New Age Spirituality as a Response to Colonial Confusion

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Within the past few decades, academia has sought to re-evaluate Eurocentric colonial histories that have hitherto been accepted as fact. McQueen’s (2011) research shows that the inability to right past injustices leads to “historical soul-searching” or an attempt to find a non-colonial historical education. This may explain why the spiritual commodification of pre-Abrahamic religions is currently rampant. York (2001) has attributed the modern popularity of New Age spirituality to an “erosion of ethnic dignity” and identity among settlers/settler-descendants. I will argue that this *colonial confusion* (that which causes one to question one’s identity and purpose in a post-colonial society) acts as a meaning threat and is responsible for the rapid growth of the New Age spirituality market. In my hypothesis, New Age spirituality fosters intertemporal interconnectedness, which has been found to mitigate meaning threats and strengthen meaning frameworks (Sarial-Abi, Vohs, Hamilton, & Ulqinaku, 2017). Meaning threats have also been linked to higher instances of religious devotion (Vail et al., 2009). My research will be done through a terror management theoretical framework, drawing primarily from psychologists (Sarial-Abi et al., 2017; Vail et al., 2009) but also sociologists (York, 2001) and legal analysts (McQueen, 2011). I will also be providing a case study on a salient group within New Age spirituality: Reclaiming. Though this subset does not encompass all New Age beliefs and practices, it will allow me to attach a tangible definition to a rather elusive concept. First, I will look at the phenomenon of *colonial confusion* (abbreviated as CC) as a meaning threat and point to some of its causes. I will then explain how CC as a meaning threat is mitigated, and finally, I will examine New Age Spirituality as a meaning framework resolution.

         During the colonial era, those entering the New World left their European roots behind to begin anew. This displacement has undoubtedly had immense cultural ramifications, leaving settlers and their descendants without a true sense of spiritual belonging. York (2001) attributes this “erosion of ethnic dignity” and identity to growing secularization. Along with this secularization, there has been a change in how history is recounted, emphasizing the colonized rather than the colonizer. McQueen (2011) explains, through analysis of topical legal publications, how legislative failures to correct colonial injustices have led to “historical soul-searching”; a non-colonial education on the history of colonization. While this education is beneficial to those who were wronged during colonial times, it often leads to the painful realization (conscious or unconscious) for settlers that they do not belong on the land they inhabit or have inhabited for their entire lives. Though ethnic identity borders non-existence for post-colonial white settlers, this is not the only contributor to CC (and the popularity of New Age as an extension of that); CC may also be caused by a need to escape the guilt that accompanies “historical soul-searching.”

Sarial-Abi et al. (2017) found that meaning frameworks (concepts which help us to interpret the world meaningfully) operate intertemporally and defend against meaning threats by connecting one’s past to the present and future. Though the study uses vintage items as an example of meaning framework restoration, the results can be applied to New Age which advocates for a return to traditional spirituality. It is worth noting that the spiritualities themselves are new, but they are adaptations upon ancient (mostly Earth-based) belief systems (York, 2001). In the case of CC, one can deal with the guilt of having ancestors who committed colonial atrocities (meaning threat) by simply identifying with other ancestors - much *older* ancestors. In fact, York (2001) noted that those within the dominant culture (white, settler culture) tend to label themselves as outsiders so as to distance themselves from the appearance of social power. New Age allows for the formation of these ‘outsider’ groups by fostering pre-colonial belief systems and identities. Thus, CC stems from the depreciating identity of white individuals as a result of non-colonial education, and the guilt that comes from this education. New Age, then, is a seemingly faultless solution to the meaning threat posed by colonial confusion.

Thus far, I have examined the nature of CC as a recent phenomenon. Now I will discuss how CC functions as a meaning threat on the psychological and sociological levels. First, I will look at nationalism as a similar meaning framework to New Age Spirituality; then, I will discuss the effect of CC on symbolic immortality. Nostalgia has long been linked with nationalism as a solution to loneliness since the days of the psychologist Beardsley Ruml (Batchko, 2013). From a terror management perspective, nationalism serves as a solution to the meaning threat of loneliness (more significantly, feeling one does not belong). I will suggest that this nationalism is a nostalgic reaction to CC, using Turkish Cypriots as a case study. The British colonization of Cyprus left two major groups on the island: Turkish immigrants and Turkish Cypriots (native to Cyprus). While the Cypriots have a direct connection to the land, the Turkish immigrants do not. Both groups can be seen as dealing with meaning threats; the Turkish immigrants act as a meaning threat to the Cypriots because they threaten their national narrative of social prosperity and civility (which is rooted in ethnic differences), and the Cypriots act as a meaning threat to the Turks as they question their right to be on the island. It should not come as a surprise, then, that both groups have sprung up nationalist movements - Cypriotism and Turkish Nationalism. Cypriotism harkens back to the ‘halcyon days’ of British rule, which allows them to assert their’ moral/civil superiority,’ looking to (colonial) Britain as the highest standard of progress. On the other hand, Turkish nationalism plays into nostalgia for the Ottoman Empire, denouncing the Western values and ‘white mythology’ used by the Cypriots (Beyazoglu, 2017). If nationalism can serve as a new meaning framework for threatened post-colonial identities, surely New Age can function similarly by creating feelings of social connectedness and moral superiority (compared to white non-New Age individuals) as seen in the national movements of Cyprus.

Colonial confusion also acts as a meaning threat through its limiting effect on symbolic immortality. According to terror management theory, symbolic immortality is a solution to mortality salience (the knowledge of death’s inevitability). Symbolic immortality allows us to feel self-esteem by giving us the sense that there is something larger than one’s current existence. While literal immortality also accomplishes this sense by overtly seeking an afterlife, symbolic immortality allows one to live on through their Earthly accomplishments (Dechesne et al., 2003). For instance, contributing to one’s community, creating music, and being a good parent are all ways in which we search for symbolic immortality (Florian & Mikulincer, 1998). CC limits symbolic immortality through questions of legacy - what do my accomplishments mean if they were all achieved on a land not my own? How can others truly be proud of my life if it was lived at the disadvantage of Indigenous Peoples? How can I expect my children to look up to my values if I was complicit in the everlasting brutality of colonization? Through the displacement and historical injustices brought to the forefront of awareness by CC, one’s symbolic immortality is seriously threatened. Coupled onto CC is modern environmentalism, as an awareness of colonial history surely gives way to an understanding of industry and its foundations. This environmentalism which demands instantaneous action and threatens spontaneous destruction without a doubt threatens symbolic immortality, in that there is a clear realization that one’s children may have a much more difficult time surviving. Thus, CC directly threatens symbolic immortality by triggering mortality salience.

When introduced to CC, post-colonial individuals are threatened not only with identity crises but also mortality salience, as discussed above. This threat creates a need for new social systems to bring colonially displaced (whether psychologically, culturally, geographically, etc.) peoples together. In the same way that nationalism can bring people together, religion functions the same way and has been associated with limiting the meaning threats that arise from mortality salience. Religion allows individuals to see themselves as spiritual beings and thus provides an escape from the pressing mortality salience of corporeal nature (Vail et al., 2009). A distinction between the body and self is also notable in religious individuals (Heflick, Goldenberg, Hart, & Kamp, 2015). In terms of CC, this allows the individual to be aware that they are displaced while maintaining the comforting conviction that their spirit exists intertemporally and is beyond the worldly concept of place.

This notion of intertemporality is essential in the discussion of meaning frameworks as it counters the binary nature of mortality (in that one is alive, then inevitably dies). Sarial-Abi et al. (2017) observe from six studies on vintage object consumption that intertemporal interconnectedness mitigates meaning threats. Though this study looked at vintage consumer items, this finding can be applied to the ‘ancient’ spiritualities sold in today’s market of spiritual commodification. I will now examine *Reclaiming* as a case study of New Age spirituality in relation to meaning frameworks. Reclaiming is a Bay-Area-based neopagan organization that emerged in the late 1970s, arguably kick-starting the growth of the New Age movement (or at the very least, the Goddess movement). The group incorporates feminism, environmentalism, and political activism with pre-colonial witchcraft tradition. One of the group’s founders, Miriam Simos (known as Starhawk among New Age circles), is a prominent feminist neopagan theorist, authoring “The Spiral Dance” in 1979, which inspired the now widespread Goddess movement (About Reclaiming, 2018). With little spiritual training, Starhawk has seemed to inspire other like-minded university-educated white settlers. On Starhawk’s personal website, the prefix “re” plays a significant role; for instance, “*re*-building,” “*re*-birth,” “*re*-membered,” “*re*-vival,” etc. (Biography, n.d.).

What is it that Starhawk is seeking to rebuild, remember and revive? What must be reclaimed? The answer lies, then, in what was lost. During second-wave feminism, many African American women felt alienated by the Friedanist rhetoric demanding the right to work outside the home as many black women were already doing so. This alienation led to the rise of prominent figures in black feminism such as Angela Davis, Florynce Kennedy, and Cellestine Ware during the late 60s/early 70s (Baxandall, 2001). It can be suggested that African American CC gave rise to the black feminist movement as the issues faced by this sector of the population are directly linked to colonial oppression and displacement – issues not faced by white settlers. Many white feminists, such as Starhawk, reacted to this African American realization of CC by distancing themselves from their complicity with colonization. White feminists may have already engaged in historical soul-searching, or the black CC could have brought CC to light in white individuals. Regardless, white feminists began to organize in racially exclusive groups such as Reclaiming, which reverted to a time before colonization, before slavery, before oppression. The impact of this reversion on meaning frameworks is twofold: (1) it deals with CC by fostering intertemporal interconnectedness as they are now part of the past, present and future, and (2) it changes one’s identity from ‘oppressor’ to ‘witch’ - the latter existing in an entirely different social and temporal sphere than the former. Starhawk, on Reclaiming’s website, outlines “the wheel of birth, growth, death and regeneration,” which combines all dimensions of time, promising a future *after* death and moral renewing (as suggested by “regeneration”) (Starhawk, 1997). Thus, adopting ‘ancient’ spiritualities allow those within the dominant settler culture to feel at peace with the passing of time (connected firmly to mortality salience) and to detach from the guilt of complicity.

Thus, New Age spirituality is a reaction to the historical soul-searching prevalent in modern times, providing a meaning framework to the meaning threat of colonial confusion. In this research paper, I looked at the changing perspectives on historical education and how this works to spawn CC. The meaning frameworks of white settlers are then threatened by (1) eroding one’s self-construal and (2) creating a burdensome sense of guilt for colonial wrongdoings. I also identified how CC could be mitigated by movements toward social connectedness such as nationalism and by achieving symbolic immortality. Lastly, I discussed the intertemporality of New Age spiritualities, which allows for meaning frameworks to be constructed and provides white settlers with an escape from the racial inequalities of the present day that stem directly from colonization. Because New Age is a relatively recent phenomenon, there has not been much research on the subject, aside from a few dedicated academics such as Michael York. Furthermore, there hasn’t been any work linking New Age to TMT, which I believe to be a missed opportunity as there is much potential for breakthrough work in the psychological and sociological effects of colonization. Academics may often dismiss New Age as too elusive or insignificant; however, the growing movements toward pre-imperialist spiritualities are becoming hard to ignore, especially in the context of terror management. Though many may see New Age as an indicator of societal progression with core values such as environmentalism and social harmony, New Agers and non-New Agers alike should be wary of what is being *reclaimed* - and who doesn’t get to claim it.

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