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## The Subtle Energies of Spirit: Explorations in Metaphysical and New Age Spirituality

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### I

If a quintessential metaphysical catechism were to be named, one of the major textual candidates would be H. Emilie Cady's *Lessons in Truth*—a basic for the Unity School of Christianity, a staple in its bookstores, and an often-cited work in its metaphysical communications. First published in 1894, the book features chapters that originated in a series of articles contributed to Unity publications from 1892 by Cady, a practicing physician. Exact records of how many copies have been published are not available, but the back cover of the 1967 edition offers one piece of evidence, announcing that the print order came to 60,000 copies per printing for many years and that this particular edition is the forty-fourth. Over thirty years later now, it is not unreasonable to estimate that some 3 million copies of the text have been printed.

This work stands out not only because of its classical status but also because its slightly old-fashioned title *Lessons in Truth* conjures, in an especially marked way, the sense of belief in a fixed order of the universe that evocations of metaphysics initially convey. In this reified ontology there is a realm of absolute truth and reality, substantial and unchanging.

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By contrast, there is a world of mirage and illusion in which humans lose sight of the eternal. And certainly some of Cady's language supports this analysis. For instance, she unequivocally affirms that God "as the underlying substance of all things, God as principle, is unchanging, and does remain forever uncognizant of and unmoved by the changing things of time and sense" (166).

Granted this and similar statements, though, as this essay will show, Cady and the entire metaphysical tradition—including its contemporary manifestation in the New Age movement—have always been drawn more to flow charts than to static entities. In fact, the preference for motion—for "flow"—is so ubiquitous in metaphysics that, if the meaning of spirituality is to be understood for the tradition, that meaning must be grasped in metaphors, descriptions, and cultural practices that, literally, go with the flow. In what follows, then, this article explores the metaphysical tradition—and especially its current manifestation in the New Age movement—against a contemporary vernacular religious horizon suffused with notions of "spirituality." What registers as spirituality for past- and present-day metaphysicians? the article asks. What continuities exist between the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century tradition and the present metaphysical moment? And, likewise, what departures from the past can be noticed in contemporary metaphysics, dominated as it is by the New Age movement? Finally, how can we revise received notions of metaphysics in light of the contemporary popular discourse of the spiritual?

First, though, let it be clear what counts for the discussion as metaphysics. Some, like Charles Braden, have closely identified metaphysical religion with the New Thought, or mental-healing, tradition. Mind cure, as he explains, yielded denominations like Unity as well as Religious Science and Divine Science, and it also percolated into general culture in ideas like the "positive thinking" most classically articulated by Norman Vincent Peale.<sup>1</sup> But even given Braden's focus in his work, he makes it clear that he views the mental-healing tradition as but one expression of a much larger religious family that includes domestic as well as Asian and European esoteric representatives (4). Still more, J. Stillson Judah—while he acknowledges the provenance of the term "metaphysical movement" in late-nineteenth-century New Thought—employs it for studying a broad strand in American religious and cultural history. The metaphysical strand, for Judah, finds expression in Transcendentalism as well as spiritualism and occultism, in theosophy as much as mind-cure manifestations (11-12). And if Braden and Judah were writing in the eighties and nineties, they would surely point, as this article already has, to the New Age movement as a late-twentieth-century incarnation of metaphysics.

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<sup>1</sup> For Norman Vincent Peale and positive thinking, the definitive source is George.

It should be added too that the term “spirituality”—although it is surely *au courant* and although it has an old and venerable past—also has a recent and contemporary history that extends back, at least in Roman Catholic circles, for probably the last quarter century. Paulist Press was publishing its Classics of Western Spirituality series, with apparent success, from the late seventies.<sup>2</sup> By 1980, in a periodical significantly entitled *Spirituality Today*, Roman Catholic scholar Jon Alexander was asking in print “What do recent writers mean by spirituality?” and concluding that they meant something at once experiential, removed from particular religious traditions, and directed to connections made with ultimate meanings and values. And Alexander was quoting Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthazar to the effect that spirituality signified “that basic practical or existential attitude of man which is the consequence and expression of the way in which he understands his religious—or more generally, his ethically committed—existence” (251).

These assessments are both broad and specific enough to serve as guidelines for exploring the meaning of spirituality for metaphysics. Moreover, their origins in Roman Catholic intellectual neighborhoods are not inappropriate for the metaphysical tradition with its almost crypto-Catholic nuances of mysticism and its self-conscious searches for unity with the One. Moving out from here, metaphysics possesses its own set of markers and distinctives. In fact, it offers a chance to look at an American form of spirituality in which the ancient cosmology of correspondence organizes insight and experience for believers. Etymologically, metaphysics moves, literally, “beyond the physical,” and the “beyond” that particularly concerns metaphysicians is the life of the mind. For metaphysicians, empowerment (arguably a goal or pay-off in all forms of spirituality) comes largely through the experience of mind, the creator and controller of one’s destiny. Here what happens in the human world and mind replicates a larger, more holistic universe of life and mind.<sup>3</sup> There are connections between individual minds and a divine one and, more broadly, organic links between the material world and a spiritual realm. As important, religious practice or ritual may be understood under the rubric of mental or material magic.

Another way to say this is that for metaphysical believers everything is linked to everything else—cut of the same cloth, as it were—and in metaphysics life becomes holographic. One piece of the universe can operate or

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<sup>2</sup> The first volume in the extensive and ambitious Paulist Press series was Julian of Norwich’s *Showings*.

<sup>3</sup> For an extended discussion of the worldview of correspondence, see Albanese 1977:4-21. I explore metaphysical spirituality in many of the same words but in a comparative context in Albanese 1999.

act on any other piece of the universe, and, with the guiding power of Mind for steerage, seemingly miraculous change can become commonplace and ordinary. In a straightforward mental magic the central ritual is some form of meditation. In material magic the mind uses the body as tool in occult practice—which often involves rituals but differently oriented from those of the churches. Ideally, the result in both mental and material cases is the attainment of states of tranquility, with the model person an exemplar more than a missionary. More than that, the model person—the exemplar—privileges individualism, and, at least hypothetically, the community drops away.

So far the description here seems to conform at least in its cosmology of Mind to Cady's "God as the underlying substance of all things." And it appears to echo as well the words of a nameless metaphysical practitioner cited by Judah, a man who thought metaphysics the "practical application" of the "absolute Truth of Being in all the affairs of our daily and hourly living" (11). These expressions reflect the tradition and its spirituality so far as they go. But arguably they do not go far enough. What does not emerge from either rendition is a strong sense of what will here be called the subtle energies of spirit. And, for this revisionary reading of the tradition, it is these energies that are basic to what metaphysicians and New Agers have understood as spirituality. Any alert reading of the documents of the tradition supports this analysis, for the signs of a kinetic spirituality are prominent in Cady and elsewhere, and they are almost banal.<sup>4</sup>

The energy equivalence of spirit is, moreover, nothing new. It is a commonplace in religious-studies scholarship that the English term "spirit" translates the Hebrew *ruah* and its Greek counterpart *pneuma*, both of which signify wind or breath, a principle of vital activity, what moves (MacGregor:455-456). Closer, historically, to American metaphysics, however, are mid-nineteenth-century formative influences on the tradition. From Europe came mesmerism and Swedenborgianism, each of them affirming from its different perspective the energetic dimension of spirit. For mesmerism there was the legacy of Franz Anton Mesmer's "invisible tides," the subtle energies that moved through the universe and through humans as well, their blockage the cause of illness and their free flow, abetted by an animal magnetist, the source of the return of health (Mesmer; Fuller). For Swedenborgianism, there was the doctrine of divine influx, the news that "the life of every one, whether man, spirit or angel" flowed in "solely from the Lord," who diffused himself "through the universal heaven, and even hell," in both a general and a particular version of the

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<sup>4</sup> Their prominence makes all the more astounding Judah's long list of characteristics of metaphysical movements, which cites the energetic dimension nowhere (12-18).

influx (Synnestvedt:126-127). From America itself came the language of motion that pervaded the nature religion of the American Transcendentalists, among them Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, but also many others (Albanese 1977). And from America, still more pervasively, came both philosophical and practical forms of spiritualism that traded on beliefs about the continuous flow between matter and spirit (a refined form of matter) and about the ever-ready manifestations of spirit (Carroll; Moore).

With this background in mind, it is useful to look again at H. Emilie Cady's *Lessons in Truth*. Here the reader does not need to go far to stumble onto Cady's "Statement of Being," which in part announces that "God is Spirit, or the creative energy that is the cause of all visible things" and that "man is the last and highest manifestation of divine energy, the fullest and most complete expression (or pressing out) of God." Cady specifies further in a series of fountain metaphors that make God a "great reservoir," complete with channels issuing into small fountains. Each human fountain, she tells, "is not only being continually filled and replenished from the reservoir but is itself a radiating center whence it gives out in all directions that which it receives, so that all who come within its radius are refreshed and blessed." And, indeed, "the love, the life, and the power of God are ready and waiting with longing impulse to flow out through us in unlimited degree!" By contrast, Cady declares that "stagnation is death." "It is our business to keep both the inlet and outlet open, and God's business to keep the stream flowing in and through us" (20, 23, 39-40, 109).

Enter, then, the role of spirituality. Keeping the channel open, keeping the flow unimpeded, is—for the metaphysical tradition and its New Age manifestation—the essential spiritual task. This point can be underlined with a glance at another classic text for the tradition. Ralph Waldo Trine's *In Tune with the Infinite* is a second catechism that can be read with profit. First published in 1908, like Cady's work the small book went through numerous editions, with Trine himself renewing the copyright at least five times. The 1970 edition, for example, boasts on its back cover that "over 1,250,000 copies of this book have been sold."

Again, as for Cady, the reader does not need to go far to discover Trine's assessment of spirit. He acknowledges that the spirit is "that Spirit of Infinite Life and Power . . . from which all is continually coming," that "the life of individual man . . . must come by a divine inflow from this Infinite Source," and that "the degree that man opens himself to this divine inflow" is the degree that he approaches God. Trine announces that the results of such openings are "God men," those "in whom the powers of God are manifesting." Moreover, his rhetoric of relationship finds comfort in magnetic metaphor and water imagery. "We are continually attracting to us,

from both the seen and the unseen side of life," he says, "forces and conditions most akin to those of our own thoughts." He calls Emanuel Swedenborg "the highly illumined seer," citing his teaching on "the divine influx and how we may open ourselves more fully to its operations," and he also hails the seer from Concord (Massachusetts) with a paraphrase of Emerson's statement: "We are all inlets to the great sea of life." As for Cady, God is a great reservoir, and it is the human job to be busy "opening the gate of the trough which conducts the water from the reservoir above into the field below" (15, 18, 20, 26, 150, 159).

In short, Cady and Trine point in a direction that gives large clues to the present. They carry across historic sources for metaphysical and New Age spirituality, bridging the century divider and showing us clearly what counts for the tradition. Surveying, however briefly, historic sources for contemporary metaphysical and New Age readings of spirituality leads to a horizon of meaning that includes the experiential and the sense of connection with ultimates, as with other forms of spirituality. It is also a horizon patterned to reflect a larger reality in correspondence with which the human world finds its truest form. But at the same time the horizon shows itself to be ever shifting, transforming itself from moment to extended moment. To be spiritual in a metaphysical universe is to unblock the door and to let the waters of life flow through. To put the matter in more contemporary language, it is to be sensitive to subtle energies and to respond to them.

## II

Exploring the cultural narratives that convey the content of this metaphysical spirituality brings past and present together again, especially in the domain of these subtle energies. For the metaphysical tradition, however, it needs to be noticed that, manifestly, these narratives are not merely told or printed. They are enacted, and their favored location is in ritual practice, especially the ritual practice of healing, and in the ideational world that has supported practice. In the nineteenth century the ideational world of the energetic model conformed in general outline to scientific theories of the ether, a medium believed to permeate all space and to transmit waves that were transverse. In the late twentieth, it lines up for believers and practitioners with the world of quantum physics. Light—that convenient legacy of the mystical tradition in both Eastern and Western Christian versions—behaves for quantum scientists sometimes as a particle and sometimes as a wave. So from a quasi-scientific world there has seemed to be confirmation, of a sort, of metaphysical experience. "When viewed from the microcosmic level," one metaphysical physician

(Gerber:59) exultantly announced in 1988, “*all matter is frozen light!*”<sup>5</sup> Thus, spirit and science have come together for New Agers and other metaphysicians to disclose a grand master plan of the universe, and in the master plan matter and spirit (or, in scientific parlance, energy) have been seen as in essence the same.

A classic case of the equation may be found in the central ritual of nineteenth-century American spiritualism, the séance. Bret Carroll has documented the pervasiveness of séance circles in major American cities and explored their ritual structure (120-151). What needs to be emphasized here, though, is the ways that they have functioned to bring the energies of spirit into a material realm to comfort and to heal. By the mid-twentieth century the National Spiritualist Association of Churches was teaching that spirits communicated by lowering their vibrational rate to synchronize with that of a medium’s body and, after the inner, or astral, body of the medium was projected outward, using it as a scaffolding for the ectoplasm that enabled them to materialize. Where did the ectoplasm come from? It flowed, said spiritualists, from a medium’s nose and ears (Judah:68).

In the New Age approximation the medium has become a channel, and the semantic world out of which the word arose is an important clue to the contemporary channeling movement’s origins and its continuing energy concerns. The language of “channeling” (rather than “mediumship”) comes from the technological shamanism of the UFO contactee movement. The human “channel” is seen as analogous to a radio or video channel, receiving waves of energy from out in space that are transformed into sound, sight, and meaning. Thus, in a relativistic quantum universe the human channel provides one conduit, one point of connection, between those who dwell within the limits of material human bodies and, hypothetically, those other “personalities”—sometimes individual, sometimes collective—who dwell beyond.<sup>6</sup> As important, these personalities offer to seekers a measure of healing for the hurts and wounds of the late twentieth century.

In his recent book, *The Channeling Zone*, Michael F. Brown identifies late-twentieth-century channels of two kinds, with some interconnection between them. There are conscious channels who function more or less as intuitive counsellors. But the more thoroughgoing channels are trance channels whose bodies and minds are possessed, as it were, by the entities

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<sup>5</sup> Emphasis in original. Gerber’s “M.D.” is prominently displayed on the cover and title page of his book.

<sup>6</sup> I borrow this analysis from conversations with J. Gordon Melton over the years and from my discussion in *Albanese* 1998:659.

who use them to get their therapeutic messages through (25). Trance channels do become, indeed, most like radio or video channels, with their own personalities and characteristic responses held, for the most part, in abeyance. So spirituality in the channeling zone means contacting spirit energy, either directly or through the aid of the human channel who allows in vibrational forces from beyond.

Another case of the energetic world of spirit-matter may be found in New Thought formulations and especially in New Thought healing practice. Mind, for New Thought, can bring matter into correspondence—not as one substance fixing the substance of another but as a constant source of in-streaming energy that catalyzes the subtle energies of the body with those of the spirit. The New Thought vehicle for so doing, since the nineteenth-century time of Warren Felt Evans, has been the affirmation. In *The Divine Law of Cure* (1881) Evans—the Methodist-turned-Swedenborgian minister who became a major New Thought theologian and practitioner—linked bodily condition to mental process. If we want to change our bodies for better, he declared, “let us *imagine*, or *think* and *believe*, that the desired change is being effected, and it will do more than all other remedial agencies to bring about the wished for result” (174; as quoted in Braden:101 [emphasis in original]). Evans’s “affirmative attitude of mind” took effective form in the practice of affirmation (Braden: 122-123), and the New Thought movement turned the practice itself into a healing form of energy.

To gain an idea of what this means concretely today, one need only call the prayer line maintained by Silent Unity at its headquarters outside of Kansas City, Missouri. The voice on the other end of the line will pray with the caller in a rhetorical mix of spontaneity and formula that affirms the good that is desired—calling it out not dryly, as the formulaic might suggest, but with “heart” and with feeling. Thus the words become catalysts for a narrative that is already a form of action. Meanwhile, readers of Unity’s small monthly pamphlet *Daily Word* must likewise take each day’s printed affirmation to heart, i.e., speak or think it with feeling—as a prompt to inner or outer action. In similar fashion, New Agers evoke the energetic basis of their spirituality when they tell each other that they create their own reality, affirming the pliancy of matter and its plasticity before the moving force of spirit. Sickness, for *A Course in Miracles*, is a defense against truth, in other words, a blockage and point of fixity. By contrast, the *Course* says, “healing will flash across your open mind” ([Schucman]:250-252).

Narratives and practices of healing energy, however, need to be set in further contexts. For if metaphysically inclined Americans have arrived at their insights in considerable measure through an esoteric export-import



trade with Europe, they have also traded with Asia, and the Asian trade has shaped kinetic spirituality in significant ways. The culture brokers who joined to produce, eventually, American metaphysics had been deeply impressed by Asia. Emerson and Henry David Thoreau among the Transcendentalists had eagerly read the Asian classics they found in Harvard's library and by the late 1830s were familiarly at home with an Asian religious vernacular.<sup>7</sup> Later, esoteric American Buddhists and Buddhist sympathizers blended Swedenborgian with Asian categories and combined Buddhism with American spiritualism. The results were most prominently displayed in the Theosophical Society, begun in 1875 as a spiritualist reform movement (Prothero 1993; Prothero 1996:44-51) but by 1878 decidedly turning to the East and especially to Buddhism. The co-founders of the Theosophical Society, Madame Helena Blavatsky and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, formally professed Buddhism after they traveled to Ceylon (Sri Lanka). Moreover, Blavatsky's published writings bear heavy burdens from the East.<sup>8</sup> Blavatsky's theosophy made terms like karma and reincarnation household coinage for the metaphysical tradition, and they point, noticeably, to movement and change, to an eternal order not of fixity but of progress and evolution.

Even more germane to the practiced narratives of the metaphysical world, however, are the theosophical teachings of subtle bodies. In her huge synthesis that became a corpus of theosophical doctrine Helena Blavatsky bridged the gap between matter and spirit by claiming the existence of a series of seven bodies, beginning with the human physical body and ending with the highest human spirit body. In this "septenary constitution of man" the bodies that Blavatsky was talking about were for the most part *energy* bodies (Blavatsky 1972:55-59). As Bruce Campbell has summarized them, "The lower four are the physical body, life or the vital principle, the astral body, and the seat of animal desires and passions. These four elements are transitory. . . . The 'upper imperishable triad' is composed of mind or intelligence, the spiritual soul, and spirit" (66). It remained for British theosophist Charles W. Leadbeater to provide the final embellishment to the teaching, an embellishment that became perhaps even more fundamental to later metaphysical thought than the subtle-body doctrine itself. In his 1927 book, *The Chakras*, Leadbeater—who was widely admired among theosophists in the United States as a clairvoyant—combined South Asian and European mystical sources with his own visions. He called the chakras (Sanskrit for "wheels") "a series

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<sup>7</sup> The classic discussion is Christy. Significantly, the Transcendentalists themselves read the Asian classics in kinetic terms, if their own expressive language can be considered a clue (Albanese 1977).

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of esoteric Buddhism, see Tweed:50-60.

of wheel-like vortices which exist in the surface of the etheric double of man." Significantly, the chakras were "points of connection at which energy flows from one vehicle or body of a man to another" (1, 4).

Accompanied by these South Asian chakras, the theosophical bodies became part of the parlance of New Thought and the New Age. Ralph Waldo Trine could evoke them when he referred to the "thought forms" of those who had died, "now manifesting through the agency of bodies of a different nature" (28). For the New Age, the energies exuding from subtle bodies became auras, visible, it was said, to anyone who tried to see them after appropriate training. Moreover, the New Age auric light acquired a scientific pedigree. It was a "magnetic" field, and the academics who have studied it have received notice in New Age literature. There is, for example, Valerie Hunt of the University of California, Los Angeles, reported to have measured the "frequency and location" of the human "biofield" (Taylor). And there is William A. Tiller, professor for over thirty years in the Department of Materials Science at Stanford and author of a more or less popular-audience book reproducing a line drawing of multiple "auric sheaths" around the physical body and explaining the phenomenon. "Just as the physical body has major antenna systems associated with it, the etheric body and our more subtle bodies have special antenna systems associated with them," Tiller writes (128-129).

What is especially important about the aura in the context of metaphysical practical narration, however, is that it can be manipulated—and it can be healed. For if there is a prevailing mode in which the subtle energies of spirit have been narrated in the metaphysical tradition, it is the mode of healing. This was as true for nineteenth-century spiritualists with their numerous newspaper advertisements by trance physicians and healers as it is today in the New Age. It was—and is—a continuing theme in the New Thought tradition, and it has certainly been part of the theosophical universe as well. Blavatsky's "chum" and co-founder of the Theosophical Society, Henry Steel Olcott, for instance, studied mesmerism in his youth, discovered that he could heal others "magnetically" and later achieved renown in South Asia as a spiritual healer (Prothero 1996: 107-110). At present, New Age energy healers like Barbara Brennan and Rosalyn Bruyere understand their work as spiritual healing to alter and assist broken and disfigured auras, and they predicate such healing on their announced perceptions of the theosophical subtle bodies and their energy formations. Brennan especially, with her credentials as a former National Aeronautics and Space Administration physicist (she studied the reflection of solar light from the earth), her Barbara Brennan School of Healing in East Hampton, New York, her widely selling textbook and her audiotapes, and her popular lecturing has brought science and spirit together in familiar New Age ways.

Meanwhile, others like medical intuitive Caroline Myss base their analysis and healing advice on extensive elaboration of the meaning of the chakras as key places of energy exchange on the body and as modes of simultaneous spirituality and physicality. In her recent book *Anatomy of the Spirit*, for example, Myss weaves together an intricate cosmology connecting each of the seven major chakras of the South Asian system with the seven Roman Catholic sacraments (her background is Catholic) and with the ten sefirot (or, as she says, “Tree of Life”) of the medieval kabbalistic text of the *Zohar* (29-30). Her personal confession at the beginning of one of her book’s chapters is instructive for all of the tradition: “Ever since I got my first medical intuitions, I have been aware that they are basically about the human spirit, even though they describe physical problems and even though I use energy terms to explain them to others. *Energy* is a neutral word that evokes no religious associations or deeply held fears about one’s relationship to God. It is much easier for someone to be told ‘Your energy is depleted’ than ‘Your spirit is toxic.’ Yet most of the people who come to me have, in fact, been in spiritual crises. I have described their crises to them as energy disorders, but doing so was not as helpful as discussing them in spiritual terms, too, would have been” (63 [emphasis in original]).

### III

Subtle energies almost by definition are changing energies, so that following the transformations of metaphysical spirituality at the present time is of a piece with following its history. Strong continuities exist, to be sure, and this article has been focusing on these up until now. It needs also to be added that it is hard not to notice other continuities that fall between the cracks in the questions addressed here. Such continuities include, for example, the prominence of women in the metaphysical tradition in the nineteenth century and now. They also include the then-and-now hostility and/or indifference to organized religion within much of the tradition—a hostility that is probably a large source of the distinction people today draw between spirituality (which they see as good) and religion (which they consider bad). Still, for all that, there are significant differences between past and present, and it is important to look at these, even if the summary is partial and incomplete.

First, though, let it be stated even more explicitly than earlier that much, if not most, of contemporary metaphysics flies under the banner of the New Age. Here, in postmodern context, metaphysical religion may be read as a response to the nihilism of a nonreligious world at a time when biblically based traditions have trouble persuading and comforting many. The pursuit of tranquility that is the spiritual goal of metaphysical

practice appeals in times in which, more and more, religion functions as a form of therapy.

Beyond that, it can be noticed that with their openness to the more mystical aspects of new scientific paradigms metaphysicians have placed themselves strategically to sabotage a secular science by seeming to join it. Spiritualists of old welcomed scientific testing of the reality of their spirit visitors. Helena Blavatsky's huge work *The Secret Doctrine* was built in part on her fascination with the theory of evolution and with purported scientific evidence for the submerged continents of Atlantis and Lemuria (1888). Similarly, present-day New Agers celebrate quantum theory as they speak of hidden "energies" and explore connections between the matter of the human body and its energetic (read spiritual) equivalences (e.g., Brennan).

In this context, one marked transformation in metaphysical spirituality is the increasing hegemony of the language of science. The "tides" and "influxes," the open "reservoirs" and "fountains" of the late nineteenth century, seem decidedly antiquated in the discourse community of a century later. Now there is talk of "bioenergy" and "electromagnetic fields," of "biofields," "bioplasmic energy bodies," and "subtle energies." A case in point is William Collinge's book *Subtle Energy*. Its table of contents is a mélange of titles and subtitles that combine contemporary language of science-sounding provenance with older esoteric and Asian-inspired concepts. One chapter alludes to the "biofield" and "flowing rivers of energy," another to "paths of the dragon" and "man-made electromagnetic fields" (vii). Figures include one of the human aura, another of Chinese acupuncture points, still others of the earth's "geomagnetic field" and, again, the "solar radio flux vs. lunar cycle" (ix).

Moving glibly between science and spirit, Collinge tells readers that conventional physics acknowledges but four types of energy: "electromagnetism, gravity, and two subatomic forces called the strong force and the weak force" (16). He finds electromagnetism the most germane of the four but still seeks to "bridge the boundary between physics and metaphysics," citing human reality as "multidimensional," with humans experiencing "a whole *spectrum* of energies, some from the physical dimension and some from beyond" (23-24, 26, 16 [emphasis in original]). Collinge points to the "energy anatomy of the earth" and calls the human mind "energy" as well. The mind, he says, is "energy, but of a special, higher order—one that can influence other energies by our conscious intention." The mind's home, he declares, "is in a higher dimension, one that encapsulates our physical time-space dimension but is not confined to it. That higher dimension has been called by many names, such as 'the field of consciousness,' 'the higher mind,' 'the One Mind,' 'the Divine Mind,' and others" (54-55).

For Collinge and others, the “higher mind” may be accessed through forms of prayer, and recent talk in New Age circles has aimed to demonstrate that even prayer can be scientific. Holistic physician Larry Dossey has pioneered in books that claim the practical efficacy of prayer, seeing prayer as a species of “non-local medicine” that is the product of “non-local mind” (Collinge:265, 116). Others also design experiments on the scientific model to test the results of the energies of prayer. In one example, Randolph Byrd, a cardiologist from San Francisco General Hospital, was reported to have carried through a controlled study of 400 coronary patients, half of whom received standard care and half of whom were the focus of prayer by various Protestant and Catholic groups throughout the nation. The usual experimental protocols were observed with neither patients nor medical staff knowing to which group particular patients were assigned. Collinge, who summarizes, calls the outcomes “striking” and continues enthusiastically, citing for those prayed for “significantly less congestive heart failure, need for diuretics, cardiopulmonary arrest, or incidence of pneumonia. They were five times less likely to require antibiotics and three times less likely to develop pulmonary edema” (265).

Likewise, Collinge’s sometime Asian allusions suggest another transformation in metaphysical spirituality. That is its increasing comfort with the “energy” vocabulary of East and South Asia. Talk of Chinese meridians and acupuncture points in the human body leads to questions about what travels these inner pathways and markers, and the answer in traditional Chinese medicine is *qi*. An elusive concept for Westerners, *qi* is something—but not altogether—like an *élan vital*; it is at once physical and spiritual or energetic, both body and what makes the body’s becoming. It is what the practitioner seeks to raise in *qi gong*, to experience in *taiji*, and to cultivate in various East Asian methods of meditation as, for example, on the Taoist “microcosmic orbit” that has its beginning and end at the navel and extends from palate to perineum. Alternately, *qi* is considered to have its South Asian equivalent in *prana*, the breath power that is nurtured through yogic *pranayama*, or—in one form—in *kundalini* yoga, focusing on the serpent power at the base of the spine (the first chakra) that the practitioner aspires to move upward (Kaptchuk: 35-41; Olson; Chia; Eliade; Woodroffe).<sup>9</sup>

New Agers, especially, keep a ready, easy commerce between key Asian terms and a late-twentieth-century American energy argot. Consider, for example, the language of late-century macrobiotics, a movement that Gordon Melton calls “an important element within the larger New Age Movement” (333). Macrobiotics, which began to grow in the United States in the late sixties and early seventies, is of Japanese provenance, and

<sup>9</sup> Woodroffe is the classic text hailed by theosophists.

George Ohsawa (Yukikazu Sakurazawa), its founder, built his system on an older Japanese tradition of food philosophy. Evoking the *yin* and *yang* energies of Chinese Taoist philosophy, Ohsawa and his Japanese students in America (most notably Michio Kushi and Herman Aihara) classified all foods on a continuum between *yin* and *yang* polarities, understanding them as mutually complementary and yet antagonistic. Balanced eating has meant eating that is centered between *yin* and *yang* forces. Such eating has been seen as the key not only to health and interpersonal harmony; it becomes the way to transform energy so that peace among nations will result.<sup>10</sup>

“To balance *yin* and *yang*, we need to learn how to create, transform, and modify energy,” Aveline Kushi writes. “Our body, our food, and our environment are changing forms and patterns of energy.” And again, “Changing the quality of food on a global level is the key to ending the spread of cancer, heart disease, mental illness, and infertility in the modern world, as well as reversing the breakdown of the family, social disorder, and mistrust between nations” (11, xi). What is wrong with conventional concepts in modern nutritional theory, argues macrobiotic counsellor Steve Gagné, is that they assume “that food is *matter*.” By contrast, he would teach the “energetics” of food, and he finds the word “entrainment” to be “a perfectly descriptive one for *Food Energetics*—because electrical events are exactly what we’re discussing!” That electrical events glide off into spiritual events is also clear. The philosophy that inspires and informs his writing, he affirms, is one about “voiding our differences” (16, 22, 282, xv [emphasis in original]).

If matter shades off into spirit for macrobiotics and other forms of metaphysical practice, other transformations of metaphysical and New Age spirituality take their cue from psychology. The human potential movement of the sixties has exhibited numerous and intricate turns, and today permutations of Freudian, neo-Freudian, and Jungian thought color metaphysical spirituality. Even a glance at the advertisements in local pulp publications like the ubiquitous *Whole Life Times*, which appears in region-specific incarnations in various cities throughout the United States, suggests the prominence of psychological language in the energy world of metaphysics. Barbara Brennan’s work is a good example. Building on the model of Sigmund Freud’s break-away disciple Wilhelm Reich, Brennan has posited five character structures that employ six general types of

<sup>10</sup> Ohsawa, in fact, was a major force in the Japanese Shoku-Yo Kai (Food Cure Society) after 1916, an organization with a strong component of Japanese cultural nationalism and a political edge. By 1948, now interested in “World Federalism,” he had begun a “World Government Center,” in Yokohama (Kotzsch 1985:37-118; Kotzsch 1981).

energy blocks. In Brennan's characterology, schizoid, anal, psychopathic, masochistic, and rigid personality types each got their "wounding" at different stages in their development, the first, in fact, even at the prenatal stage. But the resolution of their problems is always an energy resolution, and energy for Brennan is always spiritual. Indeed, the highest energy is love, and the universal malady is "self-hatred," as people again and again fail to demonstrate unconditional love for the "Godself within" (101-107, 109-127, esp. 109-110).

Any number of other healers engage in relationship therapies that at once psychologize and spiritualize, always finding love as the resolution for human ills. Metaphysical teacher and minister Louise L. Hay, for example, in her ubiquitous pamphlet *Heal Your Body* and in her later *You Can Heal Your Life*, identifies "mental causes for physical illness." It is clear, though, from even a cursory reading of her work that the mental causes are, in fact, emotional. "Everyone suffers from self-hatred and guilt," Hay announces, and "when we really love ourselves, everything in our life works." For Hay, as for so many others in the present-day tradition, "self-approval and self-acceptance in the now are the key to positive changes." Indeed, specific ills in specific body parts can be correlated to particular emotional ills, as the charts produced in her book make manifest. Bronchitis is connected to an "inflamed family environment," a sore thumb to mental "worry," cancer to "longstanding resentment" and "grief eating away at the self" (Hay 1984a:12-13, 17; Hay 1984b 5, 158-159, 165). The cure is always mental, but it is always also psychological. Thinking differently, for Louise Hay and so many others, means *feeling* differently.

Nor, familiarly, do metaphysical healers and their clientele consider their efforts unscientific. The Institute of HeartMath, as one instance, has things all ways. Dedicated to studying the relationship between the heart's (the physical organ's) function and mental and emotional well-being, it also notices connections between the production of love and positive immune-system effects. "Love, in this context," explains William Tiller, "is defined as benevolent heart focus towards the well-being of others and it is found that the heart-focussed feeling . . . produces profound electrophysiological changes in heart rate variability" (213; Collinge:238-239, 293-294).

Love, however, for Brennan, Hay, the Institute of HeartMath, and the metaphysical movement in general, is not a free gift of the spirit. For what is especially noticeable in metaphysical/New Age spirituality in the late twentieth century is its commodification and its association with a new service industry of professionals who seek to produce it. The commerce of the spirit was surely part of the spiritualist movement of the nineteenth century, and the *Banner of Light* and other spiritualist newspapers

regularly published the advertisements of spiritualist mediums of one or another sort. New Thought by the turn of the century was proclaiming its prosperity consciousness. And meanwhile theosophical ideas came into the New Age through a lineage of theosophical teachers and their students, including prominently Alice Bailey and her Arcane School and Guy and Edna Ballard and the I Am Movement, with a particularly strong infusion from the twenties to the forties through the readings of trance physician Edgar Cayce. All of these had their commercial aspects, and in the Ballard case the accusation of mail-order fraud, in fact, reached the United States Supreme Court (*United States v. Ballard*).<sup>11</sup>

Still, commercialization has become the hallmark of the New Age, and no metaphysical believers seem particularly apologetic about it. Writing specifically about the channeling phenomenon, Michael Brown observes that the market “fills much of the moral space created by the perceived bankruptcy of family, church, and government.” This estimate hardly violates the energetic character of New Age metaphysical spirituality. “Money,” Brown goes on to explain, “is viewed simply as an energy—‘accumulated human and planetary creative energy,’ to be precise—and therefore as a force of nature analogous to gravity, light, or sound waves.” Brown cites the “new religious consumerism of our time,” and he argues that channeling “mirrors . . . perfectly the society in which it has arisen”—even if, for most channels, riches are a far cry from reality (142, 145, 173).

Beyond that, increased commercialization goes hand in hand with increasing professionalism. Metaphysical service providers today come, often, with advanced degrees and specialized forms of training. To be sure, many, if not most, are products of alternative educational worlds, but this does not negate the differences between, say, a late-twentieth-century energy healer and a nineteenth-century spiritualist. Professionals in metaphysics, as elsewhere, locate themselves and what they do in terms of bodies of received theoretical understanding and practical savoir faire. They network with other professionals, attend meetings and conferences together, produce literature to support their work, and arrive at shared judgments regarding fee structures. They bring a new rationalization and bureaucratization to metaphysical service businesses that earlier healers did not know.

All the same, it is important to notice finally that what these professionals seek to produce transcends their pocketbooks and the solipsism of individual healing. It moves, in fact, toward issues of community and social consciousness. The pervasiveness of the language of “relationship”

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<sup>11</sup> After the death of Guy Ballard, a Federal Grand Jury indicted his wife, Edna, and her son Donald for mail fraud. Questions about the appropriateness of using estimates of the truth and sincerity of the Ballards' beliefs eventually brought the case before the Supreme Court (Chidester:231-233).



in metaphysical and New Age spirituality in our time suggests already the beginnings of the social turn. The wounds of the New Age and their resultant auric and energetic problems stand in the way of whole and harmonious human relationships; relationships shape the infrastructure for community; and community mediates the collective conscience that works to transform society for the good. The spiritualists of old had been social reformers, as R. Laurence Moore and Ann Braude both have emphasized. Moreover, after 1878 theosophists consciously promoted “universal brotherhood” as one of their three purposes (Campbell:28), and, as the work of Gary Ward Materra has made clear, New Thoughters in one of the movement’s two major divisions were actively concerned with social transformation and, in fact, sometimes embraced socialism.

Over the years the causes have changed, and they have become more collective. Antislavery, women’s rights, and socialism have yielded place to a feminism vastly more far-reaching and ambitious than the earlier movement, to an environmentalism that encompasses global thinking and trends, and to a peace activism that is likewise global in intent. It is important to notice this especially because the standard Protestant theological critique has uncritically faulted metaphysical spirituality for its lack of a social dimension (Albanese 1999). Although the lack was never true in the past, it is even less true now. Metaphysicians pray for the planet, and they seek to heal it. If they seem preoccupied with personal issues and private concerns, their own awareness is shaped by a sense of the collective. “Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me,” begins one popular Unity hymn.

In sum, in the late twentieth century subtle energies are also transformed energies. Spirituality in the metaphysical movement, especially in its present-day New Age manifestation, means working with the energies of the moment, “going with the flow,” and seeking, as earlier metaphysicians, to combine all of the cultural currents that act as catalysts in our time. Far from keeping their gaze focused unwaveringly on a fixed order of verities, in practice metaphysicians are manifestly sensitive to movement and change. This means considerably more than stereotypical assessments regarding “health and wealth and metaphysics.” Rather, in what could be described as constitutional ways, the metaphysical brand of contemplation ends ironically by situating believers in the midst of the very world that one side of metaphysical literature has displaced and exchanged for Truth. Metaphysicians, and among them New Agers, mostly trade in variation and difference.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> A version of this article was presented at a consultation on spirituality organized by my colleague Wade Clark Roof at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in February 1998.

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