Some Conceptions of the New Age

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ABSTRACT: To verify and supplement a series of quantitative studies of attitudes about the New Age in which 143 panelists were surveyed, I analyzed qualitatively 86 comments. In general, findings were consistent with those yielded by statistical analyses. An expert panel was more tolerant of terms, practices, and beliefs than a panel of critics. Many respondents characterized the New Age as complex, diverse, and eclectic. When I examined those comments that were concerned with the survey itself, I classified them as predominantly unfavorable, with most charging ambiguity of items and bias on the part of the investigators. When I inspected the comments for frequent topics, those with off-beat religious preferences were more favorable to the New Age than those with traditional preferences. Positive suggestions, expressions of tolerance, and other remarks were noted. I concluded that skeptics and anti-cult specialists may have to change their conceptions of the New Age.

“You are invited to share your opinions as a panelist for the New Age Survey. We are interested in determining the extent to which you consider various terms and practices to be harmful or beneficial, your agreement with various statements, and how you define characteristics of the New Age.”

For the past five years I have been involved with a series of surveys about the New Age which began with these instructions. Along with Michael Langone, who is executive director of the American Family Foundation, and Steven Dubrow-Eichel, a professional psychologist, I have attempted to study attitudes of selected panels. Using a 196-item Likert instrument, we surveyed 143 informants, selected for their knowledge and reputation. They included 58 distinguished writers, scientists, theologians, and anti-cult activists whom we termed “critics,” and, in contrast, a group of 85 recognized astrologers, clairvoyants, chiropractors, writers and publishers, and executives whom we designated as “experts”; we had reason to believe they would be knowledgeable and perhaps sympathetic. Elsewhere we have published the results when we applied factor analyses, item analyses, and analyses of variance (referred to hereafter in this article as the quantitative study).
at the end of the survey form we said, "Your comments are welcome," fully 60% took the trouble to share their opinions. In this article, I attempt to examine, more qualitatively than quantitatively, some of their conceptions of the New Age.

The literature

In our search of the literature we generated a list of over 1,500 citations to cult and occult topics; 7% concerned the New Age. Among these publications, we concluded that distinctions among cult and occult, among Satanism, evangelism, the new religions, and the New Age were often not clear. Also we identified a wide variety of perspectives; some emphasized the bizarre or the fraudulent, the criminal or destructive, others concentrated on the philosophical or theological. Proponents like Shirley MacLaine and Marilyn Ferguson were positive and optimistic, but we found relatively little research and no systematic quantitative consideration of attitudes, pro or con. For example, LeBar, Burtner, Debold, and McGuire wrote from the perspective of theology, Lewis and Melton from religious studies, Kurtz from philosophy, Langone from social psychology, Rashke from business, Rosedale from law, Gordon and Hoyt from popular journalism, and Dubrow-Eichel and Garvey from clinical observation.

Our own quantitative study comparing critics with experts was carried out from an anti-cult perspective and published in the Cultic Studies Journal which is critical of new religions. Would the written comments of the experts agree or disagree with the critics in their attitudes, specifically on the extent of harmfulness or benefit of terms and practices, on essential characteristics of the New Age, and on beliefs? How would the panelists react to the survey? And, most important, given my anti-cult perspective, what, if anything new, would they teach me?

Method

Critics versus experts. In our survey, rather than random sampling we had attempted to construct two panels, one termed "critics," who were members either of the American Family Foundation (AFF) advisory board or fellows of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), and the other termed "experts," who were listed as practitioners or close observers of New Age activities. After a series of item analyses, factor analyses, and analyses of variance, we had found that both groups described themselves as acquainted with New Age, but whereas three-quarters of the critics rated the New Age as harmful or very harmful, only one-tenth of the experts agreed. As might be expected, the critics, much more than the ex-