richness that Camino de Santiago offers. The 360° experience will allow you to choose your own journey, what to see, how and when from a unique point of view."<sup>169</sup>

Our understanding of online religion has become less well defined and this has led to a new term entering the scholarly lexicon to describe what is now the reality of

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<sup>168</sup> Mircea Eliade (1907 – 1986) was a Romanian historian of religion, fiction writer, philosopher, and professor at the University of Chicago, USA.

<sup>169</sup> The trailer for the application - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SeUWrR1j2ZU>

internet religion – the intersection of offline and online religion – or “Digital Religion.”

Heidi A. Campbell in her collection of case studies titled *Digital Religion Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* describes Digital Religion as:

Religion that is constituted in new ways through digital media and cultures... this recognizes that the reformulation of existing religious practices have both online and offline implications. It also means digital culture negotiates our understandings of religious practice in ways that can lead to new experiences, authenticity and spiritual reflexivity (Campbell, 2013: 9).

This revised definition has greater utility than previous definitions in that it recognizes the reality of current religious practice that co-exists simultaneously in an online and an offline world. The enormous advances in digital technology have drawn religious or spiritual movements along with it. Campbell expands her definition:

We can think of Digital Religion as a bridge that connects and extends online religious practices and spaces into offline religious contexts, and vice versa. This merging of new and established notions of religious practice means Digital Religion is imprinted by both the traits of online culture (such as interactivity, convergence, and audience-generated content) and traditional religion (such as patterns of belief and ritual tied to historically grounded communities) (ibid., 2013: 12).

In her book, Campbell references the work of other scholars such as Stewart M.

Hoover<sup>170</sup> and Nabil Echchaiba (2012)<sup>171</sup> to explain how the study of online religion has

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<sup>170</sup> Stewart M. Hoover is a professor of Media Studies and Religious Studies at the University of Colorado Boulder, USA and director of the Center for Media, Religion and Culture.

<sup>171</sup> Nabil Echchaibi is Assistant Professor of Mass Communication, University of Colorado Boulder, USA.

moved beyond simply the “digitalization” of religion, to looking at how digital technology has forced religious groups to “adapt to altering notions of religious tradition, authority, or authenticity to consider at a deeper level the actual contribution that ‘the digital’ is making to ‘the religious’” (ibid.).

In an article in Campbell’s book, Grieve argues that “Digital Religion represents a distinct cultural sphere of religious practice that is unique but not dichotomous with other forms of religion.” This interpretation of Digital Religion permits an examination beyond previous studies that simply viewed religion online as a development that was occurring because of the existence and growth of a new and pervasive media, to look at how religious practice online is an important, new and unique expression of religious practice. Digital Religion draws attention to a different way of viewing religion online and offline that is shaped by a society that has become influenced by technology and whose culture has been irrevocably altered by it.

As Campbell sees it, the study of Digital Religion has moved through three distinct phases, or as she calls them, “waves,” to arrive at the current definition of Digital Religion; much of this progression can be seen in the development of all new technologies or other cultural changes as understanding and analysis of the technology or culture grows. The first wave focused on the technology itself and debated whether the internet would mean the end or the salvation of the world, depending of course on whether one perceived it as a threat or a benefit. This wave has been referred to as “descriptive.” The second wave of research considered religion online from a more realistic viewpoint that recognized that the technology itself was not solely responsible for new types of religious expression but was driven by those people who saw the

opportunities that the internet provided for renewed vitality in religion. This wave is referred to as “categorical.” The third wave of study, according to Campbell, reflected a more academic approach in order to identify methodologies for analyzing data and to seek findings in support of theories. Now online ritual, community, and identity were studied in greater depth to discover how the internet, which had become firmly established in everyday life, was changing the practice of religion online as well as religion offline and this final wave is known as “theoretical.” Undoubtedly as scholarship of Digital Religion increases and the body of work on the subject grows, further waves will be identified and categorized, but for now, the term Digital Religion can be applied critically to my study of the three New Age groups in Canada.

## **2.5 Conclusion.**

In the Literature Review for New Age Movements, I remarked on the three phases or waves of academic research that have been identified by various scholars, each wave contributing to New Age scholarship, although, as Sutcliffe claims, no original questions have been asked about the New Age since Lewis and Melton's seminal work twenty six year ago. In similar fashion, three waves of research have also been noted on the subject of Digital Religion. The first wave was visionary rather than factual and explored the possibilities of the technology in relation to online religion, predicting that it would be either a liberating force on society or a marking of the apocalypse, depending on one's point of view. The second wave, which occurred after the development of the WWW, when the technology had become commonplace, took a more analytical approach in identifying online communities and their structures and defining online religion. In the third wave of study, scholars began to explore the questions of online identity and community, looking closely at topics such as authority and user generated content and convergence. The final section dealt with ideas of authenticity and community and how these differ in the real world compared to the virtual world. Most religious groups take advantage of the medium to communicate with their congregants and a few small religious groups can be found that practice their religion online, but the original promise of the medium has yet to be fully realized.

## **Chapter Three: Toronto's Universal Oneness Spiritual Center.**

### **3.1 Introduction.**

In this chapter I will be introducing the Toronto based New Age Group, Universal Oneness United Faith Canada Spiritual Center, a small and relatively new group, which I will review in relation to the global phenomenon of New Age, the group's connection to the local community, and to the specific community of its members, viewed in the context of Toronto's multi-cultural environment. I will use the Scott and Smart seven-dimensional model to analyze UOUFC's structure, governance and narrative as well as its doctrine, rituals, material culture and approach to ethics.

Beginning with the founders, David and Alex Gellman, this chapter will look at the history and development of the group, its online and offline presence in light of the phenomenon of Digital Religion and its use of digital technologies. This study was informed by a detailed analysis of the center and the founders' websites as well as semi-structured interviews with the founders and a member of the group.

UOUFC is not affiliated with any larger organization and is therefore autonomous with no parent organization into which it must report, nor any prescribed philosophy to which it must adhere, instead charting its own spiritual path. This group is deliberately in marked contrast to the groups in Calgary and Vancouver, which are closely linked to their large parent organizations in the United States, and this chapter will analyze the difference in scale as it modifies the practice and nature of UOUFC, covering areas such as the founders' ability to change the nature or practices of the group as desired and the connection between the founders' private practices and the group.

### **3.2 Universal Oneness United Faith Canada Spiritual Center.**

Before we look at the Universal Oneness United Faith of Canada, it is important to understand the ethnic and religious context in Toronto, from historical and contemporary perspectives, in order to understand what forces helped develop the group. In a country shaped by colonialism and immigration, imported cultures have clearly defined both the demographic and religious landscape. In 2016 Toronto had an estimated population of just over 2.8 million,<sup>172</sup> making it the fourth most populated city in North America.

Located on the northern shore of Lake Ontario, it is the biggest Canadian city and is often referred to as the financial heart of the country; and it is the capital of the Province of Ontario. The greater census metropolitan area (CMA) has a much larger population of 5.5 million, the largest urban and metropolitan area in Canada, and has a population density of 4,149.5 people per square kilometer (10,750/sq. mi.).

According to the 2011 Census, the racial composition of Toronto was:

- White 50%
- East Indian 12%
- Chinese 11%
- South Asian 12%
- Black 8%
- Southeast Asian 7%

The most common ancestry groups were:

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<sup>172</sup> <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dppd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=CSD&Code1=3520005&Geo2=PR&Code2=35&Data=Count&SearchText=Toronto&SearchType=Begin&SearchPR=01&B1=All&GeoLevel=PR&GeoCode=3520005&TABID=1>

- English 13%
- Chinese 12%
- Canadian 11%
- Irish 10%
- Scottish 9%
- East Indian 8%
- Italian 7%
- Filipino 5%
- German 5%
- French 4%
- Polish 4%.

Other common groups include Portuguese, Jamaican, Jewish, Ukrainian and Russian.

Foreign-born residents make up almost half of the population giving the city the second-highest percentage of foreign-born residents in the world, behind Miami, Florida. However Toronto's broad mix of ethnicities means it has no visible dominant culture or nationality, which also makes it one of the world's most diverse cities. Forty-nine percent of the population belong to a visible minority (versus 14% in 1981) and based on the Toronto CMA population in 2017 visible minorities represent 63% of the total (ibid.).

The Toronto area has a long history of colonization; first by the indigenous Iroquois, who had taken over territory previously occupied by the Wyandot people centuries earlier and then by 1701, by the Mississauga who colonized the area, displacing the Iroquois. Subsequently the area was settled by the French, who built Fort Rouille in 1750, only to abandon it nine years later. After the American Revolutionary War (April

19, 1775 – September 3, 1783), many British refugees settled in the area, and negotiated the Toronto Purchase in 1787; one thousand square kilometers of land that became the town of York in 1793, the capital of what was known as Upper Canada.

In 1834, York was eventually incorporated as the City of Toronto; adopting its original Iroquois name “tkaronto” (place where trees stand in the water). At the time, the population was just 9,000 and included many slaves who had fled from the United States. The migration of African American slaves occurred throughout much of the nineteenth century and was greatly aided by the “Underground Railroad,” a network of secret routes by which escaped slaves from the Southern states were able to reach free states in the north or Canada. The railroad operated from the early to mid nineteenth century, reaching its peak after 1850 with the enactment of the compromise of 1850 in the United States that forced officials in free states to assist slave catchers in their pursuit of escaped slaves. Slaves fleeing from the United States continued to arrive in Canada until the abolition of slavery in the United States in 1865, by which time it is estimated that 30,000 African Americans had made the journey to Ontario, settling primarily in the Southwest region of the province.

The first significant European population growth occurred as a result of the Great Irish Famine, such that by 1851, the Irish were the largest ethnic group in Toronto. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, immigration to Toronto continued to grow bringing Italians, French, Germans, and Jews, and later Poles, Russians, Chinese and others to the area. Immigration continues in the twenty first century, bringing people from South and East Asia as well as South America to enrich the

diversity of races and cultures.<sup>173</sup> From 2011 to 2016, population growth in the Toronto metropolitan area has surpassed the Canadian average, and over the next twenty years, Toronto is expected to continue its growth to beyond 3 million in 2026, and reaching nearly 3.2 million in 2036 (ibid.).

When we examine the religious panorama of Toronto, the most dominant religion is Christianity, an expected outcome given the city's roots in Western European immigration, and it now accounts for 54% of the city's population; 28% Catholic, followed by Protestant at 12%, Christian Orthodox 4% and other Christian denominations 10%. Other common religions include Islam 8%, Hinduism 6%, Judaism 4%, and Buddhism 3%. Almost a quarter of the city's population has no religious affiliation. A study conducted by Pew Research Center (June 2013) *Canada's Changing Religious Landscape* revealed that the growth of the religiously unaffiliated is due in large part to generational replacement, the gradual displacement of older generations with newer ones. Recent generations of Canadians are significantly less affiliated to a religion than earlier

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<sup>173</sup> The annual number of landed immigrants in Canada has fluctuated considerably over the last 150 years. Some of these fluctuations can be linked to immigration policy changes, others to Canada's economic situation or world events connected with the movement of migrants and refugees. For example, in the late 1800s, the number of immigrants admitted annually to Canada varied between 6,300 and 133,000. Record numbers of immigrants were admitted in the early 1900s when Canada was promoting the settlement of Western Canada. The highest number ever recorded was in 1913, when more than 400,000 immigrants arrived in the country. However, the number of people entering the country dropped dramatically during World War I, to fewer than 34,000 landed immigrants in 1915. The lowest numbers of landed immigrants were recorded during the Great Depression in the 1930s and during World War II. The return of peace fostered economic recovery and an immigration boom in Canada. Other record levels of immigration have been registered during political and humanitarian crises, including in 1956 and 1957, when 37,500 Hungarian refugees arrived in the country, and in the 1970s and 1980s, when a large number of Ugandan, Chilean, Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian refugees came to Canada. Since the early 1990s, the number of landed immigrants has remained relatively high, with an average of approximately 235,000 new immigrants per year.

<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-630-x/11-630-x2016006-eng.htm>

ones; for example, 29% of Canadians born between 1967 and 1986 have no religious affiliation as of 2011, which is 17% higher than those born in 1946 or earlier and nine percentage points higher than Canadians born between 1947 and 1966. Younger Canadians born after 1987 have similar rates of disaffiliation to the previous generation of Canadians - 29% unaffiliated, as of 2011.

The rise of the “nones” has cut across all demographic groups including both women and men and people with different levels of education, college graduates as well as those with less formal education. Similarly, individuals with no religious affiliation are found both in immigrants and non-immigrants alike and across all age groups. However, there are some significant differences in rates of disaffiliation within each of these categories. For example, Canadian men are more likely to be unaffiliated than their female counterparts and 27% of unmarried Canadians have no religious affiliation, compared with 19% of married Canadians. College-educated Canadians are somewhat less likely to have a religious affiliation than Canadians without a college degree.

Religious non-affiliation among immigrants has increased over time, according to the study. Only 7% of foreign-born adults in Canada had no religious affiliation in 1971 but by 2011, 20% of this group was unaffiliated. Much of this change may be attributed to increased immigration from East Asia, especially China, which has the world’s largest population of religiously unaffiliated people and represents a significant group in Toronto’s ethnic mosaic, and is the second largest ethnic group in Toronto.

It is within this context of ambivalence towards institutional religion that the Universal Oneness United Faith of Canada (UOUFC) arose. The group’s narrative is anchored in the organization’s commitment to being an interfaith body that is

“connecting people to the light within” ([www.uoufc.org](http://www.uoufc.org)). Although its founders vehemently deny that it is part of the New Age Movement, which should have led to its rejection from my research, I discovered through my interviews with the founders and members, as well as a review of the organization’s website and published materials, that while it may not call itself New Age, many of UOUFC’s beliefs or service offerings fit within a broad definition of New Age and many of the practices are New Age. The phrase “connecting people to the light within” is itself a New Age aspiration, to enable people to experience the light, or God, or goodness that is within everyone and learn to manipulate it in order to achieve self-awareness and happiness.

(Illus. 3. David Gellman, Co-Founder of UOUFC)



David Gellman (see illus. 3) is the founder and a director of the Universal Oneness United Faith Canada. He is a Master Practitioner in Neuro-Linguistics who provides spiritual and emotional counseling and therapy. For many years he has been a teacher of *Kabbalah*<sup>174</sup> and other spiritual disciplines. In addition to being a trained hypnotherapist, he has spent much of the past few years studying the Cree and Cherokee Indian shamanistic practices of soul recovery journeys.<sup>175</sup> As a Registered Behavioural and Executive Coach, author, lecturer and corporate public speaker, he has been working to bring spirituality

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<sup>174</sup> *Kabbalah* (Hebrew: קַבְּלָה) is an esoteric method, discipline, and school of thought of Judaism. The definition of *Kabbalah* varies according to the tradition and aims of those following it, from its religious origin as an integral part of Judaism, to its later adaptations in Western esotericism (Christian *Kabbalah* and Hermetic Qabalah).

<sup>175</sup> The following are some scholars who specialize in practices of soul recovery journey: Galina Lindquist, Kevin C. Krycka, Nancy Vuckovic, Jennifer Schneider, Louise A. Williams, Michelle Ramirez.

back to the work place, and as he said in our interview he has been interested in spirituality since he was child: "... I was ten years old when I was reading Tibetan stuff... I was fortunate enough not to grow up in any specific faith, instead I opened myself to all" (Gellman, 2013). From an early age, David was deeply interested in alternative viewpoints with metaphysical ideas that differed from his own Canadian Judeo-Christian background, encouraged no doubt by the ideas from the counter-culture that was flourishing during his youth. This exposure to eclectic spiritual ideas during his formative years informed the beliefs that helped him shape UOUFC.

Alexandra Gellman (see illus. 4), David's wife and co-founder of UOUFC has a PhD in Natural Medicine and she is a certified registered behavioural coach. Her stress age quiz, measuring how stress and life style choices affect the body's aging, was featured in the Wall Street Journal in October 2004 (Dooren, 2004). Having developed a homeopathic practice,<sup>176</sup> Alexandra conveys practical and inspiring techniques for managers and employees to embrace a healthier life in order to improve productivity. She is often seen as a guest expert on reality shows like "Style by Jury," "SOS Wedding Show" and "Save us from Our House," and has been a frequent contributor to Toronto's

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<sup>176</sup> Homeopathy, or homeopathic medicine, is a medical philosophy and practice based on the idea that the body has the ability to heal itself. Homeopathy was founded in the late 1700s in Germany and has been widely practiced throughout Europe. Homeopathic medicine views symptoms of illness as normal responses of the body as it attempts to regain health. Homeopathy is based on the idea that "like cures like." That is, if a substance causes a symptom in a healthy person, giving the person a very small amount of the same substance may cure the illness. In theory, a homeopathic dose enhances the body's normal healing and self-regulatory processes. A homeopathic health practitioner (homeopath) uses pills or liquid mixtures (solutions) containing only a little of an active ingredient (usually a plant or mineral) for treatment of disease. These are known as highly diluted or "potentiated" substances. <https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/health-topics/aa104729spec>

City TV breakfast television. Originally from Mexico, Alexandra is on contract with a human resources company in South America offering them workshops on leadership, conflict resolution and team building. She has published several books and various wellness articles. Her last book is *Passageways to your Soul*, addressing topics like “why we get sick” and “how to get well.” She is working on the book entitled, *The Seven Keys to Great Leadership Using Emotional Eye Types*.<sup>177</sup>

(Illus. 4. Alex Gellman, Co-Founder of UOUFC)



The founders’ backgrounds are similar in that they are broadly based in psychotherapeutics that they employ both in the UOUFC and their own business practices. At the time of the founding of UOUFC in the 1990s, Paul Heelas was already remarking on the linkages between the New Age Movement and business and the narrative of the group is inextricable linked to the beliefs and practices of its founders.

David Gellman explained how UOUFC came into being:

Even though Universal Oneness United Faith Canada as an organization was founded officially in 1996 it started much earlier, in an old house, in Burlington, Ontario. 20-30 people from different religious groups, who were not happy with their religious identity and were not getting a “proper spiritual life,” would get together to talk and share spirituality (see illus. 5).

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<sup>177</sup> [www.alexgellman.com](http://www.alexgellman.com)

(Illus. 5. Universal Oneness United Faith Canada, Burlington, Ontario)



When asked why he started the organization, David explained that he felt traditional religions were failing their followers, but that the foundational beliefs were sound.

I would always encourage participants to find the light within their tradition, because I feel that traditional religions do have it; it is us humans who ruined the tradition. Religion came from man, Spirit from God; man took it, fucked it up and turned it into religion and attached the dogma. As soon as man is involved then ‘ego’ is involved too and it is not pure anymore. That’s why, because of those boundaries and barriers, you are not accepted in your own tradition. However, you know as I know, that you are accepted in God’s eye.

Here David is referring to the importance of God’s Kingdom versus the Human Kingdom. God’s Kingdom is fixed and never changes whereas the Human Kingdom is constructed and therefore subject to change. The goal that David expressed, to take the members back to the pure origins of faith, is supported by the mission statement found on

UOUFC's website:

We provide a spirit of openness and resources for change to encourage individuals and groups to worship in new ways; and participate in meaningful ceremonies of life; to affirm the beauty, value and significance of interfaith spirituality as a concept that supports the underlying goodness of each person; to declare the basic truth behind all faiths, as there is only one spiritual source, with a myriad of tributaries. Christianity, Judaism, Astrology, Shamanism, Buddhism, Tarot and many more all seek to explain the same 'Truth.' A return to 'Old Age' spirituality; we take the tributaries back to their original source, incorporating all spiritual beliefs and systems through interpreting them at their most common roots. We have worked hard to become a truly multi-denominational oasis in a spiritual sea of confusion. We honour and uphold interfaith spirituality as a bridge that allows members of all religions and spiritual teachings to reach out across the water of life, to understand and communicate with each other. As a means of uniting two or more spiritual paths in the context of a purposeful, and sacred union; as a path that speaks to those who are searching for spiritual and religious alternatives.

From this commentary, the belief system behind David and UOUFC is clearly monistic,<sup>178</sup> as evidenced in the words "one spiritual source," regardless of the religious tradition, which is not only at the core of UOUFC's beliefs but also an underlying tenet of New Age spirituality.

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<sup>178</sup> Monism attributes oneness or singleness (Greek: *μόνος*) to a concept e.g., existence. Various kinds of monism can be distinguished: Priority monism states that all existing things go back to a source that is distinct from them; e.g., in Neo-Platonism everything is derived from The One.

From the doctrinal perspective however, David makes the point that UOUFC is not New Age but is, in fact, returning to “Old Age.” However, as we have seen in Chapter One, referencing “Old Age” in this manner, drawing on ancient beliefs and rituals, is a global mark of New Age Movements. It is also worth noting David and Alex Gellman’s fascination with indigenous North American shamanism. Benjamin Zeller also remarked in his essay that Native American shamanism was beginning to play a greater role in the New Age Movement because it recognizes that “god-ness” is in every living thing, and it celebrates that “god-ness” (Zeller, 84). David Gellman says: “... the closest [spiritual experience] to us is the Native Americans, because they understand what spirit is, spirit is not a building, spirit is everything that is part of creation... for Native Americans, even though there are many spirits, they still acknowledge one creator spirit, the Great Spirit.” This monistic perspective echoes directly the mission statement and David’s comments earlier. Of course, UOUFC embraces the spirituality inherent in all religions, not just the indigenous North American ones, including the monotheistic religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Shintoism, Sikhism and Zoroastrian traditions. Evidence for this universal approach to spirituality can be found throughout the practices that UOUFC follows, including ritual, principally in the prayers from many faiths that the Gellmans have blended into their services and included on the website. According to David, they welcome the inclusion of any prayer from any faith into their services, and the interfaith prayer on the website (see illus. 6) is a prime example. (Moreover, note that the illustration is bilingual in consideration of Canada’s official languages and at the same time reinforcing the country’s inherent inclusivity.)



diversity and inclusivity espoused and practised at UOUFC. It is no accident that this symbol is above all other symbols since this ideal supercedes all other religious ideals. Adorning the Tree of Life are symbols from other religions: the cross representing Christianity; the half moon and star of Islam; the *Om* symbol for Hinduism; the star of David representing Judaism; the spoked wheel representing Astrology and the *yin yang* ideogram of Taoism. At the bottom of the masthead is the shibboleth “Connecting People to the Light Within,” which summarizes the New Age belief that the source of our salvation lies within us, not in the hands of an external god.

The doctrine of universality is the thread that weaves its way through all aspects of UOUFC, reinforcing the concept of “One God. Many Paths.” David finds common approaches to spirituality among different religious traditions through an ethical dimension rather than through theological arguments. On a larger scale, this is exemplified by the failure of ecumenism to unite different Christian denominations based on theology but has succeeded on the basis of social issues, for example, the World Council of Churches<sup>180</sup> has encouraged and sponsored churches to support social justice

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concept forms the basis of Serer cosmogony. Trees were the first things created on Earth by the supreme being Roog (or Koox among the Cangin). In the competing versions of the Serer creation myth, the *Somb* (*Prosopis africana*) and the *Saas* tree (*acacia albida*) are both viewed as trees of life. However, the prevailing view is that, the *Somb* was the first tree on Earth and the progenitor of plant life. Freidel, David A.; Linda Schele; Joy Parker. *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path*. William Morrow & Co., 1993.

<sup>180</sup> World Council of Churches (WCC), ecumenical organization founded in 1948 in Amsterdam as “a fellowship of Churches which accept Jesus Christ our Lord as God and Saviour.” The WCC is not a church, nor does it issue orders or directions to the churches. It works for the unity and renewal of the Christian denominations and offers them a forum in which they may work together in the spirit of tolerance and mutual understanding. The WCC originated out of the ecumenical movement, which, after World War I, resulted in two organizations. The Life and Work Movement concentrated on the practical activities of the churches, and the Faith and Order Movement focused on the beliefs and organization of the churches and the problems involved in their possible reunion. Before long, the two movements began to work toward establishing a single organization. In 1937 the Faith and Order Conference at Edinburgh and the Life and Work Conference at Oxford accepted the plan to create one council. A conference of church leaders met

issues such as the program to combat racism in South Africa and Sudan, the reunification of Korea and defense of human rights in Latin America.

David also referred to the Age of Aquarius and the new beginning of the Mayan calendar in 2012, and here he admits that from this perspective his center is New Age. The reader will recall that the philosophy of the Aquarian Age situates the New Age Movement in its appropriate time, reflecting the change from a supposedly dark period of the Piscean Age to the positivity and creativity of the Aquarian Age. So, the doctrine of UOUFC reflects not only the personal history and beliefs of its founders but also the quintessential doctrines of the New Age Movement, combining monistic and pantheistic beliefs and presenting this philosophy in a manner that is accessible to all faiths.

Energy is frequently referred to as a force in the New Age, and David refers specifically to this experiential phenomenon in relation to ancient spiritual sites such as Stonehenge, Mount Shasta and Sedona that made them so important to ancient, native religions and he encourages his followers to visit these places and share their experiences with one another. In the first chapter I commented on many of the sacred sites that had been adopted by the New Age Movement, and how these same sites feature large in contemporary New Age culture. In the book entitled *Handbook of the New Age*, edited by

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in 1938 in Utrecht, Neth., to prepare a constitution; but World War II intervened, and the first assembly of the WCC could not be held until 1948. In 1961 the International Missionary Council united with the WCC. The WCC's members include most Protestant and Eastern Orthodox bodies but not the Roman Catholic Church. The Southern Baptists of the United States are among Protestant non-members. The controlling body of the WCC is the assembly, which meets at intervals of approximately six years at various locations throughout the world. The assembly appoints a large central committee that in turn chooses from its membership an executive committee of 26 members, which, along with specialized committees and 6 co-presidents, carries on the work between assemblies. The headquarters of the council, in Geneva, has a large staff under a general secretary. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/World-Council-of-Churches>

James Lewis and Daren Kemp,<sup>181</sup> one scholar Adrian Ivakhiv<sup>182</sup> devotes a chapter to travel to sacred sites, “Power Trips: Making Sacred Space through New Age Pilgrimage,” in which he focuses specifically on Sedona in Arizona. While he suggests that New Age travel shares much in common with the twenty-first century interest in tourism, a largely middle-class phenomenon, he avers that it differs in some key respects:

New Age pilgrimage places a high premium on openness to signs or signals, perceptions, and intuitions, and it is this quality of encounter that makes New Age pilgrimage a different form of place practice than the Cartesian relationship embodied in photography, sightseeing and other forms of commodification.

Obviously, these pilgrimages are not necessarily the sole purview of New Age practitioners; indeed much of this so-called “spiritual tourism” is undertaken by people who are merely interested in the sites’ histories and notoriety (Stonehenge and Glastonbury in England for example) and not at all interested in the spiritual or ritualistic properties of the sites. In fact, travel to sacred sites has become quite common and many websites can be found that cater to potential travellers.<sup>183</sup> Perhaps the most immersive of New Age travel experiences is a visit to the Damanhur group headquartered in Italy that receives visitors who wish to study or merely experience a community rooted in the New Age.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Daren Kemp is editor of the Journal of Alternative Spiritualities and New Age Studies ([www.ASANAS.org.uk](http://www.ASANAS.org.uk)) with Marion Bowman (Open University). He is the editor of Handbook of New Age with James R Lewis, and author of New Age: A Guide and The Christaquarians. His academic interests focus on alternative spiritual movements, anomalous experiences, and their interaction with mainstream society, especially law and business.

<sup>182</sup> Adrian Ivakhiv is a Professor of Environmental Studies at the University of Vermont. His research and teaching are focused at the intersections of ecology, culture, identity, religion, media, philosophy, and the creative arts.

<sup>183</sup> <https://newagetravel.com> <https://www.newagepilgrim.com>

<sup>184</sup> <http://www.damanhur.org/en>

The theme of connecting with existing religions, as we have seen, is fundamental to UOUFC and especially, viewed in the light of the experiential dimension. The mission statement on its website states,

We nurture our unique paths through life by teaching one another and celebrating the common roots of human spirituality. We welcome people of all faiths, and those with no faith, to participate in special events that honour the beliefs of each individual.

The welcome to everyone in a non-judgmental manner is a key feature of the New Age Movement, where the individual experience is far more important than the collective.

The mission statement continues:

We seek to share wisdom, create harmony, enhance understanding and foster love, which is the universal oneness of all life. Universal Oneness United Faith Canada is an interfaith spiritual community and our goal is to break down the barriers that have created religious intolerance by demonstrating that we all follow the same spiritual paths. While the words and names may be different, the beliefs are amazingly similar.

It can be said that all New Age practices are experiential, since the goal of these practices, such as meditation, prayer, self-help workshops and so on are intended to help participants experience change or growth in their own spiritual lives, they indulge in these practices with the full intention of experiencing personal growth or improvement. New Age spirituality is not a passive undertaking, it requires intention and action, to not only find appropriate services but to participate fully in order to achieve the desired goal of spiritual growth.

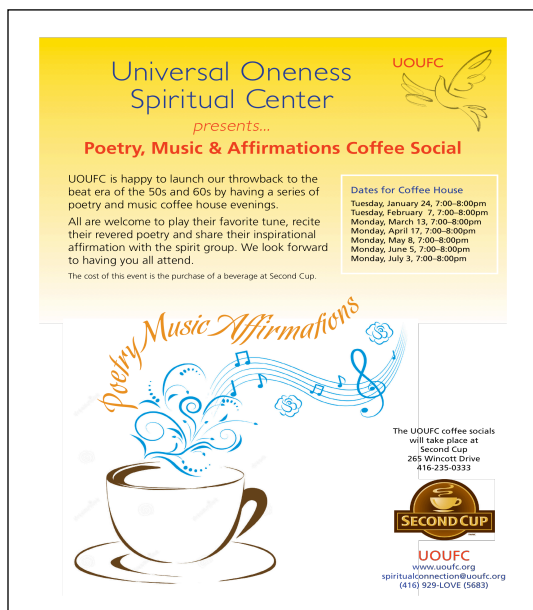
From an institutional perspective, the name of the UOUFC community itself is an intriguing choice; the word “center” instead of “church” or “organization” defines the group well symbolically, a central space that draws people from all faiths, even though the movement does not have a center nor any specific institution, it becomes a center without a center. While it could be debated that “center” conjures up many meanings, it is far more likely to be merely a reflection of a modern naming trend or fashion which can be seen throughout the marketplace – banks that our now called “banking centers” or stores that have become “shopping centers,” or even Christian churches that are called “worship centers” – rather than connoting any ideological motivation. However, the word does imply that this organization is “different” or “new” and will be unlike a traditional “bank,” “shop” or “church.”

While the physical headquarters for UOUFC is located in Burlington, services or celebrations are held in Hamilton and Toronto. However, location is not important since the group gathers in different spaces depending on the type of service being held, whether a simple workshop, a “Grief Support Group” or a lecture conducted by the leaders or guest lecturers from different religious groups or secular institutions, the meeting may take place in someone’s home or in a rented space (such as Trinity St. Paul’s on Bloor Street West, Toronto). As David Gellman said in our interview:

...Our focus is on individuals who attend our services and we are flexible with the locations. If there is a need we can get together in any place and any location, which works for the community, even more for people who cannot attend our services for any reason, we have webinars and audio-visual materials posted on YouTube.

YouTube provides the group with a digital archive of past events and allows those who wish to reprise or review the recorded materials, the opportunity to do so. It also permits viewers to reflect and study the content in greater depth, thereby entering into the realm of Digital Religion. At the same time, UOUFC’s practice of Digital Religion enables those who, for whatever reason are unable to attend a particular event to experience it after the fact. UOUFC holds meetings in coffee shops as well (see illus. 8); they advertise on their website a monthly “Poetry, Music and Affirmations” coffee social, hearkening back to the “beat era,” where members gather to listen to their favourite music, read poetry and share their inspirational affirmation with the “spirit group,” an echo of Lewis and Melton’s references to “salons,” reflecting the transformation of the New Age from a global movement to more fragmented gatherings. For UOUFC the coffee shop meetings are very practical. With no home of their own, a restaurant offers a free location that can accommodate a number of people in a relaxing and welcoming atmosphere as opposed to alternatives such as bleak church basements.

(Illus. 8. UOUFC Coffee Social)



David continues the theme of universality by seeking common ground in the rituals performed at UOUFC that have been borrowed from other religions. The UOUFC mission statement reinforces the process of supporting ritualistic synergies within different faiths.

We strive to honour the holidays of everyone. We will draw on as many available tools as possible, since all spiritual systems have cycles of time designated by specific days and energies. We provide a spirit of openness and resources for change... To encourage individuals and groups to worship in new ways; and participate in meaningful ceremonies of life.

We have already seen an example of multiple religious expressions of similar messages in the Interfaith Prayer, but it also occurs in the two festivals of Passover and Easter, for example, where David uses the word “freedom” to describe the rationale for the festivals rather than dwelling on their traditional purposes, the significance of which may be unfamiliar to the members of his congregation (Passover commemorating the emancipation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and Christianity, the freedom from the burden of sin). David finds the common denominator that everyone in UOUFC can celebrate is freedom, to be interpreted however an individual sees fit, whether it is freedom from sin or freedom from oppression, or even celebrating the symbolism of rebirth and renewal that comes with Spring. As David says:

For example, a coming holiday – Easter [Christians] or Passover [Jews] we celebrate them as a festival of freedom and not like Easter or Passover, ok? And we will do some of the key rituals involved in both – Easter and Passover celebration in the way that people who come will say – I get it now, I understand

what the Jews are doing, I understand what the Christians are doing; that's how we do it. So, it all depends on what we have scheduled, otherwise it depends on who will come.

Appropriating the festivals of other faiths follows a path that many religions have taken throughout history. Christianity for example, readily appropriated Pagan festivals such as the Winter solstice and Spring fertility rites to represent Christmas and Easter, and even incorporated Pagan symbols into the Christian ritual<sup>185</sup> such as bringing green boughs and branches into the house in midwinter and fertility symbols such as rabbits and eggs in Spring.

Other rituals performed at UOUFC cover the full spectrum of celebrations that are expected in any religious organization. Ceremonies that mark such milestones in life as weddings, divorces, and funerals are important items on the menu of ritual offerings. David Gellman points out that each ceremony is customized to the needs and wants of the participants and he devotes a lot of energy to stressing the customization of these ceremonies, both in our interview and on the website. As interfaith ministers, David and Alex provide traditional and non-traditional wedding ceremonies. David is also a rabbi, so that he can offer traditional Jewish wedding ceremonies.<sup>186</sup> He took this step because

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<sup>185</sup> Here are the leading scholars in Paganism and their major works:

Gibson, Marion, *Witchcraft Myths in American Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2007.

Hutton, Ronald, "Modern Pagan Festivals: A Study in the Nature of Tradition" in journal of *Folklore*, volume 119, 2008 – issue 3, pages 251-273.

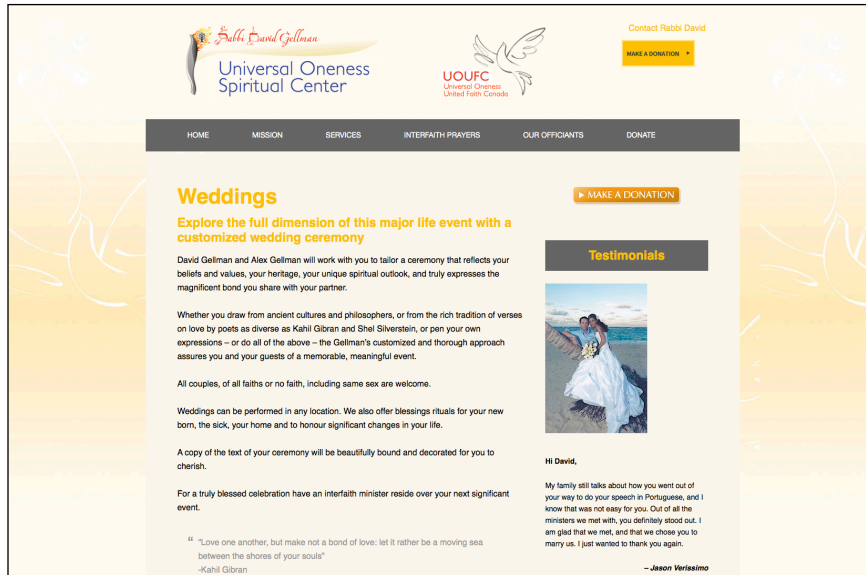
Pearson, Joanne, *Wicca and the Christian Heritage*. London: Routledge, 2007.

<sup>186</sup> Since this interview, David Gellman has become a rabbi and has a new group called "Beth Rauch," an unaffiliated, all-inclusive congregation that holds services based in Judaism. The services are egalitarian and open to everyone, and are offered online for those who are unable to attend. In order to differentiate itself from a traditional synagogue, the website sums up Beth Rauch as follows: "This is not your parents' house of worship - it is yours – where the future is now and the patterns are still being written." However it does offer traditional Shabbat dinners and High Holiday services, as well as spiritual workshops and lifecycle services.

his own background is Jewish and he is often approached to perform a wedding that, for a variety of reasons, has been refused the couple by a traditional synagogue.

In a spirit of inclusivity, UOUFC welcomes same sex wedding ceremonies, as well as weddings for traditional couples, and offers five wedding packages that range in price from \$180 to \$720 (see illus. 9). The ceremony is customized to meet the wishes of the couple and the more expensive packages include counseling and customized relationship analyses to help the couple “know each other better on a deeper spiritual plane and gain powerful and rewarding personal insights.” The most expensive package also includes shamanistic practices and rituals. In addition to weddings, UOUFC offers a ritual to commemorate divorce, in the belief that this life-changing moment needs to be recognized and the severance honoured to “vanquish and disconnect any lingering spirit essence” so that the divorcees can move on with their lives. During my interview with David, Alex Gellman pointed out that there are similar recognition rites in more traditional religions, such as *Annulment* in the Catholic Church and the *Get* in the Jewish religion. The concept of customization or personalization that is at the heart of the New Age is naturally reflected in these ceremonies that mark transitions or milestones through life. A member wants to see these important moments marked with ceremonies that incorporate both sacredness and familiarity, and for UOUFC they offer an opportunity to generate revenue for a unique event.

(Illus. 9. UOUFC Wedding Ceremonies)



Since our interview, David Gellman has expanded his customized wedding business to include “interfaith marriages serving the unaffiliated community.” Like his wife, David has embraced technology and created a new website -- [www.rabbidavidgellman.com](http://www.rabbidavidgellman.com) -- to market his interfaith wedding ceremonies, which he also promotes on [www.eventsource.ca](http://www.eventsource.ca), a curated website that provides lists of recommended wedding planners, venues and caterers, reaching beyond the UOUFC congregation to compete in the “wedding planning marketplace.” His wedding themes can be customized to suit any taste, from Star Wars to destination weddings.

Flexibility is paramount within the organization, and especially important when it comes to celebrations or rituals. It even runs to providing the means to customize services, or healing practices, or self-help programs, through what UOUFC refers to as “Rent-a-Minister.” David Gellman explains:

In the tradition of the ancients - spiritual gatherings were done in the home not in a temple, church or building. The temples were for the high priests only. The

spiritual exchange of ideas occurred at home. Meeting with the Spiritual leader in the home made for an environment of equality and exchange of ideas. In a return to simpler times and in consideration of the busy, hectic lives we lead, this concept has led to the creation of our new service – ‘Rent a Minister for an Evening.’ Gather your friends and family for an evening into whatever spiritual topic you have always wanted to learn about, and we will send you an expert in that area. The evening could include an opening prayer to honour the religious festival in that month; lighting candles to honour our higher power; prayers for the sick; or prayers for the departed. The event will be customized to your unique needs. ([www.uoufc.org](http://www.uoufc.org))

This focus on the individual, on personal needs, on customization, is the very hallmark of the New Age, and UOUFC is committed to this fundamental concept. The idea of customization can be seen throughout the New Age Movement and reflects how followers connect with the movement by selecting the topics that are of most interest to them, or by choosing workshops, healing or self-help practices that will be most helpful in their own circumstances. UOUFC even provides different subject-matter experts to further enable customization and allow followers the opportunity to find solutions in one center, as opposed to seeking help from multiple teachers in multiple locations.

The concept of “rent a minister” is far from unique to UOUFC, and in many countries has become a business enterprise for spiritual entrepreneurs. For example, [www.rentarev.com](http://www.rentarev.com) (which is located in California) allows the customer to engage the minister to conduct baptisms or baby dedications, weddings, funerals, house blessings and even marriage and family counseling. Customization in these services appears

limitless, permitting weddings to be Scottish, Celtic, Goth or even Star Trek themed, the ceremonies can be as religious as the customer wants. Discounts are offered for certain affinity groups. The primary purpose of minster rental appears to be to add a religious veneer to a wedding or baptismal ceremony for those who are not religious but feel the need at this particular time to have the ceremony blessed.

To further underline the UOUFC commitment to customization of ritual, David Gellman says:

And I tell people who come to our services – pick and choose! Take what you like! If you like what we do then participate, but if you don't, then don't make it your daily thing. Basically, you are the center of the service, whatever works for you, it is individual and we emphasize that - it is individual and organic, it is never the same.

In this sense, the UOUFC is typically post-modern in its approach. The emphasis on personal interpretation, on finding a ritual meaning that relates to one's own experience, defines post-modernism. Gellman continues: "We accept everybody, we don't turn anybody away; we accept people with all faith and no faith. They are people looking for community and spirituality, but don't necessarily want to do the whole God thing."

Universal acceptance is important not only to UOUFC but to the New Age Movement as a whole and is linked to the ability to pick and choose from a smorgasbord of spiritual offerings to find a personal solution to a personal situation.

As we have seen in the first chapter of this dissertation, an essential ingredient in the menu of offerings of any New Age organization is programs that deal with self-help, self-awareness and healing, and UOUFC readily provides these offerings, which are the

purview of Alex Gellman. As a life coach, she offers a series of workshops and lectures in her own right that deal with life skills, self-esteem, creativity and self-improvement, as well as help with health issues through her homeopathy practice of natural medicine. This holistic approach to self-improvement is typical of the New Age. As Zeller states: “New Age declares the body to be a whole that cannot be described in purely material or scientific manners. New Agers instead look to the power of the mind, bodily energy flows, and herbal supplements as methods to maintain health and recover from disease” (Zeller, 172). Alex offers a variety of courses in self-improvement and self-awareness and the most popular, according to her website, are: “High Wire Act: Keeping Your Balance in an Unbalanced World,” which builds awareness and understanding of taking a balanced approach to wellness to elevate the “satisfaction quotient” in life; “Awesome Leadership,” a presentation designed to improve leadership skills: and “The Eyes are truly Mirrors to the Self!” A presentation that deals with different personality types discovered through readings of participants’ eyes to determine their “emotional eye type” (Iridology<sup>187</sup>) and guides them towards achieving their optimal potential. These consultations, Alex maintains, will help you “gain self-knowledge, better understand your past and find direction for the future.” Once completed, Alex will then help find “methods to balance, detoxify, and embark on a holistic healing journey and may include

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<sup>187</sup> Iridology (also known as iridodiagnosis or iridiagnosis) is an alternative medicine technique whose proponents claim that patterns, colors, and other characteristics of the iris can be examined to determine information about a patient’s systemic health. Practitioners match their observations to *iris charts*, which divide the iris into zones that correspond to specific parts of the human body. Iridologists see the eyes as “windows” into the body’s state of health and they can use the charts to distinguish between healthy systems and organs in the body and those that are overactive, inflamed, or distressed. Iridologists claim this information demonstrates a patient’s susceptibility towards certain illnesses, reflects past medical problems, or predicts later health problems.

homeopathic remedies, nutritional guidance, life coaching and lifestyle recommendations.” Since our interview, Alex has expanded her wellness offerings to include a holistic weight loss program that not only provides advice on nutrition but also emotional support involving a team approach by means of free webinars on her own website.

David’s website includes a personal blog that features stories or sermons he has recorded featuring commentary on Jewish Holy Days or Torah readings, as well as videos of weddings and other celebrations. The stories are followed by a traditional folk song sung by David that he accompanies with his guitar. In one YouTube video example I followed, David begins with greetings in three languages, English, French and Hebrew, and then encourages listeners to pray to God, whom he first addresses as “He” and afterwards refers to as “She,” “It” or even “Z.” He continues by encouraging his audience to read sacred texts, because it is through these texts he claims that God speaks to us. He may suggest the listener go for a walk in the country and listen to the trees and birds, to look at the sky and ponder all the wonders of life. Then he calls on his listeners to get together as a community and to listen to each other, to share each other’s spiritual adventure, and to share each other’s compassion, kindness, and love that unites us all as a community. David then starts to sing Psalm 133<sup>188</sup> from the Torah in both Hebrew and English, accompanying himself on guitar, stopping from time to time to make comments, praying for those who need healing, renewal and love. But he also clarifies that we

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<sup>188</sup> Psalm 133 King James Version (KJV)

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!

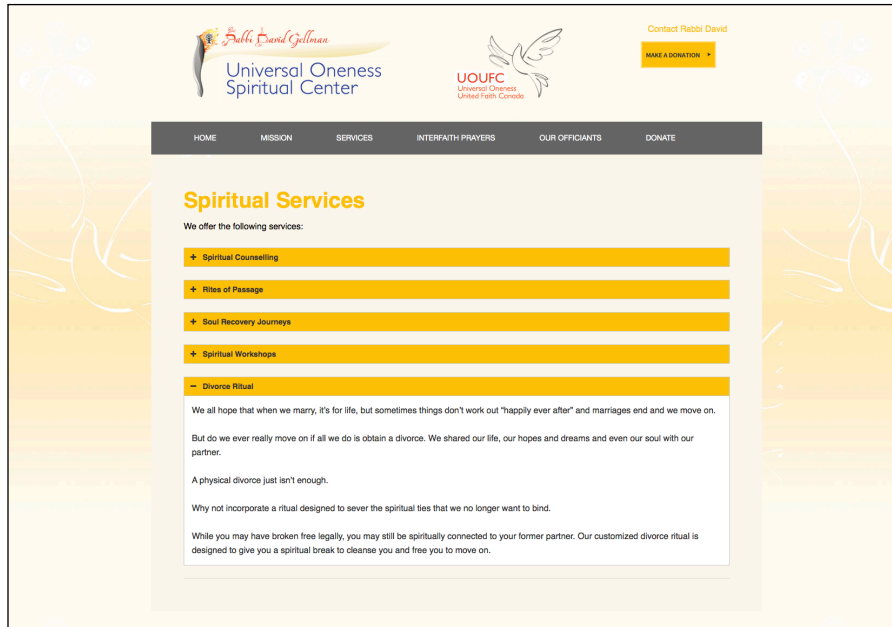
<sup>2</sup> It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron’s beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments;

<sup>3</sup> As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore.

should not limit ourselves to people alone, but should include pets in our prayers. Then he sings again in Hebrew and English, accompanied with his guitar, seemingly very spontaneous and unrehearsed, highlighting the subject of kindness, renewal and love. The video is 23 minutes long and was posted on May 18 2019. The Gellmans are evidently building their private practices quite successfully, addressing both the spiritual and physical wellbeing of their “clients,” following the well-trodden path of New Age entrepreneurial practitioners in removing the boundaries between the spiritual and the secular, and the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors.

I spoke earlier of David Gellman’s preference not to be closely associated with the New Age. However, when I take a closer look at the UOUFC website (see illus. 10), it soon becomes apparent that UOUFC devotes a lot of time to some of the more esoteric rituals of New Age. Astrology plays a large part in the life of this community, there is an online course offered in Astrology and a booklet to help prepare for the Spring Equinox, which is viewed as the more appropriate start of the year. The booklet explains the significance of each earth sign in relation to spring activities, and, by extension, personal activities. Each Astrological sign is associated with a specific deity, drawn from an eclectic mix of origins. For example, the sign of Aries is associated with “planting seeds or initiation” which, in human terms, can mean starting a new project or setting in motion the year that you want. Aries is associated with the Greek goddess Athena. The Astrological sign *Taurus* is associated with “preparing your Garden of Life,” or the “Ability to conceptualize. Potential to understand limitless. Ability to truly know the power of thoughts and words.”

(Illus. 10. UOUFC Spiritual Services)



An interfaith meditative prayer book also relates Astrological signs to the four elements (Earth, Fire, Air and Water) and details the rituals that celebrate all four elements. For example, “Winter Solstice and the Celebration of Life” took place on Sunday, December 23, 2012. Their promotion of the event was accompanied by the following message: “let’s gather to witness the turning of the Wheel of the Year on Winter Solstice, a time of darkness and light returning to the earth and to our lives.” Or “Celebrating the Autumn Equinox,” described by the following: “Join us for a post Autumn Equinox to thank earth mother for her bounty and harvest.” (September 23 2012) The prayer book draws prayers from many faiths including Baha’i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Native American, Shinto, Sikh, Wiccan and Zoroastrian, and even includes some spiritual wellness tips, reflective of the values espoused by most New Age followers (see illus. 6).

The UOUFC website outlines a number of workshops with intriguing descriptions (see illus. 12). One workshop is called:

Getting Rid of the Baggage. The 42 questions of Life. Examine how much *karma* you still carry and the steps can take to eliminate your baggage. All cultures have a day of judgment for self-examination. You will assess yourself by the ancient Egyptian 42 questions of life.

Another workshop is:

Your God Within. Discovering your own spirituality and setting out a plan for a sacred life. The evening will be concluded with a guided meditation to connect to your own spiritual awareness.

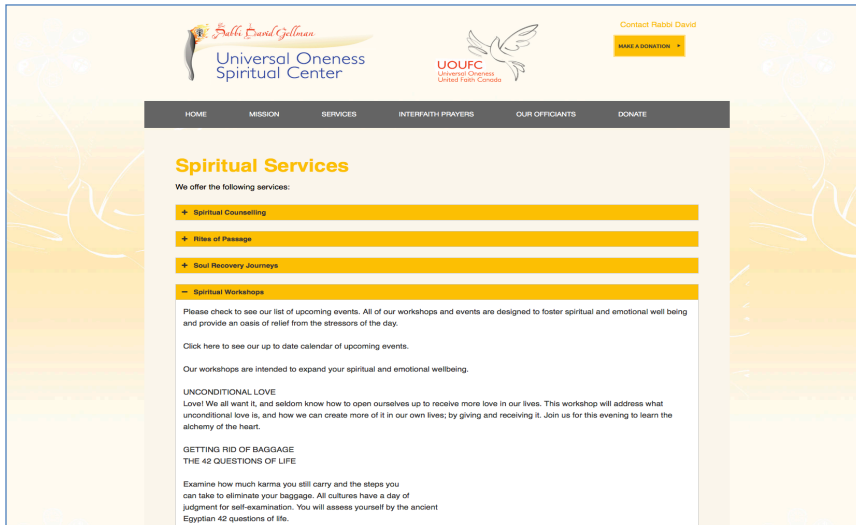
A third workshop, which the Gellmans considered important because it highlights the roots of several spiritual structures and takes the participants back to original meanings, is:

The Tree of Life: Learn to utilize this ancient tool to understand other spiritual systems. It will help in overcoming problems in your life today. We will explore how the Tree of Life symbol contains Numerology, Astrology, Tarot, the ancient Hebrew alphabet, the 10 commandments, and the *chakras*. Realize how the Tree of Life is directly connected to all current and ancient religions. Explore the roots of this symbol incorporated in most religions (see illus. 11 and 12).

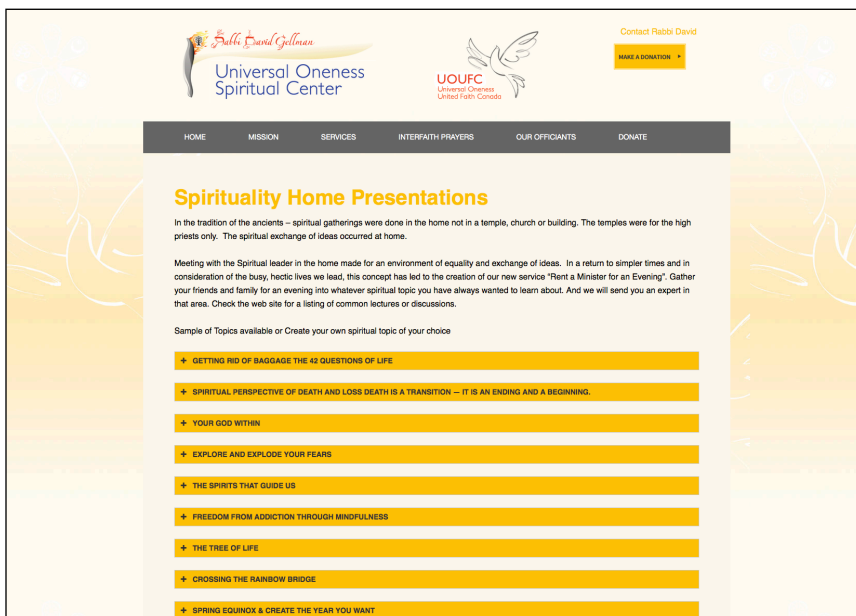
The Tree of Life is a common symbol found in folklore, culture and fiction and had its origin in religious symbolism, often relating to immortality or fertility. Examples can be found in Ancient Mesopotamia and Urartu, although its origins and meaning are not clear. The *Bo* tree, according to Buddhist tradition, is the tree under which the Buddha sat when he attained Enlightenment. In Chinese mythology, a carved representation of the Tree of Life features a phoenix and a dragon: the dragon often represented immortality.

The Tree of Life is also found in Jewish mysticism, and is the central symbol of *Kabbalah*. In Christianity, The Tree of Life first appears in Genesis 2:9 and 3:22-24 as the source of eternal life in the Garden of Eden and again in the *Book of Revelation* as a part of the new garden of paradise.

(Illus. 11. UOUFC Spiritual Workshops)



(Illus. 12. UOUFC Spiritual Home Presentations)



Grief support groups are also a significant undertaking of UOUFC. Grief is identified not

only as the loss of a loved one but also loss of a job, illness, and bankruptcy. The workshop is led by Alex Gellman, and follows the Dr. Bill Webster's<sup>189</sup> "Phases of Grief" model. The five phases of grief are identified as: "The Season of Numbness," "The Season of Disorientation and Yearning," "The Season of Confrontation," "The Season of Adjustment," and "The Season of Reconciliation and Reorganization." Participants learn how to self-heal their pain with the aid of homeopathy, aromatherapy,<sup>190</sup> journaling,<sup>191</sup> acupressure,<sup>192</sup> meditation, and iridology.

All of the foregoing services, workshops and courses fall easily within the space that the New Age has defined. UOUFC incorporates ideas from many of the ancient sources that were identified in chapter one, particularly from Eastern and Native American Spirituality, as well as from the Abrahamic religions. In addition, the organization utilizes modern psychological testing techniques such as the Jungian-based Myers Briggs Type Indicator.<sup>193</sup> Thus the Gellmans draw from a wide range of interfaith philosophies and spiritual, physical, emotional and psychological sources to serve their members or "clients." UOUFC is intent on helping people from different backgrounds and faiths find the greatest opportunity for personal growth and self-improvement. So, while the organization known as the Universal Oneness United Faith Canada may not

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<sup>189</sup> Dr. Bill Webster is a grief counselor based in Toronto, an author and TV host and Executive Director of the Centre for the Grief Journey.

<sup>190</sup> Aromatherapy involves the use of selected fragrant substances in lotions and inhalants in an effort to affect mood and promote health.

<sup>191</sup> Journaling is a method of accelerating personal development through the gaining insights into the person by keeping a journal of thoughts and feelings.

<sup>192</sup> Acupressure is a type of massage therapy that uses finger, elbow or other devices to exert pressure on trigger points within the body. It is a technique that was developed in Tibet.

<sup>193</sup> The Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is a method of categorizing people by their psychological preferences in how they perceive the world and make decisions using a questionnaire. MBTI was first published in 1962.

recognize itself as a part of the loose group of spiritual organizations that scholars have discussed and identified as New Age, the beliefs, philosophy, rituals and activities they follow certainly have a lot in common with organizations that do classify themselves as New Age.

From the members' point of view, the courses offered by UOUFC provide the opportunity for them to fulfill their desire to fully inform themselves in a journey towards self-awareness, self-development and spiritual-enlightenment, and by so doing, to create a positive living and working environment. We will see that learning is a fundamentally important component of New Age spirituality in all three of the groups I have studied. In her article "Spirituality in Education," Kirsi Tirri<sup>194</sup> states: "The educational view emphasizes spiritual sensitivity as a universal human ability that needs to be developed through education."

When it comes to the ethical dimension, David Gellman mentions *reincarnation* in reference to his own spiritual journey: "my spiritual journey ... I have been doing it for a long time; it has been a part of my life forever, or I can say it has been a part of the 'many lives' we have lived before," but there is no mention of *reincarnation* on the website, although there are workshops dedicated to *Karma*. *Karma*, another critical ethical concept in New Age Movements, is only referred to very briefly in our conversation, and does not appear to be a focal point of UOUFC. However, the concept of *karma*, or the "Golden Rule" of Christianity is shown in the Interfaith Prayer: "All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so unto them. For this

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<sup>194</sup> Dr. Kirsi Tirri is a Full Professor of Education and a Research Director at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies and the Department of Education at the University of Helsinki. Her research interests include school pedagogy, moral and religious education, talent development and gifted education, teacher education and cross-cultural studies.

is the law and the prophets” (KJV Mat. 7:12). So, while the moral code of *karma* may not have been mentioned at length, the prominence of the Interfaith Prayer, devoted to the “Golden Rule” evidently underscores the importance of this ethic at UOUFC.

A significant gap in the UOUFC literature is any reference to gender and sexuality on the UOUFC website, even though, as with the New Age generally, UOUFC emphasizes equality and openness; the one exception is that they do offer same sex wedding ceremonies. Generally, New Agers believe that a person should embrace their declared gender and sexual identity and use it as a means of self-exploration and spiritual self-development. Similarly, New Agers on the whole view sex as a form of self-expression and as much a spiritual practice as a physical one, and have borrowed from a variety of religious traditions such as Buddhist and Hindu Tantric traditions as well as Pagan Sexual Magic to achieve this end. These traditions look to sex as a form of self-transformation and healing.

Another notable piece missing from the ethical dimension is any reference to altruism or societal causes; the group is exclusively focused on the individual. One of the preoccupations of many spiritually driven individuals is a concern over the environment and our natural world; it is certainly not a consideration for UOUFC. However, there are individuals within the New Age who are ecologically driven. For example, one such niche business is located not far from Toronto and is called the New New Age.<sup>195</sup> Once a farming and retail operation that specialized in growing and selling organically grown and ethically harvested medicinal, culinary and tonic herbs, the business now focuses on farming only and has regenerated over 50 acres of farmland to native Carolinian habitat

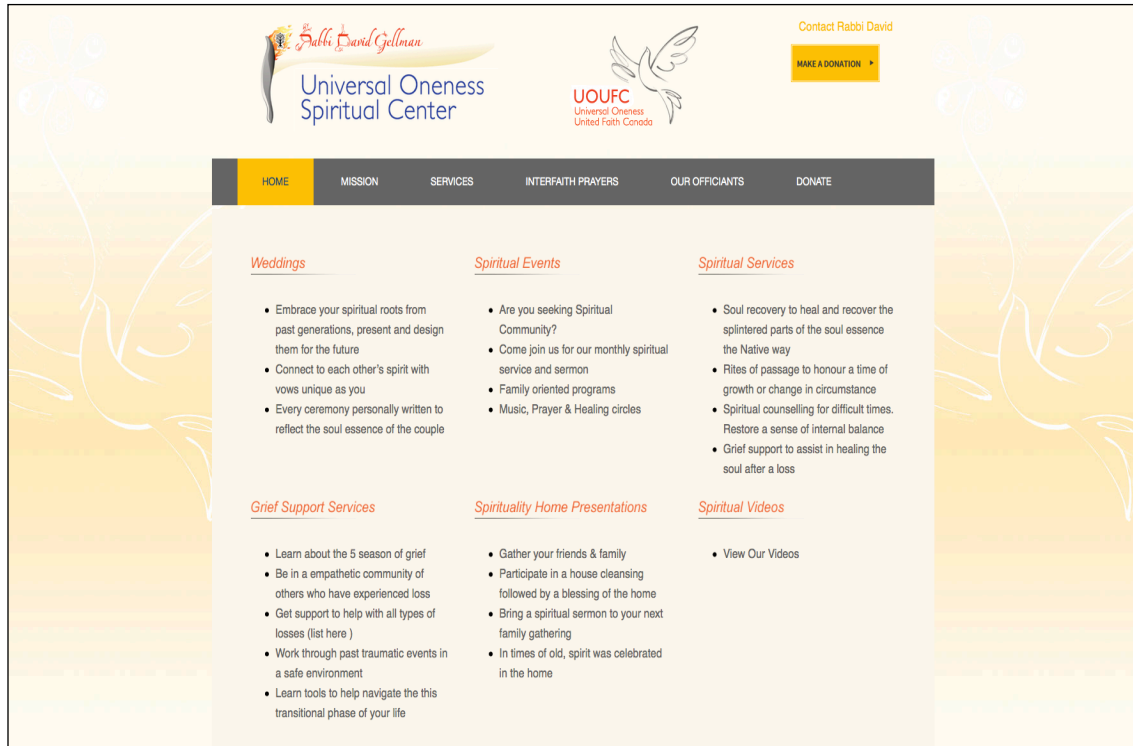
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<sup>195</sup> <https://thenewnewage.com>

with an emphasis on edible and medicinal plant species. The present focus on the self in the New Age differs greatly from its earlier incarnation in the sixties and seventies when the community was equally as important as the individual and concerns such as ecology and world peace were critical within the movement.

The use of technology is essential to many NRMs, and UOUFC employs modern media and technology to offer webinars and audiovisual lectures to simplify the learning process (see illus. 13) but does not use these media to their full capacity, such as interactive online services, in other words they have not fully embraced Digital Religion. David does see the future of UOUFC as a virtual rather than physical entity because the technology gives members the flexibility to attend services online rather than in person. While this maybe David's hope for the future, it has yet to be realized. Currently the group's online activities are limited to a website and social media, such as Facebook and YouTube, the typical vehicles that allow communication between David and his congregation, and to permit the archiving of his talks. David did say that the group has used Skype for an interactive service, but this is not a regular occurrence. UOUFC therefore is a group that has neither an offline presence (since it has no physical location, meeting instead in member's homes, or even in coffee shops), nor a full online presence, as envisioned by Helland and Dawson when they describe online religion as an "interactive venue for religious practice, ritual, observance and innovation." The vision for a future online for UOUFC remains to be seen.

(Illus. 13. UOUFC Official Website)



### **3.3 Conclusion.**

In the first chapter, I reviewed the spread of the New Age Movement throughout the world, where it became apparent that the New Age certainly adapted to its various environments globally, as manifested in rituals and practices that were particular to the national culture. UOUFC does demonstrate certain characteristics that are unique to it, primarily the fact that the majority of its adherents have a Jewish background, as does the founder David Gellman. In this regard, David pursued ordination as a Rabbi to meet the spiritual needs of his congregation. When asked if his organization would be different if it were not in Canada, he said:

The whole of Europe is imprinted with Jewish-Christian traditions and if I had grown up in China or India I might not be the same as I am now, leaning more towards Shinto or Dao, but living here I know Judaism and Christianity better because I grew up in this culture... and I guess that's why I am taking courses to become a Rabbi and not a Buddhist monk.

Our earlier discussion on New Age Movements provides a context for understanding Toronto's UOUFC. The group may meaningfully be described as a contemporary New Age association, a child of the times. David Gellman admitted as much:

I am a product of the sixties, I grew up and it was a true freedom...it is all about the rejection of the old standard stereotypes and getting back to the single light, not the diffuse prison light... the opportunity to use all those tools to reach the people, webinars, Facebook, Audiovisual, transportation, getting to the specific places becomes much easier, information travels, communication, Google, the world is completely different, the twenty first century opens new opportunities.

The fact that we live in a democratic environment allows us great flexibility and the freedom and ability to study and learn and all the rest. If I lived in a communist country, or Nazi Germany, I would not have the same ability to be able to do these things.

Evidently UOUFC is a very personal reflection of its leaders. David's background and upbringing accounts for the emphasis on Abrahamic and Indigenous North American traditions and rituals. From the interview, it was clear that Alex's influence is greatest in the organization of the Spiritual Center, particularly with regard to the workshops and events. She is very committed to the workshops on grief. Grief counseling is a prominent feature on the website and in the organization and it is she who introduced the more Eastern concepts of Astrology and the *chakras*.<sup>196</sup>

However, even though David and Alex provide the formal leadership for the group, they do not necessarily serve a cohesive congregation, which, in the New Age context, often expects a wider variety of practices and services than can be provided by one or two leaders. David was quick to point out that where there is a gap in service deliverables, this gap is filled by lay teachers or visiting speakers or experts. For example, a talk that explored the traditional Sufi saying, "The ways to God are as many as the breaths of human beings" was delivered by special guests Judiya Chamney and Sareh Wodlinger who are Sufi Spiritual Leaders. Another was a workshop on "Jewish Mysticism," given by Cole Sadler, a PhD candidate in Theology at the University of Toronto. He is a Christian who works in Jewish-Christian relations.

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<sup>196</sup> The word *chakra* comes from Sanskrit: चक्र and means "wheel." The concept of *chakra* features in Tantric and Yogic traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism. It refers to the seven centers of spiritual energy (or *chakras*) in the body.

[https://www.facebook.com/pg/uoufc/posts/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/uoufc/posts/?ref=page_internal)

Using lay people to fill the leaders' gaps in knowledge also serves to demonstrate a lack of clear delineation between leaders and the laity. Since all New Age practitioners seek self-development as part of their spiritual paths and most become well informed in many different spiritual practices as do the leaders.

As a product of the minds and spirits of its co-founders UOUFC demonstrates through its product offerings and principles the ease and flexibility with which the center operates, without the encumbrance of a parent organization that enforces adherence to uniform teachings and a code of practice. UOUFC does not have any permanent home in which to hold its services or a designated space where members can meet for discussion or social gatherings. Meetings can occur in member's homes or coffee shops. Much of the communication of the group, therefore, such as advertising upcoming meetings or promoting special events, is conducted online, using the center's website and social media accounts. As we have seen, the group has a very informative and visually engaging website which it uses to promote the center's philosophy and values. However, the website is not utilized to practice online religion in any way, and offers limited opportunities for interactivity between the leaders and members, such as a blog or chat forum or link to video conferencing. In fact, it is notable that David saw the future of his group moving fully online; evidently his vision for an internet based spiritual group has yet to be realized. If there are other individuals in the center who are open to online religion in theory at least, it is important that these members share the same expectations and values to be derived from an internet based spiritual group, otherwise it contradicts the very nature of the New Age, founded as it is on the premise of serving its adherents

with a shared understanding of spirituality, particularly when it comes to methods and forms of religious practice.

One might expect that the concept of “incorporating all spiritual beliefs and systems through interpreting them at their most common roots” would attract a diverse membership. However, one of my first observations was the complete lack of cultural diversity in the group. While the promise of New Age is one of inclusion and diversity, its appeal is still distinctly to the middle aged and white, a holdover no doubt from the early roots of the counter-culture which was predominantly white, middle-class, disaffected youth.

The mix of business and religion is common in the New Age Movement – “the client cult,” as Bainbridge and Stark referred to it -- although David and Alex Gellman keep these parts of their lives quite separate. However, the same knowledge and skills are applied to both the secular and spiritual segments of their lives, thus blurring the lines between the two. David Gellman points out that UOUFC is not a business and operates exclusively on donations and fees from followers, and while there are recommended donations for workshops and seminars, no one will be turned away if they are unable to afford a donation. Both David and Alex have full-time occupations and operate UOUFC on a part-time basis as a non-profit organization.

Other practices once considered integral to the New Age in its early formative years such as crystals, channeling, Tarot, divination and others are now left to specialized bookstores and other small groups to carry on the tradition. This fragmentation of the movement into various for-profit businesses or volunteer groups is no doubt a natural progression for members of the movement who do not feel they can embrace all of its

manifestations. UOUFC is a good example of a kind of natural selection of practices with which its founder, David Gellman, feels comfortable.

## Chapter Four: Centre for Spiritual Living.

### 4.1 Introduction.

The spiritual group I chose to study in Calgary is the Centre for Spiritual Living (CSL), the largest New Age Group in Calgary. It is an affiliated member of the Centers for Spiritual Living, a global spiritual organization headquartered in Golden, Colorado (see illus. 14). The Calgary center is very much a reflection of its parent in the United States, so in sub-chapter 4.2 I will consider the American parent organization in its worldwide scale to better understand how the Calgary group functions. Beginning with the founders, history and development of CSL, its governance and management of the global corporation, I will also examine the online and offline presence of the parent organization.

(Illus. 14. CSL Headquarter in Golden, Colorado)



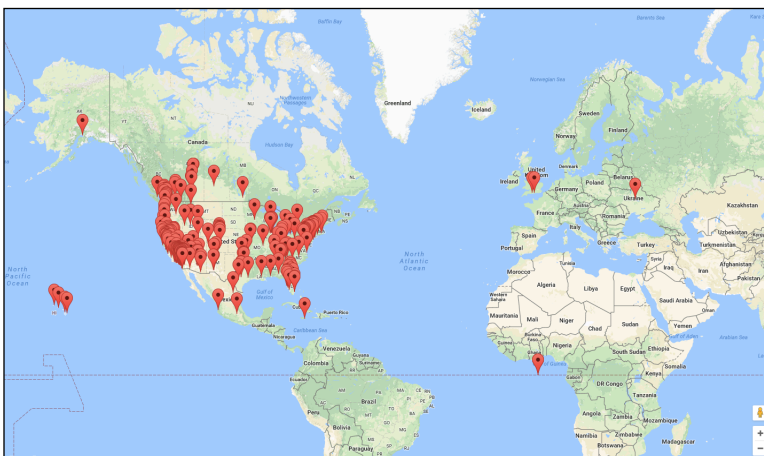
In sub-chapter 4.3, after looking at the history and development of the local branch, I will be analyzing Calgary CSL's relationship to its United States parent, and the similarities and differences between the two created by local influences. Calgary's online and offline presence and use of technologies will be examined and the extensive interviews with

leaders and members will be analyzed in detail, to determine if CSL Calgary reflects the local culture and demographics or that of its United States parent. I will also look at Calgary from the point of view of the Scott and Smart seven-dimensional model to fully understand how CSL is perceived by its adherents.

## 4.2 Centers for Spiritual Living.

The Centers for Spiritual Living is a global spiritual community consisting of over four hundred communities, teaching chapters, study groups and other ministries in thirty countries. As the map indicates, CSL's focus is in North America, with a limited presence elsewhere (see illus. 15). The narrative of the organization is grounded in Science of Mind teachings that combine religion and science and offer its followers the means to transform personal lives and in so doing "help make the world a better place." The process of "transforming personal lives" is accomplished through the study and practice of the "Science of Mind" also known as "Religious Science," which declares that all life is sacred - that each human being is an expression of God. The Center believes in cause and effect and teaches, "It is done unto you as you believe," or in other words, your thinking and expectations create your own reality. The group claims that its teachings incorporate the "ancient wisdom of spiritual traditions through the ages and from people of all spiritual paths" and it promotes tolerance, understanding and respect, advocating for a safe spiritual community of like-minded people interested in living a spiritual life.

(Illus. 15. CSL Worldwide)



CSL can be described as a religious denomination that follows and promotes Religious Science, a concept developed by Ernest Holmes within the New Thought Movement (see illus. 16). Dr. Holmes was born in 1887 on a small farm in Maine, and spent much of his formative years outdoors, which prompted him to ponder the eternal existential questions of human relevance in the world and the existence of God. His deliberations on the questions of the meaning of life resulted in his book *The Science of Mind*, published in 1926. This work describes the foundational concepts of modern “New Thought, Science of Mind” building on the original work of John Bascom,<sup>197</sup> who wrote a book also called *Science of Mind* in 1881 and shaped by the ideas of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Phineas Quimby, among others. The nineteenth century New Thought movement considered that all faith movements include a functioning “unseen force,” called variously Mind, Spirit, First Cause or even God, and this force is an indwelling presence that promotes physical and spiritual healing. The terminology can be confusing, so we can consider the term “New Thought” as the name of the overall movement. Generally, the term “Science of Mind” applies to the teachings and the term “Religious Science” applies to the organizations. However, confusion arises because adherents frequently use these terms interchangeably.

As Holmes refined his philosophy, he conducted lectures and held study groups. At first, he did not set out to create a formal institution, but in 1927, prompted by his students, he helped to found the Institute of Religious Science.

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<sup>197</sup> John Bascom (1827-1911) was president of the University of Wisconsin from 1874 to 1887. He authored some thirty or forty books on philosophy, education, rhetoric, and sociology among others.

(Illus. 16. Dr. Ernest Holmes)



Holmes defined his teaching thus: “Religious Science is a synthesis of the laws of science, opinions of philosophy and revelations of religion, applied to human needs and the aspirations of humankind.” Simply stated, Science of Mind is a philosophy that incorporates spiritual “truths” with science and physics; or, expressed in another way, Science of Mind teaches the unity of all life: “Intentions and ideas flow through a field of consciousness, which actually affects and creates the world around us.” Followers believe that the process to achieving success throughout life is a deliberate focus on positive and productive thoughts, or expressed as a simple rubric, “As you think, so you become,” which speaks less to ethics and more to the role that positive thought plays in reaching personal goals in one’s life.

In its literature, CSL denies that it is a New Age Movement, preferring instead to use the term New Thought, which incorporates the tools detailed in *Science of Mind* such as affirmative prayer, healing and creative visualization to transform lives and make the world a more peaceful, harmonious and prosperous place. While CSL does not consider its teachings to be New Age, it does incorporate ancient wisdom and scripture from many spiritual traditions, and its fundamental beliefs bear a close resemblance to the New Age Movement, sharing as it does many ontological ideas and practices.

The difference between RS/SOM and New Age rests in the definitions of principles and beliefs or dogma that govern it and provide instruction to those who follow

it. Based largely in an adapted version of Christian theology (with additions from Eastern religions and some current philosophy) RS/SOM nonetheless does follow a set of principles expressed more in the context of human thinking and action than related to a third-party deity. While New Age may utilize some of the practices of New Thought, it is a more random selection of ritual and practices, although everything still leads to a singular goal of self-awareness and spiritual growth.

It is important to examine the foundation, formation, key beliefs, doctrines and teachings of Religious Science and Science of Mind (RS/SOM) in some depth because not only do they inform the parent organization's narrative they are also critical to understanding CSL Calgary. It was Holmes, who, in his book *Science of Mind*, wrote RS/SOM's original statement of beliefs, called *What We Believe*:

- We believe in God, the living Spirit Almighty; one, indestructible, absolute, and self-existent Cause. This One manifests itself in and through all creation, but is not absorbed by its creation. The manifest universe is the body of God; it is the logical and necessary outcome of the infinite self-knowingness of God.
- We believe in the incarnation of the Spirit in us, and that all people are incarnations of the One Spirit.
- We believe in the eternity, the immortality, and the continuity of the individual soul, forever and ever expanding.
- We believe that heaven is within us, and that we experience it to the degree that we become conscious of it.
- We believe the ultimate goal of life to be a complete emancipation from all discord of every nature, and that this goal is sure to be attained by all.

- We believe in the unity of all life, and that the highest God and the innermost God is one God. We believe that God is personal to all who feel this indwelling Presence.
- We believe in the direct revelation of Truth through our intuitive and spiritual nature, and that anyone may become a revealer of Truth who lives in close contact with the indwelling God.
- We believe that the Universal Spirit, which is God, operates through a Universal Mind, which is the Law of God; and that we are surrounded by this Creative Mind which receives the direct impress of our thought and acts upon it.
- We believe in the healing of the sick and control of conditions through the power of this Mind.
- We believe in the eternal Goodness, the eternal Loving-kindness, and the eternal Givingness of Life to all.
- We believe in our own soul, our own spirit, and our own destiny; for we understand that our life is God.

This statement of beliefs fits very much into the territory occupied by the New Age Movement, adapting the teachings of various established World Religions, including Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism. The first two belief statements as well as the

seventh echo the Hindu concepts of *dharma*<sup>198</sup> and *atman*<sup>199</sup> and the fourth statement incorporates the idea of Hindu *moksha*,<sup>200</sup> although arguably it could also hint at the Christian heaven. The third statement is Christian in origin, inspired by Luke 17:20-21:

<sup>20</sup> And when he was demanded of the Pharisees, when the kingdom of God should come, he answered them and said, the Kingdom of God cometh not within observation:

<sup>21</sup> Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you.

The tenth statement is also conceptually Christian signifying the “golden rule” of the Gospels, “And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise” Luke 6:31; or “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” Matthew 22:39. The fifth, sixth, ninth and eleventh statements relate more to the New Age philosophy speaking as they do about the personal nature of God within us and our destiny, our happiness is a product of

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<sup>198</sup> *Dharma* (Sanskrit: धर्म) is a key concept with multiple meanings in Indian religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and others. There is no single word translation for *dharma* in Western languages. In Hinduism, *dharma* signifies behaviors that are considered to be in accord with *Rta*, the order that makes life and universe possible, and includes duties, rights, laws, conduct, virtues and “right way of living.” In Buddhism, *dharma* means “cosmic law and order,” and is also applied to the teachings of Buddhism. *Dharma* in Jainism refers to the teachings of *tirthankara* (*Jina*) and the body of doctrine pertaining to the purification and moral transformation of human beings. For Sikhs, the word *dharma* means the path of righteousness and proper religious practice.

<sup>199</sup> *Ātman* (आत्मन् /'ɑ:tmən/) is a Sanskrit word that means inner self or soul. In Hindu philosophy, especially in the Vedanta school of Hinduism, *Ātman* is the first principle, the *true* self of an individual beyond identification with phenomena, the essence of an individual. In order to attain liberation (*moksha*), a human being must acquire self-knowledge (*atma jnana*), which is to realize that one’s true self (*Ātman*) is identical with the transcendent self, *Brahman*.

<sup>200</sup> *Moksha* (/ˈmoʊkʃə/; Sanskrit: मोक्ष, *mokṣa*), also called *vimoksha*, *vimukti* and *mukti*, is a term in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism which refers to various forms of emancipation, enlightenment, liberation, and release. In its soteriological and eschatological senses, it refers to freedom from *samsāra*, the cycle of death and rebirth. In its epistemological and psychological senses, *moksha* refers to freedom from ignorance: self-realization, self-actualization and self-knowledge.

our own positive thought; God is an internal force over which we have complete control through prayer and meditation, summed up in the final belief statement: “We believe in our own soul, our own spirit, and our own destiny; for we understand that our life is God.” These belief statements are not necessarily new but have been shaped by Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity and lie at the foundation of the Center for Spiritual Living’s doctrine, and also include the ethical and moral dimension, addressed in the eighth and tenth statements (not unlike the Ten Commandments of Judeo-Christianity and Islam).

The focus on the individual rather than the institution was described by Berger and in his opinion, over time, religion becomes more like a psychotherapy program than a theology for the salvation of souls. In fact, the current New Thought website states:

New Thought recognizes that the driving force which serves as a crucible for personal and social transformation is ‘as we change our thinking, we change our lives.’ This is the same principle that underpins cognitive psychology.

([www.newthought.net](http://www.newthought.net)).

As noted earlier, since the publication of Earnest Holmes book, the teachings of the original organization, New Thought, have been reshaped several times, moving from their liberal Christian beginnings rooted in Biblical teachings, through a more inclusive period that incorporated Eastern texts from Buddhism<sup>201</sup> and Taoism<sup>202</sup> to its latest

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<sup>201</sup> *The Lotus Sutra* contains the ultimate and complete teaching of the Buddha. In the case of *Lotus Sutra* New Thought, we see references to the *Lotus Sutra* (Saddharma Pundarika Sutra), which translates as the Universal Mystical Law of Cause and Effect. *Seicho No Ie* is the largest New Thought organization in the world, and in accordance with Japanese *Tien Tai* traditions, *Seicho No Ie* features an “object of meditation” which is simply a principal image that enables the practitioner to focus the mind (Buddha is the principal image).

<sup>202</sup> There are 37 *Tao* poems and 44 *Te* poems <http://www.divinetao.com/home.html>

iteration “New Thought 3.1” that adds more secularism through science into the mix to address concerns about the environment, human rights and global ethical issues. Such secular works as Carl Sagan’s *Science As a Candle in the Dark* and Peter Joseph’s movie *Zeitgeist* are included in suggested New Thought 3.1 study. They also employ a process called “Mental Science”<sup>203</sup> to awaken the latent abilities within each person, endorsed through Carl Jung’s famous quote: “Who looks outside, dreams. Who looks inside, wakens.”<sup>204</sup>

According to SOM there are ten core concepts that govern their philosophy. These too have been revised in 1993 in the Foundational Class curriculum, a course that every new member of CSL must take in order to fulfill membership requirements. While these concepts are primarily concerned with doctrine, some also address ethical and ritual ideas. It is helpful to analyze these concepts using the Scott and Smart seven-dimensional model. The first concept is *Oneness* “God is the source of all that is, and God is all that is. Everything in the Universe is made of the God substance and is a unique, individualized expression of God.” In other words, God is not one thing but rather an energy source or infinite intelligence present in everything in the universe, arguably defined as Pantheism, and this concept clearly falls within a definition of doctrine. The second concept is called *Triune Nature*: “God expresses itself in three aspects: Spirit, Soul and Body. Each human being also has these same aspects. Thus there is God as macrocosm, human beings as microcosm.” Here is an obvious doctrinal parallel with the Christian canon of the Trinity as well as with the ancient beliefs in trinities of the Egyptians, Sumerians and

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<sup>203</sup> Mental Science (Cognitive Science) is the scientific study either of mind or intelligence. It is an interdisciplinary study drawing from relevant fields including psychology, philosophy, neuroscience, linguistics, anthropology, computer science, and biology.

<sup>204</sup> [www.newthought.net](http://www.newthought.net)

Babylonians. The next concept is *Creative Nature*. “God thinks, and the world comes into being. Likewise, all human accomplishments originate in thought. Our human thinking process is a reflection of the Divine Creative Process in microcosm.” Expressed in another way, since God is in everything, humans include God within them and can use the God energy to create on the human level. This is a restatement in spiritual terms of the underlying principle of all New Age thinking, that what you want to become can be created through positive thought. As such the *Creative Nature* concept fits within the doctrinal category, although as a core concept of the New Age, it is also the overarching ontological narrative.

The fourth concept is called *Prayer*. “All Good is eternally available and ready to flow into human experience. We activate this flow by means of prayer. Through affirmative prayer, or spiritual mind treatment, we increase our consciousness of Good eternally flowing to us.” This concept in essence repeats the previous one. Thus it represents both doctrine and ritual since affirmative prayer is the primary religious practice employed by SOM to connect with God in order to create all the good we want on the human level. The fifth concept in the curriculum is called *Wholeness*. “Spirit is a transcendent, perfect Whole that contains and embraces all *seeming* opposites. As human beings, we have free will and can *choose* what we experience, whether it be positive or negative. The same Principle that brings us freedom, prosperity, and joy also allows us to experience bondage, lack, or misery, according to our consciousness.” This concept falls within the territory of doctrine and raises the issue of freedom of choice; individuals have the ability to select positive or negative outcomes. Holmes expressed this idea thus: “The way we think is the way we act, and the way we act is what happens. Law in the universe

lets you have what you want - disaster or delight?" Next comes *Abundance*. "All that everyone will ever need or desire is already provided by Universal Abundance. This applies to everybody, not just some people. Every person is heir to the riches of creation, without regard to merit." This concept stems from the Judeo-Christian notion as in Luke 12:27 "Consider the lilies how they grow: they toil not, they spin not; and yet I say unto you, that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these."

The seventh concept is titled *The Reciprocal Universe*. "For every visible form, there is an invisible counterpart. This means that what we receive corresponds to what we imagine and believe we can receive, the Law of Mental Equivalents. This is also the Golden Rule: that what we do to others will be done also to us, the Law of Cause and Effect." Known as *Karma* in Eastern religions, a similar idea expressed as "The Golden Rule" is found in Christianity: "Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be out into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you" (Luke 6:38). This statement covers both the ethic of *karma*, and the idea of positive prayer: what we receive is governed by the correct delivery of affirmative prayer and by the treatment we afford others. The eighth concept also deals with ethics and is called *Forgiveness*. "In the Eternal Now, there can be no place for Divine anger, unforgiveness, or punishment. If we perceive a need for forgiveness, this is a human condition. Human forgiveness is the process that frees us to live in the Eternal Now. It is the essential step before real spiritual growth can flourish. Science of Mind teaches that the ultimate goal of life is complete emancipation from all discord of every nature, and that this goal is sure to be attained by all." In other words, there is no need for God's forgiveness since forgiveness is a human need and original sin,

in fact any of the traditional understanding of sin, does not exist in SOM. We make our heaven and hell experiences now through our choices.

The ninth concept is *Immortality*. “The Universal Truth about Life is that life never ends. What we call death is simply the changing of one form of life for another. Death, the belief and perception that life must come to an end, is a human concept. As in birth the invisible becomes visible, so in dying the visible again becomes invisible. Life continues on another plane when the body has outlived its usefulness.” Or, expressed in another way, this doctrine suggests that life evolves in this as well as in other dimensions, even after the Christian concept of soul has transitioned to those other dimensions. The tenth and final concept is known simply as *The Christ*. “Christ is not a person, but a Principle, a Universal Presence, the Universal Image of God that is present in all Creation. This is the concept of the Cosmic Christ, which is present within every person. Each human individual partakes of the Christ nature to the degree that he or she recognizes the Cosmic Christ within and lives out of that revelation. Jesus of Nazareth was a human individual who revealed the Christ Nature to the highest degree ever known.” The term “Cosmic Christ” represents a metaphor for the supreme “goodness” within all the prophets and enlightened ones who use the Principle to improve humankind or reach their own personal spiritual goal. It was a title bestowed on the enlightened or anointed ones prior to the twelfth century. Early Hebrew Kings were also given the title “Christ.” This statement covers both doctrine and narrative (myth) in that all humans have the power to become “divine,” expressed this way by Ernest Holmes “Science of Mind does not deny the divinity of Jesus but it does affirm the divinity of all people. It does not deny that Jesus was the Son of God but affirms that all beings are the children of

God. It does not deny that the kingdom of God was revealed through Jesus but affirms that the kingdom of God is also revealed through you and me.”

The emphasis on “science” raises the question whether Science of Mind or Religious Science are indeed based on empirical evidence. Ernest Holmes states in his book *Science of Mind*:

The Science of Mind, then, is the study of Life and the nature of the laws of thought: the conception that we live in a spiritual Universe: that God is in, through, around and for us. There is nothing supernatural anywhere, on any plane: that which today seems to us supernatural, after it is understood, will be found spontaneously natural (SOM p. 75-2).

Based on this comment, the “science” in *Science of Mind* is not what is generally understood to mean knowledge of the natural world gathered from facts learned through experiments and observation but rather that God is naturally within us and not a supernatural entity. However, Holmes also says: “As students of Science of Mind, we find in the remarkable character of Jesus, a great impetus toward faith and conviction” (SOM p. 160-4). This statement is a call to faith rather than a search for existential evidence. SOM, though, does not shy away from the question but states firmly that the fields of religion and science are complementary and modern science will empirically demonstrate ancient mystical beliefs about the nature of God, human beings and the universe. As does the New Age generally, SOM states that their beliefs are already being proven through theoretical physics or quantum theory, which has discovered that the universe consists of energy that cannot be destroyed and is “infinitely intelligent.” This

thinking talks of a unity that has been referred to as the “God particle”<sup>205</sup> and used by some scientists to claim proof of the existence of God or at the least to legitimize a spiritual worldview. SOM, however, utilizes laws of nature to validate spiritual principles and suggests that anyone can experiment with these principles and measure the results.

To quote further from Holmes’ book:

The Science of Mind is not a special revelation of any individual; it is, rather, the culmination of all revelations. We take the good wherever we find it, making it our own in so far as we understand it. The realization that Good is Universal, and that as much good as any individual is able to incorporate in his life is his to use, is what constitutes the Science of Mind and Spirit (SOM p. 35).

The Center for Spiritual Living’s Mission, according to its website, is to provide spiritual tools for personal and global transformation. Its purpose is to awaken humanity to its “spiritual magnificence” and its Vision is a world that works for everyone. The spiritual “tools” are more usually referred to as rituals in traditional religions, and it is with them that CSL enables its members to achieve their goals of “spiritual magnificence” and a world in which everyone finds their place. The tools are identified as prayer, spiritual practices, meditation and education as the primary methods of spiritual development.

Under the category of Prayer, CSL includes a link to its “World Vision of Prayer” website where the public can request affirmative prayers to be said for them. CSL has been offering this prayer service for 86 years and recognizes that affirmative prayer forms an important foundation piece in CSL’s structure. The Center provides an online

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<sup>205</sup> *The God Particle: If the Universe Is the Answer, What Is the Question?* is a 1993 popular science book by Nobel Prize-winning physicist Leon M. Lederman and science writer Dick Teresi.

form or a local telephone number to request a prayer; the site also provides help in writing personal affirmative prayers and even provides pre-recorded prayers for spiritual enlightenment.

The ritual of affirmative prayer, also known as “Spiritual Mind Treatment,” is a process by which the person praying states their desired outcome of the prayer as if it has already happened. It thus differs from traditional prayer in that the person does not ask a third party such as God to intervene on his or her behalf, believing instead in an active, mutual partnership with an “Infinite Intelligence” to achieve success. The person praying must state the desired outcome as a personal outcome, in a positive and powerful manner and in the present, as if it is happening right now. The purpose is to have clear thinking that will guide the person’s actions to produce the desired outcome. It is believed that this treatment will start a chain reaction in the mind that will lead the person to act in a manner that will precipitate the outcome.

The ritual process consists of five steps: Recognition, Unification, Realization, Thanksgiving and Release.

1. Recognition: God is all there is. God is the All, the One, the Infinite Love, total and complete Peace, Infinite Calm and Serenity. God is all this everywhere at all times.
2. Unification: I declare that there is One Mind, that Mind is God, that Mind is my mind now. I am inseparable from the One, the Source. This is the truth about me. This is who I am.
3. Realization: I accept the realization that I have complete peace of mind. Infinite Love. Intelligence is within me and is working for my highest good always. God

within me is perfect Peace. I am serene, tranquil and quiet. I am in harmony with all life.

4. Thanksgiving: I give thanks for this Truth about me and my life. I am grateful for the peace of mind, which is now mine.

5. Release: I release this word into the Law where it is done according to his word. I easily let go and let God. And so it is. Amen.

This ritual for carrying out an Affirmative Prayer is quite formal and each step is precise, beginning with the acknowledgment that God is the ultimate power that enables life followed by a declaration that the person praying is one with God at that moment. The next step is to accept that the unity with God grants “peace and harmony,” then to offer thanks for this peace of mind and finally to allow the prayer petitions to achieve their desired outcomes. Although formulaic in structure, this ritual allows for individualization, unlike the formal liturgy of the established churches.

According to CSL, meditation is a ritual that relaxes and helps foster a blissful state of being to clear the mind and access one’s intuition; it can be silent or guided, done alone or in groups, and according to CSL.org “Incorporating a regular meditation practice in your life will help you connect to the power of the Divine that resides within.” For beginners there is a meditation tool on the group’s website that offers prerecorded guides in English and Spanish as well as recordings of guides by Ernest Holmes.

Education as a form of ritual or tool, if you will, has been and remains a major focus of the Centers for Spiritual Living. Even though the means of delivery and the media may have changed, courses are now offered throughout the network of centers, and through the Holmes Institute (see illus. 17), which is accredited by the “Distance

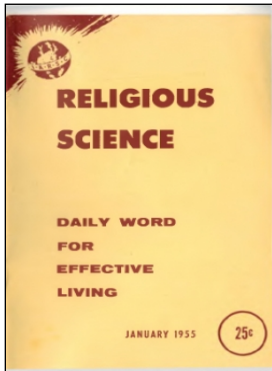
Education and Training Council” and is a member of the “Council for Higher Education Accreditation.” The Holmes Institute offers Master Degree programs with a mission to prepare spiritual leaders for service in the global community. There are thousands of (Religious Science) practitioners throughout the world whose role is to counsel and support individuals in prayer. The institute also instructs individuals who want to become CSL ministers through offline and online courses. Courses offered to members focus on New Thought and Science of Mind, the philosophy of Ernest Holmes; studies of *Emerson’s Essays*, the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803 – 1882); and the works of Thomas Troward (1847 – 1916), *Edinburgh Lectures on Mental Science* (1904), *The Dore Lectures on Mental Science* (1909). There are courses in rituals such as meditation, practical mysticism and prayer in addition to Bible study and metaphysics. Courses on such practical topics as financial freedom, prosperity and personal growth in being successful are offered as well. Most courses are of ten to sixteen weeks duration, with costs ranging from \$220 to \$495 per student, plus registration fees and are offered online or in person in local centers. For those wishing to become practitioners, the institute provides practitioner training, which spans a two-year time frame and costs \$285 per semester, plus a \$100 annual registration fee.

(Illus. 17. CSL Holmes Institute)



The headquarters and the web presence (CSL.org) act more as a clearing house to direct people to a center close to them and as a repository of past publications and recorded talks rather than an active physical space where rituals can be performed. The website does refer to online classes on Science of Mind and Spirit; and CSL also offers what it refers to as a “Focus Ministry” or a virtual ministry, an online method of bringing the CSL philosophy to groups all over the world through online outreach. The topics cover a wide range of subject matter for individual spiritual development, professional education and for training to become a minister or practitioner. The vast selection of the topics offered strongly suggests that the Center is attempting to reach out to a broad spectrum of individuals with subjects that are more secular than spiritual, fulfilling the role of a self-help group as much as a spiritual guide, demonstrating once more the blurring of lines between the secular and the religious.

(Illus. 18. Religious Science Magazine, 1955)



When we look at the material dimension of CSL, we need to first look at the physical and web-based archives<sup>206</sup> as a rich source of the organization's material culture. The archives house hard copies of *Science of Mind* magazines dating back to 1927, as well as copies of *Creative Thought* magazine from the first issue in 1954 (see illus. 18). The archives also include board minutes from both founding organizations and books and tapes of Ernest Holmes' radio lectures and video and film of Holmes and other Religious Science leaders. The archive has 12,000 volumes of books on metaphysics and personal artifacts of Holmes. The virtual archive has both published and unpublished works of Ernest Holmes in addition to many digitized books and pamphlets and it is free to search and download public domain materials. Copyrighted items can be previewed and are on sale at the Center's E-Store. Copies of past issues of *Science of Mind* magazine continue to be digitized. In addition to this extensive research resource, recordings of Ernest Holmes are made available for purchase on iTunes and Amazon, as well, his books are available through Amazon. Making the founder's papers available to scholars and the public is a common approach for institutions in order to make their archives accessible for study and critical analyses, but it also provides a revenue source for CSL and a low-key form of evangelism for the Center. This openness to sharing archived materials with the general public is somewhat unusual for many NRMs; the Church of Scientology for example, tends to be very exclusive and hierarchical in this respect.

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<sup>206</sup> <https://scienceofmindarchives.com>

From the institutional perspective, before 2011 CSL was two organizations: United Centers for Spiritual Living (formerly, United Church of Religious Science) and International Centers for Spiritual Living (formerly, Religious Science International). The current merged structure of the organization is that of a non-profit corporation with a Board of Directors (CORE - Conscious of Reality Evolving - Council) that is charged with conducting business matters and overseeing the day-to-day operations of the Center. An Executive Director and a Spiritual Leader are responsible for the public face of CSL, and a Field Leader oversees administration, ethics and professional standards, promoting the vision and mission of CSL to all member communities throughout the world. There is also a Minister Council that supports and serves all ministers in revealing “healthy and vital lives.” Priorities include communication, education, licensing, events, diversity and field support. Various other councils assist the Minister Council with specific responsibilities or mandates such as Leadership Council, Member Council, Education Committee, a Cultural Integrity and Evolution Committee, Youth and Young Adult and World Ministry of Prayer. And finally, the Board of Trustees oversees governance with fiduciary and legal responsibilities for the Center. Beneath this central hierarchy of management are the local centers, which are given a large degree of autonomy outside of their contractual obligations to abide by CSL teachings and beliefs. They provide education opportunities and adhere to CSL visual and marketing guidelines. It is not unusual for NRMs to employ modern marketing techniques, particularly those structured on a “franchise” model.

CSL views its franchised operators as “Member Communities” that serve their own constituents in their own markets. According to CSL by-laws, member communities

may consist of communities, churches, centers/centres, teaching chapters, special focus ministries (online), virtual ministries, institutes and other non-profit organizations. The member communities are actually described as a “distribution system” through which the teachings and mission of CSL flow. These communities enter into a mutually beneficial relationship through the Affiliation Agreement that also gives them the authority to grant charters to establish member communities. The term “virtual community” was added to the list of “Member Communities” by way of an amendment to the organization’s mandate in 2014 in recognition of the fact that special focus ministries had become an important means of evangelizing globally.

Even though the Center is a non-profit organization it is very concerned with branding and consistency of brand presentation to the extent that it has developed a rigorous brand implementation plan. It has been working since 2006 on the brand identity and claims to have spent over \$250,000 in research and development. Naturally the Center encourages all of its members to use the visual identity and marketing package it has developed for a global consistency in branding and message. The Center suggests that centers that have adopted the logo and brand identity materials, including web design, saw as much as a thirty percent increase in attendance, with a corresponding increase in giving. Centers are encouraged to write a marketing plan to promote the center locally and are provided a marketing template and guidelines to help them write an effective plan. So, evangelism for CSL has a much more pragmatic approach than the traditional means, and does not shy away from adopting modern, secular marketing methods to attract new “consumers” into their particular brand of New Thought. And it is a competitive marketplace for New Age/New Thought based spiritual organizations. As

Berger noted: “Religious institutions become marketing agencies, and religious traditions turn into articles of consumption” (Berger, 34).

In this context then, the Center’s preoccupation with the “brand” and marketing should come as no surprise, even though a focus on the brand appears to speak more to the business of selling the idea of personal spiritual growth than it does to spiritual growth itself. However, viewed in the light of a long history of established churches with well-known Canadian Christian brands such as “Catholic,” “Anglican” and “United” the Center is forced to use any method it can to achieve awareness and trial of its “product.” This business model is influenced more by the marketing principles of a modern franchised corporation than those of a religious organization, but the model has proven successful in the hands of such market leaders as McDonalds and Coca-Cola. Brand giants such as these multi-national corporations, while fixated on maintaining their brand integrity, are no less prepared to adapt to local culture and custom. Examples of this strategy include, beer being sold in McDonalds in many European countries, and beef burgers not being sold in India, where the cow is sacred in the Hindu religion. The NRMs are also prepared to adapt to local cultures: the Pentecostal church, for example, does not proscribe alcohol consumption in Georgia (country), where wine is fundamental to cultural traditions of hospitality. This allowance for local cultural differences, or the concept of “glocalization” as coined by Roland Robertson, will be explored at greater length in the next chapter (Robertson, 12).

As noted earlier, there are ethical components contained within the SOM Eleven Beliefs and the Ten Core Concepts, specifically those concerned with love, *karma* and forgiveness but it is noteworthy that there are no references on the website to altruism or

societal concerns such as diversity. In the fifth belief, Holmes states “We believe the ultimate goal of life to be a complete emancipation from all discord of every nature, and that this goal is sure to be attained by all.” The suggestion here is that we must be at peace with the world and our neighbour in order to achieve this ultimate goal, a similar concept to that of Jesus’ commandment to “Love thy neighbour as thyself” (Matt.22:34-40). This concept is expressed a little differently in the tenth belief “We believe in the eternal Goodness, the eternal Loving-kindness, and the eternal Givingness of Life to all.” Two of the Core Concepts also concern ethics, as in the seventh concept, *The Reciprocal Universe*. “For every visible form, there is an invisible counterpart. This means that what we receive corresponds to what we imagine and believe we can receive, the Law of Mental Equivalents. This is also the Golden Rule: that what we do to others will be done also to us, the Law of Cause and Effect.” Known too as *karma*. The eighth concept also deals with ethics and is called *Forgiveness*. “In the Eternal Now, there can be no place for Divine anger, unforgiveness, or punishment. If we perceive a need for forgiveness, this is a human condition. Human forgiveness is the process that frees us to live in the Eternal Now. It is the essential step before real spiritual growth can flourish.”

There is also a covenant that anyone wishing to become a member of CSL must agree to and sign. However, the covenant is an institutional requirement and is wholly concerned with following the by-laws and customs of the center rather than providing any ethical guidelines. The Membership Covenant is granted to those considered to be “in good standing” which means they:

1. Uphold the teachings and practices of Science of Mind
2. Attend the spiritual and social functions of the Center

3. Contribute to the financial support of the Center
4. Attend the business meetings of the Center and vote therein
5. Provide service to the Center
6. Uphold the purpose, mission and vision of the Center and act to promote harmony and oneness with the spiritual community.

The New Age generally and particularly those groups with foundations in the New Thought philosophy are, in essence, experiential on a personal level. As Holmes states, “Intentions and ideas flow through a field of consciousness, which actually affects and creates the world around us.” So in simple terms the life we want can be created through our positive thinking and expressed in affirmative prayer and thus all of the tools offered by CSL are intended to enhance the experiential process of affirmative prayer.

### 4.3 Calgary Centre for Spiritual Living.

Before we can review the Calgary Center for Spiritual Living, it is important to understand the cultural context in which the Center operates. The ethnicity and religious backgrounds of the city of Calgary inform the environment from which CSL draws its congregation and thus provides greater understanding. Located in the South of Alberta Calgary had an estimated population of 1.16 million in 2016 which made it the largest city in the province and the third largest in Canada.<sup>207</sup> The census metropolitan area (CMA) had a population of 1.37 million, or the fifth largest CMA in Canada. The city proper has a population density of 1,329 people per square kilometer (3,442/sq. mi.) spread over 825 square kilometers.

More than 25% of the population of Calgary is made up of visible minorities, giving the city a third place ranking in its proportion of visible minorities among major Canadian cities. To underscore this ranking, 78% of the immigrants who arrived in Calgary since 2001 belong to a visible minority. In 2011, the major racial and ethnic composition of Calgary was:

- White: 67%
- South Asian: 7%
- Chinese: 7%
- Filipino: 4%
- Black: 3%

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<sup>207</sup> <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=CSD&Code1=4806016&Geo2=PR&Code2=48&Data=Count&SearchText=Calgary&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&B1=All&GeoLevel=PR&GeoCode=4806016&TABID=1>

- Other: 12%

Calgarians include over 200 distinct ethnicities, led historically by English, Scottish, German and Irish immigrants, a weighting which is similar to the rest of English Canada. However, Calgary's ethnic configuration is considerably less diverse than other major cities and this diversity is reflected both in the religions and the languages spoken in the city. Approximately 70% of Calgary's residents speak English only, with 1% speaking French and 25% speaking their birth languages.

The land surrounding Calgary was first inhabited by pre-Clovis people about 11,000 years ago. By the time Europeans arrived, several indigenous groups occupied the territory including the Blood, Blackfoot, Peigan and Tsuu T'ina First Nations peoples, all within the Blackfoot Confederacy. The first European that we know of in the region of Calgary was cartographer David Thompson in 1787; the first actual settler only arrived in 1873. The site was named Fort Brisebois, an outpost built for the North-West Mounted Police (now the Royal Canadian Mounted Police), who were there to protect the fur trade. Its name was changed in 1876 to Fort Calgary.

The city developed into an agricultural and commercial centre during the 1880s after the Canadian Pacific Railway arrived. The company's headquarters were only moved to Montreal in 1996. The city was incorporated as the City of Calgary in 1894. Calgary's population grew quickly for the next twenty years as immigrants came to take up of an offer of free "homestead" land, and as a result, ranching and agriculture became pre-eminent contributors to the economy. The discovery of large deposits of oil in 1947 placed Calgary at the center of an oil rush, which created a population boom from 272,000 in 1971 to 675,000 in 1989. While oil is still Calgary's most significant

industry, the city's business has diversified and its population has continued to grow. In the 2013 municipal census, Calgary's population was 1,149,552, a 2.6% increase over 2012 and the CMA has also grown. In 2014, Calgary's population reached 1.15 million, gaining almost 30,000 people in a one year, primarily from immigration.

As with the rest of Canada, Calgary is primarily Christian, and this faith represents 55% of the population, followed by those with no religion at 32%. Islam represents 5%, Sikh 3%, Buddhist 2%, Hindu 2%, and Jewish 1%. As these percentages attest, Calgary is not a city with a great diversity of religions, yet there are opportunities to follow The New Age and New Age Spirituality here, with twenty New Age stores and twenty-nine Meetup groups serving this community.

(Illus. 19. Dr. Herman Jan Aaftink, Founder of CSL Calgary)



CSL is the largest spiritual or New Age group in Calgary, and it exists both in online and offline contexts. It's meta narrative begins with its foundation in 1964 by Dr. Herman Jan Aaftink (see illus. 19). Dr. Aaftink was born and raised in the Netherlands and came to Canada as an adult after the Second World War. He earned a Doctor of Divinity degree and was a United Church minister for four years in British Columbia. He taught New Thought courses in Montreal and eventually took over leadership of the Church of Truth in Calgary, later named Center for Positive Living. He was a broadcaster and speaker and founded the New Age Books and Arts store in Calgary. The group's website proclaims CSL's Vision as follows: "The Calgary Centre for Spiritual Living is a beacon of spiritual illumination that inspires individuals to reveal their wholeness, co-creating a world that works for everyone." The final words of this

vision statement are those of the vision statement for the Centers in the United States (a world that works for everyone) but the rest of the statement is Calgary's own.

CSL Calgary shares the same doctrinal foundation as the United States as incorporated in the eleven belief statements written by Ernest Holmes titled *What We Believe* and they form the underlying philosophy of CSL Calgary even though they are not published on the website. However, the website does announce the group's Mission Statement:

The Calgary Centre for Spiritual Living makes accessible a way of living and thinking that reveals one's spiritual magnificence and personal power. We co-create an inclusive community that fosters an expansion of consciousness.

This mission statement more or less mirrors the statement of the parent organization, utilizing such key phrases as "spiritual magnificence" and "co-creating a world that works for everyone." Their guiding principles are summed up as follows:

- We provide everyone the opportunity to discover and reveal their spiritual potential.
- By the example of our lives, we demonstrate self-responsibility, integrity and Intentional co-creation.
- Using Science of Mind principles, we create an awareness and demonstration of Infinite possibility.
- We welcome everyone as we create an inclusive community that evolves individual and global consciousness.

These guiding principles focus on the experiential dimension of individual spirituality, with the clear ethical intention of creating a harmonious global community. While more

economical than those of the Centers for Spiritual Living, these principles do cover the same ground, however Calgary's approach also includes a reference to the ethic of inclusivity that is an important component for them and reflects a more contemporary approach to the acceptance of individuals regardless of race, gender or sexual orientation.

CSL Calgary is a non-profit organization that depends on member contributions for its operation. It also charges fees for various educational courses or workshops. In its marketing via a YouTube video, CSL Calgary positions itself institutionally as a "different kind of church," for those individuals who are seeking to connect with God, or a Higher Power or a Universal Presence, but do not find any connection with a traditional church. The video goes on to explain that CSL is "trans-denominational, inter-generational, not your usual church." However the marketing video does stress that CSL celebrates "age-old spiritual traditions from around the world" with a modern and "down-to-earth" delivery.<sup>208</sup> This somewhat "folksy" marketing approach does not reflect any change to the basic mix of spirituality that CSL offers, but rather reflects what the center has found produces the best results for them in Calgary and demonstrates a relationship to New Age principles. When asked how Calgary differs from the United States, or any other country, members were quick to point out that the differences are more a question of semantics, or "languaging" as Lesley McNamara and Pat Davis – both ministers at the center – put it:

One of our ministers moved to Yugoslavia and she cannot use the word god because it's outlawed where she is, so she has to use a different word to accommodate the local culture, like the same way in Kenya, so the principles are

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<sup>208</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1PMg8HW6ueI>

the same, but the ‘linguaging’ will be used differently; so, the language is changing but the principles (teaching/theology) stay the same (Davis, McNamara, 2017).

Another member also pointed out that the basic teachings of the Spiritual Center remain constant – and is written into the agreement that each center must commit to – but clearly there is flexibility to accommodate local cultural or legislative needs – to “glocalize.” In conversation, Lance Rath, who is a member of the board of trustees, made reference to two occurrences in the international organization that underscore this flexibility and willingness to make allowances for cultural differences. For example, when it came to the question of naming the new group after the merger of two distinct organizations, the issue was resolved democratically through polling the members. The poll found that a majority of members strongly disapproved of the words “science” and “religion,” favouring instead a more secular name that recognized spirituality. This antipathy led to the name “Center for Spiritual Living,” showing a willingness not only to change language, but also to accommodate cultural shifts that were taking place among followers who were more comfortable with non-religious terminology (Rath, 2017).

Lance continued with another example of language being used differently in different parts of the CSL world to accommodate local cultural idiosyncrasies:

Here is another example of the religious science thing, there is a program that all the centers have where they teach (encourage) people to get a ‘spiritual practitioner’ and we wanted to change the term to ‘practitioners of religious science;’ the people from Russia were like, we can’t use that term ‘religion,’ if we use the term ‘religion,’ it is just not going to fly. We call ourselves spiritual

practitioners and we can't change the name. And there were centers in the South of the United States and other areas, they were saying, no, it must be 'religious science,' as this is what we are. So, still within the organization is this huge divide, which is entirely based on the culture where they are.

Even at the regional level, Lance remarked on the cultural differences between Calgary and Victoria, British Columbia, where he had once lived and attended a Center for Spiritual Living. There were, he further noted, cultural differences even within Calgary itself:

Our center moved once about five years ago and now we are about to move again. What's interesting about that is we still stay in Calgary, we are just moving to different areas of the city and it is funny because different areas of the city have their own little subcultures as well. We keep the core people as you go as well, so, I think any time you get a new mix of people you get a little bit of a new culture for sure, so, does the center itself have a culture – Absolutely. Does it change as the membership changes – Absolutely.

However, Lance also remarked that the culture of the Centre is, to a certain extent, a reflection of the minister who can exert considerable influence over the look and feel of the group (Rath, 2017). For example, Pat Campbell, the senior minister of CSL Calgary, is encouraging families with children to join the Center, even though children are noticeably absent from most New Age groups because they are not considered mature enough to take the courses required to join the journey to spiritual enlightenment. Pat, however, loves children, and in an effort toward inclusivity organizes "Funday School" to help reveal to children their "inner greatness." We saw in the mission statement that

inclusivity is an important attribute for CSL Calgary, as it is with many contemporary religious organizations, and it is equally reflected in Pat Campbell's welcoming of families to CSL demonstrating the ability of the leadership within CSL to establish a unique cultural identity for each branch.

There are other groups that follow SOM teaching and do devote time and energy to include children in their practices. Divine Science, for example, is one such organization that has a section on its website that outlines what they teach their youngest members. This instruction asserts that God is the life that is within each of them and within all creation, regardless of race, creed or colour. The group says that God can be called many things, but the name is less important than recognizing that God is the higher power. Children are taught that God is a God of love, and we obey his laws through love not fear; sin is explained to them as a mistake that we make and when we make mistakes, God does not punish us for that mistake, it is the consequence of the mistake that is our punishment. Members of Divine Science also encourage their children to obey spiritual laws and to pray or meditate every day, not just on days of worship. They explain to children that heaven is now, so they are living in heaven now and God's love can heal them now. God is also truth and beauty, peace and harmony, and as they grow to be more like God their lives will be filled with health, happiness and success. Finally, they teach that "nothing is too wonderful to happen; nothing is too good to be true, everything is possible through me and you."<sup>209</sup>

Pat also remarked that the center is accepting of all religious backgrounds, and this approach can lead to differences in "style" rather than substance:

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<sup>209</sup> <http://divinescience.com/beliefs/ourchildren.htm>

...in our philosophy we are wide open, very accepting and honouring all the different paths to a god... a few of our practitioners grew up in a Christian revival, gospel kind of church, so, they bring that kind energy to their Sunday celebration and I have not had this experience before, so, I am getting to have that experience. They have brought their culture into a religion I would say, but it did not change the tenets of the religion (Campbell, 2017).

Kenda Swanson, another member and practitioner or teacher, made an eloquent observation expanding on this point:

So, most people who subscribe to our center are predominantly Christian, mostly Catholics, they come with those beliefs and that knowledge, but they are also seeking some sort of relief from concepts like, for example, original sin. We don't believe in original sin, and they come to the center seeking some sort of relief, almost like they want to be told that there is no original sin.

And in another instance, when she was talking about changing her teaching methods to account for different religious backgrounds, she was quick to point out:

We believe in 'ones' and we teach 'ones:' one mind, one creator, one power and so there are principles that we are trying to communicate, no I would not modify... it is a languaging issue, for example, people don't want to be at 'church' but at a 'center,' because they are mad at church, right? Because we get the 'un-churched,' they grow up in a particular church tradition, they did not like the message and they come to us, because we are non-denominational, but they kind of like to have the same roots from church that they had in their old system,

but they don't want to see the word god, they would like the word spirit, creator of the universe, one light (Swanson, 2017).

Kenda describes the institution of CSL, particularly from the cultural demographics or religious make-up of the Calgary Centre. She refers more specifically to the religious backgrounds of the membership:

I think the culture is what influences religion, so, our group is influenced by the culture of the people who are attending and when I say culture I also mean their religious background. We do have people who are not just from Canada, but they are from all over the world, but predominantly they are white Caucasian who come from a Christian or Catholic background (Swanson, 2017).

As with the city itself, the Calgary Centre is far from multi-cultural; it is predominantly composed of individuals and families who are white and have traditional Christian backgrounds. Thus the cultural impact that the leadership refers to stems more from disenchantment with their traditional religious upbringing than any major shift in teaching to accommodate a widely differing multi-cultural situation.

One East Indian native, Chandresh Johnson, who is a member of CSL Calgary, said he felt very welcomed at CSL, not at all discriminated against. He had been “church shopping” for quite some time before encountering CSL and finding a spiritual home. His background in India was that of religious tolerance and respect – his father is Christian and his mother a Hindu – but he felt very comfortable at CSL: “I feel like home and I can express and receive love and feel accepted the way I am, rather than being qualified for their acceptance” (Johnson, 2017). Chandresh, however, is more of an exception than the

rule with CSL, since the center has not yet been able to attract a more culturally diverse following in spite of the efforts of its leadership.

As far as ritual is concerned, the center conducts a number of different ceremonies and services. Its Sunday services, which it refers to as Sunday Celebrations (see illus. 20) are preceded by meditation and offer practical spiritual teaching – a mandate of all CSL member communities. Unlike Judeo-Christian religions, the term “celebrate” is not associated specifically with the observation of a religious feast or festival, nor is it dedicated to a specific event, such as Passover or the birth of Christ, nor even the “celebration” of the mass. Rather, CSL celebration promotes joy and happiness derived from the divine. It is not reserved for special occasions but forms an important part of the community’s efforts to create a feeling of positivity. Since 2012, the center has provided online archived services, programs, talks and music on its own YouTube channel (see illus. 21). There are 201 subscribers and the views for videos range from 60 to 150, with a total of 17,082 views. Themed playlists are also available that include the weekly videos, talks by guest speakers, testimonials and Sunday meditation.

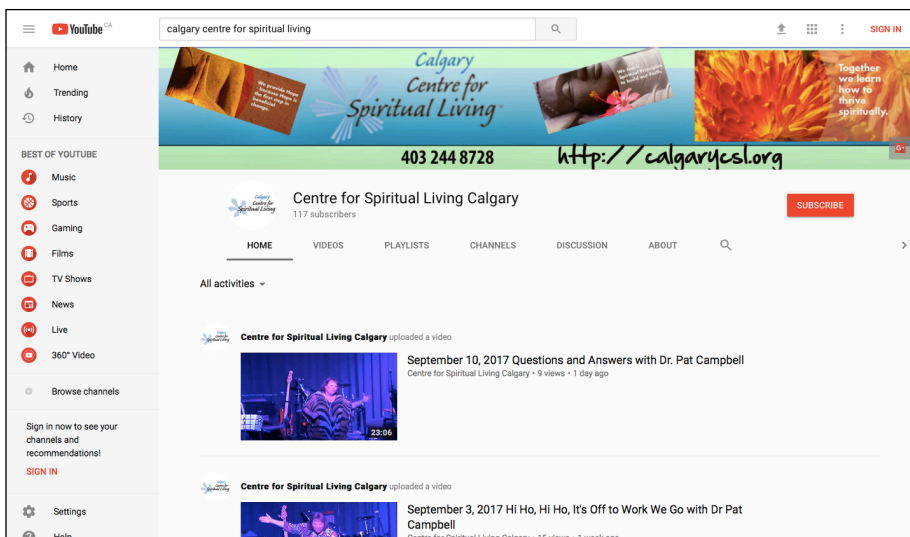
CSL Calgary is also part of “Meetup,” an online community of groups where like-minded people can find a group that might interest them. In this fashion, CSL can “sample” its programs in a neutral, non-threatening space that makes it easier for some people to experiment with new concepts and ideas without fear of being trapped in an environment from which they find it difficult to walk away. Through this medium, CSL reaches out to the broader community to encourage non-members to see what the center has to offer without making any commitments.

Music is very important at Calgary CSL, and they use local, paid musicians to deliver a wide range of musical styles from Gospel, Hip Hop and Rock to traditional hymns (see illus. 22). A new stage has been installed at the center to deliver a more theatrical experience (see illus. 23), which contributes to the creation of an environment of celebration.

(Illus. 20. CSL Calgary Official Website)



(Illus. 21. CSL Calgary YouTube Channel)



(Illus. 22. CSL Calgary Sunday Music)



(Illus. 23. CSL Calgary, the New Stage)



CSL Calgary also holds “The Get Ready for Love” workshop for single women, designed to empower and enlighten women as well as help them acquire the tools to seek out their soul-mates (these workshops can also be considered as social events as well as a service). This workshop is advertised on a Calgary event website called Carpe Diem. Guest speakers are sometimes invited to CSL to add to their curriculum and to broaden the center’s appeal to the general public. In May 2017 Sig Taylor, a well-known couples’

therapist, marriage counselor and business coach gave a talk on relationships. This focus on events for women reflects the demographics of Calgary CSL, which is predominantly white, female and middle-aged. It might also be considered an opportunity to increase membership.

The Centre conducts ceremonies of various types to celebrate different life events and all ministers are available for weddings, memorials, celebrations of life, baby blessings, house blessings and business blessings. Each ceremony is custom-designed to suit the individual or the family. So, the Centre performs life rituals that are similar to those that more traditional churches would perform, thus making any transition from a traditional church feel less jarring and to help people feel more comfortable in a spiritual environment that does not really understand itself to be a church. The Centre can appeal both to new members, who are looking for a spiritual awakening, and also to older members, who grew up in a traditional church environment where ritual played a very important role. However, the Centre's rituals are limited and the ministerial staff always keeps the principles of New Thought close to the surface. Lesley pointed out that the Centre is very open to the approaches of other faiths to spirituality and religious philosophy, but they insist on members adhering to the principles of New Thought: "Being in the present," she says, "feeling the moment and being spontaneous is the sign of our group, of course we have an agenda for our services and we follow certain steps when it comes to a service, but we are also open and ready to make changes based on that specific aura, god's presence" (McNamara, 2017).

As I described in the first chapter, continuous learning is fundamental to New Agers; they seek knowledge through bookstores, websites and specialty stores and in this

regard education can be understood to be a major element in New Age ritual. In this regard, CSL is committed to further education and offline courses are the staples of CSL's educational fare, offered in Visioning and Foundations in Science of Mind, both run over several weeks at a cost of \$295 plus registration. Workshops and discussion groups are conducted and a Wellness service is held on Wednesday evenings, following Science of Mind teachings. Special events are offered for teens, and prayer support is provided through nine "practitioners." These individuals have received specialized training and are licensed by the parent organization as "practitioners." They assist at Sunday services but are also available for individual prayer support and counseling, for which a fee is charged. A form is provided on the website to request such assistance.

CSL Calgary often organizes workshops and master classes dedicated to meditation and positive thinking, for example, a ten-week workshop titled, "Treatment and Meditation. Spiritual Practices for Daily Living" with Rev. Monika Krammer. This course focuses on developing lifetime habits of meditation and Spiritual Mind Treatment and is intended to train people in the technique. An individual's personal Spiritual Mind Treatment is reviewed and strengthened, in order for him or her to move on to treating other people. It is a ten-week course with a cost of \$295 and participants are required to have completed the Spirit of Mind Foundation class. The reading list includes *Journey of Awakening* by Ram Dass; *Can We Talk to God?* by Ernest Holmes; or completion of the *Emotional Freedom Technique* (EFT)<sup>210</sup> workshop facilitated by Kim Anderson certified

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<sup>210</sup> Emotional Freedom Technique is a type of brief therapeutic intervention and a self-help tool, often referred to as "acupuncture without needles" or "tapping therapy." EFT was developed in the early 90's and brings together the principles of traditional Chinese medicine and cognitive psychology by combining stimulation of a series of acupressure points with cognitive restructuring resulting in relief from negative emotions. EFT is endorsed by leaders such as Deepak Chopra, Brian Tracy, Tony Robbins and many more. It is used as part of a toolkit by

EFT practitioner and long-time member of the CSL Calgary. There is a \$20 fee for this workshop.

The term New Age was discussed, and while neither ministers nor members rejected the reality of New Age as a movement, they did reject New Age as a term that could be used to qualify CSL. As Lesley put it:

We are not fans of the New Age term, we prefer the term New Thought and for a lot of people the two might be the same, but the difference is there is a belief within our group that you can have a new thought and that new thought will change your life, so, if you change your thinking you can change your life; but it takes some work to change your beliefs. Whereas I think in New Age not a lot of thought is involved, it is just experiences and feelings; I guess this would be the difference. If someone comes to our center and says we are New Age and wants to check us out – Great! We are not going to poo-poo their idea, they are welcome anyway.

Or expressed in another way:

The way we differentiate is that New Thought is internal, there is nothing external you need, but New Age relies on crystals or Tarot so you are looking outside of yourself to feel better, but we say, no, you feel better because you chose to feel better, it is the good within and not without (in other words, self-actualization or self-help). So, the New Age relies on the external, like god is in the sky, god is out there etc., but we don't believe that. That's the difference, so, we are New Thought, not New Age (McNamara, 2017).

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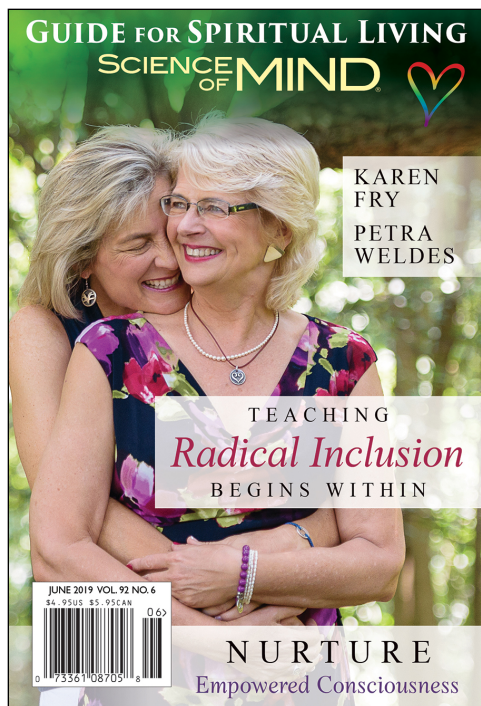
chiropractors, sports coaches and life coaches.

While it can be argued that the goals of New Age and New Thought are very similar, the adamant refusal to accept the term New Age is not in dispute. Adherents of New Thought most emphatically do not want to be known as New Age. In a secular environment, New Thought bears a striking resemblance to the practice of “Cognitive Therapy,” and as I have remarked, even recognizes this similarity on its website. Cognitive Therapy is a therapeutic practice that helps people who suffer from depression or other mental health problems to change their behaviour by changing the way they think. Positive thoughts lead to positive behaviour, and CSL is attempting to achieve the same outcomes through such ritual practices of New Thought as affirmative prayer, visioning, and meditation. It is not difficult to see the popularity in the secular world of “wellness” practices such as these to help to ease the ills of a discontented work force in the modern office. Meditation, positive thinking and positive behaviours are all being used currently to improve collaboration and a feeling of well-being in many corporations.

When we look at the ethics of CSL Calgary, we see that CSL’s website speaks about the group’s charitable contributions to a Drop in and Rehab Center in Calgary: “Through our donations of time, talents and treasures, we can provide hope, life affirming support and compassion to assist these individuals to reveal their wholeness and personal magnificence.” Support for three specific projects exemplified this charitable work: a blanket and towel drive; cold weather kits for the homeless; and a sorting center to sort donated items such as clothing and furniture that have been given by the general public. Any shortfall in this support is made up by CSL itself. The commitment to supporting charity appears to be in marked contrast to the parent organization in Golden, Colorado where there is no mention of charitable or environmental concerns, nor, as we noted

earlier any reference to diversity and non-discrimination. Inclusivity is a notable concern of CSL Calgary as evidenced by their mission statement and inclusion of children's programs in their services. The group of course is governed by Ernest Holmes' *Belief Statements* and the *Ten Core Concepts* developed for the SOM Foundation Course that includes ethical concepts of forgiveness and *karma*.

From the material perspective, CSL Calgary acquired its own building in 2017. CSL Calgary has access to all of the archived material of the parent organization including the recordings of Ernest Holmes and printed materials, plus, of course, its own archived materials, consisting of talks housed on YouTube and accessed from their



website. In addition, the monthly New Thought magazine *Science of Mind* (see illus. 24) is readily available to members.

(Illus. 24. *Science of Mind* Magazine, June 2019)

It is notable, and somewhat surprising, that the June 2019 issue of *Science of Mind* magazine, which originates in the United States, deals with the issue of diversity, specifically the issue of LGBTQ2+. Perhaps this article reflects the more explicit sensibilities concerning inclusivity that exists today and anticipates further efforts toward inclusivity globally.

From a Digital Religion perspective, CSL does not use online space to practice as a community, even though it does use it for other activities, especially as a means of

communication and broadcast and as a mechanism for teaching. In every interview I conducted, the interviewees could see a place for online practice, but it could never replace the offline experience of community. As Lance pointed out, “I like the face to face, hugs and that sort of thing, I like that stuff for sure,” because they can only be experienced in a physical space. He recognized the benefits of online, but less as a replacement for the offline experience and more from a broadcast perspective, such as online classes or watching live streaming of the Sunday Celebration for people who did not want to make the physical journey to the center. Even those ministers who, like Pat, use the internet for other purposes still referred to the energy she experiences in the offline environment:

When I am online, I definitely sense the energy of other people, but when I am in a physical space these senses are much stronger, but when I meditate alone (audio clip or whatever) it’s just me and when I am online with the group I notice the increase of energy, connection; if I put it on a scale, by myself it is two, if I am online it is five, and if I am with the group [offline] it is 10. You know what I mean, sharing the depth of consciousness, the volume is activated in a physical sense to me more, together online it is better than I am offline alone by myself.

(Davis, 2017)

The reference to energy was heard frequently throughout the interviews when people were asked to compare online and offline religious practice. The words “community” and “energy” in relation to physical spiritual practice was a recurring theme throughout the conversations with members and ministers alike, including those in their thirties such as Kenda and Chandresh who, while they were very comfortable with digital technology,

still preferred to be part of a physical group to experience the energy that the community produces. Leslie, however, did recognize the ability to connect with a larger audience online:

So, for me the internet gives me a better opportunity of connections, it deepens the connections. I heard an interesting thing recently: if you only are connected locally, you can only solve your problems from the local consciousness, but when you are connected on a bigger scale then you can solve your problems from a broader community, you know this is the global connection and I have a global insight into it. (Johnson, Swanson, 2017)

On a personal level, Lesley is involved in getting the story of non-violence out to as many people as she can and her chosen vehicle is primarily the social medium of Facebook. She uses the internet as a means of expanding her own understanding of social issues and practicing “Social Gospel,”<sup>211</sup> a Christian term that Lesley appropriates to explain her own social conscience, which she does through consulting with the marginalized, helping people with their social issues, to overcome addiction or antisocial behaviours. While not a religious practice, it is a tool she readily espouses in her ministry: “It really expands my consciousness of practicing online spirituality. So, two main things, connectedness and second, expanding your consciousness, awareness of social issues” (McNamara, 2017). By contrast, for Pat, the online minister, the introduction to online religion was from a purely practical perspective. She lived too far

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<sup>211</sup> The Social Gospel was a movement in Protestantism that applied Christian ethics to social problems, especially issues of social justice such as economic inequality, poverty, alcoholism, crime, racial tensions, slums, unclean environment, child labour, inadequate labour unions, poor schools, and the danger of war.

from a learning center to take courses to become a minister, so she took them online and upon receiving her license she continued to practice online for Calgary.

The low level of interest in the practice of online spirituality in Calgary CSL can perhaps be explained by the demographics of the congregation. Most members are older than forty-five and there are few young people and even fewer children. The congregation is mostly middle-aged Caucasian women, so the level of comfort with the medium for the ministerial and teaching staff and for the members is low: "I think the more experience you have doing religion online the more you get comfortable and when you are comfortable then it allows other people that you interacting with to feel a bit more comfortable," a comment from Pat. When questioned about the idea that the internet offers safety and anonymity to people who do not feel comfortable being with others physically, the interviewees saw the benefit of the medium for such folks. Still, they felt that this factor was irrelevant for CSL, since the group is so diverse and welcomes everyone into their meetings no matter their race, religion, sexual orientation or gender. One interesting fact that came to light in the course of my interviews is that in one center in California, Sunday Celebrations have actually been abandoned in favour of exclusive online services. This departure may reflect a different congregational mix or it may be a simple matter of economics. However, it does indicate that the organization as a whole is not against web-based ritual.

#### **4.4 Conclusion.**

As I have demonstrated, the parent operation in the United States exerts control over its Calgary group by insisting on a formal agreement and a commitment to follow the by-laws of the organization. It also encourages the purchase of a visual identity package that includes the parent organization's logo, communications templates and website design. Even though the bylaws have leeway for local cultural influence, CSL Calgary does not take advantage of this opportunity. Pat, the senior minister or Spiritual Director, as she is called, is from the United States and Pat, the online minister, actually works out of her home in the United States. Local cultural influence in CSL Calgary is negligible. The demographics of the congregation are primarily older, white females who are attracted by the current offerings of CSL. There is, therefore, little reason to make allowances for local cultural needs. No doubt the congregation is a mirror image of the average CSL congregation in the United States and reflects the appeal of New Age teaching to this demographic. It is noteworthy that in my interviews, both Lance and Pat referred to "languaging" issues in reference to local cultural differences, but these were in countries that were not close to the United States in culture or geography. Lance's references to changes in local Calgarian sub-cultures were probably more reflective of neighbourhood values than of real cultural differences. The North American CSL operations are quite homogenous with "no surprises." However, the one apparent significant difference in CSL Calgary is the focus on inclusivity, both in statement and fact.

Calgary's online presence is also quite typical of a contemporary New Age group. Its use of a website, a YouTube channel and Social Media is limited to broadcast and communications functions. The only notable exception is the virtual minister Pat, who

delivers web-based meditation classes as well as web-based consultations. She mentioned that she has students in her classes from all over North America, as well as from other countries. Both Lesley and Pat recognize the benefits of practicing online religion, largely the bigger audiences and the potential for “connectedness” - but they also felt that physical meetings were more conducive to generating the “energy” and “community” that is a common theme of the group.

## **Chapter Five: Unity Spiritual Center: One God, Many Paths.**

### **5.1 Introduction.**

The final New Age group I examined is Unity Vancouver, the largest of the three groups in this project. Unity Vancouver is affiliated with the parent organization Unity in the United States and it is also a member of Unity Canada. It is not possible to consider Unity Vancouver without first gaining some insight into Unity Worldwide Ministries and its headquarters in Unity Village, Missouri. To do so, I make use of archival photographs and illustrations that reveal the parent organization's history and development over a number of years to become a large, multi-layered religious organization with a global publishing and education operation. Its online and offline presence and use of digital technologies will be investigated, as will its business model and governance, its culture and demographics, and its global profile. Consideration of this global influence will lead us to an analysis of Unity Canada and Unity Vancouver in sub-chapter 5.3. Unity Canada is an association of all unity groups in Canada and acts as an administrative association for Unity in the United States. All Canadian Unity groups and leadership must be members of Unity Canada. Having located Unity Vancouver within its international and national contexts, we will be in a strong position to examine Unity Vancouver -- its founders, its history and development and its structure, as well as the nature of its relationship to the parent organization in the United States. My analysis of Unity Vancouver's culture will be particularly concerned with the ways in which it reflects local differences compared with its parent. I will of course be analyzing this group in the context of the Scott and Smart seven dimensional model. I will also assess how Unity

Vancouver performs in an online space, as well as the influence of its parent organization upon Unity Vancouver in the online environment.

## 5.2 Unity Worldwide Headquarters at Unity Village

Unity Center is a well-documented, well-organized body with a long and developed institutional history. Its narrative begins with its foundation in 1889 by Charles Sherlock (1854 – 1948) and Mary “Myrtle” Caroline Page (1881 – 1931) Fillmore (see illus. 24). In this photograph we see the couple as young adults in the inset pictures when they were beginning to develop “Society of Silent Unity,” and then in their later years in the full photograph when the organization had grown. Charles is shown with a candle and book, representing, no doubt, his role as author and educator and perhaps Myrtle is sitting at a writing desk to suggest her role in the “Prayer Support Group.” The group originated from Myrtle’s healing prayer circles, held in the living-rooms of its members, and grew to be a large international movement with a substantial physical presence at the center in Kansas City. First called “Society of Silent Unity” (see illus. 25), the name was simplified to “Unity” reflecting more closely what the organization had become; no longer just a prayer group but a fully-fledged religious entity incorporating many religious services and rituals such as prayer groups, Sunday services, baptisms, and Eucharist and so on.

Charles and Myrtle Fillmore’s solemn commitment to the Society of Silent Unity was endorsed in 1892 when the couple signed a covenant dedicating themselves to Silent Unity:

We, Charles Fillmore and Myrtle Fillmore, husband and wife, hereby dedicate ourselves, our time, our money, all we have and all we expect to have, to the Spirit of Truth, and through it, to the Society of Silent Unity.

It being understood and agreed that the said Spirit of Truth shall render unto us an equivalent for this dedication, in peace of mind, health of body, wisdom, understanding, love, life and an abundant supply of all things necessary to meet every want without our making any of these things the object of our existence.<sup>212</sup>

In the same year, the magazine *Unity* was first published and Dr. Harriet Emilie Cady (1848 – 1941)<sup>213</sup> wrote a series titled *Lessons in Truth* for the new magazine. The series was later compiled into a book under the same name and this publication served as the seminal work for the group. The group quickly grew and in 1906 the Fillmores were among the first ordained ministers of the organization, though a formal program to train ministers did not begin until 1931.

(Illus. 25. Charles Sherlock and Mary “Myrtle” Caroline Page Fillmore, Founders of Unity)

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<sup>212</sup> <http://www.unity.org/archives/articles/dedication-and-covenant>

<sup>213</sup> Harriet Emilie Cady (July 12, 1848 – January 3, 1941) was an American homeopathic physician and author of New Thought spiritual writings. Her 1896 book *Lessons in Truth, A Course of Twelve Lessons in Practical Christianity* is now considered one of the core texts on Unity Church teachings.



(Illus. 26. Society of Silent Unity)



In this photograph Charles Fillmore is shown at the entrance to the Society of Silent Unity, and within the sign shown next to him can be seen the name “Unity Tract Society,” another organization started by the Fillmores. In his book *The Household of Faith (The Story of Unity)*, James Dillet Freeman wrote that in 1897 the Fillmores changed the name of the *Unity Book Company* to *The Unity Tract Society* in order to “relieve the Publication Department of the appearance of a commercial venture.”

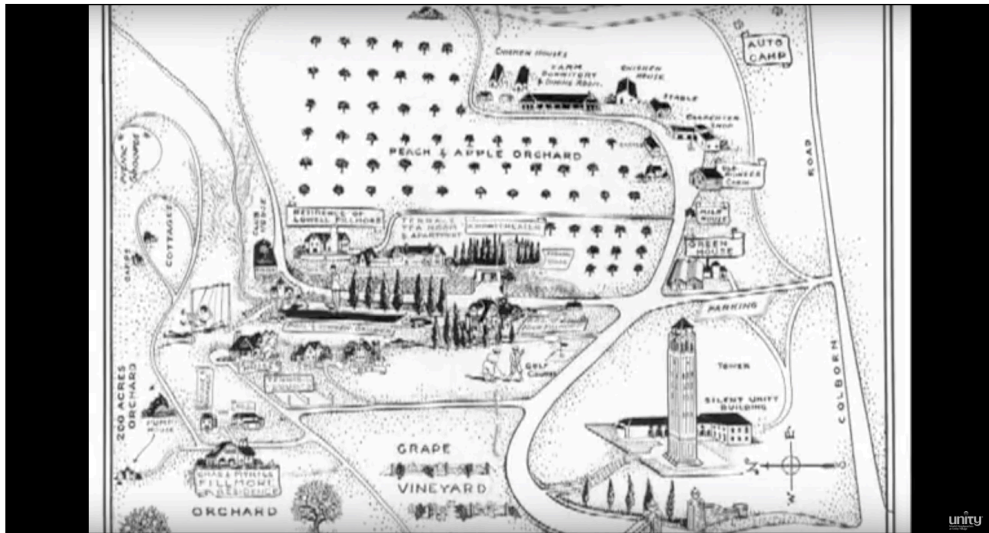
Freeman quotes Charles Fillmore as saying:

The dollar tag has been so persistently hung onto this movement in its various departments that it has become known to the public at large as a new system of therapeutics, with the usual financial appendix, instead of a religion. That people may more fully understand that there is no element of financial gain in our Publication Department we purposely adopted the word ‘tract,’ which is a synonym of religious literature issued without the idea of gain. *This is not a business, but a ministry*” (pp.70-71).

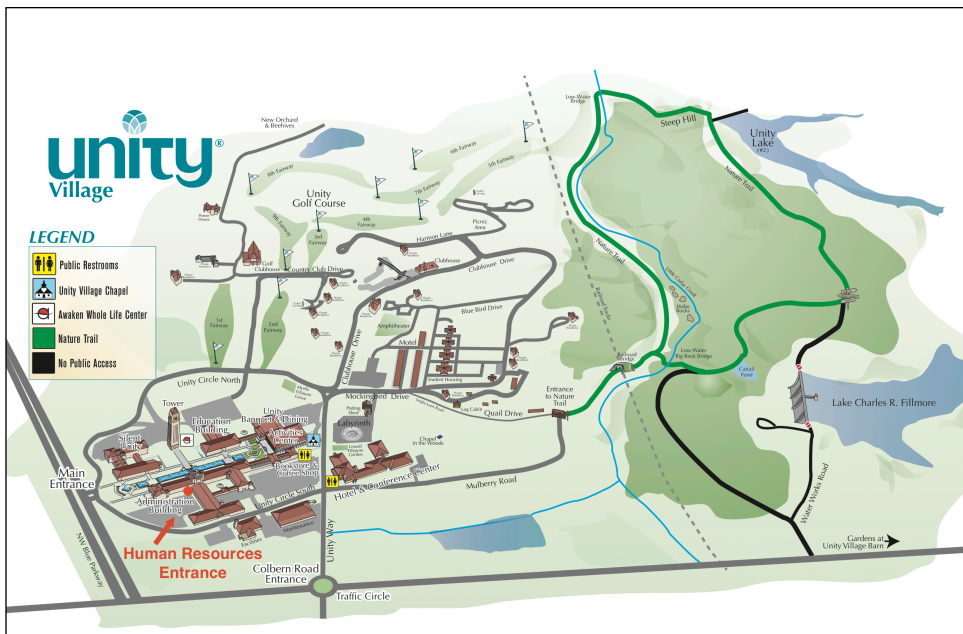
Originally the main purpose of Unity tracts was to show Silent Unity workers how to respond to requests for prayer and was never intended to evangelize or even to provide information directly to the public. In a book printed in 1924 entitled *Unity Tract Index - A Guide For the Study of Unity Tracts*, Unity said, “most of our tracts were printed primarily for the use of Silent Unity in instructing those who ask this Society for its help in overcoming ills and inharmonious of various kinds ... the tracts indexed in this book are those that are used daily in our Silent Unity work.”

Unity Village, the headquarters of the organization, began as a weekend and holiday retreat for the family in 1919 (see illus. 27), and has grown to become a residential, educational and activity center that offers Sunday services and classes, workshops and public events, in addition to maintaining a large publishing enterprise (see illus. 28).

(Illus. 27. Unity Village, Original Plan Designed by Waldo Rickert Fillmore late 1920s)

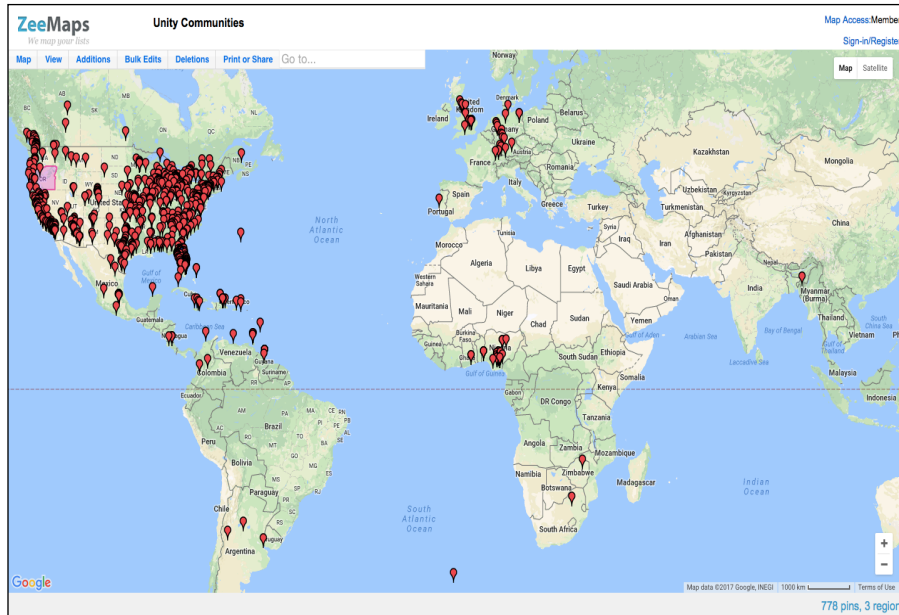


(Illus. 28. Unity Village Now)



Unity Village has developed into the headquarters for the global organization that Unity is today (see illus. 29), with a large group of 837 branches, mostly found in North America and the Caribbean, but with representation in Africa and Europe.

(Illus. 29. Unity Worldwide)



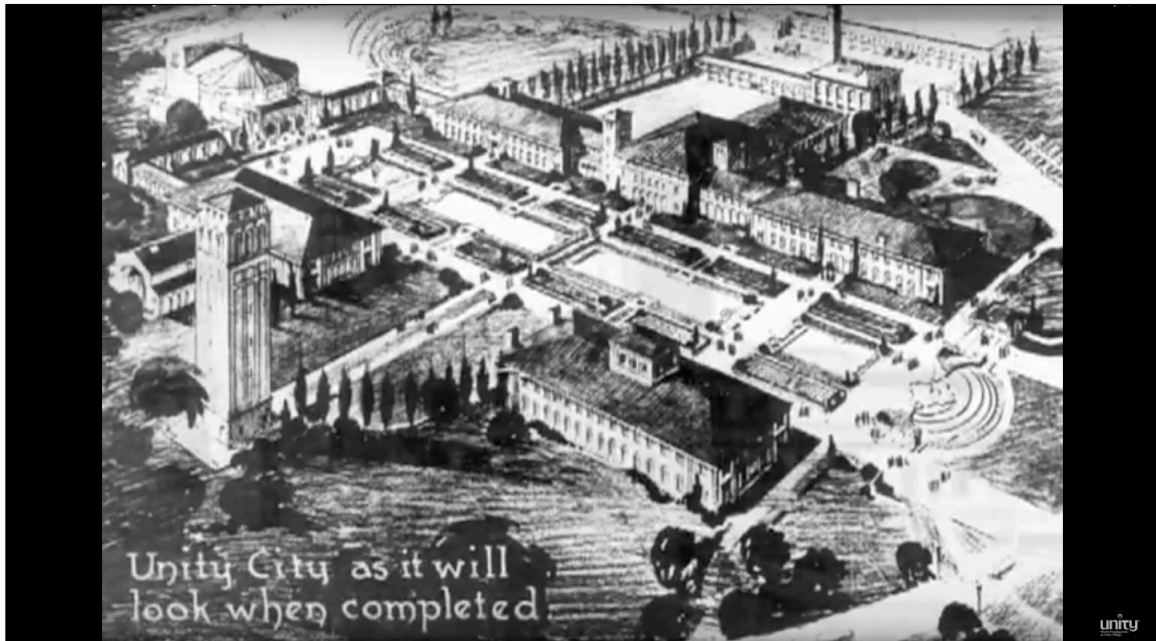
The Unity organization is well financed with substantial real estate holdings and business enterprises. Unity Village, for example, sits on a large site of fifty-eight acres (twenty-three hectares) about twenty-six kilometers from downtown Kansas City and is the largest and richest component of Unity’s material culture. In the early years of the village, Unity workers and their families camped in tents and cabins, but by 1921 these temporary structures were being replaced with more permanent buildings, erected by Unity workers themselves, which included a clubhouse where employees could entertain their families and friends. In the 1920s Waldo Rickert Fillmore (1884 - ?), the son of Charles and Myrtle, and a graduate of the Art Institute of Chicago, planned the village and designed some of the early buildings, including a house for himself and his parents.

During the construction oil and gas were discovered on the property when drilling for water and these natural resources were used to heat the buildings and illuminate the streets. Water was never found, so two large lakes were constructed, and a big tank incorporated into Unity Tower to provide the village with water pressure. More acreage

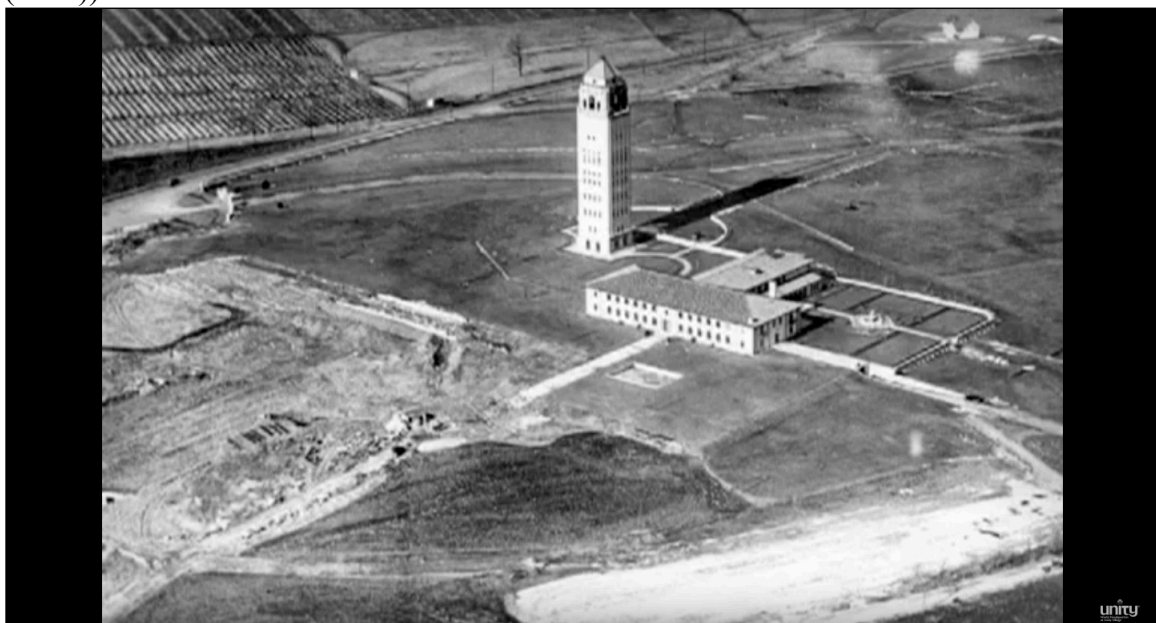
was added to the original property after the Second World War, and it was farmed as market gardens and orchards, from which the village produced up to 53,000 liters of cider each fall at its peak. The farms now grow organic produce, selling fruits and vegetables. In addition, Unity Village has always been a sanctuary for wildlife, because the Fillmores banned hunting from the beginning. The woods are now home to deer, Canada geese and many species of local birds. The Fillmores built a self-sufficient, self-contained community, a sanctuary for the organization that supported their own worldview of environmentalism.

Waldo Fillmore travelled to Italy for inspiration for the central buildings, which replicate the stucco and red tiled roofs, arches, breezeways and fountains that he fell in love with there. Notably, Unity Tower was modeled on Italian bell towers Richard had admired on this trip (see illus. 30 and 31). Consecration of the Education Center and Unity Tower, the first structures to be built, occurred in 1927; in 1989 both structures were listed on the National Register of Historic Buildings as part of the Unity School of Christianity Historic District. The Education Center housed the original Silent Prayer Ministry and today is home to the Unity Institute and Seminary. It includes classrooms, library and archives. On the first floor of the Education Center is the Fillmore Chapel, where Charles and Myrtle lectured and prayed. In 2017 it was restored and now looks exactly as it did ninety years ago.

(Illus. 30. Unity Village)



(Illus. 31. Unity Village's first two buildings, the Education Center and Unity Tower (1927))

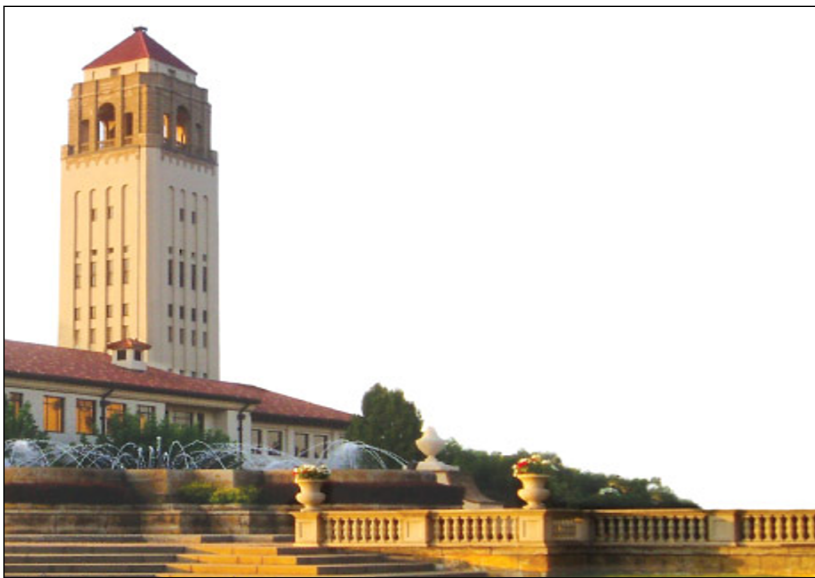


The land holdings were incorporated as a Missouri municipality in 1953 and the village elects a town council and a mayor, maintains its own roads and utilities and even has its own zip code. The Center boasts a hotel, restaurant and conference center that also

functions as a wedding venue, hosting more than seventy wedding ceremonies a year. At its peak in 1970, there were 242 residents living in the village, though the number has declined to about 80 today. A census in 2010 revealed the demographic make-up of the village to be predominantly middle-aged (median age 52.5 years), white (85.9%), single (73.8%) and female (65.7%).

Silent Unity, Unity's worldwide prayer ministry, operates from a building constructed in 1989 as a centennial year project. The building is topped with a lighted cupola that symbolizes continuous prayer (see illus. 32).

(Illus. 32. Unity Worldwide Ministries Prayer Building)



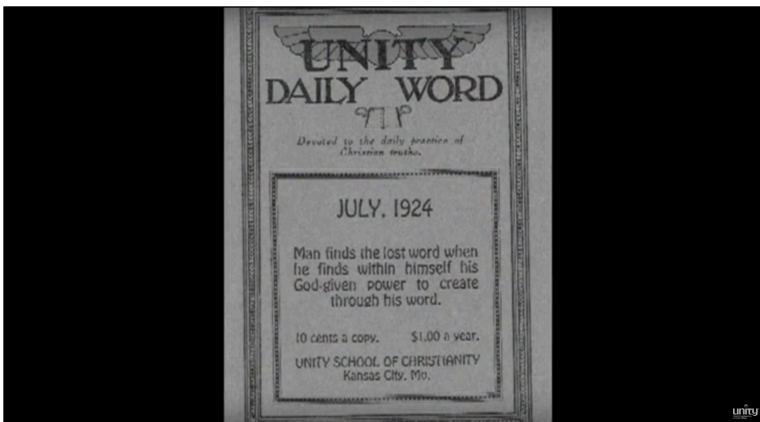
Honouring the connection of body and soul, the building contains a twenty-four-hour fitness center for employees and guests. Prayer Associates respond to requests twenty-four hours a day, every day of the year, which amounts to six thousand requests daily or some two million requests annually. Unity Village Chapel, completed in 1975, is where Sunday services, are held and where classes, workshops, conferences and public events are also hosted (see illus. 33).

(Illus. 33. Unity Village Chapel)



Unity is probably best known for its publication, *Daily Word* magazine, which started in 1924 with about 6,000 subscribers (see illus. 34).

(Illus. 34. Unity Daily Word Magazine, 1924)



That number has grown to over 1 million today, and the magazine is offered in print and online, including mobile versions. It is available in six languages and eighteen foreign editions, which are distributed in 150 countries. This magazine represents a significant contribution to the material culture of Unity, given its longevity and global circulation, and demonstrates Unity's commitment to utilize the latest digital platforms to reach as large an audience as possible.

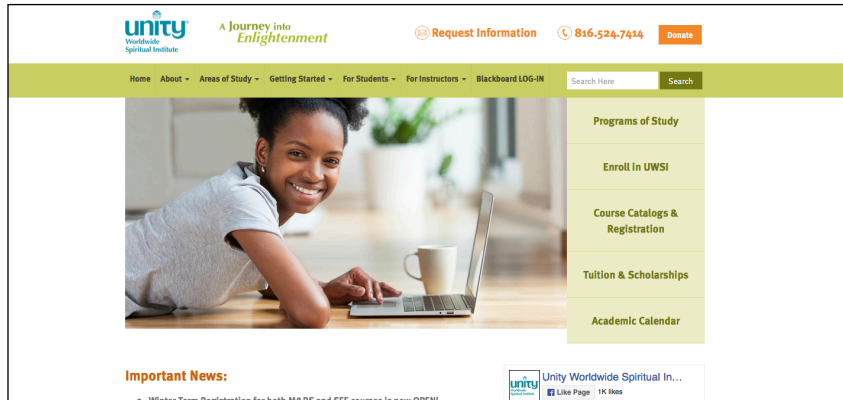
Institutionally the Center is very much modeled on a modern business organization. It is structurally flat across all divisions, but with management in each division reporting to various boards. For example, Unity World Headquarters at Unity Village (UWH) serves constituents and those seeking spiritual guidance through prayer support, publications, retreats and events as well as online resources. By contrast, Unity Worldwide Ministries (UWM) supports ministers, leaders and communities with education, consultation and resources (see illus. 35).

(Illus. 35. Unity Worldwide Ministries, Official Website)



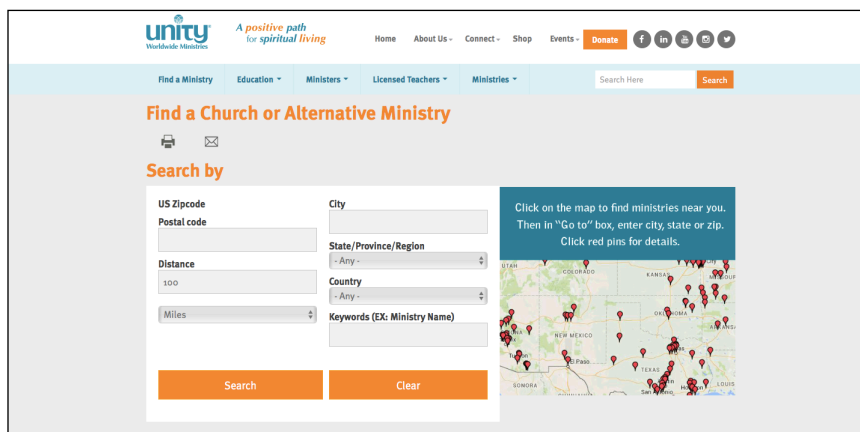
A third division, Unity Worldwide Spiritual Institute (WSI), provides spiritual education through online courses. Management of these divisions is conducted through a Board of Directors, an Executive Team and a Board of Trustees (see illus. 36).

(Illus. 36. Unity Worldwide Spiritual Institute, Official Website)



Unity is a global organization with 837 branches in thirty countries and the majority of these branches can be found in the North America, however there are thirty-three branches in Germany and forty-four in Nigeria (see illus. 37). Further enhancing its global reach, Unity has embraced the benefits of modern technology offered through a web-based application (app.) to provide instant access for those seekers of spirituality to find a local Unity Center. Searches are made by urban postal codes all over the world.

(Illus. 37. Unity, a Global Organization)



In order to reach as many potential (and existing) members as possible, Unity, like any contemporary organization, uses the internet to reach these audiences. As a means to engage its audiences proactively, Unity has adopted into its structure many of the

communications platforms found on the internet – Social Media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest<sup>214</sup> are used to talk about Unity news, to promote upcoming events or Unity programs, to fundraise and to communicate Unity tropes or memes about self-awareness and spiritual growth. Pinterest is used somewhat differently, of course, because of the nature of the platform, so Unity incorporates pictures and photographs with quotations from current and historical spiritual writers. For example, one of the posters shown on Unity’s official Pinterest page inspires users with a daily positive message on a background of sunrise over the ocean, “Today is a new day, a day in which I lay down any fear or stress, a day in which I needn’t be worried or concerned. Today I choose to live in peace.”<sup>215</sup>

The other internet platform that Unity employs with regularity is YouTube where visitors to the Unity page can play archived sermons or music videos, view talks or Sunday services, play music for meditation and prayer as well as look at video histories of Unity and its founders. For instance, the YouTube Video titled *What Will You Follow? Your Faith or Fears?* published on December 11, 2017 looks at the challenges and opportunities of trusting in faith or being influenced by fears.<sup>216</sup> The organization also uses the internet to provide resources to its ministers around the world, through delivery of online courses to those ministers, teachers and to its members, and as a means to file or archive material for review by members and ministers alike. Unity’s uPray application, a specialized mobile tool that enables the user to more easily request prayer support from

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<sup>214</sup> Pinterest is a web and mobile application company that operates a software system designed to discover information on the World Wide Web, mainly using images and on a shorter scale, GIFs and videos. The site was founded in 2009 by Ben Silbermann, Paul Sciarra and Evan Sharp. In April 2017, Pinterest announced 175 million monthly active users.

<sup>215</sup> <https://www.pinterest.ca/unitysf/daily-word/>

<sup>216</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0fd1zK9w0B8>

Silent Unity, is not only an important example of Unity's commitment to modern online communications vehicles, but also an opportunity for them to once more reinforce the power of affirmative prayer and positive thinking to an audience feeling somewhat vulnerable or needing help. The one thing that Unity does not do online is a real-time service with an online congregation.

The underlying philosophy or doctrine of Unity is summarized in the five basic principles that guide it. These principles are drawn from a variety of religions and, as their website proclaims, members should apply Unity's teachings based on their own spiritual understanding, to be enhanced through reflective prayer and meditation. The principles are:

1. God is the source and creator of all. There is no other enduring power. God is good and present everywhere.
2. We are spiritual beings. The spirit of God lives within each person; therefore, all people are inherently good.
3. We create our life experiences through our way of thinking.
4. There is power in affirmative prayer, which we believe increases our awareness of God.
5. Knowledge of these spiritual principles is not enough. We must live them.

The first two principles state that God is good and since God lives within each person, therefore all people are inherently good. This sentiment is more positive than the Christian concept of "original sin" that states that all humans are born with a tendency to be evil. The third principle speaks to creating a good life through the power of positive thinking and the fourth principle makes clear that affirmative prayer is intended to bring

people closer to goodness (God) and thereby improve their lives. Prayer is not intended as a means of seeking forgiveness, since based on the second principle, all people are inherently good, therefore unlike Christianity, forgiveness is unnecessary. Knowing and understanding these laws is not enough; one must live the truth he or she knows.

The most significant component of Unity's doctrine is based in Christian teaching, although it has adapted that teaching to its own pragmatic approach, "Unity is a positive, practical Christianity," according to the website of the parent group. The website continues:

We teach the effective daily application of the principles of Truth taught and exemplified by Jesus Christ. We promote a way of life that leads to health, prosperity, happiness, and peace of mind.

Unity is firmly rooted in its own version of Christianity and suggests that the Christ's teachings can be practiced daily; members believe "the true church is a state of consciousness within mankind and that each person is a unique expression of God" (King: 170). Unity also believes that everyone is "worthy and sacred," and emphasizes the "creative power of thought" in peoples' experience. It encourages taking personal responsibility to choose "life affirming thoughts, words and actions," claiming that "when people do this they experience a more fulfilling and abundant life" (ibid.). These statements are taken from Harriet Emilie Cady's 1896 book *Lessons in Truth, A Course of Twelve Lessons in Practical Christianity*, which is considered a core text of Unity.

Unity Church views God as "spiritual energy," which is present everywhere and is available to all people. Members of the church believe that God only seeks to express the highest good through everyone and everything and that ritual is designed to align oneself

with God's purpose. According to Unity co-founder Charles Fillmore: "God is not a person who has set creation in motion and gone away and left it to run down like a clock. God is Spirit, infinite Mind, the eminent force and intelligence everywhere manifest in nature. God is the silent voice that speaks into visibility all the life there is." He later states that: "God is your higher self and is in constant waiting upon you. He loves to serve, and will attend faithfully to the most minute details of your daily life" ([www.unity.org](http://www.unity.org)). The concept of God as "energy" or "spiritual energy" is common to the New Age and this method of dehumanizing the external God to become a "force" or "energy" within every individual allows the organizations to move away from a traditional God-figure of many churches to a controllable or exploitative force within us that can be mobilized through meditation and prayer to help each individual achieve personal goals. By so doing, responsibility for success lies within the individual and not in the hands of a fateful god, thus removing the element of chance or whim from his or her divine potential.

While somewhat dichotomous with the concept of change through positive thinking, Unity members still recognize and accept the divine nature of Christ, but only because they consider all human beings to be children of God and thus share the same divine qualities: the spirit of God lives in everyone just as it lived in Jesus. They believe he was a teacher who revealed divine potential and sought to teach others how to also reveal divine potential, such that Unity uses the term "Christ" to mean divinity for everyone; Jesus is the example of "the Christ" in physical form. Unity also teaches that its members are all expressions of God, that their "essential nature is divine" and therefore inherently good. Members are committed to expressing their divine potential as

demonstrated by Jesus, and that the more they become aware of their divine nature, the more they are capable of achieving this. This characterization of the Jesus figure once more permits Unity to maintain the individual member in the spotlight to reinforce the argument that divine potential is within reach of all, through the tools that Unity provides – that we do not have to depend on the love or grace granted to us by God or his surrogate – it is a power we all possess.

The Bible, primarily the New Testament, is a basic textbook for Unity and the group believes that scripture comes alive when it is understood, and becomes a guide to the experience of modern living. The founders, Charles and Myrtle Fillmore, studied the Bible both as “history and allegory, interpreting it as a metaphysical representation of each soul’s evolutionary journey toward spiritual awakening” ([www.unity.org](http://www.unity.org)). The organization however does recognize the Bible as a collection of texts gathered over many centuries and reflects the understanding and inspiration of the writers and their times. Unity’s interpretation of Christianity’s concept of sin and salvation is that sin occurs when we are separated from God, or rather “Good,” in consciousness, and salvation comes about when we turn our thoughts from fear, anxiety, worry and doubt to positive thoughts of love, harmony, joy and peace. Heaven and hell are states of consciousness rather than geographical locations and are guided by our thoughts, words and actions. Thus Unity considers itself as a positive, practical Christianity and teaches its followers to apply the principles of Truth in their daily lives, as taught and exemplified by Jesus Christ. The group believes that following such a way of life will lead to health, prosperity, happiness, and peace of mind and the organization strives to serve all people in spiritually and emotionally caring ways and does not discriminate on the basis of race,

gender, age, creed, religion, national origin, ethnicity, physical disability, nor sexual orientation. They express a real desire to create spiritually aware organizations that are non-discriminatory and support diversity; a message that all too often is not present in established churches. To effect inclusivity, Unity has established centers of study and worship across the world where people are introduced to and practice such Unity teachings as affirmative prayer and spiritual education. These practices are designed to address the physical, mental, and emotional needs of members and inspire those who are seeking spiritual growth.

Prayer has always been considered an important part of Unity ritual, and before the advent of electronic communications, Unity Village sent out over 38 million pieces of mail annually, and the tradition of the staff offering a prayer of thanks over incoming mail continues today. Since its inception, Unity has offered prayer support to anyone who requests it. Prayer support through Silent Unity has been provided globally for over 125 years (see illus. 38).

(Illus. 38. Unity Prayer Support Group, 1969)



Initially, petitioners submitted their prayer requests in person or by mail. Now, however, prayer support is offered on a twenty-four hour basis and can be requested through mail,

toll-free telephone at 1-800-NOW-PRAY (1-800-669-7729), and e-mail. “We’re here to pray with you: [www.unity.org/prayer](http://www.unity.org/prayer).” Prayer support is even available via a mobile application called uPray (see illus. 39), which is free. In all cases, Silent Unity prays affirmatively, serving with sensitivity, compassion and privately, and believing that God is present everywhere, and active in all lives. From the moment a prayer request is received, the sender is “lovingly enfolded in prayer.” After a response has been provided, the prayer request is placed in the Silent Unity Prayer Vigil Chapel, where prayer is continuous for thirty days. The Silent Unity prayer ministry is supported for the most part through voluntary offerings. Every prayer request is held sacred and, according to the Unity website, receives the same attention, regardless of the size of the donation or even the ability to donate. Instructions on how to request prayer and how to receive a response are all included in a form on the website or in the application. In a letter there is no limit on the length of the prayer request, however the supplicant is limited to 600-word requests in the application but can select a reply either by e-mail or letter. In addition to prayer requests, the mobile application has a list of affirmative phrases that proclaim to users the power of positive thought, for instance: “I allow only divine ideas to guide my way,” or “I am grateful for a full and prosperous life,” or “I am an agent of harmony in the world,” and “I open my heart to love and I am blessed with peace, joy and harmony.” These aphorisms mirror the third of Unity’s core five principles: “We create our life experiences through our way of thinking.” The application offers a recording of part of James Dillet Freeman’s (1912-2003)<sup>217</sup> *Prayer for Protection* with a link to the full

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<sup>217</sup> James Dillet Freeman (1912-2003) was a poet and a minister of the Unity Church. He was sometimes referred to as the “poet laureate to the moon” because his poems were twice brought to the moon, “a distinction he shares with no other author.” His 1941 “Prayer for Protection” was

prayer on the Unity website. In addition, the application also has a three-minute recording of music and words that helps the listener “quiet your mind, relax your body and refresh your spirit” through meditation and for users of the application who want more help there is a link to Unity website’s *Monthly Meditations*, where visitors can find multiple three-minute recordings, each based on a different subject such as: “Being Enough,” “Living Love,” “Grace,” “Joy,” “Life,” “Peace” to name but a few. This act of meditation relates to the final principle of the five that exhorts Unity members to translate knowledge into action.

Silent Unity’s Positive Prayer, in keeping with latest technological trends is now available as of 2019 via Amazon’s Alexa.<sup>218</sup> The simple voice command “Alexa, open Positive Prayer” followed by specific topic requests such as healing, prosperity and comfort, will activate these prayers through Alexa’s voice, which can be changed to any female (unfortunately no male voice is available yet) English accent, allowing Unity users to customize their Alexa to a familiar, local sound.

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taken aboard Apollo Eleven in July 1969 by Lunar Module pilot Buzz Aldren, and a microfilm of Freeman’s 1947 “I Am There” was left on the moon by James B. Irwin in Appollo Fifteen.

<sup>218</sup> Amazon’s Alexa is a voice activated, cloud based virtual assistant, delivered through Amazon’s Echo Dot Smart Speakers. It is capable of voice interaction, making lists, setting alarms, streaming podcasts or audio books and providing weather, traffic and sports as well as real-time information such as news.

(Illus. 39. Unity, uPray Application)



The increased use of religious applications such as those described above, however raises questions of authenticity and intention among scholars of Digital Religion. In the question of prayer as ritual, it also shifts control of this religious experience from the religious institution into the hands of the individual who is using the application. Of course, this approach is not out of keeping with the traditional concept of individual prayer, since those who offer prayers frequently do so alone and not within the context of a church or religious center. In this case, there can be no question of authenticity or intent; if an individual chooses to pray in private, they are doing so with the intention that their prayers are being directed to God or to the “energy” or “goodness” within them. The users are not responding to a clerical signal or to a liturgical mandate to follow a scripted prayer but to a desire to fulfill a personal need or duty. They are taking control of the process and choose when to start or end the prayer, what the topic of the prayer should be and what outcome they are seeking. In an article in *Digital Religion*,

Rachel Wagner<sup>219</sup> mentions Sherry Turkle's<sup>220</sup> observation in *Life on the Screen* (1995) that we are "drawn to do whatever it takes" to maintain a view of interactive robots and chat-bots as "sentient and caring" (Wagner: 85). Are we, then, really praying to God, or to some unknown individual in Silent Unity, or just to the digital platform on which the application was built? As Wagner suggests: "Since digital media, like social media, are used for a host of social encounters, if we send our fears and desires through the digital ether, we may assume an authentic encounter with God (or other believers) has taken place when all we have done is engage in a solo media performance."

In some ways the use of any applications, not just Unity's uPray, speaks to the transference of control of the religious experience from such institutional direction as the choreographing of ritual in a traditional church setting to personal choice in the selection and performance of ritual within the context of New Age. While such individualized actions may challenge assumptions about religious or spiritual authority in a traditional sense, they do ultimately point to the redefinition of authenticity, since they reinforce the personal choice of the individual user, supplicant, or worshipper, who gains increasing controls over their faith and practice. However, if applications do become a significant part of doing religion online, there will remain the debate of how authentic this ritual practice might be, since there is no secure way to identify the recipient of a prayer from an application on the one hand, nor on the other, of determining whether a ritual performed via an application has been carried out properly and acceptably. Ultimately, this intention will remain a question to be answered by the user, particularly when it

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<sup>219</sup> Rachel Wagner is Associate Professor of Religion at Ithaca College, USA. Her work centers on the study of religion and culture, particularly religion and film and religion and virtual reality.

<sup>220</sup> Sherry Turkle is the Abby Rockefeller Mauzé Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA.

comes to the New Age Movement. Indeed, it may be that in such instances institutional or authoritative corroboration of authenticity is irrelevant, since in the context of New Age it is the individual who designs his or her own path to salvation.

Prayer is such an important element of Unity that the use of an application and online and offline prayer support speaks to Unity's readiness to embrace practical solutions and to make changes to an established service in order to improve it and to expand access to it. Prayer is fundamental to the Unity philosophy of creating change from within by approaching the practice as a positive force in personal growth and change. If members, whether new or old, are to become committed members of Unity, they need to experience the change they are seeking through affirmative prayer as a proven therapy for achieving behavioural or attitudinal change. In other words, as practiced at Unity, prayer utilizes the same principles as the secular practice of recreational therapy,<sup>221</sup> cognitive behavioural therapy,<sup>222</sup> sometimes referred to as "feel

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<sup>221</sup> Recreational therapy, also known as therapeutic recreation, is a systematic process that utilizes recreation and other activity-based interventions to address the assessed needs of individuals with illnesses and/or disabling conditions, as a means to psychological and physical health, recovery and well-being. The purpose of the RT process is to improve or maintain physical, cognitive, social, emotional and spiritual functioning in order to facilitate full participation in life. Services are provided or directly supervised by a "Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialist" (CTRS). Recreational therapy includes, but is not limited to, providing treatment services and recreation activities to individuals using a variety of techniques including arts and crafts, animals, sports, games, dance and movement, drama, music, and community outings. Recreational therapists treat and help maintain the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of their clients by seeking to reduce depression, stress, and anxiety; recover basic motor functioning and reasoning abilities; build confidence; and socialize effectively. <https://www.nctrc.org/about-nctrc/about-recreational-therapy/>

<sup>222</sup> Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a short-term form of psychotherapy directed at present-time issues and based on the idea that the way an individual thinks and feels affects the way he or she behaves. The focus is on problem solving, and the goal is to change clients' thought patterns in order to change their responses to difficult situations. A CBT approach can be applied to a wide range of mental health issues and conditions, such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder and etc. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/therapy-types/cognitive-behavioral-therapy>

good” therapy.

Unity teaches affirmative prayer, which, the organization explains, connects the person with the spirit of the God that is within each person and employs positive thought about the desired outcomes. Unity suggests that affirmative prayer is what Jesus intended when he taught, “So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours” (Mark, 11:24). In other words, unlike conventional Christian understandings of prayer, which suggest that it is a way of informing God of one’s problems or an attempt to influence God’s decisions, Unity sees affirmative prayer as a means by which the person offering up the prayer may align with the power that is God. As Rosemary Ellen Guiley,<sup>223</sup> author of *Prayer Works* (1998), states:

Prayer is ineffective when it is accompanied or followed by negative thinking, or the endless repeating of affirmations. We have to put power and intensity into our thought, change our thought, and believe in the guidance we are receiving. If we spend energy on negative beliefs and feelings, we will get negative results, even if we, and others, pray daily for us. For example, if you pray for a job and then complain to others that you have no job or can’t find one, you are undermining your prayer. (Guiley: 67)

In short, Guiley asserts, affirmative prayer “sets into motion the forces that enable us to manifest what we pray for.”

As one would expect of a group that is based on Christian principles, other aspects of Christian ritual have had an influence upon the ritual life of Unity, but the forms they take have been adapted to fit the organization’s spiritual approach. Unity

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<sup>223</sup> Rosemary Ellen Guiley is an American writer on topics related to spirituality, the occult and the paranormal.

offers baptism, for example, but the practice takes a more symbolic than ritualistic form. Within the body of the Roman Catholic Christian tradition, for instance, baptism by water represents the “cleansing of the consciousness and the welcoming of a person into the body of the church,” or to look at it another way, Catholic baptism is an external ritual whereby the individual fully becomes a member of the church. In protestant churches however, baptism is generally understood to be a divine ordinance, a symbolic ritual that is a public declaration of faith and a recognition that one has already been saved, but is not necessary for salvation. By contrast to these Roman Catholic and Protestant approaches, spiritual baptism, as practiced at Unity, signifies the inflow of the Holy Spirit. Typifying the organization’s overall understanding of ritual, Unity’s point of view is that baptism is a mental and spiritual process that happens within the individual. As he or she becomes aligned with the spirit of God, baptism occurs as a result of prayer and meditation in silence. Indeed alignment with God is a recurring theme throughout Unity’s spectrum of rituals; it is the ultimate goal that ritual, teaching and prayer aim to achieve.

Christian communion is also performed at Unity, but again from a perspective that is different from that of the Roman Catholic and mainstream Protestant Christian churches. The Christian Communion, or Eucharist, is a rite commemorating the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples before his crucifixion. In the Catholic Church, once consecrated by a priest in the name of Jesus, the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ through transubstantiation. In the Protestant Church however, the ritual only serves to commemorate Jesus’ death and resurrection. By contrast, for Unity, the bread or body of Jesus Christ symbolizes the word of truth, and the “conscious actualization of God-life” is represented by the wine or blood of Jesus Christ. In other

words, Unity appropriates the ritual of communion to take advantage of what the organization believes to be the spiritual energy represented in the elements of the ritual.

Echoing the ritual practices of religious traditions other than the Christian, meditation is a ritual that Unity espouses and actively encourages. As with the organization's other ritual offerings, the primary purpose of meditation is as a means of aligning an individual with the spirit [of God]. Unity offers a vast array of guided meditation "products," both offline and online, in keeping with its aim to provide services that meet everyone's needs. In Vancouver, for example, there are offline meditation classes on Sunday mornings at the center's physical space on the one hand, and on the other, online via the center's website and YouTube channel. The range of video meditation courses offered through the Unity Worldwide Ministries' website include:

- Meditation for Everyday Living
- Meditation for Healing
- Meditation for Inner Peace
- Meditation for Guidance
- Meditation for Prosperity
- Meditation for Divine Order
- Meditation for Love and Comfort
- Monthly meditations and online video meditations.

From this list we can see that meditation is an all-encompassing ritual tool for followers at Unity to achieve many different states, from good health to prosperity to inner peace, all of which, the organization believes, feed holistically the "body, spirit and mind." Each course includes a recording of suitable text to guide the listener through the meditation

process with deep breathing, relaxation and to guide the listener's thoughts along the selected topic. The female voice is soft, caring and evokes calmness. The simple piano music accompaniment is equally relaxing and calming. The text is always positive and includes references to the divine, frequently naming God in thanks for our lives and well-being and each mediation ends with the spiritual affirmation "amen." The courses include short videos, produced in a similar fashion to the meditation guides but these are more prayer-like, offering blessings for marriage, for travel and include Psalm 23 and an Easter blessing, clear unabashed paeans to the Christian heritage of Unity.

Education is an important facet of Unity's services, and Unity Worldwide delivers a wide range of opportunities for spiritual learning, both on and offline. Unity Worldwide Spiritual Institute (UWSI) is responsible for education within the organization and offers online programs for youth and adults, including training to become a licensed Unity teacher and minister. The UWSI education program also offers Spiritual Education and Enrichment (SEE) classes for individuals seeking to grow in spirituality. The website provides access to resources as well as online education, through the UWSI, offering courses that cover Metaphysics, the History of New Thought and Unity, Healing and Wholeness, Hebrew and Christian Scriptures and the Teachings of Jesus. In addition there are courses in Unity's own theology and history, including New Thought and courses in personal development such as prayer, self-awareness and self-care, meditation and conversation skills. An eclectic mix of subjects that reference both the New Age practice of self-awareness and traditional Judeo-Christian history and beliefs. It is not surprising therefore that Unity emphasizes the importance of education in every personal spiritual journey.

All ritual and practice within Unity is experiential. Whether affirmative prayer, meditation, celebration or listening to a talk, there is always an intention, a goal to move a step closer to achieving self-awareness and spiritual enrichment. In Chapter One, “The History of the New Age,” I discussed that New Age spirituality was not passive, the practice of it is generally a singular personal endeavour and takes commitment to find the right teachers and gurus to help in spiritual healing and growth. This attitude is also present within Unity: followers must commit to taking appropriate educational courses to fulfill their obligations and must find their own path to self-awareness using the tools of prayer and meditation that Unity provides. In fact, the final principle of Unity’s Five Principles that I reviewed earlier is a command: “Knowledge of these Spiritual Principles is not enough. We must live them.” The third principle states, “We create our life experiences through our way of thinking.” So every life experience begins with the mental exercise of thinking it, followed by a course of actions such as education, affirmative prayer, and meditation and so on to achieve the desired experience.

It is enlightening to look at Unity from the perspective of ethics since there are few hard ethical rules for members to follow, like the ten commandments of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, but there are guidelines. For example, the second of the Five Principles that guide all Unity branches affirms that “all people are inherently good” and are therefore capable of following a good life based in the teachings of Christ by “committing to living up to their divine potential as demonstrated by Jesus.” Furthermore, Unity members are encouraged to take a personal responsibility to “choose life affirming thoughts, words and actions” that will lead to “health, prosperity, happiness and peace of mind.” One immutable ethical standard that the church espouses is that of

non-discrimination based on race, gender, age, creed, religion, national origin, ethnicity, physical disability, nor sexual orientation. The ethical rules for ministry however is clearly laid out in Codes of Professional Ethics (see Appendix 1) and these are extensive and cover all forms of misconduct. Every minister, spiritual leader, licensed Unity teacher, ministry group or spiritual educator must sign a Code of Ethics agreement. They all include the Five Principles, with additional rules for some, and cover professional conduct and liability issues. Essentially though, ethics for Unity members are personal compacts between themselves and the “indwelling God,” and the pursuit of their own happiness and well-being through affirmative prayer and the power of positive thinking.

### 5.3 Unity Vancouver

In order to understand further the context in which Unity Vancouver operates, it is important to examine the unique cultural, ethnic and religious landscape of Vancouver, which is on the West coast of Canada, in the Province of British Columbia. The population was estimated at 610,000 in 2016, making it eighth in Canada in terms of size. Between 2006 and 2011, the city enjoyed growth of 4.4%, somewhat lower than the rest of Canada, which grew at 5.9%. The Greater Vancouver area has a population in excess of 2.4 million, which means it is the third most populated urban area in Canada and the most populous in Western Canada. Because of its location, hemmed in by the Pacific Ocean to the West and the Rocky Mountains to the East, Vancouver is Canada's most densely populated city, with more than 5,249 people per square kilometer (13,590/sq mi). However, 74% of people in the Metropolitan Vancouver area live outside the city proper. The 2011 Census describes the racial and ethnic makeup of Vancouver as:

- European Canadian: 46%
- Chinese: 28%
- South Asian: 6%
- Filipino: 6%
- Southeast Asian: 3%
- Aboriginal: 2%
- Other: 9%

The history of immigration to Vancouver is comparable to the rest of English Canada. Early immigrants were a mix of English, Irish and Scottish, and for many years were the

largest ethnic groups in the city. This dominance is still identifiable in neighbourhoods such as Kerrisdale and South Granville. Germans are the second-largest European group. Since the 1980s, Vancouver has become increasingly diverse and over half of the population now speaks a first language that is not English. The city has one of the largest populations of ethnic Chinese in North America, many arriving from Hong Kong prior to the transfer of sovereignty from Great Britain to China. Migrants from mainland China increased this population in later years. South Asians, constitute another significant visible minority primarily of Punjabi origin. Immigration from Latin America was relatively strong in the 1980s and 1990s, but has slowed since that time. Immigration from Africa has also declined dramatically; the black population of Vancouver is just one percent, which is considerably lower than other city in Canada. Prior to the influx of immigrants from Hong Kong in the 1990s, the largest non-British groups in Vancouver were Irish and German, followed by Italian, Scandinavian, Chinese and Ukrainian. With the expansion of the Soviet Union many Eastern Europeans immigrated to the city, including Russians, Czechs, Poles, Romanians and Yugoslavs, followed by a wave of Greek immigration in the 1960s through the 1970s. About 11,000 Indigenous people live in Vancouver, and the city's West End neighbourhood is home a significant gay community. Vancouver is anticipated to continue to grow to 765,000 by 2041 with the population of Vancouver metro area reaching 3.5 million by 2041.<sup>224</sup>

Given this rich ethnic and cultural mix, it is hardly surprising that the West Coast enjoys a wide variety of religious expression. In 2016, Statistics Canada's National

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<sup>224</sup> <https://vancouver.sun.com/news/staff-blogs/b-c-breaks-records-when-it-comes-to-religion-and-the-lack-of-thereof>

Household Survey indicated that religions are moving in multiple directions, reflecting patterns noted throughout the developed world. Following a variety of world faiths based on their cultural roots, many new immigrants are becoming more devout, while other residents follow a more secular worldview or are becoming more spiritual on an individual basis rather than through organized religion. As a result of its diversity, Vancouver now has the fewest inhabitants of any major Canadian metropolitan area who identify as Christian, according to the National Household Survey, Statistics Canada's first major measurement of national religiosity since 2001. Only 41% of metropolitan Vancouver residents are Christian, compared to a national average of 67%.

Notwithstanding the city's population growth, the number of Christians declined by 4% to 950,000 in the second decade of the twenty-first century. The largest single Christian group in Metro Vancouver remains Roman Catholics, with 378,000 members. Another sizeable group is made up of those people who simply call themselves "Christian." The next biggest Christian groups or denominations in Metro Vancouver are, in order, the United Church of Canada (87,000), Anglicans (84,000), Baptists (42,000), Christian Orthodox (32,000), Lutherans (29,000), Pentecostals (25,000), Presbyterians (22,000) and Jehovah's Witnesses (10,000). Even though all Christians as a group constitute the largest single religion in the region, there is an equally large group in British Columbia and Metro Vancouver who claim no religious affiliation. Over 41% of residents (945,000) reported no religion. That is much higher than any other major city in Canada, or, for that matter, in North America.

As a comparison, the proportion of Canadians who claim no religious affiliation has risen from 16% in 2001 to 24% in 2011, and in Toronto, Canada's largest city and

arguably its most diverse, the figure is just 21%. When we include smaller cities in the review, the “least religious” towns in Canada are also both in British Columbia; 55% of the populations of Campbell River and Squamish claim no religion. Tina Chui, chief of ethno-cultural studies for Statistics Canada, suggests that the high rate of religious “nones” in British Columbia and Metro Vancouver stems from the region’s large groups of native-born Canadians and new Chinese immigrants (Pew Research Center June 2013: Canada’s Changing Religious Landscape). As a rule, Chui said, it is residents born in Canada, China, Hong Kong, Britain and Taiwan who are the most likely to claim no religious affiliation. Even though secularism is increasing in Western Canada, Chui admitted that many Canadians who claim “no religion” could well be indulging in non-affiliated spiritual practices in their homes or community. Very few of those who say they have no religion appear to completely reject religion. For example, in Metro Vancouver there are only 3,770 people who claim to be “atheists.”

Since Statistics Canada only measures formal religious affiliation, there is a lot of room for residents of British Columbia to perceive themselves as “spiritual-but-not-religious,” into which category would fall those who follow New Age or other spiritual practices. However, there is one other group that differentiates Metro Vancouver from other Canadian Cities: Sikh community also happens to be growing faster than any other community. The total Sikh population of Metro Vancouver has grown by almost 60% since 2001. British Columbia is the only province in Canada -- and in fact, the only jurisdiction in the world -- where Sikhism can claim to be the second largest religion. Among the 455,000 Sikhs in Canada, 44% of them live in British Columbia and Metro Vancouver alone has 156,000 Sikhs, constituting 6.8% of the city’s population.

Buddhism is the third largest faith group in British Columbia. Buddhists account for 3.4% of all Metro residents, or 78,000 people and their numbers have grown by 5% since 2001. British Columbia now has a higher portion of Buddhists than any other province, no doubt reflecting the heavy influx of Chinese.

The fourth largest religion in Metro Vancouver is Islam, accounting for 3.2% of the total population. However, Vancouver's Muslim population is a smaller percentage of the total than Toronto's, which stands at 7.7% or Montreal's, which stands at 5.9%. Other world religions represented in Metro Vancouver are Hindus, at 1.8% of the population, and Jews at less than 1%. Finally, another category that has grown in the past decade is one that is termed "other religions" by Statistics Canada. It includes such groups as pagans, Baha'i and Unitarians. But this entire category is still quite small with only 17,000 Metro residents. For example, there are 265 Scientologists in Vancouver. The future religious landscape in Vancouver will undoubtedly reflect the ethnic make-up of the city, just as it does now. Immigration will continue to play a significant role and it is expected that the Chinese and Sikh communities will continue to be important, though Christians will remain the leading single religion for many years to come. Immigrants from Asia have resulted in non-Christian faiths now representing 33% of Canada's religious affiliations, while the global trend to individual spiritual expression will continue among certain groups. A brief look at New Age or spirituality in Vancouver reveals that it is well represented. There are, for example, about sixty-nine New Age stores and forty-five Meetup groups.

Institutionally, Unity Vancouver exists within the context of a national organization of Unity Canada, which is headquartered in Kitchener, Ontario, where it

shares an office the Kitchener branch of Unity. Unity Canada -- or to give it its full name, the Association of Unity Churches Canada -- is not an active center, it does not provide Sunday services or teaching, nor does it appear to offer any Canadian-produced resource materials. That said, Unity Canada is the Canadian voice and point of control for Unity Center in the United States, and it links its members to such United States resources as online education and prayer support. There are twenty-five Canadian Centers active in the following six provinces:

British Columbia – seven branches

Alberta – two branches

Manitoba – two branches

Ontario – twelve branches

Quebec – one branch

New Brunswick – one branch

Unity Canada has what it calls a “Unity Ministry in Motion” as well, which is used to help start study groups in Central and Eastern Canada. A study group is the embryo from which a fully-fledged Unity Center will grow. According to the website, Unity also has a Unity Internet Ministry that offers an online ministry for someone who is not able to make a physical journey, whether it is on one on one or group bases via Skype or Zoom.

Unity Canada’s role is to support the centers rather than individual members, as evidenced in “Article 1: Purpose” in its Bylaws:

Unity Canada shall formulate policy pertaining to the interrelated activities of Unity churches in Canada and work to co-ordinate excellence in ministry in existing and emerging ministries.

Its Vision and Mission Statements also articulates this supporting role:

A world powerfully transformed through the growing movement of shared spiritual awakening. To serve and equip ministries and emerging leaders by providing Spirit-led: Education support, leadership consultancy and communication.

Membership in Unity Canada is restricted to the centers themselves, ministers and Licensed Unity Teachers (LUT) associated with the centers. All members must agree to “Abide by, and act in accordance with, the corporation’s Charter, Bylaws, rules, regulations and policies.” Structurally, then, the Unity organization operates in a similar fashion to any modern corporation in its governance, marketing and communications. As previously noted, it employs modern marketing methods to reach out to members and potential members, and a telling signal of the “franchise” approach is the importance placed on branding. One of Unity Canada’s roles is to ensure the consistent application of Unity’s “brand.” In any commercial, franchised operation the brand is all-important and is vigorously protected from “knock-offs” through the law and through consistent application of a Visual Identity program. Unity, too, has a Visual Identity program and Unity Canada sells a graphics package to each of its member centers for signage, marketing and communications, including guidance in website design. The costs are modest (\$190 at sign-up and \$100 annually) to encourage adherence to the branding, and Unity Canada also offers small grants to help centers apply the Visual Identity System and develop a website. Unity Canada therefore acts on behalf of the parent in the United States to exercise command and control over the Canadian centers from administrative and marketing perspectives.

The narrative of Unity Vancouver begins in 1968 when it was founded by Austin and Mary Hennessey as an offshoot of Unity in Kansas City, Missouri (see illus. 40).

(Illus. 40. Austin and Mary Hennessey, Founders of Unity Vancouver)



Austin’s spiritual life began as a student priest in his native Ireland and Mary’s as a novice in a French convent, but they both abandoned their traditional ministries, and after they met and married they followed a path of “evolutionary spirituality.”<sup>225</sup> They were interested in New Thought principles and that interest led them to the Unity Seminary in Missouri, where eventually they became Unity ministers. In the 1960s, they began their ministerial life in a large Unity Center in Washington State, but in 1964 returned to Vancouver to found the “Spiritual Center for Dynamic Living.” In 1968, they then moved to Unity Vancouver, which they ran until 1996, when they were dismissed for fiscal impropriety. Since then several different ministers have guided the center and each one has changed the dynamic of the center in some way. In April 2017, the center acquired new leadership, when the group hired a new senior minister, the Rev. Bruce Kellogg (see illus. 41) and his wife Jennifer Molton (see illus. 42).

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<sup>225</sup> Evolutionary Spirituality is the philosophical, theological, esoteric or spiritual idea that nature and human beings and/or human culture evolve: either extending from an established cosmological pattern (ascent), or in accordance with certain pre-established potentials.

(41. Unity Vancouver, Rev. Bruce Kellogg)



The couple came from the United States Unity headquarters, where Bruce was a minister and Jennifer was an executive director. Bruce’s background covers not only the foundational teachings of Unity, but also *Paramahansa Yogananda*<sup>226</sup> and the ideas and teachings of Carl Jung. According to his biography, he has made a commitment to “helping others to progress on a spiritual path” and “co-

creating a positive environment in which people can attain spiritual mastery and demonstrate true prosperity in every sense of the word.”

(42. Unity Vancouver, Jennifer Molton)



Jennifer’s role in Unity Vancouver is administrative which is similar to the position she held in Unity headquarters prior to moving to Vancouver. Her professional background however is in graphic design and she is a gifted artist focusing on portraiture, landscape

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<sup>226</sup> Paramahansa Yogananda, born Mukunda Lal Ghosh, was an Indian yogi and *guru* who introduced millions of Indians and Westerners to the teachings of meditation and Kriya Yoga through his organization Yogoda Satsanga Society of India and Self-Realization Fellowship. His book, *Autobiography of a Yogi* remains a spiritual masterpiece and was included in the one hundred best spiritual books of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

and fantasy dream imagery.<sup>227</sup> Her work sometimes features depictions of *mandalas*<sup>228</sup>, inspired by Hindu and Buddhist traditions and it is not surprising that her personal philosophy is informed by Hindu and Buddhist teachings.

Unity Vancouver has attracted about three hundred congregants to its Sunday services, and their demographics are quite similar to those of Unity Center. According to Jim Vollett, a member of the management board whom I interviewed, 80% of the membership is fifty-five plus. Jennifer Molton, the wife of the senior minister, and the administrator for the center, concurred that the membership tended to be middle-aged, with very few young children, and predominantly Caucasian, but with a fairly equal split between men and women. While they have attracted members from the LGBTQ community they would like to attract more, as well as a greater diversity of members in terms of ethnicity and age.

When asked about relations between religious and other elements of culture, Jennifer was quick to say that existing cultural beliefs and practices always shaped the development of religion. She reminded me that “early Christianity had readily adopted Pagan rituals and celebrations as a means of acclimatization to local cultural differences.” For example, the evergreen tree that was used to celebrate the Winter solstice, which was incorporated into Christmas celebrations; and the choice of Sunday as a day of devotion for Christian churches, when its name is related to the Pagan god of the sun. Bruce compared Canada to the United States in terms of his own organization and remarked that

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<sup>227</sup> <https://jennifermolton.carbonmade.com>

<sup>228</sup> *Mandala* (Sanskrit मण्डल) is a spiritual and ritual symbol in the Indian religions of Hinduism, Jainism Buddhism, representing the universe. In common use, *mandala* has become a generic term for any diagram, chart or geometric pattern that represents the cosmos metaphysically or symbolically, a microcosm of the universe.

he had had to adapt his own style to meet Canada's more "homogenous and cohesive culture built on mutual respect and mindfulness" from the less "respectful" United States. While he seems to be making a sweeping generalization, Bruce felt the cultural difference strongly in Vancouver with its very diverse mix of peoples. Jennifer agreed with her husband, when asked if their Center reflected the cultural make up of Vancouver:

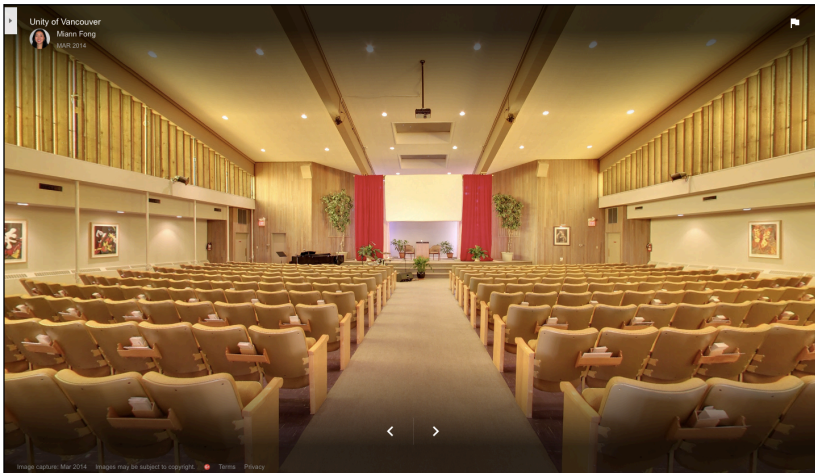
I would say yes, but only from the perspective of someone who is very, very new to both the culture of Vancouver and the culture of this church; I would say the culture of this church is remarkably different from the culture of the church we just came from, which is also a Unity church, but it has different demographics, it's an urban community vs. a rural retiree snowbird community, there is a vibrancy, there is a level of commitment, a level of education, and a level of spiritual maturity that we have not seen before. (Molton, 2017)

Both Bruce and Jennifer were struck by the differences between the cultures of the two Unity congregations, one in the United States and one in Vancouver, perhaps demonstrating national cultures that on the surface they anticipated would be similar but in fact were markedly different from each other. Both of these leaders appeared to enjoy the less competitive, more relaxed, open-minded and tolerant environment of the Canadian church.

The physical building of Unity Vancouver is located in the heart of the city and is the most significant element of the material dimension of the organization. The group's building is itself contemporary in design, and the group's website claims that the auditorium, which seats up to 500 people is acoustically in the top ten of performance venues in North America. The auditorium looks more like a concert hall than a typical

worship space, with comfortable theatre style seating and projection capability. The stage has a podium for speakers and two chairs for the frequent discussions with guest speakers. The vestibule looks as if it belongs in a contemporary theatre but the emphasis throughout is on a practical yet comfortable space. The centre has hosted a number of acclaimed speakers and musicians, including the *New York Times*' best-selling author, Gregg Braden, Don Miguel Ruiz, author of *The Four Agreements*, and the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra (see illus. 43).

(Illus. 43. Unity Vancouver, Building Interior)



The lower level of the building is designed for smaller groups, or workshops, *yoga* classes or movie nights and the building can be rented for weddings and concerts. As with all Unity branches in North America, of course, Unity Vancouver has access to all the material items of Unity Village, including facilities for educational courses and conferences as well as Science of Mind archives and historical objects such as Charles and Myrtle Fillmore's papers and lecture engagement records including transcripts.

From a doctrinal point of view, Unity Vancouver adheres to the same five principles established by Unity Worldwide and all teachings, based on Science of Mind and New Thought, are taken directly from Unity Worldwide. In my research, I found no

evidence that Unity Vancouver contributes to the doctrine and teachings of the organization, which given the nature of the franchised institutional model is to be expected. However, Vancouver does have the freedom to employ methods of delivery of the doctrine that are appropriate for its own local culture, but again I found no evidence that the organization does anything differently from the United States.

Vancouver also replicates all of the rituals followed by Unity Worldwide and also utilizes the educational resources available through Unity Center. As far as physical rituals or events are concerned, Unity Vancouver conducts regular Sunday services that are relatively unstructured, but generally include meditation, music, a twenty to twenty-five minute “talk” and discussion time to share spiritual ideas. These talks have less in common with a traditional Christian sermon than with a self-help lecture. The talks follow specific topics providing advice for living rather than an intellectual spiritual discourse or an evangelical exhortation. One of the talks for example, is *Finding Oneself in Transition* given by Rev. Bruce Kellogg on March 24, 2019, whereby he speaks of the transitions we encounter during our life, and the ability we have to overcome these obstacles. He goes on to say that the periods between transitions are where we learn. Another talk titled *The Circle of Life – Me and You* given by Janet Law<sup>229</sup> on March 17, 2019, identifies the Circle of God as an “unbroken mechanism” of which we are a part, and with God everything is possible, “...in the beginning there was a word and the word was love [god] and love was breathed in to the world creating a circle of love which we cannot escape. I call it field of our soul, it is part of how we express our humanity.” Janet takes the biblical passage John 1:1 and makes it her own by using the word “love” rather

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<sup>229</sup> Janet Law is an executive assistant at the Unity Spiritual Center for personal growth in Vancouver, Canada.

than “God,” reinterpreting the text in a more humanistic way. Another talk, given on January 13, 2019 by a special guest Kim Haxton<sup>230</sup> titled *Honouring One Another and Holding All Creation in Reverence* discusses healing from an indigenous world view, “There are five things that are universal for healing in every culture: singing, dancing, rituals (for example, prayers and meditation), storytelling (theatre and drama) and last, and most important, our connection to nature and our land.” All the talks are archived on the group’s website to be audited by members or non-members alike.

Music plays an important role in the service, and features many local musicians, many of whom also hold concerts in Unity’s facility dedicated to specific themes. The concerts tend to be upbeat, featuring contemporary or folk music to create good feelings of happiness and community rather than provide reflections on Christian theology. For example, the “Chant Your Heart Open” concert was held on Thursday, May 23, 2019 and was led by Wendy DeMos, with Anne Leader and Nathen Aswell.<sup>231</sup> It was promoted as a musical experience offering “healing songs and melodic mantras to open your heart and enliven your spirit,” explained on Ms. DeMos website:

By repeating the mantras and uplifting lyrics, we increase God’s power. When we vibrate these sounds, we tune into specific frequencies of consciousness – like a

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<sup>230</sup> Kim Haxton (Potawatomi) is a multifaceted, multidimensional educator, rooted in knowledge and steeped in community. She is Potawatami from Wasauksing. She has worked across Turtle Island and abroad in various capacities, always emphasizing local leadership development toward genuine healing. In her work with Indigeneyez, a creative arts based organization she co-founded, Kim works with Indigenous communities toward decolonization and liberation. Grounded in the arts and the natural world for embodied awareness and facilitated rites of passage, Kim develops de-escalation skills and diversity and anti-oppression education. Kim currently leads Peace and Conflict Resolution programs in the Democratic Republic of Congo, cultivating local leadership in Congolese women who have been affected by civil war, poverty and sexual violence.

<sup>231</sup> Here is Wendy Demos personal website with YouTube links and more information:  
<http://www.chantyourheartopen.com>

radio tuning into different stations. And when we sing and express our souls, we are vibrating at the frequency of love. These ‘Chant Your Heart Open’ gatherings support community, healing, compassion, and joy dedicated not only to our own uplifting, but to healing mother earth and to our larger human family.<sup>232</sup>

Or another example is a Gary Lynn Floyd concert titled, *So Grateful I’m Alive*. Gary Lynn Floyd<sup>233</sup> is an American singer-song writer whose inspirational style can also be uplifting in a spiritual environment such as Unity’s.

Like meditation, *yoga* is a defining element of the New Age and Spiritual Movements. In this respect, it is a holdover from the New Age Movement’s fascination with Eastern religions, and here Vancouver Unity does not disappoint. *Hatha yoga*<sup>234</sup> classes are offered on Sunday afternoons and are primarily focused on mindfulness, breathing, and physical movement. There is a small charge for these classes. Meditation is another important offering at Unity. A twenty-minute guided meditation session is held every Sunday morning at the Center, in addition to the meditation courses that members can access on the UWM website. However, in remaining true to its maxim of “One God, many paths,” or spiritual individualism, Unity follows no strict rules when it comes to ritual. It is entirely up to the individual which rituals he or she chooses to practice and whether those rituals are performed alone or communally. Individualism is a cornerstone of the organization.

I chose to include the subject of education in the discussion of ritual, since education plays such an important role in all Unity operations and it is expected that all

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<sup>232</sup> <http://www.unityofvancouver.org/slideshow/chant-your-heart-open/>

<sup>233</sup> <https://garylynnfloyd.com>

<sup>234</sup> *Hatha yoga* is a branch of *yoga* that emphasizes physical exercises to master the body along with mind as well as exercises to withdraw it from external objects.

members will take Unity courses to inform themselves on all aspects of the church. Unity Vancouver is no exception to this expectation, offering both offline and online courses. However, only one offline course is offered, titled Unity101, which provides an introduction to Unity. A foundational course in “modern, practical spirituality” it is based on Eric Butterworth’s book<sup>235</sup> *Discover the Power Within You. A Guide to the Unexplored Depths Within You* (2008). Intended for newcomers to Unity, it lasts eight weeks and covers a wide range of subject matter, all of which is designed to help new members find their own spiritual path within Unity. Questions addressed in the course include: What is a human being? What is metaphysics? What is mystical Christianity? Why Unity believes in one God but many paths, and why developing your own spiritual belief system and interpretation is the single most critical thing to do. No doubt the rationale for not offering more offline courses is that Unity Vancouver relies on more online courses to deliver education from Unity Vancouver itself as well as UWM.

Vancouver also provides some online resources to its members in the form of free archived materials on the website. Members or the general public may thus review past sermons or teachings, music videos and audio talks and podcasts from Unity Center’s online audio library (see illus. 44).

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<sup>235</sup> Eric Butterworth (1916 – 2003), the best-selling author of sixteen books and a prominent leader in the Unity and New Thought movements, rose to popularity with his inspiring messages of personal renewal and positive prayer.

(Illus. 44. Unity Vancouver, Audio Library)



Vancouver Unity also has a Facebook page with 727 “likes” and 716 followers (see illus. 45). As one of the interviewees told to me, it serves the purpose of an interactive medium between members or individuals who are interested in spiritual topics, and these people often use Facebook’s personal message tool to chat with one another. The Facebook platform has a section for reviews and a five-star ranking system, and Unity Vancouver’s page has garnered several reviews, all five-star rankings. As I was reviewing the Facebook page, one interaction between two individuals called Robert and Patricia caught my eye. Patricia wrote on the Unity topic of “One God, Many Paths” and Robert commented, “How about no paths?” Here is Patricia’s response:

The spiritual path is individualized for you are a unique bundle of thoughts that only the Holy Spirit knows everything about and will guide you to undo all those thoughts when you are willing to return back to God. Jesus is our first way-shower on how to follow your inner teacher to Light, Love, Truth and Freedom in Spirit in God’s Creation. Life in Spirit as One is endlessly creating and increasing. Join with Jesus in finding your pathway home.

Robert replied: “That is interesting, I never thought of that before.”

([https://www.facebook.com/pg/unityofvancouver/reviews/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/unityofvancouver/reviews/?ref=page_internal))

The significance of this conversation is that the Facebook platform provides an online opportunity for two (or more) individuals to interact on a virtual level without being in each other’s physical presence. The platform offers many benefits to users; a response can be immediate or follow later and the discussion can be stopped or started at anytime, with a record of the debate to date, so that answers can be modified after further consideration. Moreover, others can be invited to join the conversation to expand the discussion, and of course no one is limited by geography or time.

(Illus. 45. Unity Vancouver, Official Facebook Page)



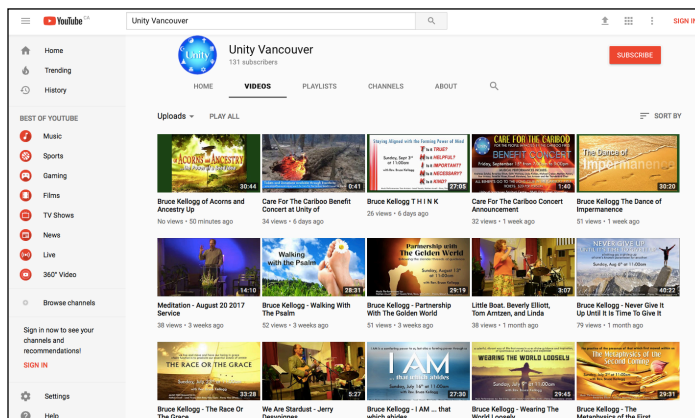
Vancouver Unity also employs the Twitter platform, but is less active on it than on Facebook, with 474 tweets and 1,689 followers (see illus. 46). Possibly, this lower level of activity reflects the average age of the membership, since Twitter tends to appeal to a younger demographic than Facebook. The limited number of characters allowed by Twitter in posts might also discourage commentary.

(Illus. 46. Unity Vancouver, Twitter)



Vancouver Unity does not have a Pinterest presence, but the group does use Yelp<sup>236</sup> to list themselves under churches. Unity Vancouver also has a YouTube Channel with 131 subscribers and 6,035 views, where music videos, archived concerts and talks can all be found. These audio-video materials are also accessible on the Center’s website (see illus. 47).

(Illus. 47. Unity Vancouver, YouTube Channel)



<sup>236</sup> Yelp is an American multinational corporation headquartered in San Francisco, California, founded in 2004 by former PayPal employees Russel Simmons and Jeremy Stoppelman. It develops, hosts and markets Yelp.com and the Yelp mobile app, which publish crowd-sourced reviews about local businesses. As of 2016, Yelp.com has 135 million monthly visitors and 95 million reviews.

I asked Bruce and Jennifer about the practice of online and offline “religion” While both were enthusiastic and recognized the potential of the power of online religion, neither had fully embraced the medium and voiced doubts that it could ever replace offline religion completely. Bruce’s first words to me were:

I just want to share something about the online process. I have, and this may or may not be appropriate here, but on a certain level, I found it very important. I have an online Skype affiliation with a spiritual teacher and it is very interesting because the energetics of it, an energy exchange, it is very, very profound. So, it’s not just a two-dimensional kind of thing, there is a definite relationship and a very powerful feeling of what I call God’s presence that moves within interaction and it’s not about him, but it is about allowing that the presence of, what I call soul.

On a personal level, then, Bruce has found in the internet a great tool to allow him to connect with his spiritual teacher. He speaks quite emotionally about the feeling he derives from the experience beyond the simple connection between two individuals: “It seems, my direct experience with this, is that the sacred space is created between teacher and student.” He was enthusiastic about his online experience. He continued:

Imaginable. Sometimes that word springs up to me that it [the online experience] is not real. Imaginable in a sense of using the vehicle of online exchange to expand the image, the image and likeness of God within the individual it can be a vehicle that is explosive in terms of its helpfulness for humanity.

He goes on to expand on this thought:

I mean if you have an online agreement with five million people at the same time and they’re expanding through their hearts and consciousness the actuality of

agreement that they have to ‘imagine’ peace, that is a huge contribution to the whole of human consciousness in my view (Kellogg, 2017).

Undeniably, Bruce acknowledges the possibility of the internet in enabling a spiritual connection between his teacher and himself; he refers to it as energy or energy exchange and even recognizing the presence of God in such connections. He intuits the potential of the power of a community digital experience talking about the prospect of enormous audiences of five million, and raising human consciousness of important attributes such as peace to extraordinary heights in a global audience.

Jennifer was equally enthusiastic about going to YouTube to enjoy a break from her busy schedule by following a Buddhist practitioner:

...the only thing I have been doing in terms of online, is watching a woman named Tara Brach,<sup>237</sup> who is a Buddhist teacher, who does a wonderful Buddhist presentation and when I feel I need something other than the very busy work we do all the time, I go to her. I personally respond to the Buddhist train of thought and need it as an antidote to the business of community, being out there and being on as a minister and as a minister’s wife. (Molton, 2017)

Jennifer was adamant that online interaction, while generating energy, was never a substitute for meeting in person, where authenticity and trust were more readily discernible. She did admit however that “there is a whole generation of people, especially younger people, right now who feel it is actually safer communing in that kind of space with a group of strangers.” Jennifer’s attraction to Buddhism allows her to escape for a

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<sup>237</sup> Tara Brach is an American psychologist and proponent of Buddhist meditation. She is a guiding teacher and founder of the Insight Meditation Community of Washington, D.C. Dr. Brach teaches their Wednesday night meeting in Bethesda, Maryland, USA.

while from her administrative duties in Unity to a completely different world, where she is no longer the minister's wife, nor the church administrator, and can immerse herself in something totally removed from her everyday. Her commitment to Unity and its beliefs is indisputable, but she finds elements of Buddhism, such as the meditation as taught by Tara Brach, to be a helpful calming influence. Ms. Brach is a psychologist who uses the practice of mindfulness for emotional healing, inspired by Buddha.

In a related way, Jim Vollett, a Unity Vancouver member I interviewed, is committed to using online tools in his own business as a personal coach. He is convinced that an online conversation can in many ways be more honest than a face-to-face meeting, but he is a little more skeptical about online religion. He speculated about the possibility of an online sanctuary, but at the most could only see a ministry that was shared both online and off. However, both Jim and Jennifer readily admitted that not being able to comprehend fully a religion conducted wholly online likely had a lot to do with their age. Not having grown up with the internet, to some degree they felt less comfortable with the technology. Bruce, the minister, agreed with both Jim and Jennifer in his assessment of the importance of the physical space in his ministry:

I see people as spiritual beings having a human experience, so, you are a soul, you are a spirit and you know right now you are playing out this wonderful fulfillment that is called your life. I feel that people need to have connection face to face with other people, this medium [the internet], which they are connected with, can be meaningful and provide connection but it's not enough, I don't feel, in terms of people being with other people. Certainly this is not a replacement. (Kellogg, 2017)

While personally committed to using the internet for their own spiritual purposes, not one of the three could envisage a similar group experience for the organization, acclaiming the real value of community in the spiritual context – the collective ‘energy’ they referred to. This stance is somewhat surprising in a spiritual environment that delights in the virtue of individual spiritual paths.

The experiential and ethical components of Unity Vancouver mirror those of Unity Worldwide, which is to be expected given the close relationship between the two entities and the origin of all education and ritual derives from Unity Worldwide.

## **5.5 Conclusion.**

Unity Center appears to exert a lot of control over its satellites, including Vancouver Unity. For example, most of Unity Vancouver's educational curriculum originates on the United States' website, with only modest local offerings. Centralized training for teachers and ministers also provides control over the agenda. Adaptivity to local cultural needs seems limited to differences between the demographics of urban and rural congregations rather than cultural differences rooted in such ethnic factors as the presence of the large East Asian community in Vancouver. This business model would suggest that the culture of the church is viewed as North American with no real perceived difference between Canada and the United States, an isomorphism reinforced by encouraging Canadian groups to adopt the same logo, visual identity, and website design as the United States' parent and United States' franchises.

It is significant that Unity Vancouver refers to itself as a church, which no doubt owes a great deal to the fact that Unity Vancouver bases its theology on Christian principles. Although the theology constitutes an adaptation of Christian values that fits within the concept of New Thought and Science of Mind, this hybridized marriage of teachings does not cause any doctrinal discordance for either the ministry or congregation. In fact, the congregation's background is mostly Catholic, which reinforces once again the practice of picking and choosing that drives New Age groups. Indeed, Unity's overriding principle of "one God many paths" is decidedly New Age in origin.

Online activity for Unity Vancouver is also limited, primarily it is used for e-mail, or as a broadcast medium for archived messages, talks or concerts, or as access to social media platforms for communicating en masse to its constituents. Education is practiced

online by accessing the United States' course offerings and some meditation and *yoga* classes are also offered online. But Unity does not practice online religion in an interactive way, other than through Silent Unity, when a prayer request does receive a response. In spite of the commitment of its ministers to the internet as a personal aide to spiritual growth, it is unlikely that Unity Vancouver will become fully devoted to online religion. This sort of practice seems to lack a sense of community and does not offer the kind of energy that is so important to the ministers and the members of Unity Vancouver.

## **Chapter Six: Afterword.**

### **6.1 Comparison of the Three Communities.**

When reviewing the material I gleaned from this study of the three New Age groups, I was compelled to reflect on whether they meaningfully be described as religious and in what sense, if any, the ideas, practices and purposes of the three Canadian organizations I study may be considered religious. I used the Scott and Smart seven-dimensional model to provide a consistency and objectivity to the analysis of each group. Somewhat surprisingly, since not one of the groups considered their own organization to be a religion, my analysis indicates that the organizations serve more or less the same function and purpose in the lives of their adherents as established religious traditions serve in the lives of their members. However, with the unprecedented growth of the internet, as well as the increased desacralization of religion, it is important to analyze the three groups in the context of digital religious scholarship and the work of scholars who have studied New Age through a digital lens and post-secularization.

First, let me turn to Frans Jespers<sup>238</sup> (2014) who, in his article “From New Age to New Spirituality: Secular Sacralizations on the Borders of Religion” sees three distinct positions in the process of determining whether New Age and new spiritualities are constituted as religion. The first position held by such scholars as Stef Aupers<sup>239</sup> and

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<sup>238</sup> Frans Jespers is an associate professor of comparative religious studies at the faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious studies at Radboud University Nijmegen, in the Netherlands. His research focus is on New Religious Movements and new spiritualities, in the Netherlands in particular.

<sup>239</sup> Stef Aupers is a cultural sociologist and Professor of Media Culture at the Institute for Media Studies at the University of Leuven, Belgium. Most of his work deals with religion, spirituality and ‘re-enchantment’ in modern societies and, particularly, the way such cultural beliefs are mediatized.

Dick Houtman,<sup>240</sup> describe New Age spirituality as a “religion of modernity” because it acknowledges the sacred in each and every person:

New Age can be understood as a veritable religion of modernity because its participants collectively sacralize the long-standing modern value of individual liberty, and especially the idea of authentic self that distances itself from allegedly alienating institutions and traditions (Aupers and Houtman, 2007:15).

The second position takes an opposing point of view: that New Age is not a religion, but represents a secular activity. This position is frequently held by the established (Abrahamic) religions. Sociologist Stephen Hunt,<sup>241</sup> for example, refers to New Age as “mix ‘n’ match religiosity,” or a “quasi-religion;” in other words not a “real” religion at all but an ersatz copy (Hunt, 2003: 132-3, 222).

A third position in this analytical model can be said to fall somewhere between the first and second positions. Heelas affirms the components of religion as “belief in a higher reality and evidence of sacralization of the self” as demonstrated in “spiritual activities” identified by the participants themselves so that they cannot be dismissed as secular. Heelas believes that the sacred in these new spiritualities is expressed as a “perfect life-force” (Heelas, 2008: 127). Hubert Knoblauch, a German sociologist, avers that the borders between religion and the secular are being blurred, especially in many new spiritualities (Knoblauch, 2009: 267).

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<sup>240</sup> Dick Houtman is professor of cultural sociology at the Centre for Rotterdam Cultural Sociology at Erasmus University. His most recent work is *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality*.

<sup>241</sup> Stephen John Hunt is a British professor of sociology at the University of the West of England.

Hanegraaff recognizes yet a fourth position, suggesting that New Age or new spiritualities are secular forms of religion, defining religion generally as “any symbolic system which influences human action by providing possibilities for ritually maintaining contact between the everyday world and a more general meta-empirical framework of meaning” (Hanegraaff, 1999: 371). Further, he suggests that most established religions provided people with a structure for practicing religion, so the institutional was a key dimension for traditional faith groups. Increasing secularization, however, has tended to degrade the institution, leaving the sacred in place, although generally focused toward an inner spirituality (ibid., 371). This phenomenon can be observed in the practices of all three groups who focus their practices on the inner spiritual journey.

Jespers, however, is critical of all four positions. He finds that the first position recognizes virtually every spiritual activity as a religion, and the second he finds too theological. Both the third and fourth positions, he opines, lack a clear concept of the secular. While all the spiritual practitioners share many of the same holistic beliefs some of their activities mimic religion and others more closely resemble psychotherapy, and in order to understand this duality, he believes it is necessary to have clearer definitions of “religion” and “secularization.” Sociologist Martin Riesebrodt (1948 – 2014)<sup>242</sup> describes religion as the practices and beliefs of people who anticipate salvation by higher powers for their problems: “Thus religious practices everywhere are addressed to superhuman powers that influence or control something beyond human control. All religions claim the ability to address misfortune, crises and salvation” (Riesebrodt, 2010: 89). “Religious practices,” Jespers suggests, refers to the forms of worship and institution, and

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<sup>242</sup>Martin Riesebrodt (1948 - 2014) was a German-American professor of sociology and politics at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, in Geneva, Switzerland.

“salvation” is principally the avoidance of misfortune, healing diseases, solving crises and the restoration of well-being. Jespers has made it clear that he is opposed to religion and follows a secular worldview that emphasizes that things and people in the world are sufficient to create meaning in life and to solve life’s problems. This secular worldview can express itself in many different ways, depending upon what values are important for each individual, whether they be naturalistic, humanistic or hedonistic in focus. Thus secularism is not necessarily a non-religious worldview but rather a life that is fulfilled within this world (Taylor, 2007: 5-12).

From this perspective very few New Age practices can be considered religion. Paganism and some indigenous spiritual practices, perhaps, since both groups combine a reverence for old gods with new spirituality; many new Buddhists believe in a higher power without calling it a personal god, tending more towards holism than theism, but they do include worship in the form of Buddha as a sacred being. So, Jespers draws a distinction between views and practices that are more traditional and theistic from those that are holistic, when he defines religion, but he draws the line at using the term religion if there is no evidence of worship or institution, and, in this case believes that that way of life is definitely secular. New Age frequently refers to self-awareness and mindfulness, but the terms are also used in therapeutic or psychological practice, often by the same people and without worship or institution, and Jespers clearly defines this as secular.

Jespers goes on to describe three distinct sub-categories of spiritual practices. The first being where spirituality functions in many ways like a religion – its followers are very much involved and committed to the organization because they expect to find some sort of salvation most commonly from a supernatural power - and they may have

meetings, meditation or healing practices, use symbols and follow rules. This, he refers to as “functional equivalent of religion” and cites mindfulness as an example of this sub-category; the activities and ideas are for many people a type of religion although they do not refer to it as such and, more importantly, it lacks any aspect of worship or veneration.

However, Jespers continues with his analysis and identifies a second sub-category of spiritual practices that is more episodic: people may come together for a course or a meeting and experience some sort of semi-religious or uplifting moments caused by the use of symbols or rituals; meditation or healing for example. This type of encounter can happen in spiritual business training courses or self-awareness weekend gatherings and through a combination of music, mantra and pseudo religious myth, the attendees can reach elation and feel in contact with the divine within themselves. His third subcategory Jespers calls “fragments of sacralization,” which are not, in practical terms, spiritual practices but rather accidental discovery or witness of symbols, magical objects, books, computer games or works of art. These moments of discovery can be uplifting and enchanting and are usually experienced alone; wellness spirituality would fit into this category, as would the practice of *yoga* and meditation.

Nevertheless, looking at the Scott and Smart seven-dimensional model, let us first review the dimension of ritual in some depth. It is the one dimension that all religious formations, including New Age, can practice online, and it is the only online religious practice undertaken not only by the groups I studied, but also by individual followers of New Age. Arguably, these factors make ritual the most important the dimension for the New Age, especially in the context of Digital Religion. However, online and offline ritual for followers of New Age is not easily described and even harder to categorize since

there is no central governing body or authority. All three groups I studied demonstrate a loose understanding of ritual from both communal and individual perspectives. Ritual, as far as the New Age is concerned, is primarily intended for self-awareness and self-improvement and all rituals have been repurposed or redefined from their original contexts or usage; these rituals may not fit the original definition of the ritual and may in fact hold different meaning for the individual practicing it. *Yoga* for example has travelled a considerable distance from its original form and purpose, yet is still performed as ritual in some New Age groups, including Unity Vancouver. Many of the most common rituals I observed, particularly meditation, (affirmative) prayer and, following a very broad definition of New Age ritual, education, are pursued as individual practice. Academic courses offered by the parent organization in the cases of CSL and Unity, are encouraged by the leadership, as well as attending (or auditing archived versions) specific educational talks offered by the leaders.

All three of the groups I studied have a variety of communal activities, which may be repeated on a regular basis and are intended to provide spiritual enlightenment, reflection, and personal improvement. These activities include Sunday services or celebrations, group meditation, prayer groups and Sunday talks. But members are not dissuaded from performing other esoteric rituals if they so wish, even if that ritual is not publicly performed or officially endorsed by the group. Unity, which is based on Christian values, also offers equivalents of Christian rituals such as baptism and communion.

To explore further, ritual studies<sup>243</sup> is a form of research that looks at a host of behaviours associated with the ritualization of human activities, and examines the personal, cultural, and societal performances that come together with symbols and ideologies. Scholars in the field do not universally agree on definitions of ritual and their different opinions range from theoretical considerations through systems of classification to particular characteristics (Bell, 1992). For example, British social anthropologist Edmund Ronald Leach (1910-1989) in his book, *Dialectic in Practical Religion* (1968) argues that ritual has many different forms and purposes that act differently in different social contexts. Victor Turner (1920-1983)<sup>244</sup> in his book *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969) considers ritual as a changing and transformational form of social engagement, carried out through the transference of religious symbols. Others, such as Dame Mary Douglas (1921-2007)<sup>245</sup> and Clifford Geertz (1926-2006),<sup>246</sup> emphasize the qualities of performance and communication in rituals. Scholarship on ritual, however, can be loosely divided into descriptions of ritual on the one hand, and on the other, studies of the outcomes of ritual, although as Leach (1968) acknowledged, these differences are often impossible to “tease apart.” For example, a definition such as

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<sup>243</sup> Ritual studies as a field of inquiry began with a research group established in 1977 by the American Academy of Religion (AAR), the international society of religious studies scholars. A decade later Ronald L. Grimes and Fred W. Clothey cofounded the *Journal of Ritual Studies*. Ritual studies is a distinct academic field that gives special attention to the performance aspect of the rites themselves (gesture, aesthetics, space, choreography, praxis, meaning) and not just to a rite’s social function or cultural context.

<sup>244</sup> Victor Witter Turner (1920 – 1983) was a British cultural anthropologist best known for his work on symbols, rituals and rites of passage. His work, along with that of Clifford Geertz and others, is often referred to as symbolic and interpretive anthropology.

<sup>245</sup> Dame Mary Douglas (1921 – 2007) was a British anthropologist, known for her writings on human culture and symbolism, whose area of speciality was social anthropology.

<sup>246</sup> Clifford James Geertz (1926 – 2006) was an American anthropologist who is remembered mostly for his strong support for and influence on the practice of symbolic anthropology, and who was considered “for three decades...the single most influential cultural anthropologist in the United States.”

“ritual consists of symbolic actions that represent religious meaning” clearly conflates the two (McGuie, 1997: 16). Christopher Helland’s definition of ritual is simple: “ritual is purposeful engagement with the sacred (whatever the sacred may be for those involved)” (Helland, 2000: 17). Although perhaps too general for many scholars, Helland’s definition does recognize that individual and personal ritual coexist with formalized group ritual. It also acknowledges that “the sacred” is not necessarily stable, but fluid.

The question of authenticity also troubles many scholars, particularly when it comes to online ritual. What role does purpose or intention play in ritual activity, and how important is it to be able to quantify or validate purpose or intention in order for a given ritual to be considered authentic? For example, as Helland suggests, does reciting grace before a meal, as a community or as a family or even alone, with little evident purpose or intention other than habit, make this ritual any more or any less authentic? The very act of participation suggests that those performing the ritual assent to the activity and to some extent, consciously or not, accept the beliefs and practices associated with it. Are such conditions sufficient to enable us to speak of the ritual as authentic? That said, other factors contribute to the authenticity, ritual can be elaborate and formal or personal and informal and has been described by ritual studies scholars as a combination of performance, media, script and representation of belief. The script gives descriptive direction to the performance of the ritual, while performance itself is the physical act of doing the ritual. The media are means of communicating and receiving the ritual, which itself embodies beliefs associated with a tradition’s understanding of the sacred.

But why do members of religious or spiritual groups perform rituals? What is the purpose of doing them? According to Helland rituals are the means by which individual

believers or groups of believers can achieve the outcomes they desire through the invocation and intervention of “supernatural beings” or “energy” that allows them to accomplish what they would otherwise not be able to do unaided. In this sense, then, participants determine the efficacy of the ritual; they determine if in fact a ritual has succeeded in achieving its intended outcomes. On a more social level, “ritual is used to teach, form identities, regulate societies, draw a community together, transform the psyche, and enact faith” (Bell, 1992: 23). It is important to note here that distance between the points of view of the participants and the observers can create conflict when ritual activity moves online. Participants obviously believe that the online ritual is effective when the desired outcomes are achieved. Viewing the same ritual, however, outside observers might not recognize its efficacy if it does not – or seems not to – meet a particular scholarly definition of ritual that has been applied to it.

In the early 2000s, scholars at the University of Heidelberg, Germany developed ritual transfer theory (Langer, 2006) and established a framework to assess the constituent parts of a ritual that would change when it is taken online. According to this framework, such change may be captured in three heuristic components: transformation, invention and exclusion. Transformation refers to the redesigning of a ritual that already exists, so that it can be conducted online. This process may require invention in order to adapt it to the new digital environment. And finally, exclusion describes the fact that not everything that exists in an offline space can be included in online activity. When these three elements have been brought to bear on a ritual, participants find that they are taking part in practices that differ from what they were doing previously and are thus faced with decisions about the efficacy of the new practices. For many people, the lack of real

substance, such as the bread or wine of Eucharist, or the physical absence of other participants, may preclude them from accepting the changed ritual. Further, if the changes are so radical that the participants no longer regard the ritual as authentic, then for them the process of transferring it online will fail. By contrast, other adherents may accept the changes in this transformation process, since they feel that the intent of the ritual remains the same and that therefore the ritual remains authentic. Most of the members of UOUFC, CSL and UV fall into this latter category.

This framework for analyzing ritual transfer from offline to online has been helpful to scholars in their ongoing examination of rituals as they change and adapt to online practice. Two fields of study have emerged: some scholars focus on how online religious and ritual practices impact the offline version, while others study the web for new forms of religious expression and ritual, like Second Life, EverQuest,<sup>247</sup> and other online role-playing fantasy games. These fields of scholarship have revealed just how increasingly complex ritual activity has become. Religion continues to have a place in contemporary life, and ritual practices and related web-based activities are constantly changing to keep pace with shifting trends and technology in the present environment. Ritual remains an integral element of today's culture, and the digital world now plays a significant role in the lives of most people, reinforcing Ronald Grimes<sup>248</sup> claim, "ritual cannot be divorced from the changing pattern which is society" (Grimes, 1982: 151). At the same time, however, Grimes' statement begs the question, what types of rituals

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<sup>247</sup> EverQuest is 3D fantasy-themed massively multiplayer online role-playing game developed and published by Sony Online Entertainment, which released on March 16, 1999.

<sup>248</sup> Ron Grimes is co-editor of the Oxford Ritual Studies Series, Director of Ritual Studies International, and the author of several books on ritual, most recently *The Craft of Ritual Studies*. He is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Religion and Culture at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Canada.

people are participating in online? For example, are they visiting the web to participate in an important event such as an online coven or a wedding ceremony? Or conversely, so to speak, are they seeking information to allow them to perform a ritual at home? In the former case, the computer actually becomes a part of the ritual, or a part of the sacred space; in the latter case, it is the channel that enables connection with the sacred. In a related manner, Nadja Miczek<sup>249</sup> (2008) and Simone Heidbrink<sup>250</sup> (2007) have distinguished between “rituals online” and “online rituals:” the latter refers to rituals that are actually performed online, while the former refers to materials about rituals that can be found on websites.

In some ways, this distinction creates a dichotomous situation for scholars of online ritual activity. Ritual involves performance and often engages with an audience, and it is internet technology that permits environments that can deliver such ritual performativity (Grimes, 1982). In the physical world, this performance is often conducted by a religious leader or expert, who mediates between the audience and the sacred. In the online space, by contrast, the audience may be an individual at home, auditing a web-based ritual but doing so in private, and the publishers of the website may not even know who is using their site or information, although this information is becoming more readily available through such online tools as Google Analytics.<sup>251</sup> However, this activity is still religion online (Helland, 2005) and the computer is in a broadcast mode, not unlike a sermon preached from the pulpit. For many participants, receiving the teachings of a

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<sup>249</sup> Nadja Miczek is Associate Professor in the department of Religious Studies at the University of Heidelberg, Germany.

<sup>250</sup> Simone Heidbrink is Associate Professor in the department of Religious Studies at the University of Heidelberg, Germany.

<sup>251</sup> Google Analytics is a free web analytics service offered by Google that tracks and reports website traffic. Google launched the service in November 2005.

religious leader is a powerful form of religious engagement. Although it is a one-way flow of information, similar to television broadcasts of church services or evangelical sermons or YouTube videos of spiritual talks, people continue to do religion in this manner. Nonetheless, can this type of non-participatory religious activity be considered as ritual?

Many religious organizations do things this way. Christian evangelists, for example, use websites to broadcast their sermons and engage with audiences that they cannot reach by television or in person (e.g., [www.lakewoodchurch.com](http://www.lakewoodchurch.com)). Similarly, the Vatican's YouTube channel ([www.youtube.com/user/vatican](http://www.youtube.com/user/vatican)), the Dalai Lama's website ([www.dalailama.com](http://www.dalailama.com)), and even personal Wiccan homepages providing spells, information, and video clips for people to practice magic offline. My own observations of UOUFC, Calgary Spiritual Center and Unity Vancouver noticed that they all use this "broadcast out" form of religious activity to reach their membership and potential members.

As anyone who has used it has discovered, the internet has infinite capacity to store information about any conceivable subject, no matter how esoteric, and these data can be accessed by anyone with a computer and internet access or even a smart phone. Everything from ritual scripts and ancient texts, magic spells and potions as well as instructions in ritual performance are readily available. Furthermore, the web is a formidable networking mechanism that has the ability to link like-minded individuals in community experiences that can include participatory ritual practices. Formerly this activity was impossible to measure so that someone officiating had no knowledge of who

was participating but with the advent of new monitoring tools such as Google Analytics, this information is readily available.

In the early days of the internet, online ritual activity was very limited, and academics tended to ignore it, believing it to be “inauthentic, superficial, and more of a ‘game’ than a real form of religious engagement” (Campbell, 2005). Most forms of online ritual were associated with prayer and prayer requests and as we have seen from the examination of the groups in Calgary and Vancouver, this activity is still a major component of online ritual in New Age groups. The question of authenticity in connection to online ritual has occupied scholars of religion for many years. The earlier view that ritual was grounded in a documented, standardized system of performance and symbols understood and accepted equally by participants and performers, has been tested by both NRMs and online religion. The traditional static definitions not only of ritual but also of what constitutes real religion are now called into question. New Age groups such as Unity and CSL, in the spirit of personalizing the religious experience, encourage their followers to bring their own spiritual background to bear in the performance of ritual. Online ritual, too, that in many ways is defined by the medium or “mediatized,” cannot be examined for its authenticity in the same way as offline ritual. In fact, the only real authority for defining what is real or authentic in both these cases is, at this moment, in the hands of those performing the ritual – it is they who decide what is real.

It is certainly not problematic to the members or leaders of UOUFC, CSL and UV whether their members’ individual interpretations of ritual follow a prescriptive path, as

long as their experiences and ultimate personal goals for performing the ritual are met either on or offline. As Kerstin Radde-Antweiler<sup>252</sup> suggests:

Future research on authenticity must concentrate on the strategies and legitimating process employed by religious users and must analyze how authority and credibility is constructed in a mediatized world. Nevertheless, one has to ask if authenticity as an analytical category is still helpful. (16)

Likewise, online rituals are decidedly challenging for scholars attempting to study this process. A major problem is that the definitions and theories of ritual were developed long before the advent and growth of the internet and as a result much of the framing of the theories of ritual studies does not satisfy online ritual practice. However, people are performing rituals online and the participants are convinced of their efficacy, so rather than dismissing this online activity as inauthentic or not real, the academic world should examine the practice more closely. This field of study would be invaluable in improving the understanding and acceptance of online ritual and broaden the knowledge of the interactivity between a technology that seems to reimagine itself daily (e.g. the advent of augmented reality, artificial intelligence, wearables, the internet of things etc.) and society, and society's practice of spirituality, religion and even "secular religion."

When we look at CSL Calgary and Unity Vancouver as institutions with respect to the Scott and Smart model, they are structured in quite vertical or hierarchical terms, at least from an administrative point of view, and organized along business lines with boards of directors, advisory boards, CEOs and divisional directors. Each of the divisions is responsible for a particular discipline, such as education, ministerial resources or

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<sup>252</sup> Kerstin Radde-Antweiler is Associate Professor at the Institute for the Study of Religion and Religious Education, University of Bremen, Germany.

prayer requests. The branches in Canada are flatter in structure, largely because they are smaller and no doubt unable to support a large administrative team, but they are contractually committed to the parent organization and therefore report into it. In the case of Unity, there is also a Canadian organization that sits between the United States and Canadian branches. Headquartered in the United States, both global groups have built disciplined, well-managed business organizations to run their global enterprises. This management structure has been achieved in several interrelated ways: through standardization of marketing; through visual identity programs that every branch in the world is encouraged to adopt; through an established set of values or philosophy to which each branch willingly adheres; and by the insistence that all branches maintain close ties to the United States parent with respect to education for the laity and the leaders.

UOUFC is unlike the other two groups because it is unaffiliated with a larger external organization. Rather, its structure reflects the whims of its founders. In fact, it is somewhat unstructured and follows a more fluid path of spiritual expression. In this respect this group is closer to Sutcliffe's (2003) understanding of a non-institutional New Age group. UOUFC does not even have a permanent location in which to hold meetings or workshops. One explanation may be because this group is not a source of income for its founders but rather a special interest to them.

When it comes to the political and social components of the institutional dimension, politically none of the groups have any published affiliation or support and CSL Calgary in fact specifically forbids such activity:

This Center shall in no way be active in supporting propaganda nor in any other manner attempt to influence legislation. In addition, the Center shall not participate in any political campaign on behalf of any candidate for public office. Nor do any of the groups devote any organized activities to the social element, with the exception of the charitable donations that CSL Calgary make to local charitable organizations. Undoubtedly, individuals in all of the groups personally support both political and social causes.

From the perspective of the narrative dimension of the Scott and Smart model, these groups follow the development and history of the New Age Movement and use stories and myths from a variety of ancient, monotheistic, polytheistic and pantheistic religions, allowing members to decide for themselves which narrative best suits their personal spiritual paths. UOUFC is particularly eclectic in its selection of narratives, moving from the expected Eastern religious practices such as meditation and *yoga*, through Pagan and shamanistic spirituality found in North American indigenous religions to Jewish mysticism in *Kabala*, and esoteric practices such as Tarot cards and Astrology. UOUFC truly espouses the “pick and choose” or “customer’s choice” approach associated with the New Age spirituality. Being a group expressly rooted in the Christian tradition, Unity Vancouver, shares much of the mythology associated with the figure of Jesus Christ, but it reshapes this mythology to its own doctrinal point of view. For Unity Vancouver members, Christ is divine, for example, but no more so than all humans, who are considered children of God and thus possess the same divine potential as Jesus. For Unity’s followers, therefore, the purpose in life is to express their divine potential as demonstrated by Jesus, which is achievable by using the tools that Unity provides to

unlock the spiritual power that everyone possesses. CSL more or less follows the same narrative direction as Unity, which is perhaps not surprising since they were both founded on New Thought principles. But my analysis of CSL reveals little evidence of any appropriation of traditional world religious practices. Instead, CSL emphasizes the different delivery mechanism of their narratives rather than the content of these narratives in order to differentiate itself from the established churches and to offer a “fresher” approach to its members. While encouraging their members to bring their own experiences into their spiritual journeys, neither Unity nor CSL offer a battery of ritual or religious practices from which they might “pick and choose.”

All three of the groups studied here have doctrines that guide them. CSL’s doctrines were developed by its founder, Ernest Holmes, and are presented in twelve articles of belief, as we have seen in Chapter Four. Unity’s doctrine consists of the five teachings posted on the group’s website and laid out in Chapter Five. It is not surprising that the beliefs of these two organizations are quite similar since they originate from the same source, New Thought. Unity is more Christian in its philosophy and accepts God as “the source and creator of all,” but its members also believe that our lives are controlled by the way we think, which reflects the fundamental ideas of New Thought. CSL’s belief system recognizes “God, the living Spirit Almighty,” but also the “incarnation of the spirit in us” and “God is personal to all who feel this indwelling Presence.” Charles Fillmore, the founder of Unity, suggests that God is “waiting upon you. He loves to serve, and will attend faithfully to the most minute details of your daily life.” CSL expresses similar values: “We believe in our own soul, our own spirit, and our own destiny; for we understand that our life is God.” While recognizing an omnipotent spirit,

both groups also believe that redemption and personal well-being and happiness can be achieved through the power of thought or the power of the mind. Further, they consider that this power can be accessed through the tools or rituals that their respective organizations provide, including prayer and meditation. UOUFC, however, expresses its mission somewhat differently. It describes its doctrine in less formal terms, stating that the group is guided by following a “path of interfaith spirituality in search of religious alternatives.” The focus of this group is that there are common roots to human spirituality, and while it honours the beliefs of everyone, UOUFC will “break down the barriers that have created religious intolerance by demonstrating that we all follow the same spiritual paths.” The reward for following the teachings of these organizations is spiritual and worldly fulfillment now, here on earth, and not living for a mythical promised land after death.

As far as the ethical dimension is concerned, the picture is a little less clear. In general, within the New Age, individual autonomy is the overriding ethical absolute. This emphasis on individual autonomy results in a view of morality that is singular and subjective, based on how every individual hears the “god within us” and in terms of which every individual determines their own ethical system. Certainly, this approach is antithetical to the written moral code or law of a more traditional religion, such as the Ten Commandments of Judeo-Christianity and this subjectivism can of course lead to moral relativism, since personal ethics are, well, personal and can change as the “god within” has a change of heart; without the authority of an external law, there is no court of judgment, so to speak, in which individual choices may be put on trial and perhaps repudiated. The one element of control within this apparent ethical soup is the concept of

*karma* to which most New Age practitioners subscribe. Certainly, members of all three groups recognize *karma*. Even though the concept may not always be discussed explicitly, it is among the beliefs of each organization. It is expressed as “The Golden Rule” by Ernest Holmes and it appears as “The Law of *Karma*” at Unity. At UOUFC, David Gellman readily talked about *karma*, and in fact, UOUFC offers a course in *karma* intriguingly titled “Getting Rid of the Baggage.” The course considers “The 42 questions of Life” and challenges participants to “Examine how much *karma* you still carry and the steps you can take to eliminate your baggage.” “All cultures have a day of judgment for self-examination,” the course description asserts, as it tells students, “You will assess yourself by the ancient Egyptian 42 questions of life.”

CSL does define the expectations that come with membership in the form of a membership covenant that each new member undertakes with CSL. The member undergoes a probationary period until he or she is recognized as a “member in good standing” and meets the following:

- Upholds the teachings and practices of Science of Mind
- Attends the spiritual and social functions of the Center
- Contributes to the financial support of the Center
- Attends the business meetings of the Center and votes therein
- Provides service to the Center
- Upholds the purpose, mission and vision of the Center and acts to promote harmony and oneness with the spiritual community.

Unity, too, publishes a Code of Ethics for its ministers and teachers (see Appendix 1).

When we review the sixth dimension, experiential/emotional, the two Western

groups are clearly established on the developmental works of their founders and early members – Ernest Holmes for CSL in Colorado and the Charles and Myrtle Fillmore’s foundational works upon which Unity was built and the members wholeheartedly subscribe to the founders’ ideas to the point that they willingly take the mandatory courses in *New Thought* and *Science of Mind*. UOUFC in Toronto is of a more flexible bent, but nonetheless is grounded in New Age principles presented with a veneer of Judeo-Christianity. The experiential dimension for the members of these groups is guided by the overriding principle of New Age, focused on the here and now: heaven is here on earth, and happiness, well-being and prosperity are achievable worldly goals. In turn, as we have seen, ritual practices are all designed to assist members in reaching these goals. On an emotional level, followers frequently mentioned the sensation of energy that they experienced in the physical presence of other members when practicing some form of ritual be that a CSL celebration or Unity’s group meditation. The experiential dimension is significant for New Age spirituality; everything is done with purpose or intention. Rituals such as prayer, meditation or celebration are carried out with the intention of achieving a connection with the divine in order to gain spiritual growth or well-being.

We see the final dimension, the material, expressed most completely with Unity. This group has preserved and expanded its Unity Village as an historical and religious site to which many followers pay homage as pilgrims or which they visit to attend conventions or educational courses. However, all three groups preserve the works of their founders or significant contributors to their thinking, online as well as offline, including copies of important historical publications in text and video. Both Unity and UOUFC follow the typical New Age practice of using symbols borrowed from many different

religions. In its logo, for example, Unity displays a Christian cross, the crescent moon of Islam, the Jewish Star of David, a Buddha, the *yin yang* ideogram, and shamanic and Astrological symbols, reflecting recognition of the ancient teachings of multiple faiths that are the paths that lead to one God (see illus. 48).

(Illus. 48. Unity Vancouver, Logo)



(Illus. 49. CSL Calgary, Logo)



Similarly, on the Tree of Life, UOUFC incorporates the *yin yang* ideogram, the crescent moon of Islam, the Jewish Star of David, the Christian cross, the *Om* symbol of Hinduism, as well as a compass and a rainbow for inclusivity. CSL, on the other hand, does not declare its New Age roots, using instead a stylized starburst symbol with emanating rays of light for its logo (see illus. 49).

Another of the questions I was seeking answers to before starting this research was what influence multiculturalism might play in a New Age group. If the three groups I studied are any indication of the impact of culture on a New Age group, the answer is very little. In one sense, UOUFC is the exception, since it is largely influenced by its Jewish founder, David Gellman, follows a mainly Jewish path in pursuit of spiritual awareness and growth, and attracts mainly Jewish members to the group. By contrast, the groups in Calgary and Vancouver follow the lead of the parent operations in the United

States. Certainly, the groups have not drawn members from multi-cultural communities in their own cities. In fact, all three groups are quite homogenous in their composition, their membership is white, middle-aged, middle-class and well-educated, with a few LGBTQ members. In this respect, their members seem like older versions of the followers of the early New Age Movements in the 1970s. This demographic picture is consistent with the findings of other scholars of New Age (Höllinger, Franz, Paul Heelas), whose work reveals that the philosophy appeals to a white, middle-class, educated, literate and liberal demographic for whom a person-centered spirituality holds far more appeal than the established religions.

If we return to the scholarship of the original author of the seven-dimensional model, Ninian Smart, we find that his vision for the model was to improve global understanding and acceptance of the world's different religious traditions. He incorporated the political dimension of belief systems into his work but regarded his study as "old fashioned" because it examined the concept of religion through "traditional categories and old symbols." Smart believed the reader needed to deal with modern religion in terms of a contemporary worldview that included newer symbols and forms that could lead to a comparative view of religion and a better understanding of the other. This change in thinking led Smart to an optimistic outlook of global belief systems. He was convinced that cross-cultural understanding was possible, and he felt that this possibility might serve as a remedy for the more pernicious effects of nationalism and racism. For Smart, the idea of the incompatibility of different cultures might prove to be false. His desire was that "we may get more used to good and sensible discussions about

resemblances and difference, and we may get used to a tolerant style of debate.”

Furthermore:

The spirit of debate and thinking is in the long run inevitable...and the idea of the phenomenological also will spread and deepen. This is where it is reasonable to be optimistic. Persistent irrationality and the espousals of mutual unintelligibility are bound to wither, and many will look back on modern thinking with contempt and amazement. (Smart, 1999: 256, 312)

While the underlying theme of universal harmony in world religions is laudable in this piece of scholarship, it may be an ambitious vision for the New Age that has yet to extend its appeal to a multi-cultural audience.

## **6.2 Implications for the Study of Digital Religion.**

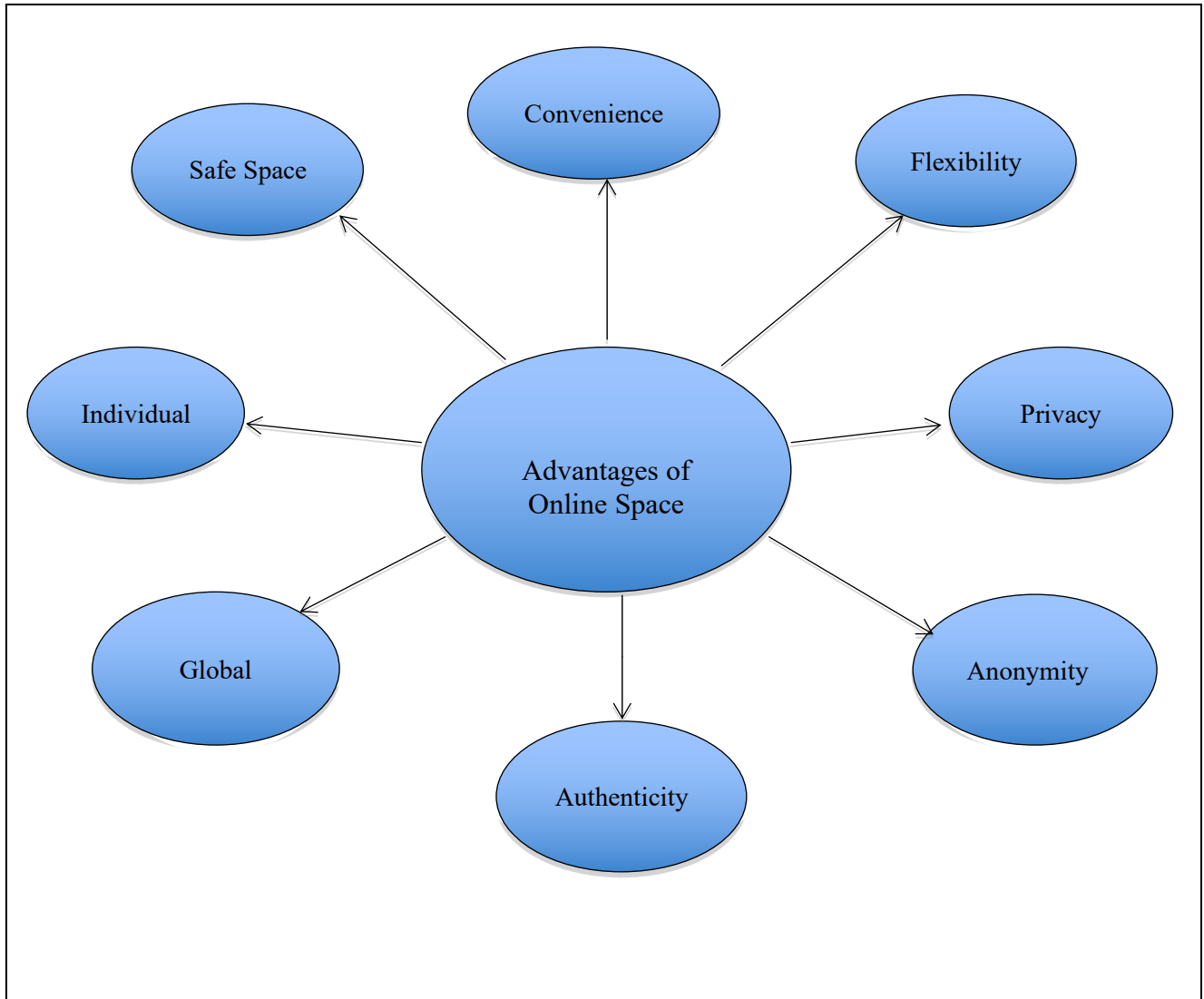
One of the main purposes of working on this project was to examine how readily the three organizations I studied had adopted the online world as a significant part of their spiritual offering, and, as a result of that study, to see how they were using the internet to enhance their spiritual life, or in other words, what could they accomplish better online than could be accomplished offline? My hypothesis before starting this work was that all these New Age groups would be utilizing the internet extensively – or planning to use it this way in the near future - in all facets of their spiritual activities. Such facts would range from interactive online ritual in real time to online prayer and the usual, prosaic activities of any organization, such as communication by means of newsletters and e-mails, and filing or archiving. I anticipated that each group would host a website that explains the its purpose and provides information on schedules for services, classes, meetings and so forth, as well as including articles on topics that are relevant to the members or that are important to the ministers, such as hyperlinks to relevant or interesting sources of information.

However, as I progressed from East to West in examining the three groups, it became obvious that I had overestimated the promise of the internet as a complete replacement for the offline presence. The three organizations had indeed readily adopted the internet for the more mundane operations that any organization must carry out, and they were also using it extensively as a means of meeting instructional or educational needs, but these groups were far from replacing their physical presence, either wholly or in part, with the world of cyberspace. All three groups are engaged in social media. Their Facebook and Twitter accounts deliver interactivity in the form of posts and engagement,

as well as offering an opportunity to advertise upcoming events to followers or casual browsers. But in every case, from the perspectives of both the ministers and the members, online religion could never replace the sense of community, often expressed as energy that was present in an offline environment. Even though the leaders and members were comfortable with using an interactive, real-time, audio-video platform to hold successful personal counseling sessions, or even online meditation classes, they felt the medium was lacking in the ability to provide the energy defining the communal participation that members were seeking. This expectation is somewhat akin to the affirmation that performers receive when delivering a good performance in front of a live audience. It is also probable that the upfront and ongoing costs associated with hosting a truly interactive experience for a group in Canada, with its need for large servers, video-audio equipment, and operators and technicians, could be prohibitive.

If the internet is not being utilized by these groups as fully as some of the leaders felt it could be in terms of delivering a complete “package” of spiritual fare, what could be accomplished in an online environment compared to offline? What are the advantages of doing religion online versus offline? A closer examination of the benefits and drawbacks of doing religion online, of Digital Religion if you will, would be useful (see fig. 2). From a purely pragmatic point of view, the online space offers convenience. Once the basic hardware and software have been acquired, everyone can participate in any available activity they choose without the need to travel, leave the comfort of their home, dress in Sunday best or follow any of the social customs expected when attending a physical space such as a church or worship center.

(Fig. 2. Advantages of Doing Religion Online)



If the religious or spiritual practice is not in real time, then even time ceases to have relevance and practitioners can focus solely on the content. If some of that content is not immediately understood, the user then has the opportunity to stop, review and continue at his or her own pace. Moreover, the online experience also allows for immediate corroboration or validation of the delivered message through referencing related websites, so questioning the veracity of the pastor or teacher can occur in private, without fear of

reprisals or rebuke. The drawback to practicing religion this way is that the feeling of community, the fellowship of shared beliefs or the “energy,” as many described it, is missing. Energy seems to be an essential -- if not *the* essential element -- in the religious experience: sharing values and experiencing the support of like-minded people, especially in moments of celebration or grief and sorrow. There is a sense of an inexplicable attraction, driven by the need to belong to be needed and to feel that you are a part of something greater than yourself.

However, for those individuals who wish to pursue religion or spirituality on their own, the internet provides a real opportunity to select only those pieces of content that hold relevance for them, thus truly personalizing the experience that New Age followers are seeking. Even if it is an archived sermon or service that is being viewed online, sections that are irrelevant or unwanted by the viewer can be “fast-forwarded” or ignored, adding personal relevancy and, in fact, renegotiating the whole meaning of the experience between deliverer and recipient. Thus, while the internet is a public and open space, in the context of religion or spiritual practice, it can become an individual and flexible space, reconfigured to meet the needs and wants of the individual. The user can therefore take ownership of the experience rather than behave as a more passive recipient of a message. By the same token, the proliferation of information can overwhelm users and create confusion and obfuscation of original messages or lead the user away from the original site to sites they had no intention of visiting.

This flexibility, then, raises the question of authenticity. If, for example, the intention or meaning of the broadcaster of the message is adapted or edited, does that make the message any less authentic for the user? From the perspective of these New

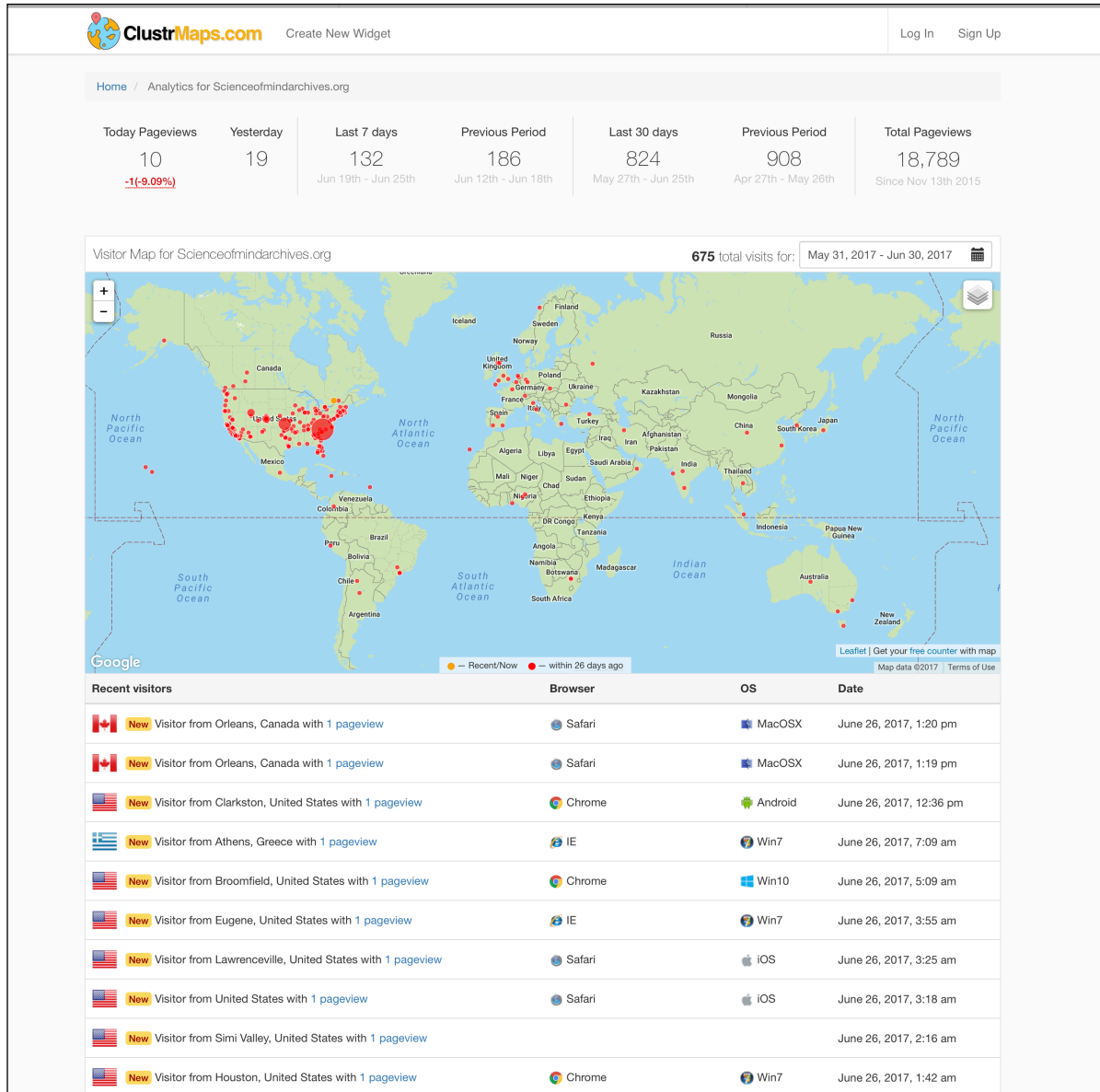
Age groups the answer would have to be a resounding “no” authenticity is not lost when messages are changed to suit the listener’s worldview, since this process is strongly encouraged – one god, many paths – bringing personal relevance and understanding to an institutional viewpoint. In fact, I would venture, each of these groups would understand this activity as the adding of new and equally valid meaning to the original message in the new context of online practice. Undoubtedly, this practice would not be acceptable in a more traditional religion with authoritative dogma, canonical texts, a hierarchical leadership and a formalized liturgy. However, a downside of solely web-based religion remains this question of authenticity. Is it possible to completely trust that the site you are visiting is legitimate and its content truthful? The answer is “not always.” The web opens up the possibility of fraud in many forms, not least of which is the issue of fundraising. The stories of fraudulent web-based fundraising schemes are legion from fake crowd-sourcing to non-existent charities, and the web is wide open to fraud on bogus religious sites. Most religious or spiritual websites are maintained through donations, so it is common to see a “donate button” on the landing pages of these sites.

In many respects, the internet “secularizes” the religious or spiritual experience because it is an agnostic medium. Spiritual encounters are not treated with any added reverence or awe; they are dependent on content, as is every site if it wishes to be relevant to those who use it. This democratization of the communication vehicle opens the content up to closer examination than perhaps would be the case offline. Tradition dictates that we do not question the “pastor” in his or her own environment, yet this act can be accomplished quite easily online. It is also perhaps why the online experience in the New Age context is more likely to focus on wellness and personal happiness than on

spiritual enlightenment. This focus embodies the spirit of the medium more closely than does a spiritual interpretation of the message.

Other benefits of doing religion online can be summarized in the ideas of safety and anonymity. For those who may feel unwelcome in a physical space, or prefer to practice their religion in private, online allows them to do so. Gender, race and sexual orientation are all irrelevant in the online space and for those for whom this aspect of identity may be an issue in the real world, it ceases to be so online. Again, content is what is important, and issues of identity politics or mental health disappear. Hierarchical power no longer has significance online since the participants are not sharing the same physical space, problems of intimidation and feelings of inferiority fade away. However, the corollary of this apparent safety and anonymity is the recognition that the web is neither necessarily safe nor anonymous. Once your presence is recorded on any social site or website, your data are recorded and become the property of Google or the owners of the site. CSL, for example, records the source of all the traffic to its site, so the organization knows where searches have originated (see illus. 50). Social media sites use algorithms to track the habits of all their users and use that data to help advertisers target their messages with great accuracy at users who fit their own consumer profiles. Moreover, this targeting can be accomplished instantly. Search for any product online and the next time you visit Facebook or Twitter you will be fed an advertisement for the very product for which you had been searching.

(Illus. 50. CSL Website Traffic Record)



In a general sense, the Internet allows for easy “religion surfing” or “religion searching,” just as it permits surfing for any subject or object. One can shop for any product on many sites, price compare, purchase and arrange shipping in a short period of time without leaving home, and so too with religion. In fact, in Japan, the services of a Buddhist monk to perform funerary rites can be acquired through Amazon. Buddhist funerals are the most common form of funeral in Japan, but the Japanese are finding it increasingly

difficult to locate a monk at a reasonable cost and at the appropriate time, so this service is very useful, especially since it is usually offered at a fixed cost.<sup>253</sup> Social media, which are so prevalent online and in people's lives, can also be used for spiritual messaging. CSL Calgary uses paid advertisements on Facebook to promote its centre. It also utilizes a local application, Meetup, to organize group meetings outside of the normal services in the centre's physical space.

And in its broadest perspective, we cannot forget that the internet is global so there is the potential to reach out to a global as well as a local audience simultaneously. I witnessed this glocalized approach in Calgary where Pat, the online minister, had found followers of her online meditation group from around the world. Language could be a problem when it comes to international presence on the web, but English has become the *lingua franca* of the web and most users around the world have become accustomed to using it online.

Perhaps the most important area of religious practice online is prayer. In the *Pew Internet & American Life Project: Religion Surfers Survey*, fully 85% of religion surfers said that that private prayer and meditation were "very important" to their spiritual life, and almost half of religion surfers said they found more resources for prayer online than offline. Notwithstanding, the survey found that those who used the internet for prayer resources did not claim to pray online, though this concession is no different from the person who uses a prayer book and considers the actual book as a medium of prayer. The resources are external, but the practice is internal, and Pew feels that this definition might

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<sup>253</sup> [https://www.amazon.co.jp/お坊さん便-法事法要手配チケット-移動なし/dp/B018HVTRXO/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1454690814&sr=8-1&keywords=お坊さん](https://www.amazon.co.jp/お坊さん便-法事法要手配チケット-移動なし/dp/B018HVTRXO/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1454690814&sr=8-1&keywords=お坊さん)

help to understand why even the most devout users of online resources did not feel that the internet was critically important to their religious life. The survey goes on to suggest that even if a spiritual practice such as prayer is not changed by the internet, online resources may have other effects. A few of the surfers admitted that the act of searching online for spiritual material or information had increased their own commitment to their faith. Fifteen percent of the religion surfers said that online resources had strengthened their religious commitment, and 27% said it had improved their spiritual life at least somewhat (<http://www.pewinternet.org/2001/12/23/part-2-what-religion-surfers-do-online/>).

So, is this as far as online New Age religion will go? Is this where religion online will stay? Is the desire for energy and community so great that religious group members will never move to an online version of their offline experience? Of course, the answers to these questions are not obvious; there will always be a need for fellowship and physical interaction that can never be replaced by doing religion online. But if the futurists are to be believed and the affects of changing demographics considered, there is likely to be a much greater occurrence of online religion. Conducted in 2014 among 2,500 experts and technology builders, *The Pew International Research Center's Internet Project* was designed to paint a picture of what to expect in the online world in 2025, and they all came to some consistent conclusions:

- Overall, the experts foresee an “ambient information environment” such that we will have the ability to access the internet from anywhere, effortlessly, through personal technologies. We already see this happening as the popularity of smart phones grows, providing continuous access to the internet. Fully 50% of Google

searches are now performed from mobile devices leading to exponential growth in mobile applications and mobile enabled websites.

- Augmented reality enhancements to actual events that people will experience through the use of portable, wearable or implantable devices.
- Disruption of business models: Amazon, Uber, Airbnb are current examples of business disruption that these experts acknowledge this will increase.
- Tagging, databasing and intelligent analytical mapping of the physical and social fields. (<http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/05/14/internet-of-things/>)

And while not mentioned in the Pew study, advances in the development of artificial intelligence (AI) offer boundless opportunities to the practice of online religion. Given the foreseeable ubiquity and facility of access to the internet, it is inevitable that its use as a medium in which to conduct religion will increase. This increase is not just a matter of the ease of accessibility and use; it also has to do with changing demographics. An aging population is more likely to be attracted to spiritual activity and having grown up with the internet, this group is comfortable using it, which will inevitably lead to the internet becoming a more common venue for practicing religion, even in an interactive, real-time way. All those group members I interviewed foresee greater involvement of religion online. Hard though it is to envisage a time when religious practice will abandon physical environments completely, it is equally hard to imagine a future without greater use of the internet in religious practice.

### **6.3 Implications for the Study of New Age.**

In preparing this research on the New Age Movement, I was faced with the challenge of determining whether New Age in fact continues to be a movement. Such academic luminaries as Lewis and Melton have advanced predictions of the demise of the New Age Movement since the 1980s, yet New Age continues to thrive as populist everyday spirituality. In contemporary life, New Age, or versions thereof, have become established as an alternative spirituality to the traditionally recognized organized religions and are not considered in any way extraordinary. Appealing to a largely white, middle-class demographic of professional, managerial, artistic and entrepreneurial occupations, New Age also holds appeal for women, as we have seen in all three of the groups I reviewed, although as Sutcliffe points out, “the relative social power and status of New Age women remains an unresolved issue” (2014: 223). In an analogous way, the demographics of the New Age highlight one of the issues I noted throughout my work: the lack of diversity in any of the groups. I deliberately looked for reflections of local cultural differences and what impact these may have had on each group, but it soon became apparent that the movement had not proven to be attractive to individuals from other ethnic or demographic identities. The appeal, however, appears to be that of a lay spirituality, open to everyone, with no complicated membership requirements and the option to select or reject any component that is deemed unsuitable.

Sutcliffe points out that the profile of New Age spirituality is constantly changing as new ideas enter or old ideas leave the individual groups. He also notes:

...when an aspiring leader emerges – there is inbuilt resistance at the heart of the phenomenon, for the logic of seeking encourages movement laterally (to share

and network with peers and colleagues) rather than vertically (scaling a hierarchy).

This resistance to vertical leadership has created problems for the movement and does not help with the development of consistent policies that depend on a stable hierarchy, as was the case in the early days of New Age. History has shown that many groups have had fleeting appearances on the spiritual landscape, leaving those who seek New Age spirituality to move on to other movements or organizations. In the early twenty-first century, those who are searching for new spiritual expression have a wide range of options from which to choose, greater, according to Sutcliffe, than any other period in the history of religions. The drive to self-preservation of a movement that is marked by a spirituality that is simple, direct and offers relevance in a secular world is perhaps the “pre-eminent expression of popular religion in contemporary culture” (Sutcliffe, 2003). It is also, perhaps, a reflection of the “liquid modernity” we experience in the period of late capitalism. However, the inherent instability that Sutcliffe describes was not present in the groups that I followed. In Calgary and Vancouver, there was clear stability, largely brought about by a business model rooted in a firm and controlling leadership in the United States. Local autonomy left individual groups to manage their own affairs to a certain extent, but the groups functioned more as a mainstream religious entity than a New Age collective, which explains why they were a better fit (more or less) with the Scott and Smart model, a model that Sutcliffe vociferously argues is not designed to accommodate the New Age spiritualities.

As noted previously, the word “energy” cropped up again and again in my interviews among teachers and members, and this term dominates New Age discourse

both metaphorically and experientially. Everything can have an invisible energy. Inner spirit and consciousness are seen as forms of energy. The presence of people generates a hidden energy. Unlike traditional religions that isolate the divine to a sacred place controlled by the priesthood or leaders, energy for New Age is found everywhere. It is the energy within humans that determines whether they are happy, healthy and affluent, especially when aided, as we have seen, by tools such as affirmative prayer and meditation. Energy now appears as the standard explanation of why spiritual practices function. Sutcliffe ascribes the main sources for this development to quantum physics, Theosophy and Western Occultism, as well as such Asian teachings about invisible forces of life as the Chinese concept of *ch'i*<sup>254</sup> and the Indian ideal of *prana*.<sup>255</sup>

In the first chapter of their book, Lewis and Melton state that individuals, institutions and even periodicals that formerly referred to themselves as New Age are increasingly reluctant to do so due in large part, they suggest, to the negative connotations that the name has acquired in the mind of the public. Similarly, this reticence about identifying the New Age Movement was very much in evidence in my interview with the Gellmans. When asked whether they considered themselves to be New Age, David and Alex Gellman made it clear that they were eager not to be labeled as New Age, so instead, I took Lewis's suggestion that "Researchers whose studies require them to make a distinction between New Age and non-New Age should (thus) be well-

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<sup>254</sup> In traditional Chinese culture, *qi* or *ch'i* is believed to be a vital force forming part of any living thing. *Qi* translates literally a "breath," "air," or "gas," and figuratively as "material energy," "life force," or "energy flow." *Qi* is the central underlying principle in Chinese traditional medicine and Chinese martial arts.

<sup>255</sup> In Hindu philosophy including yoga, Indian medicine, and martial arts, Prana comprises all cosmic energy, permeating the Universe on all levels. Prana is often referred to as the "life force" or "life energy."

advised to utilize whatever criterion is best suited to their particular project” (Lewis, 3). This approach entailed a more indirect line of questioning, asking whether the Gellmans followed any of the practices typically associated with New Age, such as *reincarnation*, Astrology, holistic healing methods, self-improvement, *Yoga*. It is of note that they readily admitted to following such practices.

In the Calgary and Vancouver groups, members and ministers alike pointed out that they were New Thought rather than New Age, and in Calgary Pat Campbell, the senior minister, expressed some negativity about being called New Age. She saw a fundamental difference between New Thought and New Age in the focus of the latter on external forces that brought spiritual growth or self-awareness, such as crystals or Tarot or Astrology. By contrast, in New Thought teachings, everything needed to achieve self-awareness and eventual happiness and prosperity already resided within each person; it just needed guidance and the tools that CSL could provide to bring it to fruition.

However, both organizations were perfectly happy, in the true spirit of “one god many paths,” to accept that some of their members would indulge in New Age practices, and both organizations agreed that this eventuality would be acceptable. Why, then, does there appear to be a reluctance to accept that an organization is part of the movement generally known as New Age? Is it because apparent New Age practitioners like the Gellmans in Toronto and Jim Vollett in Vancouver not only practice affirmative prayer, meditation and worship services as part of their spiritual observance, but also offer therapeutic and business counseling, through workshops or courses on team-building, self-improvement, or leadership, following similar principles to their religious activities, such that an association with the term New Age may be perceived to be too far removed

from the mainstream for their more conservative business clients. For example, Alex Gellman's client, Chris Koehler, who is President of Rational USA, leaves this feedback on Gellman's website:

I am happy to recommend Alex Gellman as a motivational corporate speaker. She taught my sales team how to communicate more effectively with each other and their clients and how to deal with stress more effectively. I was impressed by her ability to connect with each individual and assess their unique gifts and the key that will unlock their optimal potential.

[http://www.alexgellman.com/pdfs/AlexGellman\\_BioSheet.pdf](http://www.alexgellman.com/pdfs/AlexGellman_BioSheet.pdf)

The tendency to blur the distinction between private and public, religious and secular areas of life is a characteristic of the practice and practitioners of New Age spirituality.

Researchers should also understand that the New Age community is constantly transforming itself, shifting its focus from one practice to another. In some cases, for example, channeling and crystal healing have lost popularity in favour of practices such as shamanism or American Indian spirituality, mirroring the personality or interests of practitioners like the Gellmans, who exhibit great enthusiasm for American indigenous spiritual traditions. But the very mutability of the New Age Movement appears to be one of its primary appeals. The ability to provide "clients" with personalized services, such as the Gellman's desire to add a Jewish wedding ceremony or rent-a-minister gatherings, are examples of this flexibility. Whether these solutions reflect a market approach to spirituality, appealing to a specific target market and staying ahead of the competition, or whether they reflect a need to be current, to mirror the latest spiritual trend or a

characteristic of the zeitgeist of late modernity, will occupy discourse on New Age for some time to come. As we have seen, CSL in Calgary and Unity in Vancouver, which are perhaps a little closer to a more traditional church with an established bureaucracy, have both attracted a middle-aged, middle-class congregation, who for the most part, no doubt, prefer a less flamboyant path to spiritual growth than New Age provides, even though vestiges of New Age remain within both organizations.

Ultimately, does a desire not to be called New Age or to provide flexibility in service offerings have any impact on the New Age Movement itself? A reluctance to associate with the name does not necessarily indicate a reluctance to follow the practices of the New Age. Lewis may quote Paul Zuromski, editor of the New Age magazine, *Body Mind Spirit*, who asks the question “Is New Age dead?” But I would venture that the spirit of New Age is not dead. Indeed, it lives on most definitely in all three of the congregations I examined, but it has moved well beyond its formative stage. Only further study among other New Age organizations in Canada can verify whether New Age as a movement is flourishing and growing in Canada and merely reshaping its public profile. Or, on a more fundamental level, has the New Age Movement lost its religious veneer and become more readily identifiable as secular? Or was it ever religious? Though suggestive, the study of just three organizations is insufficient to draw any generally binding conclusions about New Age in Canada, still less about its global state. However, we can conclude that the basic theme of personal spirituality leading to self-awareness and happiness is an integral part of the groups I have studied.

Each group studied here has adopted some of the earlier practices and certainly shared fundamental positions of New Age, so New Age remains relevant, even if the

groups and their leaders are unwilling to expressly identify as New Age. We are in fact in a period of “Post New Age.” In this period, groups adopt modern technology where it makes sense and shed practices that are no longer relevant to them, based on trends or fashion. They do so to meet the changing expectations of their users, eschewing any formal definitions. Where there is no central dogma, New Age groups are at liberty to act in this way to a greater or lesser degree. At the same time, however, this constant updating creates challenges for scholars studying New Age groups. Their fluid and flexible nature in this era of “liquid modernity” makes them unpredictable and interchangeable, such that scholars studying groups such as UOUFC, CSL and UV are required to maintain more and more frequent checks on the changes that each group is making.

Looking beyond the strict definitions of New Age institutions, we encounter New Age spirituality in many aspects of everyday life and on street corners in every city in Canada, both literally and in cyberspace. The original movement has indeed moved in many directions, some of which more closely resemble therapy than religion. This shape-shifting plays into Bauman’s concept of “liquid modernity,” which recognizes the complex needs of many individuals today. These needs have resulted in an increase in the use of therapy throughout the Western world, as people seek ways to cope with the tortuous complexities that modern life presents in all its aspects, limiting opportunities to achieve the elusive goal of happiness. Even within more traditional religions, as earlier scholars like Stark and Bainbridge and Berger have noted, this need gave rise to Social Gospel ministries and the greater role of the church as therapist.

This trend has been a cause of concern for some members of the original New Age Movement, who perceive it as diminishing the original idea of a New Age. While the original New Age Movement was born out of idealism and altruism, the tendency in the late twentieth century, as we have seen, all too quickly became commercialized into a spiritual marketplace to fill the needs of individuals and corporations rather than congregations. The original movement adopted a relatively coherent Theosophical and metaphysical philosophy. By contrast, later incarnations tended to present a mixed bag of ideas without a clear focus and direction that had more to do with supplying a market or customer need than with reflecting an adherence to an established belief system. These fluctuations may reflect a North American influence of New Thought traditions on the movement. Indeed, the recent New Age Movement has tended to be dominated by American cultural and spiritual ideas and values, and the most vocal proponents have been American, for example, Shirley MacLaine and James Redfield, as I highlighted in my first chapter.

As we approached the turn into the twenty-first century, more and more devotees of alternative spirituality began to reject the label New Age, which they perceived was debased with questionable activities like channelling and crystal healing. This rejection of the New Age label has made researching the subject more difficult, since it is no longer possible to study the New Age Movement, understood in a general sense, simply by questioning people who identified themselves as involved in New Age. During the 1990s, participants increasingly refused to identify themselves as New Age, preferring vague and noncommittal terms such as “spiritual.” I witnessed such reluctance in my interviews in Vancouver, Calgary and Toronto. However, I believe it would be misleading to

interpret this attitude as meaning that New Age is dead. Instead, it seems clear to me that New Age has changed from a collective counter-culture movement that refuted the traditional values of the post-war Western world to an individual spiritual path of customizable practices leading to self-awareness and mindfulness. These practices position the New Age as a more acceptable spiritual option within our current cultural landscape. In other words, accepting the philosophy of the New Age without calling it New Age.

I have demonstrated throughout this research that the New Age Movement has almost developed into a spiritual supermarket where customers seeking a form of personal redemption can pick and choose the “spiritual commodities” that appeal to them and use them to create their own spiritual concoction. This idea of a spiritual supermarket is not limited just to the New Age but can be seen as a phenomenon that may be encountered in many religions in the West today, all competing for a shrinking group of religious consumers. However, in this marketing battle for the consumer, the New Age enjoys certain advantages over more traditional religious institutions that better equip it to succeed in a spiritual marketing campaign. While virtually all other religious entities have at least some sense of a formal structure that allows its members to feel part of a spiritual community, the spirituality that New Age offers is focused only on the individual and his or her personal goals. There is, therefore, no hierarchical structure to criticize or reject a person’s own interpretation of salvation. The consumer is in the “driver’s seat” and controls the transaction, so within the current context of a free market of ideas and practices, the New Age’s focus on the self and on individual belief systems as the only trusted source of spiritual truth, a truth that cannot be held into question by

religious dogma or community values, clearly prevents New Age from developing into an organized religion. It is this focus on individual wants and needs that makes the New Ager the ideal spiritual consumer. Apart from this rigid focus on self and personal spiritual development, there is nothing to prevent a New Age consumer from adopting any new product or service that fulfills their (changing) spiritual needs or meets the full range of their spiritual interests. New Agers can continually reinvent their own belief systems and values through the ritual means or symbolism that those supplying the New Age market offer. They have been given endless opportunities for presenting “new and improved” spiritual commodities, not unlike a traditional product marketer.

If then New Age is alive and thriving, where does its future lie? Analyzing current manifestations of New Age, I identified five primary directions that it has taken in recent years. This analysis in turn suggests directions New Age might take in the future. The first, and the most traditional expression of the movement, is the quasi “church-like” form of service and delivery that includes scheduled activities such as weekly celebrations and learning groups, as well as social gatherings. As we have seen, this form of the New Age is exemplified in the Unity Center in Vancouver and CSL Calgary. These organizations satisfy the needs of people who grew up in a tradition of established religious values and lifestyle and who remain comfortable with a more formal approach to religion. Such participants are not interested in a more radical articulation of their spirituality, yet they still seek a more open-minded, modern, pluralistic concept of their beliefs. Beyond the organizations I studied, there are other examples of such congregations across Canada. One such example is the Spiritualist Church of Canada (SCC). SCC has more of a focus on spiritualism than do either Unity or CSL, but its

overarching principles have many similarities to theirs. From the seven principles found on the website of the group, we can discern clearly that it follows the fundamental New Age pattern of seeking greater self-awareness and personal growth. Its website includes this self-description:

As a way of life, Spiritualism engages our entire being in an effort to attain our true spiritual nature, our highest and best, a higher ground from which to live our lives. It is an exciting journey of self-discovery, self-mastery, service and fulfillment.

The Church also recognizes a single, omnipotent deity, expressed as “Infinite Spirit, Divine Creator of All That Is,” as do both CSL and Unity. The Spiritual Church of Canada has seventeen groups across Canada from British Columbia to Quebec.

The second indication that New Age is alive and thriving has to do with more informal types of spiritual praxis. Reminiscent of original New Age practices in its coming-of-age years in the sixties and seventies the praxes of some young groups change constantly. This changeability arises from the wishes or needs of the members of the group, or from the whims and abilities of the leaders, or simply from changes in circumstances. These groups therefore tend to be small and flexible and have no affiliation to a larger spiritual organization and of course, they are not franchised. Though Gellmans’ UOUFC in Toronto epitomizes this phenomenon there are many other groups that fall into this category. *Ruah* Toronto and *Metaphysique*, located in Toronto’s Yorkville area, are two groups. *Ruah* is the Hebrew word for “breath of God” which, according to this group, represents the creative spirit that formed the world. *Ruah* Toronto sees its role as exploring a “cosmic and Earth-centred spirituality, or eco-

spirituality.” The group is concerned with the current progress of the world that appears to lack any concern for ecological matters or for the state of the planet. The group believes that earth-based spirituality must include a “spirituality of liberation that challenges us into right relationship with all other creatures.” The Ruah Toronto community indicates that their spiritual journey is framed by the question posed by Thomas Berry, a mystic, monk and cultural historian:

How will we reinvent the human and move into the only process that matters – our authentic maturation as a species? Only by understanding ourselves within the unfolding cosmos as a whole can we begin to discover the meaning and the blessing of ordinary things.

They suggest that this understanding is anchored in pre-Biblical belief and is consistent with mysticism from many faiths. Ruah Toronto’s foundations are Jewish and Christian, but like many New Age organizations they “honour and celebrate the wisdom expressed in the writings, the art, the poetry and the music of other faith traditions.” By contrast, Metaphysique, as expressed on its website, Metaphysique’s goal is:

to help you live your life to your fullest potential. By discovering parts of yourself that are holding you back, while uncovering new and exciting possibilities, our goal is to help you to bring ease and joy into your life in a fun and exciting way.

This goal is achieved through such activities as soul-reading, Ro-Hun therapy<sup>256</sup> and Kundalini<sup>257</sup> energy work. Therapies also include spiritual psychotherapy, group therapy, relationship and couples counseling, hypnosis, transpersonal and transformational psychology, and past life regression.

This second indicator might also include small, local gatherings or groups of like-minded individuals who seek spiritual fulfillment or health and wellness through small groups. These groups may only exist online, or they may gather either on a regular or *ad hoc* basis through a medium such as Meetup. Started in 2002 with the intent of “using the Internet to get off the Internet,” Meetup is community-building software that enables people to connect with others in their local communities who share common interests like New Age spirituality. This particular segment obviously has appeal for those who avoid any formal approach to spiritual therapy and who seek out groups that are likely to include common New Age practices such as *yoga* and meditation in their programs, but with the specific goals of healing, wellness, spiritual enlightenment and consciousness raising. If they choose, they can participate without long-term commitment or membership. In Toronto alone, over fifty such groups thrive, each with fifty to several thousand members. The list includes groups that cater specifically to women, like “Taking Charge: Health, Wellness and Fitness for

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<sup>256</sup> Ro-Hun is a systematic and rapid-acting psychotherapy for personal growth and change. An energy based method of healing, Ro-Hun uses the electromagnetic fields surrounding the physical body to work simultaneously to integrate the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual bodies. It combines both transpersonal psychology and metaphysical spiritual techniques in a rare and unique heart-centered holistic process.

<sup>257</sup> *Kundalini* (Sanskrit: कुण्डलिनी) in Hinduism refers to a form of primal energy said to be located at the base of the spine. *Kundalini* awakening has been said to occur as a consequence of deep meditation, which results in a feeling of enlightenment and bliss.

Women”<sup>258</sup> and “Mindful Intentions: Women’s Mindfulness Group.”<sup>259</sup> These groups help women “achieve a true sense of inner peace, happiness & joyful living through my natural-born (intuitive) empathic abilities.”<sup>260</sup> There are also groups that cater specifically to men, like “Sacred Brotherhood Gathering,”<sup>261</sup> which describes itself as a Meetup group for men of all ages to explore their inner feminine and integrate with their masculine energy to live as a whole being.” There are even groups for children, like “Free Guided Meditation Group for Children, Youth and Parents,”<sup>262</sup> whose activities and interests encompass ecstatic dance and meditation, *yoga*, Buddhism, wellness and healing, as well as a host of esoteric practices ranging from indigenous smudging ceremonies to tantric massage. Nor is Toronto alone among the Canadian cities featured in this research in having such groups. In Calgary there are thirty plus New Age inspired spiritual and wellness groups on Meetup and in Vancouver there are over thirty such groups.

The third direction that New Age is taking can be found in the retail world. It consists of several sub-categories. While these enterprises are clearly for-profit businesses, taking the movement away from its sacred origins into a thoroughly secular environment, they have always played a significant role in the life of the New Age Movement. Nor have New Age followers ever perceived any conflict in this apparent fuzziness between the spiritual and the secular. New Age bookstores abound in most cities in the West, and New Age sections can be found in virtually every bookstore

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<sup>258</sup> <https://www.meetup.com/Taking-Charge-Health-Wellness-Fitness-For-Women/>

<sup>259</sup> <https://www.meetup.com/Mindful-Intentions/>

<sup>260</sup> <https://www.meetup.com/Mindful-Intentions/>

<sup>261</sup> <https://www.meetup.com/Sacred-Brotherhood-Gathering/>

<sup>262</sup> <https://www.meetup.com/Richmond-Hill-Free-Meditation-Play-Group/>

including online bookstores; they undoubtedly represent the largest subcategory of the retail segment. Another important New Age retail component is the “accessory” store selling such New Age accouterments as crystals, talismans, candles, Tarot cards and other esoteric paraphernalia. Many of these stores also offer courses, workshops and events in identified with a variety of New Age practices. Other stores that could be said to be related to New Age, or at least influenced by the trends associated with it, are clothing and accessory stores that cater specifically to *yoga* and meditation.

Lululemon,<sup>263</sup> a Canadian chain, is probably the best-known *yoga* store, but sports stores like Toronto’s Sporting Life<sup>264</sup> also carry specialized *yoga* and meditation clothing and accessories. Also, there is a plethora of online retailers who also offer similar products, like HealthyLifeCycle.ca and Zulily.ca. In addition, alternative and holistic medicine stores have popped up in virtually every community in Canada, as well as a host of health and wellness websites. Nutrition House,<sup>265</sup> for instance, is a leading franchised retailer and [www.well.ca](http://www.well.ca) a leading website. The proliferation of these outlets has occurred simultaneously with the popularization, secularization and selling of New Age. Toronto’s Happy Soul New Age Store exemplifies such enterprises.<sup>266</sup> According to its website, this store offers online as well as offline services. In addition to selling such popular New Age artifacts as crystals, it offers workshops on New Age practices under the title of the *Mystic Workshop Series*. There is a ten-week Tarot Master Workshop for \$300; a one-day “Crystal Master Certification” for \$200; and one-on-one Tarot Master and Crystal Master

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<sup>263</sup> <https://shop.lululemon.com>

<sup>264</sup> <https://www.sportinglife.ca>

<sup>265</sup> <http://www.nutritionhouse.com>

<sup>266</sup> <https://happysoulonline.com>

workshops with Joey Wargachuk,<sup>267</sup> each for \$350. Happy Soul also offers readings, crystal rentals, clearing and smudging services; a course described as *Certified Crystal Energy Healing* with Graciela Gabica<sup>268</sup> for a fee of \$45; *Psychic Reading* with Rev. Sheila Scott<sup>269</sup> and Wendy Bryant<sup>270</sup> for a fee of \$55; *Akashic Records Reading*<sup>271</sup> with Cheryl Brightman<sup>272</sup> for a fee of \$55; and *Home and Business Clearing* for a fee of \$150. These services can be further customized through the selection of the ingredients used in the service. So, for example, the smudging ceremony offers over ten varieties of sage, the clearing and crystals for homes and businesses rituals offers over twenty varieties of incense, as well as a least three varieties of Palo Santo<sup>273</sup> and six varieties of clearing sprays. Smudging, an indigenous ceremony, serves to protect premises and people from ghosts, spirits, entities, portals to other realms, negative energy from others and psychic

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<sup>267</sup> Joey Wargachuk is an entrepreneur, digital marketing and communications specialist, Tarot and Crystal reader, and certified Reiki Master and teacher based in Toronto.

<sup>268</sup> Graciela Gabica is a certified crystal worker based in Toronto.

<sup>269</sup> Sheila Scott is a licensed spiritualist minister in the province of Ontario, a certified psychic specializing in Angel Reading, Energy Healing and Tarot Card Reading.

<sup>270</sup> Wendy Bryant is a certified psychic based in Toronto.

<sup>271</sup> In Theosophy and Anthroposophy, the Akashic records are a compendium of all human events, thoughts, words, emotions, and intent ever to have occurred in the past, present, or future. They are believed by Theosophists to be encoded in a non-physical plane of existence known as the *etheric plane*. There are anecdotal accounts but there is no scientific evidence for the existence of the Akashic records, it is referred to in virtually every ancient spiritual teaching and known as the “Book of Remembrance” in the Torah and in the Bible as “The Book of Life.” This ‘Book’ translates your life into reality. Every thought, feeling, word, deed or action you have experienced is here for your learning and growth. By accessing your own soul’s Akashic Record, you are able to transform unhealthy living patterns, belief systems, cultural and societal teachings, attachments, words, deeds, feelings, ailments, illnesses and thoughts that inhibit your growth into the full potential of who you are. During an Akashic Record consultation, a client consciously reconnects to the energy field of his or her Akashic Record. Once having accessed this energy, you are able to ask questions of God/Spirit/Source that will help you overcome obstacles on your path. At the end of the process, when the negative energy is cleared, your Akashic Record is closed until the next time you want to reconnect and focus on soul clearing.

[http://www.wisdomsway.ca/akashic\\_record.htm](http://www.wisdomsway.ca/akashic_record.htm)

<sup>272</sup> Cheryl Brightman is a certified Akashic Record consultant and teacher based in Toronto.

<sup>273</sup> Palo Santo is a wood from central and South America used as incense and oil for cleansing ceremonies.

attacks. Happy Soul's clearing experts also incorporate sound into the practice, sounds such as Tibetan chimes, brass and crystal singing bowls and blessed Tibetan bells.

However, one service that is missing from Happy Soul's New Age menu is Holistic Services because, according to its website, it is not licensed by the City of Toronto as a Holistic Centre.

Similar enterprises may be found in Vancouver and Calgary, our other Canadian focus cities. The website of Vancouver's Utopia the Mystical Sanctuary states that the store offers virtually identical products and services to those of Happy Soul in Toronto, but claims even greater customization, which translates into higher fees, since it charges by the minute (\$1.55) rather than by the hour or by a fixed cost per workshop or service. Outlining her credentials and experience, Margaret, one of the course directors, captures the spirit and intent of Utopia:

I have been reading and teaching Tarot for over thirty-five years. I just love the information that Tarot gives when read properly. The cards end up 'speaking' to each other, and can tell your recent past, where you are now, and what is coming up for you. I was born in Scotland and raised in a Spiritualist family, so talking to those who have passed over seemed natural. I had mediumship training in Toronto at Springdale Spiritualist Church. I have healing skills using *Reiki* and Spiritual Healing, and also dabble in Numerology. If I 'read' for you it is with compassion and understanding, and of course, complete discretion. It is your reading, not mine.

In like fashion, Calgary's Divine Mine, established in August 2004, tells us on its website that the store it will help to find a peaceful atmosphere in which to "de-stress," to relax

and “heal the mind, body and spirit.” The name “Divine Mine” neatly and unabashedly puns on the idea of personal spirituality and the store’s value as a rich source of goods and opportunities for fulfilling it. It offers various services, workshops, meditations, certificate courses and New Age products, and provides opportunities for “physical healing, personal growth and deepened spiritual connection.” These services include Tarot, palm and angel card readings, past life regression, Astrology, *Reiki*, Hypnotherapy, Reflexology,<sup>274</sup> and *Yoga Nidra*.<sup>275</sup> The store also sells books that include titles on such familiar New Age topics as spiritual growth, alternative healing, Astrology, and numerology. In a particularly enterprising innovation Divine Mine provides a mobile version of the store and will attend “clients” events to offer some in-home New Age shopping.

As noted in the introduction to this dissertation, customization -- that is, the ability for followers of New Age to personalize their own route to salvation -- has been a hallmark of New Age spirituality. The further customization of New Age practices that I have outlined above not only reflects a continuation of this characteristic but also acknowledges the phenomenon as it has been developing in the secular, private sector. In her book, *Brands of Faith. Marketing religion in a commercial age*, Mara Einstein<sup>276</sup> discusses the commodification of religion in general within the current consumer-focused environment, which Cheryl Russell, a former editor of *American Demographics*

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<sup>274</sup> Reflexology, also known as zone therapy, is an alternative medicine involving application of pressure to the feet and hands with specific thumb, finger, and hand techniques without the use of oil or lotion.

<sup>275</sup> *Yoga Nidra* or *yogic* sleep is a state of consciousness between waking and sleeping, like the “going-to-sleep” stage.

<sup>276</sup> Mara Einstein is a Professor of Media Studies at Queens College, City University of New York, specializing in the study of the cultural impact of marketing and advertising, particularly as it relates to religion and spirituality

magazine, calls “the personalized economy.” Russell explains that while the industrial economy was based on mass production, the personalized economy is based on “customized products for individualistic consumers” (Russell, 1993, p.56). We encounter this personalization in virtually every consumer market, from technology to media to packaged goods. For example, cable channels such as Netflix, Crave, Amazon and Hulu offer programming for every taste that can be viewed on every device from smart phones to televisions, whenever and wherever a subscriber chooses to view it. Not only has television changed to become more personal, but so has radio. Streaming services such as Spotify and iTunes allow users to select any genre of music from an enormous library of options. In an effort to reinvent themselves, major newspapers such as the *Globe and Mail* and *Toronto Star* have turned to personalization in order not only to survive but to be more relevant to consumers. Readers can pick and choose online the stories that interest them, and they can choose to pay for subscriptions or they can even receive a hard copy of the paper delivered to their homes. Any survey of the internet will reveal that global news outlets like the *BBC* and *CNN*, as well as newspapers like *The Guardian* and *Washington Post*, provide stories via social media based on the news-consuming habits of individual user. What is more, users do not even have to request this content.

The proliferation of consumer product brands can be seen in any major supermarket. For example, in the milk section of your local supermarket you can find a variety of milk products: white or chocolate, skimmed, 1%, 2% or 3%, soy milk, almond milk in multiple flavours, and so on. Bottled water is no longer just water; it comes in carbonated, natural source, flavoured, and energized versions. Even vegetables and fruit today are offered in regular or organic versions, peeled and sliced and pre-packaged, or in

bulk. Every conceivable product from telephones to television, from beauty to weight-loss products is developed and sold to appeal to different tastes. So, it comes as no surprise that this trend has found its way into the marketing of religion, with New Age Spirituality leading the field. In fact, no other religious entity was as well-equipped as New Age to move so readily and so easily into customization, since this sort of service is what it had been providing its followers from its early days. After all, while the secular commercial world has taught consumers to expect instant gratification whatever their taste, New Age spirituality that focuses on healing the mind and body to arrive at happiness fits this mold perfectly.

The fourth direction for New Age we can readily identify is the place that it has found among Hollywood's elite. In the first chapter, we discussed the history and the development of the New Age in North America and how celebrities such as Shirley Maclaine and J.Z Knight adopted and promoted New Age spirituality in the West, especially in Hollywood. A primary source for the popularity of the practices of the Post-New Age are contemporary Hollywood celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey<sup>277</sup> and Deepak Chopra,<sup>278</sup> both of whom have used such popular media as television to further transform and commoditize the New Age. However, Oprah Winfrey is but one of many celebrities who have espoused New Age spirituality and occult practices. Hollywood is home to many performers who have embraced New Age customs like numerology, Chinese horoscopes, and Tarot card readings, as means of self-awareness and fulfillment. The list

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<sup>277</sup> Oprah Winfrey is an American media executive, talk show host, actress, producer, and philanthropist.

<sup>278</sup> Deepak Chopra is an Indian-born American author, public speaker, alternative medicine advocate, and a prominent figure in the New Age Movement.

includes such well-known celebrities as Stephanie Kramer, Marsha Mason, Linda Evans, Lisa Bonet, Sharon Glass, Levar Burton, George Lucas, and Joyce Dewitt.

It has been observed that stars of the entertainment world can tend towards egomania; fueled by the adulation and egostroking of fans, they can think of themselves almost as demi-gods. On her talk show, Oprah Winfrey once told her guest, Gary Zukar, an expert in spirituality, “I don’t just like me. I adore me.” Similarly, it is claimed that Shirley MacLaine shouted to the surf in California, “I am God, I am God.” A sentiment, needless to say, that would be wholly unacceptable in mainstream churches. Modesty is not an attribute normally associated with celebrities who often reject traditional forms of worship and create their own designer religion, one in which their god is always accessible and always ready to assist. In this milieu of inflated egos it is not at all strange that Hollywood has welcomed New Age. It claims to offer immediate calm and serenity as well as physical and mental well-being to people who live in a precarious world that is full of anxiety and stress. As such, it might well provide resilience for actors faced with daily criticism and rejection and a job that is often rigorous and physically tiring. The commitment to a successful career in entertainment can exact an enormous toll on performers, so that they find themselves taking unconventional measures to relax, including subscribing to spiritual and physical regimens that are seen as essential to a performer’s wellbeing.

The fifth direction that New Age spirituality has taken, and perhaps the most significant, is the inclusion of its techniques into traditional forms of therapy. This phenomenon has been discussed at length throughout this dissertation, as has the effect that it produces of blurring the lines between the secular and the religious. The

practitioners in this category are usually registered psychotherapists, like the Gellmans in Toronto. They bring a psychological and more rigorous discipline to the field of New Age spirituality, often customizing programs for individuals or groups. There are many instances of professional therapies and therapeutic approaches that incorporate spirituality into their practices. One example is Toronto's Sumeet Saini, a spiritual therapist who through counseling and coaching via video-conferencing can, according to his website, assist individuals with a variety of treatments, among them:

- Clarity of Spiritual focus
- Creativity in order to expand ideas and vision
- Leadership - help to understand the impact that one can have on others and the community.

Saini's website also informs us that he has a certificate from Transformational Arts College's program in Spiritual Psychotherapy Training, and that he charges his clients between \$80 and \$120 per session. Based on his profile, Saini's focuses his business on South Asian clients, though he works with people from all age groups and a diversity of backgrounds, including bisexual and gay or transgendered people, as well as those suffering from chronic diseases such as cancer and HIV/Aids. Saini claims to address a very broad spectrum of issues, including anger management, bipolar disorder, codependency, coping skills, family conflict, grief, life coaching and life transitions, men and women's issues, relationships, and so on. In this respect, his offerings are very similar to the services that any non-spiritual psychotherapist would provide. Likewise, his

treatment models also vary, and include Adlerian,<sup>279</sup> art therapy, existential and experiential therapy, family systems, feminist, gestalt, humanistic, integrative, interpersonal and multi-cultural therapies among others.

Like Gellman and Saini, Sage Riley is another practitioner of spiritual therapy in Toronto. According to his website, Riley also incorporates much of the New Age into his work, including first nations' spirituality. He focuses on dealing with anxiety, depression, substance abuse, poor self-esteem, loss and grief, chronic illness, and what Riley calls "consumer survivors," that is, people who have been mis-medicated or mis-diagnosed. To quote from his website:

Your concerns will be explored/addressed as we together create a Holistic and Structuralist, Body, Mind and Spiritual plan to help solve issues and move forward.

In all these cases, we clearly see a client-focused service that never refers to God or religion and is solely based on a personal physical or psychological need, thus fulfilling the client's wishes such that the emphasis is placed on the individual and not on God. This type of practice is to be expected given that these practitioners are in the business of psychotherapy, but, like many others, they have adopted the practices and techniques of the New Age to produce results for their clients, whether those clients are corporate and seeking help with workplace morale or wellness, as with Gellman, or individual and couples therapy, as with Saini and Riley. In essence, what these practitioners do is to remove the element of mysticism or magic from New Age therapies and focus on the

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<sup>279</sup> Adlerian therapy is a brief, psychoeducational approach that is both humanistic and goal oriented. It emphasizes the individual's strivings for success, connectedness with others, and contributions to society as being hallmarks of mental health.

therapeutic benefits. In addition, both Saini and Riley take advantage of the platform offered through *Psychology Today* to advertise their practices. A magazine devoted to making psychological literature more accessible to the general public, *Psychology Today* includes lists of clinical professionals, psychiatrists and treatment centers that provide mental health services in Canada, the United States and internationally. A review of Toronto, for example, revealed 400 or so spiritual therapists currently practicing in or in the vicinity of the city. Some of these have postgraduate degrees and many have been practicing for a number of years.

In this context, we must also acknowledge how mainstream New Age spirituality has become in the world of commerce and government. Expressing their practices as “wellness and mindfulness programs,” corporations frequently employ the techniques of meditation, *yoga* and mindfulness to help employees deal with the stresses and anxieties that confront them in a modern workplace. This phenomenon also fits comfortably within the corporate trend to incorporate Emotional Intelligence (EI) and empathy into the workplace to strengthen employee engagement. This human resources strategy is based on the theory that if employees are engaged in their work, they will be happier and therefore more productive and loyal, which is beneficial not only to the employee but also to the employer, of course, since following a practice that brings focus to an individual and helps to alleviate stress can improve the productivity of the employee, rendering him or her more valuable to the employer. That said, however, most large corporations and government bodies recognize the intrinsic value of having employees who are both emotionally and physically stable. Many forward-thinking companies even set aside a quiet space where workers can meditate and reflect and encourage employees

to take breaks to practice meditation or other methods of relaxation. The pace of the modern workplace creates high levels of stress and seldom allows employees the time to find their own antidote.

It would be difficult to look at the five directions that New Age has taken and arrive at any firm conclusions as to which of these directions exerts more influence in furthering New Age values. What we can conclude, however, is that New Age's approach to customizing spirituality for individuals who do not necessarily accept a rigid, hierarchical form of delivery has enabled these different directions to develop and to cater to individuals whose preferences lean towards a diverse approach, whether that approach is based on age, race, gender, sexuality, social status or level of education. This desire for approaches that put the client first can be seen throughout modern society, from social media, where personal information is shared willingly to produce customized content, to flexible work environments, where workers can select the work situation that most appeals to them, to health services that run the gamut from traditional clinical healthcare to Chinese medicine to holistic healing. In this context, the New Age will continue its metamorphosis to accommodate people who are interested in spirituality, but not always accepting of the forms or platforms of delivery. We cannot look at the New Age without looking at the significant role the secular world has played and is playing in its progress and development. If technology introduces a new medium or platform, New Age spirituality will adapt to whatever form it may be, in order to continue to serve its constituency.

Doubtless, this research will benefit from further elaboration. In some ways, this dissertation marks only a preliminary step, uncovering more questions than answers

about New Age and its future. The baseline of data needs to be expanded to generate a statistically reliable sample of post New Age groups. Such future research might include the cataloging of all the spiritual groups in each of my three focus cities -- Toronto, Calgary, and Vancouver. A catalogue of this kind will enable deeper and more wide-ranging analysis and hence solid conclusions. A deeper examination of the spiritual landscape in each city will reveal data that could be used to answer less equivocally questions about the extent to which New Age groups reflect the vibrant, multi-cultural cities they exist in. It will also identify more clearly whether there are any groups that use the internet extensively as a means of doing Digital Religion. Another limitation of my research is that, for practical reasons, it was deliberately restricted to only a part of English Canada. If we are to paint a truly complete picture of New Age spirituality in Canada, it is imperative that the prairie and maritime provinces, as well as French Canada, be included in future studies, representing as they do, 36% of the country's population. Also, future studies should include a statistically representative baseline of uniquely Canadian New Age groups. Two of the groups I followed in this study are so closely tied to their United States parent organizations that it is difficult to consider them wholly Canadian.

From online research, a database of potential New Age groups can be developed. A quantitative study that interviews a representative sample of these New Age organizations would follow this database, and thence candidates can be identified for further qualitative research. This type of comprehensive study will permit both macro- and micro-analyses of Canadian New Age formations. But it would require other resources to effectuate, including other scholars interested in the same field. The results,

however, would be far-reaching in mapping the state of the New Age in Canada. Further, were I to take a more comprehensive approach to New Age study, I would consider examining CSL and Unity on a global scale, but in greater depth, to allow comparison between local centers and the parent center, examining how cultural differences come into play. We have already seen some minor variances from country to country, like nomenclature in Unity, and it is possible those differences extend to the ways in which a New Age spiritual group based in North America practices in other parts of the world, especially in those countries where the internet is not as well established, and technology is not as familiar as it is in the West. Lesley in Calgary, for instance, pointed out that members of CSL groups in Kenya are far more devoted to spiritual practices offline than online, because of the technological limits in that country. This difference might also explain why CSL Kenya does not have a website. This type of in-depth study focusing on one or two significant New Age organizations would enable a robust review of how culture influences religion and how online versus offline religious practices can be influenced in greater or lesser technologically advanced environments. Finally, however, the one thing that is abundantly clear from my research is the ability that the New Age has demonstrated in adapting to changing landscapes both in the physical and the virtual worlds. It is, therefore, not hard to speculate that the New Age will continue to adapt to technological advances that provide it with new markets and new opportunities. This changing landscape will of course encourage new waves of research that will undoubtedly challenge the existing New Age scholarship.

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## Appendix.



Revised: 06/12

### **Code of Ethics for Ministers/Spiritual Leaders of Our Unity Worldwide Ministries**

#### **Introduction and Intention**

Foundational to Unity’s principles and teachings is the belief that we are individualized expressions of God; that our spiritual purpose is to give expression to God. This calls us, as Unity ministers/spiritual leaders to live from our Christ nature in all circumstances—thereby, being a healing presence and a role model for those we serve. Because of this, it is our intention to be accountable to a high level of professional ethics.

Our Code of Ethics articulates a vision of ethical behavior grounded in our beliefs and teachings. Its purpose is to provide guidelines for behavior that is both ethical and authentic, and allows us to give full expression to our Christ nature. This document also serves the purpose of allowing us to hold one another accountable to this standard. When we fall short, the Ethics Review System seeks to provide a compassionate process that calls us back to integrity and wholeness. We seek to restore, to rehabilitate, and to make amends whenever possible.

We also recognize that there are certain violations of our covenant that must be addressed. Some behaviors are explicitly illegal, and such violations may require suspension of membership from Unity Worldwide Ministries. Some behaviors and attitudes are unethical by our standards and compromise our ability to perform and provide ministry. Other behaviors and attitudes harm us and interfere with our ministry and our own efforts toward wholeness. Ministers/spiritual leaders who act in ways that are inconsistent with our Code of Ethics may be subject to review through our Ethics Review System. We seek to address these violations honestly, directly, and in such a manner as to assist one another in living our highest potential.

**Section I and Section II relate to our spiritual principles and self-care. It is recommended that all ministers/spiritual leaders aspire to follow these practices. If a minister/spiritual leader falls short of these practices, an ethical review would not be probable.**

**I. Dedication to Truth Principles**

- A.** As a Unity minister/spiritual leader [minister/spiritual leader here and throughout the document refers to those individuals who are credentialed and/or recognized as Unity leaders by Unity Worldwide Ministries], I dedicate myself to the principles of Truth as taught and exemplified by Jesus Christ and interpreted by Unity and Unity Worldwide Ministries [UWM], including:
1. God is Absolute good, everywhere present.
  2. Every human being is an expression of the Divine; the Christ spirit, by whatever name, indwells all people. Their very essence is of God, and therefore they are also inherently good.
  3. Human beings create their experience by the activity of their thinking. Everything in the manifest realm has its beginning in thought.
  4. Prayer is creative thinking that heightens the connection with God-Mind and therefore brings forth wisdom, healing, prosperity, and everything good.
  5. Knowing and understanding the laws of life, also called Truth, are not enough. A person must also live the truth that he/she knows.
- B.** I look to the indwelling Christ for inspiration, to guide, govern, and prosper me.
- C.** I will, to the best of my understanding and ability, bring the freeing truth to humankind. This I will do in a spiritually dignified way, being guided by divine wisdom and good judgment.
- D.** I believe in the power of prayer and I am convinced that, as Jesus said, “All things are possible to one who believes.”
- E.** In consecration to God and the work of ministry, I offer myself as a channel for God’s will to be made manifest that I may honor and glorify God.
- F.** I believe that the true minister/spiritual leader is one who has been called to this work by the spirit of Truth within. I desire only to express this Truth, and to teach others to live it.

**II. The Ministerial Relationship to Self – Self Care**

Recognizing that wholeness is expressed on all levels of my being, I will honor myself in spirit, mind and body.

- A.** Following the example of Jesus, I will take time away from the crowds for conscious contact with God, and will maintain a spiritual practice of prayer and meditation.
- B.** I will respect the need to develop and broaden my intellectual and spiritual capacities through personal reading, and professional continuing education programs that are vital and relevant to my growth.

- C. I will endeavor to maintain a program of emotional and physical fitness that includes vacation time, and time off each week for rest and relaxation.
- D. Knowing that ministry makes great demands upon the ministers/spiritual leader's time, I will endeavor to maintain a proper balance between the life of the ministry and the rights and privileges of my family relationship.

**Sections III through Section VII relate to standards of behaviors all ministers/spiritual leaders are expected to demonstrate. Failure to do so could result in a review through the Ethics Review System.**

**III. The Ministerial Relationship with Others**

The ministerial relationship pre-supposes certain role expectations; the minister/spiritual leader is expected to make available certain resources, talents, knowledge, and expertise which will serve the best interests of the ministry.

- A. The role of minister/spiritual leader carries with it authority and power. I will fulfill my responsibility and use this power to benefit the people who call upon me for service. I will offer acceptance and support to all people with whom I have contact regardless of age, race, socio-economic status, creed, nationality, gender, or sexual orientation. When people are angry, critical, or unkind, I will respond compassionately.
- B. I will conduct my work, private and public, after the standards and in accord with the teachings and ideals of Unity World Headquarters at Unity Village and Unity Worldwide Ministries without competition and contention, realizing that the more truly I practice the Principles of Unity, the greater will be the good to each and all immediately concerned, and to the community at large.
- C. I will maintain the boundaries of the ministerial relationship, realizing that crossing boundaries is a betrayal of trust. In honor of that trust, I will not exploit nor violate the emotional, spiritual or physical well-being of people who come to me for help or over whom I have any kind of authority. I will not use my authority to defame or manipulate individuals or groups, or foster division within the ministry. I will not create or cultivate dependencies. I will avoid situations and relationships which could impair my professional judgment or compromise the integrity of the ministry. I will not exploit situations or relationships for personal gain.
- D. As a minister/spiritual leader, I shall work within my professional qualifications and limitations. People with needs beyond my expertise shall be referred to a qualified professional.
- E. **Confidentiality:**
  - 1. I am honor bound to hold sacred all confidences reposed in me, except if a confidence reveals that the person confiding may pose a threat to self or others; I will abide by law mandating or authorizing reporting to agencies. In addition, where law shields from liability voluntary disclosure of suspected possible child abuse, elder abuse, dependent adult abuse, or animal abuse, I will make a good faith report of such abuse to the appropriate agencies whether or not reporting is mandated by law.

2. I will never mention, without permission, either privately or publicly, the name, residence, or locality of any person under treatment in the past or present in illustration or verification of Truth principles.
  3. I will not use privileged information for personal gain.
- F.** I will refrain from sexual contact and/or sexualized behavior with a congregant, client, or employee with whom I have a professional and/or pastoral relationship, realizing it is unethical and is deemed clergy misconduct. (Clergy misconduct involving sexual abuse and/or sexualizing a professional relationship is defined as sexual activity or contact, not limited to sexual intercourse.) [Refer to Unity Worldwide Ministries Sexual Conduct Policy.]
- G.** I believe that more is taught by what a minister/spiritual leader is than what s/he says. Therefore, I will seek to keep my morals above reproach. I will exercise good judgment in regard to my social conduct. My relationships will be such as to command only the highest respect. I am conscious of the fact that to be pure in heart is to be pure in conduct also.

**IV. Relating to Colleagues**

- A.** I will hold all ministers/spiritual leaders in esteem and respectful regard, and use all rightful means to protect the personal and professional honor of all other ministers/spiritual leaders.
- B.** I will not interfere with the work of another minister/spiritual leader.
1. If I am asked by a member of a Unity ministry in which I am not serving to conduct a special service or provide pastoral care, I will consult the minister/spiritual leader of that ministry before accepting.
  2. I will not accept an overture from a ministry whose minister/spiritual leader has not yet resigned.
  3. I shall provide cooperative assistance to other minister/spiritual leaders as they endeavor to do ministry, including when working as part of a Unity Worldwide Ministries Ministry Team.
- C.** When assuming the leadership of an established ministry, I will avoid criticism of the former minister/spiritual leader or her/his work. In those rare times when an ethical lapse by a prior minister/spiritual leader has occurred, I will be truthful and compassionate while maintaining confidentiality.
- D.** After leaving a ministry:
1. I will modify my relations with members of a congregation which I have previously served in order to support the highest interest of the current Unity minister/spiritual leader and the ministry.
  2. After relinquishing my work to another minister/spiritual leader, I will not participate in that ministry in any way without the approval of the ministry's current minister/spiritual leader.

- E.** When I am disturbed by the activities of another colleague, I will communicate directly with that colleague. When I am disturbed by the activities at another Unity ministry, I will communicate with the appropriate leaders of the ministry.
  1. If necessary, I will consult with other Unity Worldwide Ministries representatives who could include any of the following: my Regional Representative, my Regional Judicatory Representative, and/or Unity Worldwide Ministries staff members.
  2. I will hold the situation in prayer.
  3. If guided, I will file an Ethics Review System complaint.
- F.** As assistant or associate minister:
  1. I will give the senior minister/spiritual leader full support and cooperation.
  2. I will not criticize the minister/spiritual leader in any way, or discuss the minister/spiritual leader in a negative way with any ministry member, board member, or person outside the ministry.
  3. If a problem arises, I will discuss it directly with the senior minister/spiritual leader.
  4. In cases of perceived violations of the Code of Ethics, I will seek input and guidance from Unity Worldwide Ministries' representatives which could include my Regional Representative, Regional Judicatory Representative and/or a representative from Unity Worldwide Ministries' staff.
  5. If an Ethics Review System review of the senior minister is initiated, I will cooperate fully with the review process.
- G.** I will be ethical and respectful in my conduct and attitude toward other ministries or denominations, organizations and metaphysical groups.
- H.** Ethics Review System members and relevant Unity Worldwide Ministries staff must be able to speak frankly about ethical violations in Ethics Review System reviews, in Ethics Review System training, and in evaluations of the Code of Ethics. Performing these activities is not to be construed as a violation of the Code of Ethics; nor is engaging in communications with the Ethics Review Team about a Minister/Spiritual Leader when a review is in process to be construed as a violation of the Code of Ethics.

**V. Relating to Ministries**

- A.** I respect the free will of members to transfer membership away from the Unity ministry I serve and will accept such requests without hesitation or inquiry.
- B.** I will keep in mind that the welfare of the congregation is paramount. Should I experience any personal crisis, the consequences of which could affect the ministry, I will confer with my Board of Trustees and a representative of Unity Worldwide Ministries. I may also choose to seek counseling or confer with colleagues.
- C.** I will not attempt to draw members or congregants away from any other established ministry or group.
- D.** I will not use the ministry for personal gain. Any funds or assets that have been raised in the name of Unity will be registered in the name of Unity and not in the name of an individual. I will take care not to mishandle or appear to mishandle funds.

**VI. Relating to Our Unity Worldwide Ministries**

- A. I will not attempt to carry on Unity work in any city without first obtaining the full approval of the local Unity Worldwide Ministries for such work and without seeking the cooperation of already active and recognized Unity leaders in that vicinity.
- B. I work in harmony and accord with Unity Worldwide Ministries in my speaking and teaching programs.
- C. I will, to the best of my ability, communicate the Unity Worldwide Ministries' values, mission, vision, and goals in service to my ministry.
- D. I will adhere to the policies and bylaws of Unity Worldwide Ministries.

**VII. My Pledge**

I sincerely devote myself to living in accord with this Code in letter and in spirit. I recognize our Unity Worldwide Ministries and this Code of Ethics as a framework in which I individually agree to function. I recognize that such an agreement augments our mutual and individual effectiveness. If I find myself contemplating or actually functioning outside of this framework, I agree to seek the kind of help described in Section V. (B). Failure to seek such help will mean that, by my own choice, I am functioning outside of the framework of this Code and consequently placing myself outside of Unity Worldwide Ministries.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



## Licensed Unity Teacher Code of Ethics

Name of Licensed Unity Teacher \_\_\_\_\_  
(please print)

- I. I look to the indwelling Christ for inspiration and guidance in all that I do.
- II. I honor myself and others and celebrate our diversity as children of God.
- III. I use prayer as the center of my life and encourage others to do the same.
- IV. I acknowledge the minister as the leader of the ministry that I serve.
- V. I maintain a professional relationship with the minister and ministry that is cooperative, supportive, honorable, and keeps me in integrity. I understand the boundaries and appropriate moral behavior with members of the congregation, staff, ministers and other teachers. I hold all confidences as sacred trusts, except where professional intervention is legally required.
- VI. I undertake activities related to the ministry only with the knowledge and approval of the minister.
- VII. I recognize that all formal outreach study groups must be sponsored by my parent ministry or the Expansion Department of Unity Worldwide Ministries.
- VIII. I will, to the best of my ability, serve with excellence and empower others to live the Truth. When teaching, I will present subjects which are deemed compatible with basic Unity principles and acceptable to my minister.
- IX. If a challenge arises, I acknowledge that direct communication with the person or the minister is essential, in an effort to reach a positive and productive solution. If the challenge is with the minister and solution cannot be reached, I will refrain from critical discussion with members of the congregation, staff, board, other teachers in my ministry, or other ministers. I will first take it into prayer, then contact: 1) my Licensed Teacher Regional Representative; 2) the Licensed Teacher Coordinator at Unity Worldwide Ministries, for direction and support. I understand that to communicate any criticism of my minister—whether written, spoken, or even non-verbal—to any member of the congregation, staff, board, or other teachers, would be a violation of this Code of Ethics.
- X. I, as a Licensed Unity Teacher, dedicate myself to the principles of Truth as taught and exemplified by Jesus Christ, and interpreted by Unity Institute and Unity Worldwide Ministries.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Licensed Unity Teacher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Recommending Minister

\_\_\_\_\_  
Chair Board of Trustees

\_\_\_\_\_  
Vice President of Education,  
Leadership and Ministry Development

\_\_\_\_\_  
President

\_\_\_\_\_  
Licensed Teacher Coordinator



## Code of Ethics for a Ministry

The ministry provides services, classes of instruction and demonstrates the principles of Truth by using them in the operation of the ministry and adopts other means that in the judgment of the minister will further the principles of practical Christianity among people everywhere.

### I. Dedication to Truth Principles

- A. As a Unity ministry we dedicate ourselves to the principles of Truth as taught and exemplified by Jesus Christ and interpreted by Unity School of Christianity and Unity Worldwide Ministries. We will adhere to the five basic ideas:
  - God is Absolute good, everywhere present.
  - Every human being is an expression of the Divine; the Christ spirit, by whatever name, indwells all people. Their very essence is of God, and therefore they are also inherently good.
  - Human beings create their experience by the activity of their thinking. Everything in the manifest realm has its beginning in thought.
  - Prayer is creative thinking that heightens the connection with God-Mind and therefore brings forth wisdom, healing, prosperity, and everything good.
  - Knowing and understanding the laws of life, also called Truth, are not enough. A person must also live the truth that he/she knows.
- B. We look to the indwelling Christ for inspiration, to guide, govern and prosper.
- C. We will, to the best of our understanding and ability, bring the freeing truth to humankind. This we will do in a spiritually dignified way, being guided by divine wisdom and good judgment.
- D. We believe in the power of prayer; and we are convinced that as Jesus said, "All things are possible to him who believes." And we will seek to deepen our prayer life and prayer experiences, for only as we drink from the fountain of truth ourselves can we offer the cup of truth to others.
- E. We consecrate ourselves to God, and in so doing surrender any selfish desires and personal ambition so that the will of God may be expressed through this ministry in service to humankind.

### II. Relating to the People We Serve

- A. We believe that all people are created with sacred worth. Therefore, we recognize the importance of serving all people within the Unity family in spiritually and emotionally caring ways.
- B. We shall work together for the highest good of the ministry, blessed with the privilege of providing activities that assist humankind in becoming aware of its divinity.
- C. We accept the obligation to maintain integrity, and confidentiality when called for, while maintaining open and timely communication, as we work toward the highest good of the ministry and in alignment with the Unity Movement.

- D. We are committed to the well-being of our organization and seek appropriate services, counsel and expertise to further our mission and purpose as a member of Unity Worldwide Ministries.

**III. Relating to our Minister**

- A. We support and encourage the abilities of the minister(s), assuring that the minister's (s') needs for spiritual, emotional, and financial support are fully met. It is essential that the ministry and the minister(s) function as a team, holding a common vision of the highest good of the ministry.
- B. We recognize and honor that the minister(s) is/are the spiritual leader(s) of the ministry as the professionally trained and qualified administrative head.

**IV. Relating to our Unity Worldwide Ministries**

- A. We adopt and abide by the recommended bylaws and policies of Unity Worldwide Ministries.
- B. We will, to the best of our ability, work in harmony with Unity Worldwide Ministries in fulfilling its values, mission, vision and goals.
- C. We will keep in mind that the welfare of the congregation is paramount. In the event of a dispute and/or circumstances adversely affecting the well-being of the ministry, we will seek the assistance of Unity Worldwide Ministries.

**V. Other Churches**

- A. We shall respect the work both public and private of other ministries.
- B. We shall not infringe upon or interfere in the work of another ministry.

**VI. Pledge**

We sincerely devote ourselves to living in accord with this Code in letter and in spirit, and to seeing it made manifest in all others, thus bringing to ourselves only associations and conditions that harmonize with this Code. We recognize our Unity Worldwide Ministries and this Code of Ethics as a framework in which we agree to function. We recognize that such an agreement is necessary for our mutual and individual effectiveness. If we find ourselves contemplating, or actually functioning outside of this framework, we agree to seek the kind of help described in Section II (D). Failure to seek such help will mean that, by our choice, we are functioning outside of the framework of this Code and consequently placing ourselves outside of Unity Worldwide Ministries.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Board of Trustees (Name of Church)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Chairperson of the Board of Trustees

\_\_\_\_\_  
President and CEO of Unity Worldwide Ministries



### Certified Spiritual Educator's Code of Ethics For Adults Serving Children and Teens

1. I, a Unity Spiritual Educator of children and/or teens, dedicate myself to the principles of Truth as taught and exemplified by Jesus Christ, and interpreted by Unity World Headquarters at Unity Village and Unity Worldwide Ministries.
2. I daily dedicate myself to listen to the indwelling Christ for inspiration, to guide, govern, and prosper me.
3. I will emphasize the importance of prayer in every person's life, and especially, I will use prayer to make my life an example of living Truth.
4. I serve in this position in order to support the overall vision, mission, and goals of this church and our spiritual family.
5. I will give my minister my full support and cooperation as the spiritual leader of our church.
6. I will, under Divine Guidance and the best of my understanding and ability, endeavor to teach classes of a quality that will inspire our children and/or teens to live in Truth.
7. I will teach Unity principles and Living Curriculum. In this, I will avoid teaching any subjects which may be deemed incompatible with Unity Principles. I will prepare my lessons well, knowing that the students deserve excellence. My lessons will be presented with integrity in a practical, beautiful and inspiring manner.
8. I will always be mindful of the specific needs for the developmental level of those I am teaching. I will create an experience that meets individual needs and learning styles.
9. I dedicate myself to creating a loving environment in which all children and teens may unfold their Divine Potential.
10. I will be above reproach in my behavior with children, teens and other spiritual educators.  
Specifically:
  - I will not tell jokes or speak words which contain sexual innuendoes.
  - I will not prolong hugs, or return/initiate a kiss.
  - I will not touch anyone in a sexual manner, specifically on any area covered by a bathing suit.
  - I will not be alone with children and teens in any compromising location.
  - I will not allow any child or teen to touch me in a way which makes me uncomfortable.
11. I will come from integrity when I am in disagreement with the direction our church is taking, following the proper procedures and going through proper channels to voice these concerns. I choose to deal with conflict constructively, thus strengthening and building our spiritual community, rather than in a way that could be destructive to the life of our church.
12. I will avoid innuendoes, rumors, blame, and putdowns. I focus my energy on the issue, not the personalities, always open to the expression of unconditional love.

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*Certified Spiritual Educator*

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*Date*

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*Recommending Minister*