Occultism surges in periods of spiritual crisis, periods when the idea that encapsulates a society’s core values and beliefs loses its luster. Nietzsche called this idea the “myth.” I use “myth” to apply to ideology as well. Nietzsche did not use “myth” as the antonym of “truth” because he believed there is no absolute truth.

The “myth,” which can be religious or secular, informs a society’s laws and institutions, permeates the culture, endows life with meaning, and helps shape personal and national identity. When the “myth” fades, long-held values and moral norms are challenged; established institutions are called into question, identity issues come to the fore, and people feel anxious, or confused, or insecure. Many of them turn to the occult for certainty, or guidance, or solace. Occultism can supplement the “myth” or replace it.

Of course, in any society, some people will be going through a spiritual crisis, for reasons that vary from one person to another, and some people will be drawn to the occult. This chapter is not about them. It is about periods of widespread spiritual crisis when occultism becomes pervasive. In such periods, the occult ideas and doctrines of previous periods are recycled; new elements that address contemporary concerns are added; and new doctrines are constructed. Occultism subsides when a new “myth” is established.

In Russia, occultism surged in the revolutionary and early Soviet periods (1890–1927) and subsided when Stalin became the new god. It (occultism) revived in the wake of de-Stalinization (the 1960s and ‘70s), and surged in late Soviet and post-Soviet Russia (1985–2000). Occultism also surged in the United States during and after the 1960s. The “myths” were different and they faded for different reasons, but in each case, their fading precipitated a spiritual crisis to which people responded by turning to the occult.

I would like to thank Paul Hillery for his helpful comments and suggestions.
Prerevolutionary and Early Soviet Russia

The spiritual crisis in prerevolutionary Russia was an extreme version of a pan-European crisis brought on by secularization, dissatisfaction with rationalism, positivism, and materialism, and (in some cases) distaste for the emerging mass society. In Russia, the spiritual crisis was intensified by the obsolescence of Autocracy, the destabilizing effects of the industrialization drive of the 1890s, and modernization in general. Modernization undermined established elites and institutions and fostered new values—individualism, self-fulfillment, and enjoyment of life—that contradicted the values of the Orthodox Church and of the intelligentsia. The spiritual crisis included a moral crisis propelled, in part, by Nietzsche’s call for a “revaluation of all values” and his attack on Christianity.

The tendency of the Russian intelligentsia to seek an all-encompassing idea (or “myth”) by which to live is well known. In the 1870s and ‘80s, the “myth” was populism (narodnichestvo), an agrarian socialism based on the peasant commune (the mir), and on the assumption that the peasant is a socialist by nature. So if the Autocracy and the aristocracy are removed, Russia would pass from the commune to full socialism, by-passing the capitalist stage of development. Rapid industrialization worked to the detriment of the agricultural sector and undermined the peasant commune. Searching for a new “myth” by which to live, some intelligentsy turned to Marxism, others to Symbolism, a literary aesthetic imported from France that was based on the esoteric idea of correspondences—“as above so below” in the words of Hermes Trismegistos, the legendary Egyptian priest. French Symbolism was in turn informed by the occult revival spawned by Eliphas Lévi (pseudonym of Alphonse Louis Constant, 1810–1875) soon after the failure of the Revolution of 1848. Before that Revolution, Lévi had been a political radical.

Russian Symbolism was born in the early 1890s with Dmitrii Merezhkovskii’s lecture, On the Causes of the Decline in Russian Literature and on the New Trends in Poetry (O prichinakh upadka v russkoi literature i o novykh techeniiakh v poëzii, 1892, published 1893), which became the manifesto of Russian Symbolism. In that lecture, he maintained that people of his generation were experiencing a spiritual crisis unprecedented in its intensity, because never before has the need for faith and the impossibility of faith (due to reason and science) been so great. Lambasting the “arid” rationalism and “soulless” materialism and positivism propagated by the intelligentsia, Merezhkovskii accused it of stifling creativity, hampering the development of individuality, and ignoring the “inner man” (the soul or the psyche). He predicted that Symbolism
would lead to “higher truths” because it explores the depths of the human soul and “other worlds than ours,” and, eventually, to a new faith that would become the basis of a new culture of creativity, beauty, and emotional freedom.

Merezhkovskii (1866–1941) made Symbolism into a surrogate religion that exalted artistic creativity as a metaphysical activity and rejected the asceticism, self-denial, and humility preached by the Orthodox Church and (in secular form) by the intelligentsia. But art alone did not quench Merezhkovskii’s “spiritual thirst” nor did it assuage his fear of death. So in 1896, he posited two eternal principles—Christianity and Paganism, personal immortality and enjoyment of worldly pleasures—and set out to reconcile them. In 1899, he “turned to Christ.” A year later, he concluded that “historical Christianity” (the Christianity preached in the churches) is obsolete because the Second Coming is imminent. Jesus Christ Himself would grant humankind a Third Revelation (a Third Testament) that would reconcile all contradictions: Christianity and paganism, spirit and flesh, East and West, and so on.

In 1901, Merezhkovskii co-founded the Religious-Philosophical Society of Saint Petersburg (1901–1903, 1906–1917) as a forum for discussing such issues as Lev Tolstoy’s excommunication by the Orthodox Church, Christian attitudes to sex, whether new Christian dogma is needed and if so, who has the power to create it. The members were clergymen and lay intellectuals. The latter, mainly philosophers and poets, were dubbed God-seekers, even though most of them were already believers. They were seeking new, specifically Christian answers to the problems of modern life, as opposed to what they called the “mechanical world view” of the West, which stemmed from Newton and became the epistemological basis of the Enlightenment. Their religious quest encompassed the occult as a supplement to Christianity, not a substitute for it. The hitherto unprecedented spectacle of clergymen and lay intellectuals debating one another on equal terms attracted capacity audiences. Similar societies were founded in Moscow, Kiev, and other cities. The Moscow Religious-Philosophical Vladimir Soloviev Society (1905–1918) was named after the philosopher, Vladimir Soloviev (1863–1900). These societies helped inspire a religious revival. Maria Carlson considers occultism its “illegitimate offspring.”

The Symbolists were carriers of occult ideas. They believed that earthly phenomena are but symbols of a higher reality, invisible to ordinary people but accessible to the artist’s intuition. Most Symbolists also believed that art has theurgical qualities and that the Word can generate a new reality. Symbolist

Occultism as a Response to a Spiritual Crisis

poetry emphasized the sound of a word rather than its meaning, by-passing the intellect. Female Symbolist poets drew on folk spells, incantations, and divination because they conferred “a special right to command the spiritual world through the power of language.” Andréi Bely (real name Boris Bugaev, 1880–1934) wrote an essay titled “The Magic of Words” (1909). His novel The Silver Dove (Serebriany golub’, 1909) is replete with Theosophical terms and images and the protagonist, like Bely cast his own horoscope. Valerii Briusov was interested in Spiritualism, not for its supernatural qualities but as a mode of non-rational cognition.

The Symbolists’ “revaluation of all values” included a fascination with the devil and demons. The Symbolist journal Golden Fleece (Zolotoe runo, 1906–1909) announced a competition for the best literary and pictorial depiction of the devil. Mikhail Vrubel’s paintings of “The Demon” were inspired by Lermontov’s demon, which was in turn inspired by Milton’s Satan, who would rather rule in Hell than serve in Heaven. Some Symbolists regarded the Devil as a tragic figure, who defied divine authority and conventional morality. Briusov glorified “the Lord and the Devil alike.” His novel, The Fiery Angel (Ognennyi angel’, 1907), which is set in 16th century Germany, depicts erotodemonic possession, devil-worship, black magic, and witchcraft.

The Symbolists were apolitical until the Revolution of 1905–1907. Merezhkovskii concluded that the revolution was the harbinger of the apocalypse, that all revolutions are essentially religious, and that the Decembrist Revolt (1825) was inspired by mystical freemasonry (he was himself a mason). Georgii Chulkov (1879–1939), a minor Symbolist poet, declared that Russia is in the grips of an “all-pervasive crisis (…) the entire culture is breaking up.” Viacheslav Ivanov (1866–1949) proclaimed that individualism is obsolete and would be superseded by sobornost’; in his view, a society cemented by love (eros, not agape), myth, and sacrifice. The myth would be a synthesis of Christian, occult, and Nietzschean elements. Between 1906 and 1908, he supported Chulkov’s doctrine, Mystical Anarchism, which purported to reconcile unlimited indi-

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2 Faith Wigzell, Reading Russian Fortunes: Print Culture, Gender, and Divination in Russia Since 1765 (Cambridge/UK, 1998), 193.
3 For details on the Symbolists and the occult, see Nikolai Bogomolov, Russkaia literatura nachala veka i okkul’tizm (Moscow: NLO, 1999).
vidual freedom with being part of a loving community, and which rejected all forms of dogmatism, whether in religion, philosophy, morality, or politics. Bely opposed Mystical Anarchism because he considered it amoral. Nevertheless, between late 1908 and 1910, he joined Ivanov and Anna Mintslova, a Theosophist, in a “mystical triangle” dedicated to “saving” Russia.

Occultism increased in popularity after the Revolution due to the recent turmoil, eased censorship laws, and fewer legal restrictions on organizations. The Russian Theosophical Society was chartered in 1908. Some intelligenty, disappointed with the results of the Revolution, abandoned politics and turned inward.

A new aesthetic movement, Futurism, emerged around 1909 and came to public notice in 1912 with its manifesto *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste* (*Poshchechina obshchestvennomu vkusu*). Paradoxically, some of them were interested in alchemy and shamanism. Velimir Khlebnikov (1885–1922) was enthralled by the ancient Egyptian concept of the *ka* (the Egyptian concept of the spiritual essence), was interested in occult botany, and developed numerical formulas for divination. He also believed that changing the letter of a word actually changes reality and in the existence of a fourth dimension.6

Occult themes and motifs permeate Russian literature, including popular literature, from the 1890s to the mid 1920s.7 Faith Wigzell reports a “vigorous revival” in the sale of occult books, especially dream-books, in the 1890s.8 Why the 1890s? Modernization broadened the scope of personal choice and created new opportunities and new dangers. In the burgeoning cities, people were very much on their own. Some of them turned to astrology to know their future, or to gain or regain health, wealth, and love, and/or navigate the new order by guiding their actions by the stars. The spread of literacy (itself a product of modernization) created a market for new publishing firms and enabled people to read about astrology in “how to” manuals, pamphlets, and articles in penny newspapers and popular journals. The well-to-do had their horoscopes cast. Also popular were articles on how to cultivate one’s will-power, by hypnosis for example, other forms of fortune-telling such as palm-reading and numerology, séances, and demonstrations of mental telepathy as entertainment. Popular occultism filled a spiritual void as neither conventional religion nor the

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6 For Khlebnikov’s language, see the articles in: O Khlebnikove: Konteksty, istochniki, mify (Moscow, 2002).
8 Wigzell, 17.
new ideology of science and technology became dominant. (See Julia Mannherz’s chapter)

The famous (or infamous) Rasputin was the last of a series of faith-healers summoned to cure the Tsar’s hemophiliac son. Rasputin did not cure him; but he did stop the bleeding, which gave him enormous influence over the royal couple, especially the German-born Empress, whom he seemed to control. Opponents of the government used Rasputin to discredit it. A group of aristocrats assassinated him in December 1916, too late to stave off the revolution that broke out the following February (March by the Western calendar).9

The occultism of prerevolutionary Russia is important, firstly because aspects of the most popular doctrines—Spiritualism, Theosophy, and Anthroposophy—became embedded in the wider culture; secondly because occultists who emigrated after the Bolshevik Revolution gained European and American admirers who disseminated their ideas; and thirdly because ideas drawn from the above doctrines were recycled (with some modifications) in the 1960s and after in both the Soviet Union and the West.

Spiritualism had the most adherents. The modern Spiritualist movement was born in upper New York State, on March 31, 1848, when the Fox sisters, Maggie and Kate, ages 12 and 14, claimed to have spoken with the spirit of a murdered peddler.10 In only a few years, Spiritualism swept the United States and Europe, including Russia, because it “proved” that life continued after death and “enabled” the living to communicate with the dead with the aid of a medium. Spiritualism soothed religious anxieties and it empowered women (most mediums were women). Some Spiritualists claimed their doctrine was a science and conducted experiments in thought transfer and hypnosis.

Spiritualism reached Russia in the 1850s. Séances were held at the royal court and in private homes. One factor in its appeal was the Crimean War, “which was accompanied by a sense that history was on the march and that great change was about to come.”11 Spiritualism became widespread in the 1860s, due in part to the social and economic dislocations induced by the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. Moreover, Spiritualism could counter the intelligentsia’s atheism.

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9 See e.g. Enid Goldberg, Grigory Rasputin: Holy Man or Mad Monk? (New York, 2008)
11 Ilya Vinitsky, Ghostly Paradoxes: Modern Spiritualism and Russian Culture in the Age of Realism (Toronto, 2008), 8.
In Russia, as in other countries, Spiritualism evoked a great deal of controversy inside and outside the movement, and it took on national characteristics. Some Russian Spiritualists regarded their faith as the new all-encompassing idea, because it reconciled faith and science. In an extreme expression of the Russian cult of great writers, certain Spiritualists summoned Pushkin’s ghost.  

American Spiritualists perpetuated the optimism and individualism of their culture; they believed in perpetual progress, even after death. The spirit ascends a ladder of perfection. This is the same spirit; they did not believe in reincarnation. The popularity of Spiritualism peaked in the 1860s and '70s, because people desired to communicate with loved ones killed or missing in action during the Civil War. (More American soldiers were killed in that war than in all other American wars combined.) Abraham and Mary Lincoln held séances in the White House in an attempt to communicate with their favorite son, Willie, who died at the age of eleven.

Spiritualism peaked again during and after World War I and II. The escape-artist and magician Harry Houdini denounced Spiritualism as a fraud and berated mediums for profiting from other people’s grief. During World War II, people sought news of loved ones in the armed forces in séances or by turning to a Ouija board, “Spiritualism’s most popular innovation.” In the 1960s and '70s, Ouija boards became a fad among adolescents. For some it was merely a game; for others, its secret messages and intimate communiqués made it a “youthful rite of rebellion, presumably because Ouija boards were considered a “dangerous portal to the other side.”

In Russia, Spiritualism “remained constantly within the field of vision of the cultural elite.” Vladimir Soloviev sought out Spiritualist circles when he went to London and he was interested in the occult generally, as was his older brother Vsevolod (1849–1903). The latter was friendly with Elena Blavatsky (founder of Theosophy), but then turned against her.

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13 Many observers have noted American optimism. By contrast, a powerful strain in Russian culture idealizes suffering; it stems from the image of the kenotic Christ. See Natalia Gorodetsky, *The Humiliated Christ in Russian Thought* (New York, 1938) and Dirk Uffelmann, *Der erniedrigte Christus. Metaphern und Metonymien in der russischen Kultur und Literatur* (Cologne, Weimar: Boehlau, 2010).
14 I am grateful to Jenna Silvers for this information.
16 Ibid., 72–73.
Blavatsky (1831–1891) started out as a Spiritualist medium. In 1875, she and Colonel Henry Olcott, also a former Spiritualist, founded the Theosophical Society in New York City. In 1878, they moved to Adyar, India. By 1900, Theosophy had become a world-wide movement.

Blavatsky taught that Theosophy is a universal religion, based on one eternal truth, *The Secret Doctrine*, which Mahatma Morya, of the Lodge of the Great White Brotherhood in the Himalayas, transmitted to her astrally. Theosophy was primarily Buddhist and Hindu, but it incorporated the Gnostic rejection of matter, the legend of Atlantis, mystery religions, neo-Platonism, and the “vast body of Western Occultism, both ancient and modern, with interpolations from the natural and social sciences, comparative religion, archaeology, medicine, and evolutionism.”

Blavatsky regarded the individual as a microcosm of the macrocosm, and the soul as an emanation of the Divine, so each “human monad is more than a mirror of God, it is God.” She denied the existence of a personal God and of the Devil, and rejected the Christian concepts of heaven and hell in favor of karma, the “law of retribution,” the “one universal law.” Her interpretation of karma allowed the individual to shape his or her future lives.

Many artists and writers were drawn to Theosophy, at one time or another, because it offered means to explore psychic and spiritual states that defy rational interpretation and a new vocabulary for discussing these states. Moreover, it offered a structured worldview that was amorphous enough to accommodate other forms of mysticism, occultism, and religion.

Theosophy was so popular that the St. Petersburg Religious-Philosophical Society devoted its entire November 24th 1909 meeting to it. The discussion revolved around whether Theosophy and Christianity are compatible. Merezhkovskii said they are not, because Theosophy lacks a personal God. (Vladimir Soloviev had said much the same thing.) Other speakers argued that since both doctrines reject materialism and egoism, they are ethically compatible. Even certain Marxists were interested in Theosophy. Anatolii Lunacharskii (1875–1933), future Commissar of Enlightenment, and Maxim Gorky (1868–1936), a personal friend of Lenin’s and a future formulator of Socialist Realism, appreciated Theosophy’s denial of a personal god, its condemnation of egoism.

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19 Ibid., 116.
20 Ibid., 29–30.
and individualism, and its tenet of universal brotherhood. They thought that the macrocosm/microcosm paradigm could be accommodated to socialism. Gorky recognized the proselytizing potential of thought transfer and hypnosis. Ardent admirers of Nietzsche, both men recognized the importance of myth.

Anthroposophy was founded by Rudolf Steiner, a prominent German Theosophist who left the Society after Annie Besant, its leader after 1907, proclaimed a young Hindu boy, Jidda Krishnamurti, an avatar of Christ. Besant posited an “esoteric Christ” as one of a series of Divine manifestations, an Adept, a Mahatma, a Master, but not the one Messiah or a unique historical figure. She considered Buddha superior to Christ. Anthroposophy attracted people who thought that Theosophy had become too Buddhist.

Steiner taught that the birth of Christ was the central event in cosmic evolution, which he portrayed in both spiritual and physical terms. Before the birth of Christ, divine Being existed only outside man in the cosmos. With Christ’s birth, divine Being descended to earth as a human body, thus creating an inner bond between earthly mankind and divine Being. Christ’s sacrifice at Golgotha introduced a new spiritual mystery into the evolution of the cosmos; at that point, Christ’s spirit entered into man, hence, Anthroposophy rather than Theosophy. Steiner called Anthroposophy “spiritual science” and “the science of the invisible,” and claimed that it reconciled religion, philosophy, and science.21

Theosophy spawned other offshoots as well. Petr Uspenskii (1878–1947), a leading Russian Theosophist, wrote about the Fourth Dimension, originally a mathematical concept that came to be associated with mysticism and the occult. Trained as a mathematician, he “proved” his theory of dimensions with a mystical mathematics of space. Seeking a new all-encompassing idea, he wanted to unite Asian mysticism, Christianity, science, and Western philosophy. Uspenskii taught that the higher dimensions of reality were accessible only to a “new man” who has developed supersensible (occult) powers. His “new man” united the Theosophist concept of a “higher man” with Nietzsche’s Superman and Soloviev’s God-Man (Jesus). Uspenskii’s major works, *The Fourth Dimension* (Chetvertoe izmerenie), *Tertium Organum* (Tertium organum), and *Symbols of the Tarot* (Simvoly taro) were published in *Vestnik teosofii* (Herald of Theosophy, the journal of the Russian Theosophic Society). In 1915, he became a disciple of Georgii Gurdjieff (1866 [?–1949). They emi-

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grated (separately) after the Bolshevik revolution and worked together in France in the 1920s. Then Uspenskii went his own way.

Gurdjieff taught that human beings are essentially asleep and must be awakened by working on themselves individually and in a group setting according to his principles and instructions. “The Work” featured the development and integration of mind, body, and emotions, and included music, sacred dances, self-discipline, and obedience to the Master (Gurdjieff). For example, at his command, students had to stop whatever they were doing and hold that position until he released them. Gurdjieff had American and British admirers who propagated his ideas. His thought became important in Russia in the 1960s.

Nicholas Roerich (1874–1947) and his wife Elena Shaposhnikova-Roerich (1879–1955) claimed a karmic tie to Blavatsky by way of Mahatma Morya. They emigrated soon after the Bolshevik Revolution. In the 1920s and ‘30s, they constructed Agni-yoga, named after the Hindu god of fire, who mediates between the gods and mortals. Agni-yoga combines eastern and western esotericism and includes discussion of diet, health, education, daily life, and human relations. Again, we find the typically Russian desire for an all-encompassing idea.

Theosophy and Anthroposophy were compatible with a long-standing Russian messianism. Blavatsky believed that the Slavs had a mission: to create a more spiritualized humanity. Steiner predicted that the Russians would play a special role in evolution because they had kept themselves open to the “Christ impulse.”

The above doctrines were also compatible with the apocalypticism that permeated Russian culture from 1900 on. The Symbolists assumed that the end of their world would be the end of the world. Their apocalypticism was not all doom and gloom, however. They expected the Apocalypse to be followed by the establishment of the Kingdom of God on Earth.

Blavatsky taught that alternating manifestations of the seven root races are separated by periods of obscurantism and chaos (Kali-Yuga in the Hindu religion). The approach of such a period is signaled by cataclysms of fire and water, eschatological signs, and a general feeling of apocalypse. Humanity is now in such a period, Blavatsky claimed.

Steiner predicted that The Second Coming would not be the resurrection of Christ's physical body but of the “divine being” within man. Humanity, having attained supersensory powers through cosmic evolution, the “etheric Christ” (His living spirit) will be visible to all. He thought this would occur in the twentieth century, in the sixth post-Atlantean age.
The Bolsheviks vaunted reason and science and condemned “superstition” (religion and the occult). They banned dream-books in 1918,\textsuperscript{22} Rudolf Steiner’s writings in 1923, expelled the God-seekers from Russia in 1922–1923, and founded \textit{The League of Atheists (Soiuz bezbozhnikov)} in 1925. The word “militant” was added later. Despite these measures, the Bolsheviks constructed a quasi-religion, the Lenin Cult, and worked with occultists for their own purposes. In the 1920s and early ’30s, the secret police worked with the occultist Barchenko and the government funded Roerich’s search for Shambhala. In the 1960s and ’70s, the government denounced yoga as spiritual contraband, even while studying yogic breathing techniques, that could help the astronauts, and it supported research on parapsychology. (See the chapters by Oleg Shishkin, Markus Osterrieder, Birgit Menzel and Boris Falikov).

The “myths” were Marxism-Leninism, then Stalin’s interpretation of it, and then Leninism. Throughout these changes, Soviet citizens were supposed to forget their personal concerns and devote their energies to “building socialism.”

Occultism retained its appeal after the Bolshevik Revolution, because it helped people explain, or at least cope with The Dictatorship of the Proletariat (really of the Communist Party), hunger, epidemics, a bitter and bloody civil war, the “red terror,” and economic collapse. The Religious-Philosophical Societies of St. Petersburg and Moscow reopened as the Free Philosophic Association (\textit{Vol’fila}, Petrograd 1919–1923), and the Free Academy of Spiritual Culture (\textit{Vol’naia akademiiia dukhovnoi kul’tury}, 1918–1922). The members discussed Theosophy, Anthroposophy, and other esoteric doctrines, frequently mingling them with references to Golgotha, Armageddon, and Resurrection, which tie into the Russian belief in redemption through suffering. \textit{Vol’fila} was a haven for Anthroposophists.

Occultism persisted during the NEP period (New Economic Policy, 1921–1927), partly because the partial restoration of capitalism dismayed some people and confused others; partly because important issues, such as how to implement Marxism in a “backward” country, how to present Marxism to the masses, and who would succeed Lenin had yet to be resolved. For many people, life was a struggle and its outcome depended on forces they could not control. Some people, even some Communists, hoped to use occult forces to achieve their goals. Early Soviet literature is permeated with occult ideas, old and new.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{22} Wigzell, \textit{Reading Russian Fortunes}, 53.
\textsuperscript{23} For some examples, see Rosenthal’s introduction in: \textit{The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture}, 227.
Cosmism, a new occult doctrine, incorporated the Soviet faith in science and technology. Its sources include Nikolai Fedorov and Konstantin TsioIkovskii (father of the Soviet space program). (See Michael Hagemeister’s and Marlène Laruelle’s chapter on Cosmism in this volume). By contrast to prerevolutionary occult doctrines, which emphasized personal spiritual growth, cosmism was impersonal. The emphasis was on transforming man and nature.

The line between science and magic disappeared as Soviet writers transferred hopes formerly vested in magic and religion to science and technology, which the government considered essential to the transformation of life. Andreei Platonov (1899–1951) treated the engineer as a prophet and magus. Marietta Shaginian’s novel Mess-Mend (1924) depicted an occult conspiracy in which the Communist’s technological magic defeats the magic employed by the capitalist West. Before the Revolution she was part of Merezhkovskii’s circle.

New occult groups responded to drastically changed conditions. Some groups supported the Revolution and tried to convince the Bolsheviks that the occult could be used to build socialism. Other groups opposed Bolshevism but could not say so openly. (See Konstantin Burmistrov’s chapter).

In 1928, Stalin, the victor in the battle to succeed Lenin, instituted the first Five Year Plan, also known as the Great Break (Velikii perelom) because it was supposed to transform Soviet society. The Stalin Cult emerged on Stalin’s fiftieth birthday (December 21, 1929). Its creators praised Stalin’s “wise and firm” leadership and referred to him as the “Lenin of our day.” Stalin’s interpretation of Marxism became the only permissible interpretation. Subsequent versions of the Cult endowed Stalin with divine powers (omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence) and called him the object of his people’s boundless devotion and love. Stalin became the personification of the Soviet “myth.” He determined how the “myth” would be presented in literature and the arts, and in history and biology as well, and had his critics purged. The Great Purge began in 1934 and escalated into the Great Terror (1936–1939).

Between 1934 and 1939, known occultists were arrested and sent to the Gulag. Other occultists saved themselves by going underground. Occultism

24 Also see, George Young, Nikolai Fedorov, An Introduction (Belmont, MA, 1979); idem, Fedorov’s “Transformations of the Occult,” in: The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture, 171–183; Michael Hagemeister, “Russian Cosmism in the 1920s and Today,” ibid., 185–202; idem, Nikolaj Fedorov: Studien zu Leben, Werk und Wirkung (Munich: Sagner, 1989), and Irene Masing-Delić, Abolishing Death (Stanford, 1991).

contradicted the Soviet faith in reason and science, but there might have been other reasons as well. Stalin may have feared that occultists might make negative predictions that could demoralize the population, or that they had special powers and might use them to sabotage the Plan. A.A. Menialov contends that Stalin had contacts with shamans and soothsayers during his early exiles in Siberia and utilized his knowledge to construct the Stalin Cult.\textsuperscript{26}

In any case, on the surface, occultism disappeared. Science fiction was an exception. Matthias Schwartz suggests that science fiction was popular because it had a religious/apocalyptic component and also because it was believed to contain a coded explanation of the Great Terror (See his chapter).

**Late Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia**

By 1939, Stalinism was ensconced as the Soviet “myth,” so Stalin’s death, in March 1953, came as a great shock. But it was Nikita Khrushchev’s “secret speech” to the 20\textsuperscript{th} Party Congress in February 1956, followed by de-Stalinization that triggered a spiritual crisis. Khrushchev exposed Stalin’s crimes against “honest communists,” accused Stalin of desecrating Lenin’s memory, and called for a return to Leninist norms. In 1961, he had Stalin’s remains removed from Lenin’s tomb and Stalingrad renamed Volgograd. All this, of course, was very unsettling to people who had idolized Stalin.

Leonid Brezhnev’s tenure (1964–1982) has been called the “era of stagnation,” but it was also an era of intellectual ferment and spiritual quest, as more and more people lost faith, not just in the leadership but in the communist ideal and, in some cases, in the materialism on which it was based.

Occultism revived, often as part of a larger search for meaning and for recognition of the spiritual dimensions of life. (For occultism in this period see the chapters by Birgit Menzel and Leonid Heller). By the 1970s, the God-seekers’ writings and classic occult texts were being published in samizdat, and contacts between Russians and Americans interested in transpersonal psychology began (see Boris Falikov’s chapter). The Helsinki Accords (1975) permitted foreign travel and facilitated cultural exchange, enabling some Russians to learn about the West.

Occultism came out in the open during Mikhail Gorbachev’s tenure (1985–1991) thanks to his policy of glasnost’ (openness), which was in turn a response to the nuclear explosion at Chernobyl\textsuperscript{’} in April 1986. Acknowledging a wide-

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\textsuperscript{26} See *Taina Val’kirii* (Moscow, 2006). I am grateful to George L. Kline for calling this book to my attention.
spread withdrawal from public life, spreading alcoholism and drug addiction, the growth of crime, a “weakened respect for work,” pessimism, and cynicism, Gorbachev declared that the Soviet Union was facing a spiritual crisis (dukhovnyi krizis), as well as an economic one, so both structural and spiritual reconstruction (perestroika) were needed. To curb alcoholism, he limited purchases of vodka and had several vineyards in Georgia destroyed. Glasnost had unexpected consequences. By allowing a torrent of criticism, it helped set in motion a process that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union in December, 1991.

The collapse was followed by the stresses (during Boris Yeltsin’s tenure) of a flawed privatization, which enriched a few and impoverished ordinary people. Demyan Belyaev refers to a spiritual vacuum that occultism filled. John McCannon observes that Russians “turned in any and all directions for spiritual comfort.” (See their chapters). Identity issues came to the fore in new religious movements such as rodnoverie (see Marlène Laruelle’s chapter) and in the nationalist turn of intellectuals such as Aleksandr Dugin. (See Mark Sedgwick’s chapter).

Disillusion with reason and science fostered interest in shamanism (see Natalia Zhukovskaia’s chapter), alternative medicine, spiritual healing, and intensified interest in yoga. Novelists rewrote the history of the Bolshevik Revolution and the Early Soviet period to emphasize the power of occult forces. (See Marina Aptekman’s chapter).

**Spiritual Crisis in the United States**

Occultism was by no means new in the United States, but its extent and intensity from the late 1960s to the present is unprecedented. This is because Americans were experiencing a spiritual crisis brought on by the fading appeal of the American civil religion, also known as the American Dream: the belief that hard work and delayed gratification would result in happiness and prosperity. This is, of course, a secular version of the Protestant Ethic. Many baby-

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28 Previous occult revivals were more limited in scope. For a history of occultism in the United States, see Mitch Horowitz, *Occult America*. We know that tabloid newspapers began to publish horoscopes during the Great Depression, and that Roerich had Henry Wallace’s ear, but more research on the 1930s is needed. There was not a spiritual crisis during World War II because, except for isolationists, most Americans regarded the war as a fight against evil.
29 The influential sociologist Robert Bellah famously argued that the United States has an unofficial civil religion in an article titled “Civil Religion in America,” *Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Science* (Winter 1967) 96, 1–21.
boomers found the civil religion sexually repressive and spiritually unfulfilling. Defying parental and societal authority, these baby-boomers sought self-realization and insisted on doing their “own thing” (Ralph Waldo Emerson’s term). They refused to participate in the “rat race” for higher incomes and better jobs, and disdained material acquisitions. Many of them were indifferent or hostile to organized religion; they were spiritual, they said, but not religious.

Other factors in the spiritual crisis were fear that the Cold War would turn into a nuclear war, the inconclusive Korean war (1950–1953) which was called a United Nations “police action,” the discovery of Soviet spies in high places, McCarthyism, and the first Sputnik (1957) which punctured Americans’ technological hubris. Even before the Sputnik, Americans had been fascinated by the possibility of life on other planets and space travel. Science fiction was very popular. The sightings of Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs) near Roswell, New Mexico in 1947 triggered several investigations. Some people believed that the UFOs were occupied by gods or semi-divine beings from an extraterrestrial civilization. The 1951 hit film, The Day the Earth Stood Still featured an erudite looking alien who comes to earth, is immediately shot by troops, escapes and lives with a family, learning about humans and finally announces to the entire world that he is a policeman, sent to deliver a simple warning: now that humans have nuclear weapons, they must get their warlike nature in check and put their petty political differences aside, because others are watching and will not allow this violent tendency to spread. This was ten years before the Cuban Missile Crisis. Aliens came in other forms, such as the insidious seed pods in The Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1957) which would break open under the bed and slowly absorb memories and features, leaving a soulless duplicate (no anger, no joy), answerable to a central will. This metaphor for communism would be repeated over and over in books and films.

Still other factors in the spiritual crisis were the decline of scientism (the belief that science can solve all problems); rejection of rationalism, positivism, and materialism (which are basic to both classic liberalism and classic Marxism), and the revelation of the Nazi death camps, which negated the Enlighten-
ment belief that human beings are by nature rational and good and which led some people to ask “where was God?”

The cultural mainstream idealized the nuclear family and suburban life, extolled the superiority of capitalism over communism, mandated conformity, and was characterized by fixed gender roles, and a double standard in sex. “Nice girls” were supposed to wait for marriage. Homosexuals were in the closet. Television programs promoted “togetherness,” which some people found stifling. This was the era of “behaviorism”, when there was great faith in psychiatry and pharmaceuticals. Paradoxically, Americans extolled their individuality, as opposed to the supposedly brainwashed communists of Russia and China. Advertising created the term “lifestyles” to categorize individuality into marketing niches.

The “beats” were the first to drop out of the mainstream. Allen Ginsberg, author of *Howl* (1956) and Jack Kerouac, author of *On the Road* (1957) protested conventional values, preached and practiced sexual freedom, and were interested in Zen Buddhism. Ginsberg was openly homosexual and he objected to both capitalism and communism, the latter as currently practiced. He visited several communist countries to promote free speech but was expelled as a troublemaker. For example, in 1965, he was deported from Cuba for publicly protesting persecution of homosexuals. The Cuban government sent him to Czechoslovakia, where one week after being named the King of May (a student festival), the Czech government labeled him an “immoral menace” because of his open expression of radical views and deported him. Václav Havel considered Ginsberg an important inspiration in striving for freedom. Rock and roll was also a liberating force.

Many hippies appreciated the “beats.” In fact, the terms were used interchangeably until 1967. The hippies were the first baby-boomers to turn to the occult. Hippie enclaves developed in big cities and college towns. There, people could have their horoscope cast, their palms read, tarot cards interpreted, and purchase amulets for good luck and crystals with special powers. College and university students discovered astrology, the I Ching (for divination), Nietzsche, Hinduism, and Buddhism, and picked up aspects of a “natural” and sexually

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31 Also important was the debate about the morality of dropping the atom bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; and works of social criticism such as David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), William Whyte’s *The Organization Man* (1956), C. Wright Mills’ *The Power Elite* (also 1956), and Vance Packard’s *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957).

free life-style. After the “Howl” obscenity trial (1956), censorship relaxed and free speech was thought of as a major difference between America and Russia or China. College kids avidly read sexually explicit authors such as de Sade, Wilhelm Reich, James Joyce, and William Burroughs, along with Marx and Mao. Many baby-boomers tried to combine individual freedom with belonging to a close-knit and loving community, and dreamed of the coming Age of Aquarius (around 2,000 CE.) to be achieved by love.

Other factors came into play in the middle and late ‘60s. The official account of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy (November 22, 1963) was disputed, undermining confidence in the government, which was further undermined by the war in Vietnam, which escalated in December 1964. By the late ‘60s, a counterculture had developed; it featured sex, drugs, and rock and roll, and rejected reason and empirical knowledge in favor of mysticism, especially Asian mysticism, and the occult. The Gay Rights movement began in June 1969, after the Stonewall riots in New York City. Some women embraced Wicca (witchcraft) a nature-religion, because it empowered them. In the 1970s and ‘80s aspects of the counterculture, including mysticism and occultism, became mainstream. But of course, not all hippies were big city kids into sex, drugs and rock and roll, rejecting work ethics. Many escaped their cities and parents, formed communes or ashrams and created the Back-to Nature Movement, embracing the lifestyle of Thoreau’s Walden (1854) or of Jesus the Carpenter. They grew organic food, made music, arts and crafts, used natural medicines and practiced communal childrearing. Their reaction to the fading myth was to start their own utopia, tolerant and responsible to the group. While at the same time, saving the world, as well as the whales. They were pioneers of the Ecology Movement, with Stewart Brand’s Whole Earth Catalogue as their guidebook. Sam Peckinpah’s groundbreaking Western film, The Wild Bunch showed (for the first time) shoot-outs with bodies blown apart, because, as Peckinpah said, he had fought in Korea and knew those boys in Vietnam were not dying the bloodless sanitized Hollywood way, and that people should see it. The body bags were on the news each night. The hippies’

33 The search for such a community recurs in American history. Many utopian communities were formed in the 19th century, when much of the U.S. was “unspoiled” wilderness.
34 The term stems from the progressions of the zodiac: from Gemini to Taurus in 4000 BCE, from Taurus to Aries in 2000 BCE, from Aries to Pisces in 1 CE (the birth of Christ), and from Pisces to Aquarius around 2000 CE.
abhorrence to violence had many factors and many of their parents accepted them and were loved by their kids.

The hippies were apolitical until the mid–1960s, when some joined the Left (the old Left and the new Left) in opposing the war in Vietnam. The new Left objected to the authoritarianism and dogmatism of the old Left, inadvertently creating a space for mysticism and the occult. Some Leftists rejected the American Dream altogether; others wanted to extend it to Blacks and (later on) to Native Americans, Chicanos, and women. The mantras of the anti-war movement were “peace and love” and “make love, not war,” and its symbol was an inverted Y inside a circle, which Jungians regard as a kind of mandala (an aid to meditation used by Hindus and Buddhists). Roerich’s Banner of Peace (1935) has a similar inverted triangle composed of circles, but the now standard symbol of peace is a 1958 design by a British artist (Gerold Holton) for a nuclear disarmament demonstration in London. Allen Ginsberg chanted Hindu phrases at anti-war rallies. Martin Luther King’s non-violence melded Gandhi and Jesus. But some Blacks rejected Christianity saying that it inculcated a slave mentality. A back-to-African roots movement gained adherents, even among church-going Christians, as Blacks sought a new identity. Some Blacks changed their name. The poet LeRoi Jones became Amiri Baraka; Stokely Carmichael, former leader of SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee), became Kwame Ture, and renounced non-violence in favor of self-defense. Malcolm Little became Malcolm X (the X stands for the African family he never knew) and joined Louis Farrakhan’s Nation of Islam. Farrakhan’s sermons include Masonic symbolism, numerology, and references to UFOs. Some Black nationalists advocated racial separatism, espoused a vehement anti-Semitism, and invented a glorious African past.

In 1967, Ginsberg and Abbie Hoffman, the future “Yippie” (an acronym for Youth International Party, an urban guerilla group), organized hundreds of demonstrators to levitate the Pentagon. By chanting and singing outside it, they would perform an exorcism and end the war. This event was part of a larger demonstration that drew thousands of people and resulted in over 700 arrests. In August 1968, the Yippies were involved in a riot at the Democratic Convention in Chicago that was carried live on TV.

John Lennon and his wife, Yoko Ono, were active in the anti-war movement. They were fans of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, founder of Transcendental Meditation, and of the British occultist and magician Aleister Crowley (1875–1947). Crowley was an influential member of the esoteric Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn Ordo Templi Orientis (O.T.O.), one of the greatest influences on 20th century Western esotericism, before founding a religious com-
mune in Cefalu, Italy, known as the Abbey of Thelema. His picture is on the cover of Sergeant Pepper's Marching Band. Lennon once said: “Do what thou wilt, as long as it doesn’t hurt somebody,” a variant of Crowley’s tenet, “Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law.” Crowley is an extremely controversial figure because of his use of both black and white magic, his advocacy of “sex magic” (tantric sexual practices) and his fondness for shocking statements, especially an often-quoted one that seems to advocate human sacrifice and ritual cannibalism. The British tabloids called him the “wickedest man in the world” and “the Beast 666.”

The 1960s and early ‘70s were full of violence as well as love. Civil rights workers were murdered in the Deep South. Riots in the Watts area of Los Angeles in the summer of 1965 lasted six days. Over one hundred thousand “flower children” flocked to the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco in 1967, to participate in the “summer of love.” But that same summer, sections of Newark, Detroit, and other cities were torched by Blacks angry at continued discrimination. The assassination of Martin Luther King (on April 24th, 1968) sparked riots and arson in Washington D.C. and other big cities. Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated the following June. Black Panthers and White Supremacists formed para-military groups. Streets became unsafe as violent crime skyrocketed. Rock and roll concerts often ended in riots. A Left radical group called the Weathermen bombed government buildings in the late 1960s and early 1970s. They took their name from Bob Dylan’s line “you don’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind is blowing.” To some hippies, the “natural” life style meant living off the land and rejecting commerce and industry. For these reasons, and also to be safe from the bomb, they set up agricultural communes. Most of them were short-lived.

Half a million baby-boomers converged at the Woodstock festival (in upstate New York) for music, peace, and love on August 15–18, 1969. Nevertheless, by the end of the ‘60s, violence outweighed love. A week or so before Woodstock, the Manson Family, a cult-group of California hippies, committed a series of gruesome murders and used their victims’ blood to write, “kill the pigs” on the walls. Charles Manson, the leader of the cult, called the murders “helter skelter,” the title of a song in the Beatles White Album (1968), which

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36 To give one example, “It would be unwise to condemn as irrational the practice of devouring the heart and liver of an adversary while still warm. For the highest spiritual working one must choose that victim which contains the greatest and purest force; a male child of perfect innocence and high intelligence is the most satisfactory.” This is from the section “Of the Bloody Sacrifice and Matters Cognate,” in: Magick Book 4, Part III, chapter 12.
Manson interpreted as a prophecy of an apocalyptic race war. The Family would survive by hiding in “the bottomless pit,” a secret city underneath Death Valley, which they would reach through a hole in the ground. When the victorious Blacks proved unable to rule, the Manson Family would emerge and become the new rulers. The “bottomless pit” (Revelation 9: 1–2, 11) is ruled by Apollyon, a name for the devil or the angel of death. Apparently, Manson identified with him. When the murderers were discovered there was a revulsion against cults and hippies, even though Manson denied being a hippie and poked fun at the naïve flower children. Some extreme elements of the counterculture thought the murders were “cool.”

The following December, a young Black man was murdered at a Rolling Stones concert in Altamont, California that was intended to be Woodstock West. The murderer was a drunken Hell’s Angel (a notorious motorcycle gang) who was hired as a security guard. At the same concert, there was a riot in which scores of people were injured and extensive property damage. Meanwhile, the carnage in Vietnam continued and was broadcast live on television. In 1974, the Symbionese Liberation Army kidnapped heiress Patricia Hearst and got her to take part in a bank robbery.

The occult explosion of the ’70s was an escape from all this, a turn inward, a concentration on the self. Housewives and hippies, celebrities and bureaucrats, practiced Transcendental Meditation because it promised inner peace. Also in vogue were programs that promised self-transformation and personal empowerment. Werner Erhard’s EST (Erhard Seminars Training, late 1971 to late 1984) taught that we create our own reality. He became a millionaire and a patron of a group of hippie physicists (see below).

Astrology became an integral part of popular culture. Jesse Stearn’s *A Time for Astrology* (1971) and Linda Goodman’s *Sun Signs* (1975) became best sellers. People would open a conversation by asking, “What’s your sign?” A survey taken in the early ’70s revealed that at least 5 million Americans planned their lives according to astrological predictions, roughly two thirds of daily newspapers had a daily horoscope column, and there was enough business to keep 10,000 full time and 175,000 part time astrologers busy. Their clients included “Yuppies” (young, upwardly mobile affluent professionals), who retained aspects of the hippie ethos of their youth.

Opposition to the counterculture increased in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and increased again in 1978–1979, because of stagflation, the hostage crisis, and the hostage crisis.

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crisis in Iran, which began in November 1978 and lasted 444 days, and the mobilization of the “religious right” by activists such as the Reverend Jerry Falwell, who founded the Moral Majority in 1979.

Contributing to the growing conservative mood was the murder (or forced suicide) of 909 people, 303 of them children, in Jonestown, Guyana, in November 1978, around a year before the hostage crisis began. Jonestown was the home of the People’s Temple Agricultural Project, a Christian cultic community that Jim Jones founded and led. A communist, Jones used the trappings of religion to recruit members and infiltrate the church. The members were by no means hippies, but the People’s Temple was a cult as well as a commune dedicated to what Jones called “apostolic socialism.” The members had to sign over all their assets, including welfare payments and social security checks, to the People’s Temple. The estimated wealth of the Temple in late 1978 was $26 million. Jones saw Jonestown as a means to create a “socialist paradise” and a “sanctuary” from media scrutiny and from the bomb.

He started to build Jonestown after defectors from the cult and concerned relatives of present members complained about police-state conditions and demanded a government investigation. As pressure for one mounted, Jones considered relocating the cult to the Soviet Union and was in contact with Soviet diplomats in Guyana. One diplomat visited the commune and praised it for being a socialist haven.

After he had an investigating committee, headed by Congressman Leo Ryan, murdered, Jones felt cornered, so he ordered the cult members to commit “revolutionary suicide” by drinking a Kool-Aid like drink mixed with poison and committed suicide himself. Before doing so, he told the cult members that a flying saucer, hiding behind a comet, was waiting to take them to

38 The Agricultural Project was the last incarnation of the People’s Temple. The first People’s Temple, founded in Indianapolis, Indiana, in 1951, was an urban community. In the 1970’s Jones moved the cult to Northern California, first Redwood City, and then San Francisco, where he became politically active. Unlike other cult leaders, Jones enjoyed public support and contact with some of the highest level politicians in the U.S., including Walter Mondale, Governor Jerry Brown, and George Moscone, Mayor of San Francisco. Moscone rewarded The People’s Temple for helping him get elected by appointing Jones Chair of the San Francisco Housing Authority. For details on the People’s Temple, see John Hill, Gone From the Promised Land: Jonestown in American Cultural History (New Brunswick/NJ, 1987), and Tim Reiterman, Tom Reiterman, and John Jacobs, Raven: The Untold Story of Reverend Jim Jones and His People (New York, 1982).

39 In the early 1960s, Jones considered moving the cult to a remote location in Brazil to be safe from the bomb.
heaven. Jonestown was the largest mass murder in American history until September 11th, 2001, so the media covered it extensively. In 1987, a book titled The Jonestown Carnage: A CIA Crime was published in the Soviet Union$$.

Reagan has been credited for revitalizing the American Dream, after the malaise of the Carter years. Reagan envisioned the United States as “a beacon of light to freedom loving people everywhere.” His idea of freedom was “small government” as opposed to “big government” and the welfare state, and the end of the “evil empire” (the Soviet Union). He urged Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall.

Reagan’s private beliefs included astrology. That became public knowledge in May 1988, when Donald Regan, former White House Chief of Staff, revealed that Nancy Reagan regularly consulted a San Francisco astrologer, Joan Quigley, and that almost all presidential travel, press conferences, and even his cancer surgery was based on information that Nancy Reagan received from her.40 Many movie stars had a personal astrologer. There were even investors who timed their moves by astrology. By the mid-1980s, astrology had so pervaded the culture that The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal published articles about it.41

The New Age movement began in the ’60s and grew steadily thereafter.42 Marilyn Ferguson, author of The Aquarian Conspiracy (1980), maintained that a leaderless but powerful network is working to bring radical change to American life; a new era of personal fulfillment and limitless potential is at hand. Once again, we find American optimism.

The New Age movement has no organizational structure, no centralized leadership, and no sacred text. It can be regarded as an outgrowth, or a maturation, of the counterculture, or put differently, as the counterculture for

40 Quigley was not the Reagans’ first astrologer. Her predecessor, Jeanne Dixon, predicted that Reagan would be Governor of California and eventually President of the United States, but not in 1976. Unhappy with Dixon’s prediction (which turned out to be correct), the Reagans dropped her. The astrologer Sidney Omarr claimed (without offering proof) that Nixon and Kissinger consulted astrologers too.


42 Details in Wouter J. Hanegraaf, New Age Religion and Western Culture (Leiden: Brill, 1996).
adults. Loss of confidence in Western ideas and in conventional ways of doing things fostered a willingness to try out anything new, including Asian medicine and Asian belief systems, in a search for alternatives. William James talked about a “will to believe.” People who turned to the occult wanted to believe in something. The New Age movement incorporates aspects of Spiritualism and Theosophy. New Agers refer to “channellers” rather than “ mediums,” and they concentrate on self-discovery and self-realization, rather than on speaking to departed loved ones.

Other sources of the New Age movement include American Indian spirituality (a rough parallel to contemporary Russians’ interest in shamanism) and Carlos Castaneda’s *The Teachings of Don Juan* (1969), about a Mexican Indian shaman able to reach an alternate reality by using hallucinogenic plants, which was translated into Russian. Castaneda’s eleven books sold more than eight million copies and were translated into seventeen languages. And there was the proclaimed prophet, trance-healer and psychic, Edgar Cayce (1877–1945), a devout Christian who believed in karma and reincarnation.

Occultism has become an intrinsic part of American popular culture. In *Out on a Limb* (1983) and in subsequent books, Shirley MacLaine described her experience in recovering her past lives and her beliefs. *Out on a Limb* and *Dancing in the Light* (1985) were on *The New York Times* Best-seller list for several months. Like Blavatsky, MacLaine considers the soul an emanation of the Divine and contends that we are all gods, and that we can control our present and future lives, but she goes far beyond Blavatsky in asserting that we choose our parents and siblings. The emphasis on choice is quintessentially American.

MacLaine popularized an occultism that includes esoteric Christianity, the belief that “The man Jesus studied for eighteen years in India before he returned to Jerusalem. He studied the teaching of Buddha, became an adept himself, had complete control over his body, and understood that the body is only the house for a soul. He believed in karma and reincarnation, but the Nicene Council altered His teachings.” In *Dancing in the Light* (1985), MacLaine repeats what a trance-healer told her, “there is only one spiritual law (…). Everyone is a god. Everyone.” MacLaine visited Peru and reported that sightings of UFOs occur regularly. Some New Agers believe that Peru is an

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43 According to an article in *Money* magazine, September 1st, 1987, as of that date, *Out on a Limb* had sold 3 million copies and *Dancing in the Light*, 2.2 million.


45 Shirley MacLaine, *Dancing In the Light* (New York, 1985), 412.
Occultism as a Response to a Spiritual Crisis

energy knot of the universe (like the Pamir knot for some Russians)\textsuperscript{46} and that Machu Picchu and the mysterious Nazca lines (which are visible only from the air) were created by extra-terrestrials. Erich von Däniken promulgated this theory in \textit{Chariots of the Gods} (1968).

Self-healing is a prominent feature of the New Age Movement. Louise Hays, author of \textit{You Can Heal Your Life} (1984), refers to “dis-ease” and counsels “affirmations”, a kind of mind-control or faith-healing that perpetuates the American insistence on “the power of positive thinking,” a staple of the New Thought movement. In the same positive spirit, New Agers talk about wellness rather than sickness.

Hays runs a publishing empire. Her clients include Wayne Dyer, author of self-help books, including \textit{Change Your Thoughts: Change Your Life: Living the Wisdom of the Tao} (2007); Deepak Chopra, an Indian physician who writes about spirituality, nutrition, and well-being; Ruth Montgomery, who calls herself a Christian psychic, and Sylvia Brown, author of \textit{Confronting your Spirit God} and \textit{Sylvia Brown’s Book of Angels}. “Angelology” is the study of angels, demons, and Satan, but the New Age movement talks only about angels, another example of American optimism. Satan and his minions are prominent in “hellfire and brimstone” Christianity, which the New Age movement rejects.

The New Age movement was not just an aspect of popular culture; an intellectual and cultural elite was seriously involved in it as well. Their center was the Esalen Institute, a retreat co-founded by Michael Murphy and Richard Price in 1962 and incorporated as a non-profit institute in 1967. It became the center of the human potential movement and in David Kaiser’s words, an “incubator of all things new age.”\textsuperscript{47} Located in Big Sur, California, on a site of striking scenic beauty and naturally occurring hot springs (the famous coed hot tubs), the Institute is sometimes described as a playground, even though path-breaking intellectual work was going on. What makes Esalen “new age” is its blending of eastern and western thought, its optimism, its advocacy of “experiential learning” (as opposed to abstract intellectualism), its appreciation of

\textsuperscript{46} See George M. Young, “Fedorov’s Transformations of the Occult,” In: Rosenthal, ed., \textit{The Occult}, 181–183. The Pamir knot is in what is now Kirghistan and Tadzhikistan, in the high border country where the former USSR meets Afghanistan and China. Other Russians believe that the Altai Mountains were an ancient power center. The Altai mountains are in Central Asia where Russia, China, Mongolia, and Kazakhstan come together. See Andrei Znamenski, \textit{Red Shambhala. Magic, Prophecies, and Geopolitics in the Heart of Asia}, (Wheaton/Ill.: Theosophical Publishing House, 2011).

sexuality, its emphasis on the emotions, the senses, and the body, and its embrace of mysticism and occultism.

Murphy defines mysticism “as any altered state of consciousness that is revelatory of some deeper truth or reality,” and occult “as related to the exalted contemplative states of the mystical life, but with a heavy accent on [what he calls] the supernormal powers, that is the psychic and physical phenomena of mysticism (precognition, clairvoyance, bodily transfiguration, reported levitation, and so on”). He distinguishes between the supernormal and the paranormal. What is considered paranormal in western culture is perfectly normal, he says. It refers to unconscious abilities that appear supernatural because they are not yet under conscious control. The supernatural is the paranormal that has come under conscious control.

Both Murphy and Price had “life-altering ‘break-out experiences’” in 1955-56. Murphy lost faith in the Episcopalianism in which he was raised, but was rescued from his “faith crisis” (Jeffrey Kripal’s term) by Frederick Spiegelberg, professor of comparative religion and Indic studies at Stanford University, and by Sri Aurobindo, “an Indian saint.” It was under Spiegelberg’s influence that Murphy read Sri Aurobindo’s book, The Life Divine, and was so impressed that he visited Aurobindo’s ashram in Pondicherry and stayed for sixteen months. Aurobindo posited a bipolar reality similar in many respects to Nietzsche’s Dionysian and Apollonian impulses and he believed in an occult evolution that will reunite the spiritual and material dimensions of reality within the human soul that will eventually result in a Superman, Aurobindo’s term for a diversely gifted race of “gnostic beings” or “cosmic individuals” who consciously embody a full integration of Matter, Mind, and Spirit. Note the Nietzschean terminology. Aurobindo’s philosophy was deeply indebted to the Tantric traditions of India, which affirm the world and the erotic body, and which have much in common with Nietzsche’s thought. In prerevolutionary Russia, Nietzsche helped spur a “revaluation of all values.” His thought had a similar effect on Esalen in the 1960s.

Price’s “break-out experience” was a psychotic breakdown, followed by institutionalization, during which he received fifty nine insulin shock treatments, ten electroshock treatments, and large doses of phenothiazine. The effects, both

48 Jeffrey Kripal, Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion (Chicago, 2007), 471.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid., 82.
51 Ibid., 65.
52 Ibid., 21.
psychological and physiological, were brutal and long-lasting. Years later, the memory of his suffering motivated his co-founding of a Spiritual Emergency Network within Esalen that operated from 1980 to 1989. But the real crisis, Price concluded, was often a hermeneutical or cultural one. Westerners were undergoing intense spiritual experiences that could not be understood, much less appreciated, within their own cultural frames. They were thus experiencing tremendous cognitive, religious, and emotional dissonance. In other words, they were experiencing a spiritual crisis induced by the inadequacy (to them) of rationalism, empiricism, and materialism, and of what the Godseekers called “the mechanical world view.” But while Murphy favored Tantrism, Price was drawn to Theravadic Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, and Taoism.

Esalen challenged established verities in psychology and physics, helped popularize alternative and complementary medicine, experimented with parapsychology and with new life styles, and held two conferences on UFOs, a topic shunned by conventional academia. The gurus of the counterculture—Norman O. Brown, Allen Ginsberg, Alan Watts, Timothy Leary, Paul Goodman, and Herbert Marcuse—all had strong indirect connections to Esalen. Aldous Huxley never taught there (he died in 1963) but his intellectual and personal influence was enormous. Other members of the intellectual or cultural elite who taught at Esalen, or were connected to it in some other way, include Joseph Campbell, Frederic (Fritz) Perls, Abraham Maslow, Fritjof Capra, Rollo May, Susan Sontag, Harvey Cox, Deepak Chopra, Ida Rolf, Michael Harner, and Andrew Weil.

The Institute’s very first brochure listed “psychical research” and work on “mind-opening” (by means of psychedelic drugs, such as LSD, and consciousness altering plants) as two of its three major foci; the third was psychology, the study of the mind itself as the basis of the other two. Maslow was a key figure in Esalen’s attempt to create a humanistic psychology as an alternative to Freudian reductionism and the behavioralism of John B. Watson and B. F. Skinner. Esalen’s fourth seminar, on “drug-induced mysticism,” was based on the assumption that certain drugs give access to unconscious layers of the mind. That seminar became one of the most popular and most frequently offered.

The longest running seminar was on the “physics of consciousness” (1976–78). Among the participants was the Fundamental Fysiks Group, hippie physicists interested in metaphysical questions ignored by most physicists at the

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53 Ibid., 80.
54 Ibid., 267.
55 Ibid., 117.
time. After the job market in physics collapsed in the early ‘70s, the hippie physicists pursued their interests in ontology, parapsychology, and the physical effect of mystical experiences. Funding for their research came from the CIA, NASA and other government agencies worried that “Psychic Discoveries behind the Iron Curtain,” the title of a book published in 1970, meant that the Soviet military and the KGB could leap ahead of the United States in telepathy, mind control, and psychokineti
cs. They also got funding from businessmen such as Werner Erhard, who was interested in Zen and in expanding consciousness.

The Fundamental Fysiks Group attempted to meld quantum mechanics with parapsychology and Eastern metaphysics in the hope that quantum mechanics could be harnessed to convey psychic powers. The scientific basis of their attempt was Bell’s theorem, which offered experimental confirmation that once two entities (such as electrons) have interacted with one another they remain connected. Bell also proved that quantum mechanics implies non-locality—that is, a measurement of particle A would instantaneously affect particle B, even if they are a galaxy apart. Non-locality, the hippie physicists hypothesized, could collapse space and time, thereby allowing instant signaling and faster than light communication. Today’s encryption technology is based on quantum mechanics.

The hippie physicists championed an organic or holistic world view, rather than the Cartesian dualism prevalent in western philosophy since the 17th century, and the “mechanistic fragmented” world-view of classical physics. They concluded that while mind and matter are different ontological orders they are inherently connected. In addition, they claimed that our impressions of the world arise, not from reality per se, but from our mental filters and habits, or what in ancient Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist teachings are called illusions. Their stance challenged the Enlightenment belief (or “myth”) that objective truth exists and can be discovered by reason and science.

Wishing to broaden physicists’ range of approaches and methods, to push beyond what they considered a narrowness of vision, “they laced their investigations with more of the Dionysian spirit than the strictly Apollonian. As [Jack] Sarfatti put it in 1976, physicists needed more “‘Mythos’ to leaven the ‘Logos’.” The hippie physicists were not entirely Dionysian; they did not deny the need for experimental proof.

57 Ibid., 36–38.
58 Ibid., 275.
They took mind-altering drugs, including LSD, in their search for a quantum-physics based explanation for such phenomena as telepathy and extrasensory perception, which they assumed existed, and experimented with remote viewing and precognition. If matter can affect consciousness, they asked, can consciousness affect matter? They were interested in the Israeli psychic Uri Geller, who claimed not only clairvoyance but psychokinetic powers as well. His most famous feat was apparently bending metal objects by sheer energy.59

Books written by hippie physicists reached a huge popular audience. Fritjof Capra’s *The Tao of Physics*, (1975) and Gary Zukav’s *The Dancing Wu Li Masters* (1979) were best sellers. *Wu Li* is the Chinese word for physics; literally translated, it means patterns of organic energy. Capra’s book came out at a time of tremendous spiritual thirst, a widely shared striving to find some meaning in the universe that might transcend the mundane affairs of here and now, so it became a catalyst, triggering an enormous reaction.60 At least as important, the hippie physicists interacted with more conventional physicists, challenging long-held assumptions and asking fresh questions, thereby propelling further study of quantum mechanics.

**Russia Revisited**

In the 1980s, Esalen tried to end the Cold War and prevent a nuclear war by practicing “citizen diplomacy,” private-sector initiatives between Soviets and Americans that were called Track Two. Track One was formal diplomacy. Based on the assumption that actual or potential conflict can be resolved or eased by appealing to common human capabilities to respond to good will and reasonableness, “Citizen Diplomacy” was a natural outgrowth of the Institute’s faith in human potential and its long-standing interest in psychology and parapsychology (see Boris Falikov’s chapter). On a previous trip to Russia, Murphy discovered a government-supported equivalent of the human potential movement. Now he wanted to know more about “psychic discoveries behind the iron curtain,” and to meet Soviet psychics.

The decision to found a Soviet-American Exchange Program was made in 1980. A host of initiatives followed.61 In 1989, Esalen was chosen (out of a list

59 Ibid., 72–73; see also 82.
60 Ibid., 155
61 To give a few examples. In 1981, Esalen sponsored the first of six conferences on Citizen Diplomacy. In 1982, Esalen pioneered the first space bridge, which allowed Soviet and American citizens to speak to each other via satellite, a new technology at the time. In 1983, Esalen...
of fifteen organizations) to host Boris Yeltsin on a nine day tour (September 9th to 17th) of the United States. He converted from communism to capitalism in a Houston supermarket; returned to Moscow “furious at the lies of Soviet propaganda, quit the Party, and helped lead a revolution that would eventually help topple Soviet communism.”

Esalen’s influence on Soviet-American relations continued after Yeltsin’s visit. In late 1991, a few days before Gorbachev resigned, Jim Garrison, the Executive Director of the Soviet-American Exchange Program, convinced him to visit the United States.

Subsequent initiatives include the establishment of a Library of Psychological Literature at Moscow State University (this gave Russians access to Western psychology, which had been banned in the Soviet Union since the 1930s), publication of a series of monographs titled *Future Scenarios on Russian American Relations*; conferences, and publication of a Library of Russian Philosophy, that featured books by Soloviev, Berdiaev, and Bulgakov. At the back of some of the books is a capsule history of Russian philosophy, in which Murphy limns what he considers its most valuable characteristics:

> …epistemological realism, integral knowledge (knowledge as an organic all-embracing unity that includes sensuous, intellectual, and mystical intuition), the celebration of integral personality (tsel’naia lichnost’) which is at once mystical, rational, and sensuous, and an emphasis upon the resurrection or transformability of the flesh [preobrazhenie, BGR] (…) It is bol’shaia, big as philosophy should be. It is broad and individualistic, bearing within it many different perspectives (…). Above all it is universal. The principle of sobornost’ or all-togetherness (human catholicity) is of paramount importance to it. And it is future oriented, expressing a

62 Kripal, *Esalen*, 316, see also 396–397.
63 These include a conference on “Russia in Crisis,” (1998) held, by coincidence, just after the ruble collapsed, and conferences on health issues, ethnic conflict, sports, and religious fundamentalism.
64 A complete list of the books published is in Kripal, *Esalen*, 528.
philosophy of history passing into metahistory, the life-of-the-world-to come-in the Kingdom of God.65

Preobrazhenie is better translated as “transfiguration,” a Russian Orthodox doctrine that is closely linked with the Orthodox concept of deification. Just as the flesh of Christ had been transfigured, so would the flesh of the redeemed. Or, as was said at the first Nicene Council: “God became man that we might be made God.” Deification is roughly compatible with Blavatsky’s idea that since our souls are emanations of the Divine, we are all Gods, except of course that the Christian ideal is to become like Christ.

The surge of occultism in Russia and in the United States in the time periods treated in this chapter was a response to a widespread spiritual crisis precipitated by the fading of the “myth.” The “myths” were different and they faded for different reasons, so the occultism of each period reflected contemporary problems and issues.

In prerevolutionary Russia, the official ideology (Autocracy, Orthodoxy, and Nationality) was undercut by modernization, as was populism, the “myth” of the intelligentsia. Some intelligenty tried to quench their “spiritual thirst” by extolling creativity; their “myth” was Symbolism, which was based on the esoteric idea of correspondences. Some Futurists perpetuated a different set of occult ideas. Astrology attracted people seeking guidance in a rapidly changing world. New occult doctrines—Spiritualism, Theosophy, and Anthroposophy—gained adherents.

After the Bolshevik Revolution, the “myth” was Marxism-Leninism, but details of implementation had yet to be worked out, and people had to adjust to The Dictatorship of the Proletariat and to other drastic changes such as the institution of NEP in 1921. The government combated “superstition” (religion and the occult), but belief in them persisted. Cosmism, a new occult doctrine, incorporated the Soviet faith in science and technology as a world-transforming force.

Occultism subsided after Stalin, but it revived (clandestinely) in the 1960s, partly because of the unsettling effects of de-Stalinization, partly because the “era of stagnation” eroded faith in the communist ideal and in the materialism on which it is based. Gurdjieff’s teachings became popular; occult classics were published in samizdat, and there was great interest in Asian religions in general and in yoga in particular.

Gorbachev instituted far-reaching changes, including an almost unlimited freedom of the press and freedom of speech, so a mish-mash of occult ideas came out in the open. Gorbachev himself endorsed the “Roerich idea.” Occult classics and Western New Age books were published legally in English and in Russian translation. Some of Gorbachev’s critics attributed Russia’s woes, past and present, to a Judeo-Masonic conspiracy. A new religious movement, rodnoverie, glorified Russia’s pre-Christian past. Glasnost’ inadvertently set in motion a process that culminated in the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991.

During Yeltsin’s tenure, a flawed privatization left people without a safety net and turned their world upside down. Not surprisingly, occultism surged. Whether it will subside, now that order has been restored, the Soviet Union is once again recognized as a great power, Orthodox Christianity is the de facto official religion, and high prices for oil and natural gas buoy the economy, remains to be seen.

As for the United States, in the 1960s “beats,” “hippies,” and many baby-boomers found the unofficial civil religion spiritually unsatisfying and emotionally repressive, opposed the war in Vietnam, and supported the struggle for civil rights. They created a counterculture that featured sex, drugs, and rock and roll, back-to-nature and self-sufficiency, and that rejected conventional rationalism and empiricism in favor of mysticism, especially Asian mysticism, and the occult. The counterculture morphed into the New Age movement. In the 1970s and ‘80s, occultism became part of the cultural mainstream, while opponents of the counterculture mobilized against it. Since then, the nation has been polarized. On one side are advocates of “small government” and cultural conservatives opposed to abortion and same-sex marriage. On the other side are supporters of “big government” and cultural libertarians. Neither side is monolithic; there are divisions within each one. As of this writing (August 2011), neither side has a governing majority. So the spiritual crisis continues, and no reconciling new “myth” is in sight.