

Prophecy, cosmology and the New Age movement: the extent and nature of contemporary belief in astrology.

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Abstract

Most research indicates that almost 100% of British adults know their birth-sign. Astrology is an accepted part of popular culture and is an essential feature of tabloid newspapers and women's magazines, yet is regarded as a rival or, at worst, a threat, by the mainstream churches. Sceptical secular humanists likewise view it as a potential danger to social order. Sociologists of religion routinely classify it as a cult, religion, new religious movement or New Age belief. Yet, once such assumptions have been aired, the subject is rarely investigated further. If, though, astrology is characterised as New Age, an investigation of its nature may shed light on wider questions, such as whether many Christians are right to see New Age as a competitor in the religious market place. The academic literature on the New Age also generally assumes that New Age is a modern form of millenarianism, without investigating the connection further. If New Age is millenarian and astrology, in turn, is New Age, then astrology's current popularity may be a millenarian phenomenon. This study sets out to establish the extent and nature of contemporary belief in astrology within the broader context of hostility from Christians and sceptics, but apparent support from New Agers and readers of horoscope columns. It investigates astrology's relationship with millenarianism and New Age culture, and explores the penetration of New Age ideas into twentieth-century astrology. It examines attempts to quantify belief in astrology, discussing the wider question of whether the quantification of belief is even possible. It then uses indepth interviews and questionnaires to consider the nature of belief in

astrology amongst both the general public and astrologers. The thesis concludes that there is no single reliable measure of belief in astrology and no necessary clash between astrology and Christianity. The question of whether astrology's survival in the modern world is an anachronism is considered and it is concluded that it is not. Astrology is part of the matrix of ideas which constitutes popular belief in modern Britain.

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