

Blue in the New Age: New spirituality or old hegemony?

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Abstract:

New Age beliefs and practices, once considered anathema to conservative religions, have gradually become inserted into mainstream culture. One of the tenets of the New Age is the privileging of 'female' spirituality over men's, which has helped to create a specific kind of female subjectivity. This privileging of the female is associated with New Age beliefs about colour and colour's benefit in developing spirituality, but in doing so it also associates with perspectives on traditional and contemporary female social position. Women, whilst attracted to New Age precepts, also find themselves embroiled in the patriarchal order, and New Age teachings assist in the continuing production of this hegemonising imperative. Blue, the colour associated with femininity, is also the colour most necessary to an individual's spiritual journey, in contrast to red, which is associated with masculinity and earthly pleasures and appetites, and so is of little spiritual benefit. Blue usage permits development of attitudes and a work ethic which produce a passivity similar to that expected of women under patriarchy. Blue's use by New Age women (and some men) enjoins them to partake of the benefits of mainstream culture via an idealised service ethic and so to benefit through an expansion of inner peace, whilst accepting that karmic debits are to be reaped in the next life.

Introduction

The New Age is a quasi-religious movement that incorporates numerous modalities from paganism and witchcraft to a range of disconnected beliefs and practices including astrology and clairvoyance. Colour healing is one technique that appears common to many New Age adherents (henceforth called New Agers), and it is to this aspect of New Age practice that this paper is addressed. A review of twelve New Age texts (see Appendix A) has elicited a basic colour spectrum which illuminates New Age beliefs,

and which produces a strongly gendered dichotomy of colours. The 'warm' colours of this spectrum are representative of masculinity and the 'cool' colours of femininity. Red, in particular, is associated with male energies and has some pejorative connotations amongst New Agers, but it is blue, the colour most closely associated with women, that is of particular interest here. Using Foucaultian ideas of technologies of the self, an analysis of New Age beliefs about the colour blue uncovers a particular view of femininity, one which, as will be shown, encourages a passivity akin to patriarchal views of women's place in society.

Technologies of the Self and the New Age

The New Age movement has entered the mainstream of western society to such an extent that there are few media offerings which do not incorporate at least some form of New Age tradition. This infiltration has, in Australian society, resulted in a commercialisation and commodification of New Age activities that belie its spirituality-seeking nineteenth century genesis. New Age teachings and practices have been particularly attractive to the middle class, who tend to be well-educated and have sufficient resources to engage in often costly New Age activities (Heelas 1996: 3-16).

The project of self-transformation, encouraged in New Age beliefs, has parallels with the technologies of the self identified by Foucault (1988), to effect 'a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls' and so produce a similarly ordered figure, whose function is self-government. Governmentality of this kind results from indirect/mediated forms of power operating through the 'free' choices of individuals (Foucault, 1977) to select from amongst a range of spiritual-therapeutic modalities, those which appeal to the individual to best assist in the project of personal transformation. Assisted by various forms of expertise offered by New Age practitioners, mainstream ideals and beliefs about 'correct' activity are facilitated and encouraged alongside the search for spiritual awareness. Reshaping and re-focusing of emotional responses via technologies such as colour therapy enable the citizen/New Ager to develop an 'expertise of subjectivity' (Rose, 1989) in which she/he acquires the knowledge and skills to create an altered self whose purpose is to live more comfortably within Western society.

The New Ager's 'Higher Self' is believed to provide the means to prosperity and abundance unconnected to capitalist priorities (Heelas 1996), in a project of spiritual, and concomitant physical transformation; 'to strive for personal fulfilment' in one's earthly life - a literal 'care of the soul' (see Rose, 1989, 1998). Furthermore, New Age beliefs proclaim that the nature of corporeal existence automatically positions individuals as deviating from 'true' spiritual purposes, and so the 'normal' condition of incarnated mortality is deviance – a deviance that separates the soul from universal 'goodness' and 'power', and has an incarnated purpose in the realignment of individual experience with this universal power. Thus for the New Age, each adherent is enjoined to establish their own, unique, individual spiritual truth, through which the appropriate technologies of change are expected to reveal themselves. One New Age technology utilised frequently, both because it is the simplest to use and because it can be used consciously as well as unconsciously, is that of colour, which is believed to demonstrate needs and point to appropriate remedial activities as well as give therapeutic relief.

The Self's attunement to spirituality, gained through usage of various New Age colour technologies, encourages learning about the self, to identify faults and strengths and to apply appropriate 'corrections'. Such striving toward the attainment of a spiritual ideal is made visible through correct activity in the external world of everyday life, such activity encouraging acceptance of the social norms and attitudes of mainstream everyday life. Correct activity in turn, eliminates want and desire from the individual, and eases the New Ager's transition from corporeal-bounded thinking to a spiritual focus on the body as an incarnated vessel to be used for a 'higher purpose'. The New Ager is encouraged, through use of colour technologies, to work steadily toward a spiritual goal that facilitates positive outcomes in all aspects of daily life.

Colour and Gender and the New Age

Within the New Age, colours are assumed to be ontologically secure and measurable. In this paradigm, all of life is an interconnected whole and colour is constructed as something both within and beyond human perception, belonging to each individual as an inherent part of his/her physico-psycho-spiritual-social make-up. All animal life is believed to be surrounded by an electromagnetic aura which energises, and in turn is

energised by, the flow of spectral rays through a system of chakras, which are energy loci within the body. The colours of the chakras generally present the range found in the visible spectrum of light, and to each of these colour spaces, particular and specific abilities and difficulties are assigned (See Appendix B for an overview of these). Chakras are aligned along the spinal column and into the cranium, beginning with red at the sacrum and continuing upwards following the spectral changes of orange, yellow, green, blue and indigo, and ending with the crown chakra, which is designated 'violet'. Individuals can be trained to *see* the colours of auras and chakras, and through this knowledge, differentiate needs and necessary pertinent corrections to facilitate a developing spirituality which in turn facilitates adaptation to the demands of everyday life.

The transformative process of the New Age colour technologies involve development of a belief system which includes recognition of women's special place, but this agenda is never addressed in New Age explications, although research has uncovered that women are more likely than men to become New Agers (Possamai, 2000). . Moreover, unlike its purported egalitarianism, the New Age, through beliefs in the 'colours' of the human spirit, not only attracts more women than men, but also produces *a specific kind* of woman. One example of how this is achieved is through examination of New Age beliefs and practices surrounding the colour blue.

For the New Ager, each colour has a specific use in therapeutic and spiritual interventions, and beliefs about colour involve a complex system which aligns spirituality with the blue end of the spectrum, and earth-boundedness (and its consummate *un*-spirituality) with the red end of the spectrum. In this belief system, it is women, associated with the colour blue, rather than men, associated with the colour red, who are more likely to be spiritual and thus aligned with higher ideals and gifts. This view therefore privileges women as the keepers of spirituality and virtually eliminates men from spiritual attainment, unless they achieve equilibrium with their 'feminine sides', a condition embodied in the SNAG (Sensitive New Age Guy) acronym (McMahon 1998). This tendency to privilege female adherence does not preclude male involvement, yet men tend not to be attracted to the New Age nor do they develop praxis in New Age activities in the same numbers as women.

Colour therapies are enjoined in self-monitoring technologies that not only offer the participant spiritual well-being, but also encourage new perspectives that hinder anomie. Each of the chakra colours represents specific qualities and skills which, when applied to the self, permits the individual to develop the potentials inhering to the specific colour(s) used. Blue is the colour of the fifth chakra, and for New Ager involves the ability to express both knowledge and understanding through the throat and mouth: as a symbol of purity, virginity and a disengagement from materialistic objects and forms, blue is seen to be both 'natural' and beyond this world. The quiet sense of aloofness that is sought through the use of blue (in potions, lotions, as food, clothing, or in meditation) carries with it the ability to work silently, carefully and thoroughly whilst engaged in an emotionally nourishing inner dialogue. The content of this dialogue is invariably acceptance of responsibility as indication of a soul at peace, one that can carry out all necessary inner 'work' whilst engaged in the mundane and oft-repetitive tasks of everyday life. Blue's associations are therefore with inner speech, inner truth and sincerity, but they also accord with devotion, and it is this aspect which creates an individual whose ethic involves service to others as a prime drive. This sense of duty is an uncomplaining selfless devotion to others, one that New Ager value as a way to ensure both the working through of old karmic debts, and the creation of new ones, with a strong emphasis on rewards in the *next* life.

New Age beliefs about the colour blue involve the supplicant in many behavioural adaptations that engender a perspective on life and work that encourages service. In no way can the spiritual aspirant develop spirituality without surrendering ego constructs and developing a praxis that is *other*-oriented, thereby diminishing the urges to personal accumulation. In this respect, these beliefs and practices serve patriarchy well, as they produce an individual whose purpose is to offer no criticism or complaint to work that involves little personal gain in monetary or status terms, and instead permits blue users to accumulate spiritual power to overcome the self's negativity, so that duty becomes pleasant, if not pleasurable. In this light, femininity, tied to the colour blue, is expected to develop a spiritual rather than an emotional stance in relation to everyday experience, and so maintain a distance from 'earthly' pleasures and desires. For greatest effectiveness, the paler blues are used to promote understanding of issues and a clarity of

purpose, whereas darker blues support the work ethic, enabling the user to achieve goals and confer benefit to others. Moreover, benefit to others accrues benefit to Self, in that the self is enjoined to celebrate work well accomplished, and bask in the glory of those for whom the work was begun. In this way, work itself becomes glorified.

To acquire a spiritual identity, New Agers must submit themselves freely to the superior subject, God, or in New Age terms, 'the Universe', and as there is no distinct gender dimension to this Universe, service to it becomes, in incarnated terms, service to all. Moreover, this service must be voluntary, carry with it no fee or warranty, and be given on demand. In contemporary Australian society, New Age blue engenders a passivity which determines that femininity is exercised in relation to accumulation of 'positive' karmic debts and the elimination, through service, of 'negative' karmic debts. In this way, any demand made upon a New Age blue-user is considered a karmic command, and immediate action to meet that demand becomes paramount. Yet blue spirituality is not only tied up with service, it is also bound by a service ethic which demands obedience, reliability, silence, and above all, an uncomplaining attitude. Blue's use in effect increases the emotive and physical distance between male and female, and reduces feminine opposition to masculine power.

Part of this acquiescence to masculine power is bounded by belief in the gender-neutrality of spirit, so that the choice to incarnate as a male or female is part of the karmic cycle of spiritual tasks to be completed, and an unsatisfactory earthly situation will, through the use of 'right' action, enable the seeker to adopt the other sex in the next life. This waiting for spiritual benefit also serves to ease the discomfort of those who are unhappy with the status quo. New Agers do not threaten patriarchy, but instead join in a distribution of resources where, due to the newly-acquired spiritual beliefs, they are rendered capable of accepting a lesser share in capitalistic fortunes, and indulge in a work ethic which makes this lack paramount for growth of the soul. The mundane existence of everyday life becomes for the New Ager, through the aspirations of blue, purposeful, comfortable and a sign of devotion.

Additionally, New Age colour technologies point to the lack of a gender dimension in the concept of technologies of the self, an omission that assumes universality rather than

specificity and results in failure to recognise the gender subtext of women's special involvement in work on their and other's selves. Similar differences in male and female approaches to self-change and development have been uncovered by Tamboukou (2003), who, in her analysis of autobiographical texts by women educators, determined that the notion of technologies of the self needs to be both gendered and contextualised. For the New Age, the context appears in a privileged role for women, whose gender attributes potentiate spirituality, and whose 'healing' activities clearly encompass these self-transformative technologies. Nonetheless, women's New Age activity and experience with blue relies not on the 'objectified knowledge' of men, but instead fosters a continuing subordination of women's place in society (see Smith, 1990).

Conclusion

The New Age, as a quasi-religious movement, has failed to produce the challenge to established religion that its inception promised. The kind of self-analysis and self-modification promoted by the New Age does not succeed in removing the individual from the constraints of hegemonic power. Instead it has deep affinities with mainstream technologies of the self, such as techniques for maintenance and enhancement of physical and mental health, improvement of relationships and career building. These techniques, although involving the use of colour rather than a conventional 'psy-therapy', are sufficient to produce a change in the way that New Agers think about everyday life, and also how they subsequently act in daily activities. However, with its privileging of women, through the ideas expressed in the colour system of the chakras, the New Age also offers a 'feminine' process of addressing life's difficulties, involving a spiritual awakening and the development of an attitude to work which places the New Ager in a passive role, and thereby enhances the patriarchal order.

New Age potentialities arise within the dominant cultural ethos. Therefore their alternative or counter-cultural character remains subsumed within mainstream culture, producing fundamental parallels in beliefs and practices that also demonstrate hegemonising effects. Women's place, through their association with blue, is in the nurturing, caring activities that arise from unconditional and selfless devotion to women's 'other', men. It is no accident then that New Agers, finding their spirituality through

devotional work, fail to challenge the patriarchal dividend. Nevertheless, despite the existence of specific New Age beliefs that involve ideas far removed from established dogma, potential New Agers continue to be attracted to it, gradually working toward a peacefulness that arises only through spirituality.

As a therapeutic tradition, New Age blue presents an aspect of the technologies of the self that has not been addressed previously. It is women who have traditionally been associated with the work of service-to-others, including the maintenance of emotional and relational flows amongst human beings, and so can be expected to indulge more readily in these transformative activities. The colour technologies of the New Age demonstrate this clearly, and hint at the necessity for a gender value to contribute to the understanding of Foucault's 'technologies of the self'. Although bound by the New Age context, the colour technologies nevertheless have implications for further study into women's ways of being and doing.

Appendix A: New Age Colour Therapy Resources

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Appendix B: Table of Major Chakra Colours and overview of their New Age meanings and uses.

COLOUR	Positive Effects	Negative Effects
Red	Action, sacrifice, stimulates and excites, persistence, living with gusto, courage and energy, symbolises masculinity	Impulsivity, aggression and gratuitous sexual activity, destructive and hyperactive tendencies, despotic, angry, tyrannical passions
Orange	Detoxification, absorption, confidence, courage, survival, resourcefulness and creativity	Recklessness, thrill-seeking, daredevils with an insatiable appetite for an adrenalin rush,
Yellow	Memory, anti-melancholic, anti-depressive, activates intellect, releases fear, mental confrontation, happiness, optimism	Fear, anxiety, obsession, rebelliousness, irresponsibility, laziness and avoidance behaviours
Green	Balance, youth, growth, choices-of-the-heart, sense of freedom, inexperience, hope, aids concentration	Envy, jealousy, superstition, harsh, rigid and condemning judgements, encourages competition and challenge
Blue	Speech, inner truth, devotion, calm and sincerity, dissolves fear, calming and relaxing, nurturing and supportive, stability, associated with femininity	Rigidity and harshness in thought, manipulative, overwhelmed, overworked and overly concerned, drudgery, parsimony, depression, sloth,
Indigo	Sleep and dreams, occult psychic knowledge, highly imaginative, honest, principled and disciplined, enhanced intuition, higher consciousness	Self-destructive, depressed, anxious, easily overwhelmed and overloaded, frightened and disoriented, confused and despairing, withdrawal from social contact
Violet	Playful, artistic, charismatic, magnetic, visionary idealism, calms emotionally erratic behaviour, adaptability, receptivity to change	Narcissistic, arrogant, pompous, self-important dictator-like behaviours, overwhelmed, lost, confused, frivolous, destructive potential

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