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The Shock of the New: The Origin of the Age of Aquarius and the 2012 Phenomenon

Nicholas Champion

Abstract. The recent attention paid to the prophecy that December 2012 was to be a pivotal moment in world history has renewed interest in the relationship between astronomy and apocalyptic ideas. This paper examines the background to the '2012 Phenomenon' by exploring the origins of the idea of the Age of Aquarius. It concludes that the Age is best understood as a means of objectifying the prediction of a future golden age by reference to measurable astronomical certainties. In line with the revolutionary traditions of western millenarianism, the Aquarian Age is counter-cultural and opposed to political and religious authorities.

We are indeed living just at the time when the Dark Age has run its course and a new epoch is just beginning....What is beginning at this time will slowly prepare humanity for new soul faculties.

—Rudolf Steiner.¹

Recent interest in the supposed apocalyptic role of the end of the Maya calendar long count in December 2012 has focused attention on the relationship between astronomical and the wider cultural sphere, in this case, millenarian hopes.² The so-called '2012 Phenomenon' drew on two existing currents in modern millenarian thought, the New Age and the Age of Aquarius, both of which are counter-cultural in that they look forward to the overthrow of the existing order. The links between Aquarian Age teachings and the 2012 prophecies are clear: Jose Argüelles, the originator of the 2012 Phenomenon was the protégé of the

¹ Rudolf Steiner, *The Reappearance of Christ in the Etheric* (Spring Valley, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1983), p. 15.

² Joseph Gelfer, (ed.). *2012: Decoding the Countercultural Apocalypse* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2011).

Dane Rudhyar, one of the most active of Aquarian Age theorists.³ Such developments in the twentieth century were closely related to the impact of the artistic movements that Robert Hughes described as ‘the shock of the new’.⁴ Indeed, the connections between many leading artists, and theosophical expectations of an imminent New Age, have been documented, if not researched in detail.⁵ This article will explore the origins of the 2012 Phenomenon via its basis in Aquarian Age teachings.

Since the early part of the twentieth-century the apocalyptic terms New Age and Age of Aquarius have often been used as synonyms. They are not, in spite of the many writers who regard them as identical, the same. As an astrological phenomenon, the Age of Aquarius is based on the precession of the equinoxes, the gradual shift of the stars and constellations in relation to the Sun’s location at the spring equinox, 21 March.⁶ The astronomical details are not of concern here, for they are just a vehicle on which to hang a certain kind of apocalyptic belief: modern astrological theory holds that the major shifts in human civilisation conform to major movements of the constellations or zodiac signs in relation to the equinox. In most accounts the next astrological age, the Age of Aquarius, will be inaugurated when the Sun rises in Aquarius on 21 March and can therefore, at least in theory, be dated exactly, even if there is considerable disagreement about the exact year in which this event takes place.⁷ In actuality, there is a fair degree of confusion about the precise methodology by which the Age’s inauguration should be

³ John Hoopes, ‘Mayanism Comes of (New) Age’, in Gelfer, 2012, pp. 38–59; Stephanie South, 2012: *Biography of a Time Traveller. The Journey of José Arguelles* (Franklin Lakes: New Page Books, 2009).

⁴ Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New: Art and the Century of Change* (London: BBC Books, 1991).

⁵ Kathleen Hall, ‘Theosophy and the Emergence of Modern Abstract Art’, *Quest*, Vol. 90, no 3, (May–June 2002). Accessed 13 January 2013.
<http://www.theosophical.org/publications/quest-magazine/1446>

⁶ Jacqueline Mitton, *The Penguin Dictionary of Astronomy* (London: Penguin, 1993), pp. 306–7.

⁷ Nicholas Campion, ‘The Beginning of the Age of Aquarius’, *Correlation*, Vol. 19, no. 1, (Summer 2000): pp. 7–16.

measured. That said, the astronomical foundation for the theory of astrological ages lends them an aura of objective reality, a demonstration in mathematically measurable celestial patterns that the New Age really is about to arrive.⁸ The New Age itself is a phase of history whose existence in time is defined by humanity's psychological inclination to anticipate an imminent transformation for the better in society, the world, or the entire universe.⁹ Like the *parousia*, Christ's coming reappearance, the New Age is always imminent, but never comes.

In the Bible the astronomical warnings of the *parousia* took the form of one-off, dramatic and unpredictable events created by God.¹⁰ Sometime in the first centuries of the Christian era, the Persians regularised the system by applying the cycle of Jupiter-Saturn conjunctions to the measurement of the entire sequence of prophetic events for the whole duration of world history.¹¹ There is though, not a single known example of the use of precession of the equinoxes by astrologers until the late nineteenth-century. There are indeed arguments that precession was used by astrologers in the ancient world, but they are based entirely on circumstantial evidence and lack any textual support in the surviving astrological literature. David Ulansey, for example, has proposed that Mithras, the hero of the Roman mystery teachings named after him, was responsible for shifting the constellations and therefore marking shifts in history.¹² Ulansey's case is plausible, and literary evidence is not everything, but, when it is entirely absent in the works of the people who should have been most concerned with it, the fact does require some attention; simply, there are no extant classical or medieval

⁸ Nicholas Campion, *Astrology and Popular Religion in the Modern West: Prophecy, Cosmology and the New Age Movement* (Abingdon: Ashgate, 2012).

⁹ Campion, *Astrology and Popular Religion*, pp. 36–38.

¹⁰ Isaiah 13.10; Mark 13.24–26.

¹¹ Abu Ma'shar, *On Historical Astrology: The Book of Religions and Dynasties (On the Great Conjunctions)*, ed. and trans. Keiji Yamamoto and Charles Burnett (2 vols, Leiden, 2000); E.S. Kennedy and David Pingree, *The Astrological History of Masha'Allah* (Cambridge, 1971).

¹² David Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries: Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford, 1989).

astrological texts that attribute any astrological or historical significance to precession. Instead the increasing separation between the tropical and sidereal zodiacs was used to discredit astrology, on the grounds that the planets no longer occupied the parts of the zodiac claimed by western astrologers. The earliest extant example of precession being used to undermine astrology was penned by the Church father Origen (c.185–254), evidence that precession was used against astrologers, not by them.¹³ During the late middle ages and the Renaissance the shift of the constellations away from the signs of the zodiac was regarded by some of the most notable astrologers, such as Guido Bonatti in the thirteenth century and Thomas Campanella in the sixteenth century as a major problem.¹⁴ At no time was it considered a possible source of astrological forecasts. *Hamlet's Mill*, which is partly responsible for the modern assumption that precession of the equinoxes was widely known and understood in the ancient world consists mainly of circumstantial evidence which, in many cases, is over-interpreted.¹⁵

The origin of the belief that the Age of Aquarius is imminent is relatively modern and can be traced to three separate but interlinked strands in eighteenth-century European thought.¹⁶ The first was the attempt, central to Enlightenment ideology, to establish a common origin for all religion. The means by which this was to be accomplished was the study of comparative religion, the deliberate aim being to diminish

¹³ Origen, *The Philocalia of Origen*, trans. George Lewis, (Edinburgh: I and T Clark, 1911), chap XXII, 18 (From Book III. of the Commentary on Genesis). See also Jim Tester, *A History of Western Astrology* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1987), p. 54.

¹⁴ For Bonatti see Wayne Shumaker, *The Occult Sciences in the Renaissance: A Study in Intellectual Patterns* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 1972), p. 40 and for Campanella see Tester, *Western Astrology*, p. 214.

¹⁵ Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend, *Hamlet's Mill: An Essay Investigating the Origins of Human Knowledge and its Transmission through Myth* (1969; repr. Boston, MA: David R. Godine, 1977); Edmund Leach, 'Bedtime Story: Hamlet's Mill by Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend', *New York Review of Books* (Feb 12 1970), p. 36.

¹⁶ Nicholas Campion, 'Prophecy, Cosmology and the New Age Movement: the extent and nature of contemporary belief in astrology', (PhD thesis, University of the West of England, 2004), pp. 50–58.

Christianity's claim to unique status.¹⁷ The second was the use of the apparent shift of the stars caused by the precession of the equinoxes as a means of dating the history of the Indian sacred texts, the Vedas. The third was the theory that all male gods, and Gods, originate as solar deities.

The twin concepts of the Sun as the origin of all male-anthropomorphised religions (so that all gods and divine saviours are solar deities) and the shift of zodiac signs precession of the equinoxes as a guide to the changing character of religious observation circulated amongst both atheists and occultists through the first half the nineteenth century. As a simple example, it was said that, when the Sun rose in Taurus, which it did roughly between 4,000 and 2,000 BCE, bull-gods were worshipped.¹⁸ There is a difference in explanations for this phenomenon between the atheists, such as the radical, Reverend Robert Taylor, who thought this showed the meaninglessness of religion, and the occultists, such as Geoffrey Higgins, who found it meaningful.¹⁹

This was the intellectual milieu in which H. P. Blavatsky founded the Theosophical Society in New York in 1875. The society is the most important single institutional influence on the New Age movement, partly because of its global reach, from the United States to France, Britain, Germany and India, but also because of the number of leading intellectuals who were members in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²⁰ Blavatsky set herself two goals. The first was to recover what

¹⁷ See the discussion in Eric Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (London: Duckworth, 1975), pp. 1–6 and Rodney Stark, 'Atheism, Faith, and the Social Scientific Study of Religion', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* Vol. 14 no. 1, (1999): pp. 41–62.

¹⁸ Charles Dupui, *Christianity a Form of the Great Solar Myth* (London: Thomas Scott, 1873), pp. 34–36.

¹⁹ Godfrey Higgins, *Anacalypsis, an Attempt to Draw Aside the Veil of the Saitic Isis; or an Inquiry into the Origins of Languages, Nations and Religions*, 2 Vols. (London: Longman, et al., 1836); Robert Taylor, *The Diegesis; being a Discovery of the Origin, Evidences, and Early History of Christianity* (London: Richard Carlile, 1829).

²⁰ See Bruce H. Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revived: A History of the Theosophical Movement* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980).

she considered to be the lost wisdom of a once universal human civilisation by bringing together its surviving fragments from Indian, Platonic, Hermetic and Kabbalistic thought. The second was to form a body of people who, by studying and practicing ancient wisdom, could prepare the world for the imminent shift into the new historical era. Influenced by the German idealist philosopher George Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), whose theories of history, she argued, had ‘their application in the teachings of Occult science’, Blavatsky set out her theory of cyclical history, in which complex patterns of cycles regulate a cosmos in which physical evolution is dependent on spiritual evolution.²¹ In her own words:

The revolution of the physical world, according to the ancient doctrine, is attended by a like revolution in the world of intellect—the spiritual evolution of the world proceeding in cycles, like the physical one.

Thus we see in history a regular alternation of ebb and flow in the tide of human progress.

Blavatsky believed that the Jupiter-Saturn conjunction in Pisces in 7 BCE was a specific sign of the birth of Christ, arguing that it ‘shines as a symbol of all the past, present, and future Spiritual Saviours who dispense light and dispel mental darkness?’²² ‘The history of the world’, Blavatsky wrote, ‘since its formation and to its end “is written in the stars,” i.e., is recorded in the Zodiac’.²³

Blavatsky, though, had no awareness of the concept of the Age of Aquarius and included just one reference to the sign Aquarius, inspired by the poet, Chartist and spiritualist, Gerald Massey; the passage concerned Massey’s reading of the twelve tablets of the Nimrod epic as a solar allegory, rather than the astrological ages.²⁴ It was Massey, not Blavatsky, who produced a detailed scheme which explained world

²¹ H. P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* (Los Angeles: The Theosophy Company 1982), Vol. 1, p. 641.

²² Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. 1, p. 653.

²³ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. 2, p. 438.

²⁴ See Blavatsky *The Secret Doctrine*, Vol. 2, p. 353.

history and the evolution of religion according to the precession of the equinoxes. 'The birthplace (of the divine child, the Messiah or the mythos)', he wrote was always that of the equinoctial colure, whether the sign of the Fishes, the Ram, the Bull or any preceding sign.²⁵

Astrologers, who one might imagine would have been eager to adopt the theory of astrological ages as soon as it started circulating, stood aloof. They were either unaware of the conversations taking place, or reluctant to adopt such important information from outside their community. The earliest known reference to the precessional astrological ages in the English-speaking astrological literature occurred in 1879 in the A. J. Pearce's *The Textbook of Astrology*, but with no mention of the Aquarian Age.²⁶ Pearce added, with the same certainty as Massey, that 'from the remotest antiquity there has existed a belief that the world was created at the vernal equinox. It is a remarkable fact that the Christian era is connected with the epoch of the vernal equinox in Aries—the scriptural ram or lamb'.²⁷

The general view of the Aquarian Age's nature and characteristics was formed in the 1880s and has changed little since then. A formative description, which directly links nineteenth-century ideas to Renaissance Hermeticism, was given in a text issued to its members by the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor.²⁸ According to the text's anonymous commentator the world had entered the seventh of the latest phase of ages, that of 'Michael', which was related to the Sun, on 21 December 1880 in February 1881. According to the Brotherhood, the 'Age of Michael':

²⁵ Gerald Massey, *The Natural Genesis*, 4 Vols., (London: Williams and Norgate, 1883), Vol. 2, p. 337, and see also Gerald Massey, *The Hebrew and Other Creations* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1887), p. 7. The colure is the intersection of two great circles, in this case the celestial equator and the ecliptic, the point the sun occupies at the spring equinox.

²⁶ Alfred Pearce, *The Text Book of Astrology*, 2 Vols., (London: Cousins and Co., 1879), Vol. 1, p. 10.

²⁷ Pearce, *The Text Book of Astrology*, Vol. 2, p. 15.

²⁸ Godwin, *Theosophical Enlightenment* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), pp. 337, 345, 357–58.

will be a period of Imperial Greatness, Empires will shine full of glory, the Human intellect will have full play and all Churches, Religious Creeds and Ecclesiastical Dogmas will fall to the ground and become things of the past. Parsons, Vicars and Bishops will have to work in different fields if they mean to obtain an honest livelihood. Yes, I repeat this prophecy. The Churches and Chapels will fall with a terrible crash, and be destroyed. But from their ashes, Phoenix-like, shall arise a new Religion, whose shining Motto will be: Veritas Excelsior, Truth Above. This era shall proclaim the rights of man. It is essentially the age of reason dreamed of by Bruno and Thomas Paine.²⁹

With the exception of the prophecy of Imperial greatness, which was at odds with the Age of Aquarius' normal egalitarian character, the Hermetic Brotherhood's statement set the model for all future descriptions of the Aquarian Age, with its prophecies of religious and spiritual revolution. It was an exact counterpart in the spiritual realm of the revolutionary, materialist socialism which was spreading so rapidly at the time.³⁰ Given that both Marxist and New Age prophecies were heirs to the European millenarian tradition, this is not a controversial observation.³¹

The theosophist Max Heindel (1865–1919) gave what may have been the first relatively detailed version of the astrological ages in his *The Message of the Stars*, first published in the 1900s. The Aquarian Age, he announced, 'will be illuminated and vivified by the solar precession, for the upliftment of the Son of Man (Aquarius), by the Christ within'.³² Heindel's Christ was 'the Christ', the cosmic Christ, who may manifest

²⁹ Cited in Godwin, *Theosophical Enlightenment*, pp. 358.

³⁰ Nicholas Campion, *The Great Year: Astrology, Millenarianism and History in the Western Tradition* (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 458.

³¹ For Marxism, see Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millenium* (London: Paladin, 1970).

³² Max Heindel, *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception* (1909; repr. London: Fowler, 1929), pp. 12–13.

in different periods, as he did in around 2,500 BCE when he inaugurated the Arien Age and the religion of the Lamb; he was the great 'Sun spirit', a claim justified by the traditional astrological claim that the sun is 'exalted' in Aries, the ruling sign of the first Age of the Arien Epoch.³³

The cosmic Christ, as lord of the Aquarian Age, but with a typically theosophical regard for the east, was the focus of Levi Dowling's 1907 *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ*. This gospel was reputedly channelled from the Akashic records which claimed that Jesus had studied with Buddhists and Brahmins.³⁴ 'The Christ', as opposed to the Jesus Christ of mainstream Christianity, was defined in another of Levi's channelled texts as the God of Love, and the son of the Almighty God, the God of thought. A Christ, as opposed to the Christ, is the teacher, the 'master spirit' allotted 'to every world and star and moon and sun'.³⁵ It was from such sources that the twentieth century's two most influential theosophists borrowed their versions of the Age of Aquarius (although Steiner himself preferred to talk about the Age of Michael). 'There is much talk about periods of transition', Steiner wrote in 1910 '...human beings will slowly and gradually develop new faculties and in which human souls will gradually undergo a change....What is beginning at this time will slowly prepare humanity for new soul faculties'.³⁶

Along with Steiner and Bailey, the most influential prophet of Aquarian Age, was C. G. Jung, the founder of analytical psychology. In Jung's theology Christ became a symbol primarily of the self rather than the sun, although his portrayal as a fish in early Christian iconography was indicative of the manner in which human psychic projection onto the universe shifted when the vernal point moved into Pisces.³⁷ For Jung, the

³³ Heindel, *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception*, pp. 25, 28. William Lilly, *Christian Astrology*, (London, 1647), p. 101.

³⁴ Levi (Levi Dowling), *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ*, (1907; Chadwell Heath: L.N. Fowler, 1980); see also John P. Newport, *The New Age Movement and the Biblical Worldview: Conflict and Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans, 1998), p. 161.

³⁵ Newport, *The New Age Movement and the Biblical Worldview*; Levi, *The Aquarian Gospel*, p. 12.

³⁶ Steiner, *The Reappearance of Christ*, p. 15.

³⁷ C. G. Jung, 'The Sign of the Fishes', in *Aion*, Collected Works, Vol. 9, Part 2, trans. R.F.C. Hull, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), pp. 72–102.

external symptoms of the change of ages, including the collapse of old religious institutions and political divisions, were secondary to the inner process. The transformative crisis, he argued, can be recognised neither by philosophy, nor by economics, nor by politics, but only by the individual being, via his experience of the loving spirit.³⁸

The discussion remains a live one amongst astrologers. On 5 December 2009 the astrologer Erin Sullivan presented a day-long Seminar as a part of the Robert Bateman ‘Green Learning Series’, on ‘Global Transformation: *The Evolution of Consciousness through Mythology and Planetary Archetypes*’ at Royal Roads University in Vancouver. The description included the following:

Each of us in our own unique way contributes to the collective consciousness. This collective leap has been gestating for about 500 years, but now we are on the threshold of the astronomical closure of a 2,160-year epoch—the Age of Pisces—and the earliest stage of Age of Aquarius. These are creative and critical times where epochal archetypal shifts carry both the dark and the light.³⁹

Sullivan herself has strong counter-cultural credentials, having been a member in the 1960s of both the Merry Pranksters and of the Hog Farm, who played an important role at the Woodstock festival in 1969.⁴⁰

The history of the emergence of the idea of the Age of Aquarius parallels wider shifts in millenarian thought in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, from the French revolution in 1789 via the Paris Commune in 1871, to the Russian revolution of 1917. The strength of this spiritual alternative to materialist socialist and Marxist traditions was demonstrated by its reappearance as the ‘2012 Phenomenon’, even if the latter took its astronomical basis from the Maya calendar rather than

³⁸ Jung, ‘The Sign of the Fishes’, p. 87.

³⁹ ‘Global Transformation: *The Evolution of Consciousness through Mythology and Planetary Archetypes*’, <http://www.royalroads.ca/continuing-studies/CYGLEL1820-Y09.htm>, accessed 23 September 2009.

⁴⁰ Erin Sullivan, personal communication, 16 February 2013.

precession of the equinoxes. In such cultural appropriations of astronomy, the political imperative matters more than the astronomical detail.