

The New Age Comes of Age: Saturn in Sagittarius
By Armand Diaz

To paraphrase U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, it's not easy to define what we mean by *New Age*, but we know it when we see it: crop circles and aliens, The Aquarian Conspiracy and The Pleiadian Agenda, indigo children and astral projection, and Atlantean and Lemurian reunions are all part of the New Age. So are psychics, channels and (like it or not) astrologers. The work of scientists and scholars with mainstream credentials who venture outside of currently accepted models, such as Stanislav Grof and Rupert Sheldrake, is also often considered to be part of the New Age movement¹. It isn't necessary for something to be *new* to be *New Age*: Buddhism, Paganism, and the resurgence of interest in astrology are just a few examples of Old New Age.

The timeline for the New Age is as vague as its content. We can clearly see a tie to the emphasis on consciousness expansion and cross-cultural connections in the 1960s, but we can also see a resonance with the late 1800s/early 1900s and groups like the Theosophists and the Order of the Golden Dawn. Pushing back a bit further into the 19th century, the Spiritualist and Transcendentalist movements look like forerunners of the New Age. In fact, to the extent that the New Age represents an alternative view to conventional models of reality, the entire Western esoteric tradition can be seen as earlier incarnations of the movement.

One of the defining characteristics of the New Age is implicit in its name: a common (but not ubiquitous) theme is that humanity is on the brink of a new stage in its evolution. In this, it represents a hopeful counterbalance to the more apocalyptic visions of the near future that emanate from many sources, religious and secular. Yet even in its emphasis on the coming of a New Age, the movement has historical precedence—Christianity itself is in a sense a New Age religion¹.

The term New Age in its current context came into use gradually, with sometime in the 1970s often cited as the point at which it began to describe the eclectic group of ideas we associate with it today¹. Neptune was in Sagittarius from 1970 through 1984, opening up ideas about spirituality beyond the confines of traditional religion, a hallmark of the New Age. The passage of Uranus through the sign of the archer also helped, by revolutionizing our approach to religion, particularly with an increased self-reliance on spiritual experiences rather than acceptance of dogma—another hallmark of the New Age, and one that is quite Uranian in nature.

During the 1980s, the phrase “New Age” came into popular use, particularly with the publication of Shirley MacLaine's book, *Out on a Limb*, and the Harmonic Convergence. Both the television miniseries version of *Out on a Limb* and the Harmonic Convergence took place in 1987, during Saturn's last transit through Sagittarius. While Saturn in Sagittarius in the 1980s is certainly not the beginning of the movement, it is a good reference point for the consolidation of the New Age into a known thing in popular culture. As Saturn and Uranus both left Sagittarius for Capricorn, the movement was well underway as an established social phenomenon.

From an astrological perspective, we can see that as the four outer planets passed through the sign of Sagittarius, associated with religion and belief systems, our understanding of these things was radically transformed. While Neptune, Uranus and Saturn set the stage and began the action for the New Age, it was Pluto's passage through the sign from 1995 to 2008 that really accelerated the transformative process. The explosion of publications and media outlets dealing with New Age topics made sure that the movement was anything but *occult* (hidden), and the internet mushroomed the amount of New Age information and discussion to incredible proportions. Those who can remember searching through the local bookstore for the tiny astrology section or ordering a book by mail can appreciate how easily information is now available (not just on New Age topics, of course), whether online or at the mammoth bookstore/cafes that are found in every shopping mall.

Every movement has a countermovement, and the outer planets certainly stirred up the Sagittarian tendency towards polarization. With Neptune in Sagittarius, a significant strand of the 1960s counterculture found comfort in old-time religion, albeit with a more progressive twist (the plays *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell* in 1971 are two examples of this movement in popular culture). Uranus in Sagittarius may have fostered individual exploration of spirituality and being

“spiritual but not religious,” but it also saw the emergence of the rather coldly judgmental Moral Majority, as long-haired Jesus Freaks (not my term) became cropped and shaven born-again Christians. Of course, Pluto in Sagittarius saw not only an increase in religious fundamentalism but horrific violence fueled by religious fervor. While the New Age is likely to be called to account for itself during Saturn’s voyage through Sagittarius, traditional religions—especially in their more fundamentalist guises—are also up for review.

What is Saturn in Sagittarius likely to mean for the New Age? As my colleague Eric Meyers points out, the outer planets, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto are all at the end of the zodiac, working their transformative magic on our cultural and social institutions. These are challenges and changes to the basis of our collective lives. But the infinite possibilities suggested by the outer planets have to be made real here on Earth, where Saturnian reality reigns. While Saturn was traditionally seen as the outermost planet, Eric stresses that with the discovery of Uranus, Neptune, Pluto and beyond, Saturn went from being a boundary to a portal, a door to the trans-Saturnian realms². Yet getting beyond Saturn to a place of greater possibilities – where much of the New Age clearly resides—requires that we “do” Saturn well, that we have a grounded and realistic approach to serve as a basis for our explorations. We need to accept our mortality and limitations. Just how much of the New Age can stand up to Saturnian scrutiny?

While I don’t agree with those who offer a blanket characterization of the New Age as *Spirit Lite*, there are definitely trends towards simplification and over-optimism. Simply intending or wanting a thing is often believed to be all that is needed to make it so. There is also something of a tendency to apply spiritual approaches to mundane things, sometimes confounding the two. Want a Mercedes? Light a candle and meditate on it. The popular book and movie *The Secret* (2006) and the movie *What the Bleep Do We Know!?* (2004) offer different versions of key New Age ideas about consciousness applied to a mundane level, so that *wishing* and *having* are nearly equated. Indeed, one of the facets of the New Age that is most often decried is that spirituality is made ridiculously easy, as though no true effort were required. The *Dark Night of the Soul* is truly a single night, and nothing that some Rescue Remedy and a few candles can’t dispel. Saturn in Sagittarius is likely to remind spiritual seekers that some real work is involved in furthering the soul’s evolution, and that one cannot bypass the Saturnian gate in the quest to access the freedom offered by the outer planets. In fact, some of the more pernicious problems associated with the outer planets come from having a poorly developed Saturn—lack of structure and an inability to build new structures is what makes for problems with Uranus, Neptune and Pluto.

Authority is an aspect of Saturn that will visit the New Age particularly hard. At present, floating an idea to the New Age community is as easy as writing a book or giving a talk. Given that a good many New Age ideas are channeled or purport to come from ancient sources of dubious origin, the lack of authority in the movement is a significant problem. Where the ideas are coming from is likely to be investigated with greater vigor than in the past, and more people will question the authority of both the people presenting them and their sources. After all, just how many ancient Egyptian papyri describing the 21st century can there be, and can we really accept that the ancient Toltec culture was using ideas not found in the West until the psychoanalytic movement? More than one wizard is likely to be revealed as a far more humble (and somewhat humbug) man behind the curtain, and a number of self-styled gurus may have a fall from grace.

As a result of the deflation Saturn is likely to bring to the New Age, there will probably be a consolidation of the movement. While the internet will continue to offer an outlet for anyone selling any idea, gaining traction with New Agers will be more challenging as hokum detectors are set to a lower level by Saturn. The eclectic, anything-goes nature of the New Age is so much a part of it that permanent structured institutions are unlikely to emerge, but there may be some attempts, and a few may be more or less successful. These could be groups that will vet ideas and people in order to present a more realistic New Age movement.

From a slightly different perspective, we have to realize that the movement does generate a lot of money, and this may come to the attention of corporate interests that want to get a finger in the New Age pie. Already, online sites like Amazon and brick-and-mortar retailers like Barnes & Noble are making a profit from the New Age, but it is a limited focus for them, while even the largest of New Age companies, like the publisher Hay House, are comparatively small businesses. It will be interesting to see if the New Age begins to attract the interest of larger corporations, or if smaller

companies grow to become more substantial. Of course, Saturn may also prune existing businesses that have over-expanded down to a more modest size.

Sagittarius is the sign we associate with higher education, including spiritual pursuits. Holistic education and retreat centers have been around for a while, and represent some of the most established aspects of the New Age. The New York Open Center opened in January of 1984, just as Neptune was leaving Sagittarius for Capricorn, and it established itself with Saturn in Sagittarius in the late 1980s. The Omega Institute in Rhinebeck was established in 1977, also with Neptune in Sagittarius. Other centers of holistic learning like the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, date back to the 1960s or earlier. Although it is difficult to estimate the financial viability of holistic centers at present, it is likely that some will grow significantly in their scope while others will be shuttered.

In addition to more informal holistic centers there are also a number of schools of higher education offering alternative academic programs with a New Age theme. Many of them are accredited and most are in the Western United States (although The Graduate Institute in Connecticut, is an exception). California Institute of Integral Studies, JFK University, Naropa University, and California Institute for Human Science are examples of schools that have established academic programs, and, notably, charge tuition similar to more traditional schools. As with holistic education centers, the alternative academic schools will be facing a make-or-break time with Saturn in Sagittarius. Some may continue to thrive, some may fail, and some may need to incorporate a larger proportion of traditional academic material into their curricula. These schools have already found that having a traditional program (like clinical psychology or social work) that meets accreditation standards helps to get more esoteric programs accredited as well. Yet even traditional schools of higher education are under considerable stress and are likely to face significant challenges with Saturn in Sagittarius (see my article in the Jan/Feb 2015 *NCGR Memberletter*), and alternative programs will have to prove themselves in order to survive.

Not all of the New Age is new, and while yoga, Buddhism, and other traditions may have predated the movement, they are now closely entwined with it in the West. Religion is a Sagittarian area, and we'll see many religious beliefs, believers, and clergy under scrutiny, including but not limited to those associated with the New Age. Pressures can come from a variety of directions, including questionable ethics and financial strictures. Significant changes may result, probably in the direction of contraction. While much of the New Age lacks structure, these more institutionalized aspects of the movement may need to become even less flexible and more demanding if they are going to grow or even continue.

With Saturn moving through Sagittarius, the New Age in all its many forms is likely to experience a number of changes. The movement will remain eclectic and varied, but it is likely to be less of a free-for-all. The *spiritual entertainment* that has characterized it for some time may simply start to wear thin, as the promises of a quick and easy, better life on material, psychological and spiritual levels fail to deliver. Economic pressures and opportunities are also likely to have an effect, leading to selective expansion and contraction. The feel-good messages will continue to appeal, but there will be a greater emphasis on finding out what truly works. Part-time spirituality may be replaced by a deeper commitment, but some people will choose to abandon the project altogether. The New Age will survive Saturn in Sagittarius, and it may emerge stronger and more realistic—but it is likely to be a good deal less fun.

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References

¹ Wouter Hanegraaf (1997) *New Age Religion and Western: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*. New York: SUNY Press.

² Eric Meyers (2015) From Separation to Connection: Healing the Rift Between Saturn and Uranus. *The Mountain Astrologer*, December/January 2015.