



NEW AGE IN CONTEMPORARY GLOBALISM: AN ISLAMIC RESPONSE

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates New Age and its challenge to religion, in general, and Islam, more specifically. The article is based on the empirical data gathered by Hugh Urban, Daren Kemp, and James R. Lewis. New Age will be situated within its socio-cultural context to better understand its appeal as an alternative to mainstream religion. The article will also investigate the Poet Muhammad Iqbal's spiritual system as a means of finding an Islamic response to New Age. Rhonda Byrne's popularity among Arab youth will be examined, as will the response to it by Shaykh Muhammad Saalih Al-Munajjid. The article proposes that educational syllabuses in Muslim higher learning institutions must be upgraded to include Islamic responses to New Age, by emphasizing Islam's spiritual tradition. Currently there is a gap in the academic literature pertaining to New Age and Islam. This article hopes to provide a stimulus to great research in this area. The research uses comparative and qualitative method of content analysis. One of its drawbacks is that no empirical studies have yet to be done regarding Muslim youth perceptions on New Age. This research concludes that Muslim academics and educators must re-examine Iqbal's spiritual paradigm in order to deal effectively with contemporary challenges such as the New Age challenge. This research is important because it will help to extend the scope of Comparative Religion in Islamic studies to include new cultural elements as New Age. It also may be suggestive of how Islamic studies departments, in universities and institutions, can update their syllabus to include responses to the latest socio-ideological changes amongst the younger generation. Finally, this research shows the vitality of Iqbal's thought to contemporary issues facing the globe. This article will be useful to educators who are interested in engaging with Muslim Youth on the latest topics that may affect them.

Keywords: New Age, Muhammad Iqbal, Rhonda Byrne, Spirituality, Muslim Youth



Introduction

Hugh Urban has argued that New Age represents a Neo-Pagan revival as a reaction against to the failure of established religions to deal with consumerism. This article will critically examine this thesis. It will analyse the claim, as put forward in the Handbook of New Age, edited by Daren Kemp & James R. Lewis. It is claimed that New Age is not a temporary fashion or fad but a serious long-term phenomenon on a global scale. This research will engage in the methodology of comparative textual analysis, alongside a cultural-sensitive contextualization of spiritual matters. The research will seek to answer three important questions about New Age: why does it flourish in the midst of economic success and scientific progress in developed countries? What is the spiritual principle that underpins most forms of New Age? What are the inherent limitations of New Age? After answering these questions, the research will propose that Islam's spiritual heritage is a more effective answer to contemporary spiritual crisis than New Age. To show this, the research will use Muhammad Iqbal's famous spiritual book *Secrets of the Self* as a reference to refute the above claim. It will show that Iqbal's notion of spiritual transformation is a stronger paradigm for spirituality than New Age is. The research posits that the New Age phenomenon can, in principle, occur in the Muslim World given globalization and its pernicious effects. To ward off this danger, it is suggested that the Muslim World should enact the spiritual paradigm that Iqbal urged, as well as raise awareness amongst Muslim Youth to Islam's spiritual heritage. To exhibit the robustness of Iqbal's position, the research will examine the response to Rhonda Byrne's *The Secret*, a New Age book translated into Arabic and popular amongst Muslim Youth, by Shaykh Muhammad Saalih Al-Munajjid. Several flaws in the response will be highlighted. In contrast, it will be shown that Iqbal provides a far more comprehensive response to Byrne's thesis.

Brief Sketch of Iqbal's Life

According to Encyclopaedia Britannica (2022), Sir Muhammad Iqbal was born in 9th, November 1877, Sialkot, Punjab, India which is now in Pakistan. And He died in April 21, 1938, Lahore, Punjab. Iqbal was from a pious family of small merchants. Initially he received his education at Government College, Lahore. In between 1905 to 1908, he received a degree in philosophy from the University of Cambridge. Later, he also received a doctorate from the University of Munich, Germany. His important thesis, *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*, introduced Islamic mysticism that was not well acquainted in Europe previously. After his return from Europe, he earned money by the practice of law. However, he got his popularity from his writings. His poetry was widely known during his time. He, in fact, was considered as the greatest poet of the 20th century in Urdu language.



New Challenge of New Age

The current Islamic discourse is static. In both as an educational and religious sphere, current Islamic discourse relates to Shirk (polytheism) as a form of historic paganism. After all, outside of India, no one takes seriously the idea that stone idols are gods. The concept of Kufr (disbelief) has been translated to the notion of atheism and materialism. Yet what is evident from current trends is that Muslim youths have little attraction to the philosophy of atheism or the ideology of materialism. What they are primarily attracted to is the cultural hegemony that is espoused by neo-liberalism. In short, Muslim youth are more interested in 'freedom' than they are in any specific doctrine or position. This means the two terms Shirk and Kufr have little relevance, at least where Muslim youth are concerned. This is to look at the matter through the prism of the current educational and religious sphere. If we take a step back and look at the matter from a distance, another picture emerges.

Paganism is not an ancient historical phenomenon. New forms of paganism have arisen. One instructive example can be provided. Colin Wilson (2001) wrote his famous book *The Outsider* in 1956. Wilson made the convincing case that Western society was spiritually empty. Only by lying outside of Western society could a person reconnect to a deeper spiritual undercurrent. Wilson's argument is impeccable. Everything he says is in line with Islam's own view of the spiritual emptiness of crass mechanistic worldview. Yet we should be very careful in fully endorsing Wilson. Time unveils wonders, as it is said. In the end of the 1970s, Wilson published *The Occult* (2015) and *Mysteries* (2020). In the end of the 1980s, Wilson published *Beyond the Occult* (2020). These three books were collected as *The Occult Trilogy*. In the trilogy, Wilson champions Satanism and Satan-worship as the solution to materialism. He tries to show how science is in harmony with satanic powers, etc. Later on, Wilson (2005) published a monograph praising Aleister Crowley, the most notorious demon-worshiper in England's history. The movement from spiritual angst in *The Outsider* to demon-worship in *The Occult Trilogy* is astonishing yet instructive, nonetheless. Perhaps, it is easier to relate Wilson's notion if we can trace to current status quo in popular media. If the content of current Hollywood movie, *"Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness"* is taken into consideration apart from Rubin's (2022) analysis of opening week in the box office, it is easy to predict what Wilson is trying to draw through his *Occult Trilogy*.

In Islamic terminology, Wilson's later position is termed as Shirk. But his former position can be seen as recognition of the spiritual emptiness of Kufr, understood as atheistic materialism. The current Islamic discourse does not chart for us any movement from a rejection of Kufr to an acceptance of Shirk. Indeed, such a movement seems absurd. If a person rejects Kufr, surely, he would also reject Shirk. But Wilson shows us that such a movement can indeed be done. Paganism has a new form that is far more appealing than the ancient notion of idol-worship. In order to better equip the educational and religious sphere in Islamic studies, this research will try to trace the latest developments in such paganism, which is dubbed 'New Age'. By seeing how New Age developed and interacts, the research will then be able to pinpoint its salient features and provide a robust Islamic response. It is hoped this research



can stimulate academics, educators, and scholars into rewriting the educational syllabus and religious discourse in such a way as to deal with contemporary challenges that lie outside the immediate schema of the current Islamic discourse which is static.

New Age and Globalism

Hugh B. Urban (2015) provides one of the most in-depth studies of New Age. One salient feature of his study is his sympathy. He writes with enthusiasm about New Age; his aim is not to criticize but promote New Age. Urban considers a lot of New Age practices to be a form of "Neopaganism". The term is his and warrants some attention. The prefix 'Neo' refers to 'resurgent' or 'newly formed'. Paganism refers to all spiritual tendencies which lied outside the scope of established religion. This understanding of paganism has its roots in Christian history, where all forms of non-Christian faiths were labelled as pagan. Throughout his book, Urban stresses that New Age is an "alternative spirituality" that is contrary and heretical to established religion.

There is not enough space to deal with all of Urban's thesis; so, this research will only utilize its bare bone structure. In Chapter 1 of his book, Urban stresses that New Age began in North America. In Chapter 6, he refers to the importance of taking drugs in New Age practices. In Chapter 7, he refers to Scientology, which was a made-up religion that became famous due to several Hollywood stars embracing it. In Chapter 8, he discusses the 'Church of Satan'. Lastly, in Chapter 11, he talks of the importance of popular culture in making New Age practices more appealing. Urban's conclusion is that New Age shows the attraction and influence of "alternative spirituality" in contemporary capitalistic age.

The Neopagan elements in New Age include magic (Siḥr), superstition (Khurāfa), and belief in elemental gods (Shirk). What is more significant, however, is that New Age as a whole claim to provide spirituality free of any organized religion. In short, Americans wanted spirituality, but wanted to reject all religions. This movement is far more subtle than the usual atheistic materialist moves of rejection both religion and spirituality. Urban's thesis explains well how Americans felt disillusioned by the rigidity of religion and the shallowness of consumerism. The solution that showed itself was New Age.

If New Age was specifically an 'American' phenomenon, it would be of little interest to the wider world. But given globalization, the American-origin New Age spread across the globe. There are now many non-American forms of New Age. A tell-tale sign of the influence New Age has can be seen in Western academia. In its series investigating "contemporary religion," Brill published the Handbook of New Age by Daren Kemp & J. R. Lewis (2007). Western academia has now recognised that New Age is indeed part of the contemporary religious matrix. If anything, this shows the seriousness and significance given to New Age nowadays.

Kemp and Lewis have a section on "Global Aspects of New Age," which includes discussions of New Age in Japan. In the Handbook, J. G. Melton argues that New Age was especially attractive to Millennials and can exert attraction even beyond (p. 77-97). One of the most



important features of Millennials is their reliance on social media to keep connected to the global fashions and trends. Such interconnectedness explains how New Age can easily become global. Melissa Harrington discusses how academics view New Age as a reformation of paganism for a global era (p. 435-452). Throughout the Handbook, various academics stress again and again that New Age is a spiritual system that aims to fill the void people faced in societies dominated by materialism.

From the above, certain salient features of New Age become clear. Firstly, New Age began in America, which was the model of economic success at the time. The rise of consumerism and capitalism led to a spiritual vacuum. Since organized religion was too formal and rigid, Americans chose to follow New Age which was more flexible. Later on, with the advent of globalism, New Age spread across the world. Yet, we still find traces of New Age being a specific expression of developed nations. For instance, Japan and Ireland have New Age fashions, while it is rare to find third world or developing countries who have the same. Secondly, the spiritual principle that underlies New Age is a double movement, or a so-called dialectical motion. New Age rejects atheistic materialism. In this sense, it rejects Kufr. But then New Age accepts paganism, or a reformed version of it, and thus endorses Shirk at some level. Thirdly, the limitations of New Age are apparent from perusing the studies mentioned above. New Age is characterised by 'believe whatever you want' attitude that leads to New Age systems having a diversity that defeats any attempt at coherence.

In order to appreciate the difference between Islam and New Age, it is necessary to compare Islamic spirituality with the sketch of New Age. In the next section, the Poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal's spiritual system will be sketched briefly and compared to New Age.

Iqbal's Spirituality of the Self

One of Iqbal's most important books is *Asrār-I Khudī*, an epic poem written in Persian. R. A. Nicholson, the famous Orientalist, translated this book of Iqbal's poem into English under the title *Secrets of the Self* (1920). This translation is important because Muhammad Iqbal had sent a letter to Nicholson explaining the philosophical basis for the poem. Nicholson includes this letter in his translation (p. xvi-xxix). What follows is a brief sketch of the spiritual system that Iqbal expressed in his epic poem.

The birth of the poem came to Iqbal in his sleep; he had a dream of Jalaludin Rumi visiting him and urging him to compose the poem. For this reason, Iqbal's poem resembles Rumi's *Mathnawi* in content and form. Nicholson remarks that the relation between Rumi and Iqbal is like that between Virgil and Dante (p. xiv).

Iqbal provides this allegorical tale: a thirsty bird saw a diamond. Due to the brilliance of the sunlight playing on the diamond's surface, the thirsty bird mistook the diamond for water. The bird tried to drink from the diamond but failed. The bird ended up crying from his



inability to drink water (chapter xii). Here Iqbal is vividly portraying how wealth and riches can never fulfil the spiritual thirst inside everyone. A person can be living in opulence but still be depressed to the point of tears.

Where does this spiritual angst come from? Iqbal describes the Self (or the soul) as “the life-spark beneath our dust” (p. 28). The physicality of the human body is dust, nothing more. The true centre of life is the Self which is where our personality and individuality are found. This life-spark cannot be dealt with physically, but only spiritually.

Iqbal juxtaposes two types of life. There is the life of love (‘Ishq) and the life of begging (Suāl). The life of love is when you are motivated by inner passion. In this sense, Iqbal is merely repeating the common theme of Love in Islamic literature. What is original, however, is Iqbal’s notion of begging. Iqbal refers to the Prophetic criticism and hatred of beggars. But Iqbal understands this in a spiritual not financial sense. For Iqbal, a beggar is a person who takes his personality from his society. A beggar is he who doesn’t seek out the truth by himself but relies on the opinions of others (chapter iv). The aim of spirituality is for a person to gain individual freedom. Iqbal says: “What is Life but to be freed from moving around others” (p. 123). In order to get this individual freedom, a person must take a spiritual journey.

The spiritual journey to freedom, according to Iqbal, has three stages. The first stage is that of a camel (p. 72-4). A camel has the ability to cross the harsh desert in its journey, Man must become like a camel by obeying the Islamic precepts. These precepts help to equip Man with the patience necessary to undertake a spiritual journey. But being a camel is not enough. It is only the lowest stage of self-transformation. The next stage is the rider of the camel (p. 75-78). Man must learn to direct himself in the direction he wants to travel. A camel by itself will get lost in the desert. A rider controlling the camel will be able to finish the journey. To become a rider, Iqbal says, Man must learn self-control. This strengthens the soul until it is ready for the third and final stage of the journey, which is when Man transforms into a Caliph (p. 78-84). When Man’s soul is a Caliph, he reaches the stage where he can create his own values and produce a new vision of life. Iqbal says: “To delight in creation is the law of Life/ Arise and create a new world!” (p. 89-90).

To anchor his poetic imagery in the concrete, Iqbal gives us an example of what he means by the three-staged spiritual journey. He refers to the Prophet affectionately calling Ali (R) by the nickname “Abu Turāb”. This nickname means ‘Father of Dust’. Iqbal shows the spiritual significance of this name. Ali (R) was initially nothing more than a physical body, like all other physical bodies. He was no more valuable than the earth people walked on. After his education by the Prophet, Ali (R) became both the Caliph of this material world, and also the Caliph of the spiritual world. His very name and memory shaped Islamic history in the deepest ways possible (section x). All humans initially have no value. But by undertaking the spiritual journey, humans can become more valuable than the entire world, and can even live on, in memory and adoration, after their deaths.



Iqbal ends his epic poem with a scathing criticism of scientific-secular education. Modern education produces only “paper roses”. It is bereft of deep passion. This sort of education makes life so lifeless; everything becomes a matter of “idol-worshipping, idol-selling, idol-making” (p. 129). People view each other as bereft of inner significance; so, human interaction is merely lifeless idols engaged with soulless statues. “Modern science,” Iqbal says, lacks personal wisdom and individual passion (p. 130). The result is that scientific-secular education ignores the spiritual dimension of Man, which leads to an entire generation of people experiencing spiritual emptiness. Iqbal hoped that his epic poem could be seen as a supplementary education that could help minimise the side-effects of despiritualization in modern education.

The comparison and contrast of Iqbal’s position with New Age is clear and critical. New Age actually proves that Iqbal was right when he argued that economic success (as the allegory of the diamond and the bird suggests) and scientific-secular education would lead to spiritual emptiness culminating in anguish. In America and other developed countries, swathes of people are turning away from the shallowness of capitalism and consumerism. New Age wants a flexible spirituality and scorns the rigidity of organised religion. Iqbal provides a flexible spirituality that effectively neutralises any rigidity in Islam. For Iqbal, Islam’s ultimate aim is for people to create their own values from their innermost soul. As Iqbal says:

“He founds a new system to work by...He gives a new explanation of Life. A new interpretation of this dream” (p. 82)

At the same time, however, Iqbal bases his entire vision on the richness of the Islamic heritage. This allows Iqbal’s poetic vision to tap into the multiple sources of wisdom, such as the Persian wisdom, the Arab wisdom, the Urdu wisdom, and even more. The structure of Iqbal’s poetry follows that of Rumi’s Mathnawi. All of this saves Iqbal from ending up in the fleetingness that New Age now faces. Because New Age is merely a ‘believe whatever you want,’ the various New Age practices and beliefs rarely have any deep structure and organisation to them. In contrast, Iqbal’s poetic vision is grounded in Islam, while at the same time allowing, at the third stage of spiritual growth, for a person to create new values for himself. In this sense, Iqbal got the benefit of a flexible spirituality and the benefit of organized religion. Taking everything together, Iqbal’s spiritual system agrees with the core motivations of New Age, while being superior to New Age by its organisational structure. The other obvious benefit is that Iqbal doesn’t need to relate to paganism, but instead champions Tawhid [Oneness of God].



New Age in the Muslim World

It may be contended that New Age is not a serious issue for the Muslim World. After all, the studies on New Age show the link between financial prosperity and New Age adherents. This, however, will be taking a very narrow view of things. Many Muslim countries are financially prosperous, especially in the Middle East. Even in Muslim countries that are either developing or third world, the middle and upper class enjoy a wealth status that was unheard of in the previous decade or two. Additionally, the widespread technology of smartphones and social media make it easy for New Age ideas to filter down even to the less well off. It is true that most studies on New Age do not mention Muslim countries. That is because academia in the Muslim world has not done in-depth research into New Age. Lack of research does not mean lack of existence.

One good example of New Age ideas filtering into the Muslim world can be seen in the Middle East, the Arabic translation of *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne became an instant bestseller. This led to Shaykh Muhammad Salih al-Munajjid issuing an interesting fatwa where he criticized the paganism in New Age. Before analyzing Al-Munajjid's response, it would do well to brighten on the "Law of Attraction". Later on, Byrne published *The Magic* (2012) which was a manual teaching people how to engage in magical spells for having a successful life. Her latest book is *The Greatest Secret* (2020) that explains the latest New Age practices. A central message of Byrne's three books is that humans must go beyond the material realm and enter the spiritual realm if they want success. She recognizes the shallowness of materialism; yet she then embraces Neopaganism. This move from rejecting Kufr to accepting Shirk is similar to the one Wilson did decades before.

Al-Munajjid's (23rd Oct, 2016) critique of Byrne's *The Secret* is instructive. He notes that the book supports "idolatrous philosophies". He rails against the "positive thinking" that "Law of Attraction" upholds. What is most interesting is Al-Munajjid's schematic presentation of the flaws in New Age, or what he calls "New Thought Movement". Al-Munajjid thinks that by merely tabling the points of contradiction between Islam and New Age, he can convince readers to reject New Age. This is perhaps an overly negative approach.

As has been shown previously, Iqbal's spiritual system agrees with New Age in its fundamental motivation. In a similar fashion, the positive thinking Byrne promotes as the "Law of Attraction" is recognisable, in a somewhat different form, in the Quran itself. The Quran promotes positive thinking, as is evident from the many words of encouragement the Quran provides to the Sahaba [companions of the Prophet] as they faced hardship in Makkah and Medina. It would have been better if Al-Munajjid accepted that Islam and New Age agree that positive thinking is vital for success in life.

When putting Iqbal and New Age into conversation, it was seen how Iqbal provided an alternative spiritual journey for people to traverse in seeking spiritual fulfilment. Al-Munajjid provides no alternative at all in his response. Iqbal contributed a positive new dimension to



Islamic discourse; Al-Munajjid provided only an absolute negation. In that sense, Iqbal's spiritual system has more attraction to young Muslims seeking a flexible spirituality, whereas Al-Munajjid provides nothing.

If asked why Iqbal is more preferable to Byrne, a substantial answer can be given. Leaving aside the issue of permissibility or not, of haram [unlawful] or halal [lawful] it can be said that Byrne's spirituality is in an idiom foreign to most Muslims and is very shallow in its historical identity. Her work is a popular mishmash of various New Age ideas that lack any serious historical continuity. Iqbal, on the other hand, speaks using the idiom of Muslim culture (Persian, Indian, Arabic), while also being deeply embedded in the long tradition of Islamic spirituality, such as Rumi. For young Muslims, they can get the benefit of Byrne's positive attitude to life while still being connected to the Islamic heritage, if they adopt Iqbal's position. This tips the scales, as it were, in favour of Iqbal over Byrne from the perspective of young Muslims. They would be more comfortable identifying with their own culture and heritage than falsely trying to identify with a foreign cultural expression that has no long-term appeal. No matter how hard young Muslims try, they will never be regarded as part of the Western New Age fraternity. Iqbal shows us the way to dealing with New Age in a more nuanced and sympathetic manner that Al-Munajjid's fatwa cannot. This is suggestive evidence that perhaps Iqbal's approach to Islamic spirituality should be taken more seriously.

Moreover, Iqbal sketched the direction for Muslim Ummah in general on how to deal with contemporary challenges in his work '*The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*'. Ali (2013, p.75) mentioned about the consequence of Western thoughts affecting Muslim Ummah indicated by Muhammad Iqbal. Hasan and Ali (2021) also showed how Iqbal's synthesis can help Muslim Youth to deal with various new contemporary challenges. Ali (2019) discussed issues of Islamization of human knowledge based on some prominent contemporary Muslim thinkers. The message of Iqbal and these Muslim thinkers seem to carry the similar answer for the solution facing Muslim Youth in contemporary time. Mumtaz Ali (2016) in his book '*Islamization of Modern Science and its Philosophy: A Contemporary Civilizational Discourse*' has raised same concern about modern science (missing spirituality) and urged for paradigm shift based on truth-based science (The Quran). Overall, the point is worth emphasizing that what New Age has lacking to provide the complete solution for spirituality, on the other hand, Islamic spirituality has the solution for in more comprehensive manner that Muslim Youth can easily grasp from Iqbal's thoughts.



Conclusion

This research has delved into New Age and the challenge it poses to the Muslim world. It has been shown that New Age includes a new model of disbelief that is contrary to the usual atheistic materialist model of disbelief that current Islamic discourse focuses on. While New Age began in America, due to globalization it has spread across the world. New Age has already infiltrated the Arab world, and by extension the Muslim world, as seen in the case of Byrne. Iqbal's spiritual system provides a corrective to New Age. Iqbal would agree with many of the motivating factors of New Age but is able to fuse a flexible spirituality alongside a deep appreciation for Islam as an organizing principle for individual freedom. This position helps Muslims accept partially some ideas of New Age, while also providing a better alternative to it. In contrast, the absolute negation attitude of scholars like Al-Munajjid lack such potential.

It has been noted that Iqbal always saw Islamic spirituality as a necessary antidote to the side-effects of modernized secular education. Unfortunately, his proposal has yet to be taken seriously on a wide scale. It may be the right time for Muslim academics to rethink and reimagine the education syllabus to allow for special emphasis to be placed on the flexibility of Islamic spirituality as a road to individual freedom. This can occur by incorporating Iqbal's spiritual system into already established courses. For instance, in the current schema of Islam's response to modernity, the main emphasis is always placed on scientific enterprise and its relation to Islam. As we have seen, Iqbal's response to modernity was a spiritual response, based on personal passion and individual freedom. The scientific and social systems of his time, such as scientific socialism, led to a depersonalization of humanity, and a negation of individual freedom for the sake of communal identity (such as Marx's notion of the proletariat). We rarely hear this side of the story when it comes to Islam's response to modernism. Currently, the New Age phenomenon shows that many people in the West have become frustrated with the emptiness of crass materialism. Their flight to spirituality can easily be accommodated within Islamic spirituality. But if Muslims do not include Islamic spirituality in the education syllabus, then we shouldn't be surprised if New Age will become a more potent form of faddish paganism that rejects Islam, even while rejecting atheistic materialism. Hopefully this research will motivate other academics into exploring this new area of educational policy for the Muslim world.



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