

Fear is a Lie. Emotion and Religion in the "New Age"

by Pascal Eitler

"Our lives seem filled with separations, schisms, leavetaking [sic]. We take leave of someone. [...] At birth we separate - or are separated - from the protective shield of our mother. And one further thought: Sometime, somehow our spirit detached itself from God. And to go back even farther: - at some point, somehow, our spirits, our divine spark, separated from God. [...] The door behind us gradually closes, the connection to the creative source becomes nebulous [...] and thus our fear begins." (16)

In her self-help book "The Healing of Emotion," published multiple times on both sides of the Atlantic, Chris Griscom claims that fear should not be one emotion but *the* "core emotion" of humans (21).[1] However, in her book, Griscom does not only try to vividly guide her audience's eyes to this "core emotion" and make it in a reputedly larger correlation understandable. She more so and most notably, strives to overcome this fear, a fear allegedly every human has, one of separation and loneliness. Within this framework she has opened a good approach to the meaning of and dealing with feelings in the so-called "New Age," between the early seventies and late eighties of the twentieth century.

The "New Age" was back then often described and advertised as a *mélange* of religious, medical, aesthetic, political or scientific, economic practices and discourses, actors and organizations. These simultaneously circled around a mission of "self-realization" and a claim of "wholeness," and in this respect shifted body and emotions in particular into the center of their focus.[2] Chris Griscom was in the seventies and eighties not one of the omnipresent prototypes of the "New Age," as for example Marilyn Ferguson or Fritjof Capra. However, she was one of the better known names of those who dealt with an emphasis on the meaning of emotions in a particularly intense and characteristic manner, as well as the founder and director of the "Light Institute," a "holistic" community center and sanatorium in New Mexico.[3]

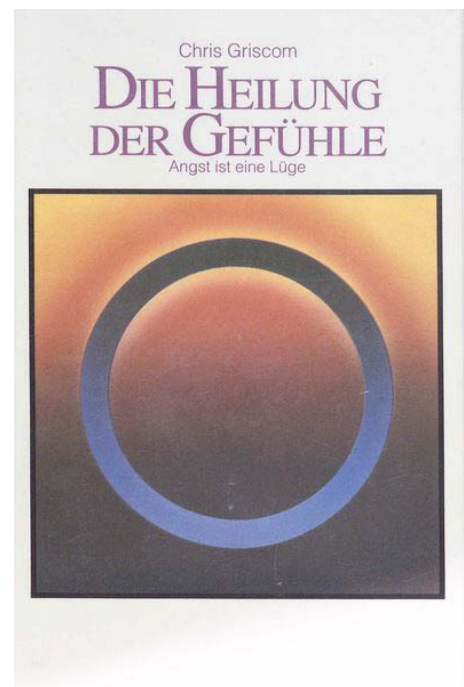
It is precisely because of the significance of these feelings in and for the "New Age," that many advice manuals dealt with emotions only in passing. "The Healing of Emotion," which Griscom specifically targets in her book, orientates itself in two ways: Definite feelings - as with fear - should be "cured" as quickly as possible; however, other emotions were allegedly able - equally again with fear - to "cure" people and make them once again "healthy" and "whole."

As is common within the "New Age" movement, emotions are termed as energy or "forms of energy," which then seem to form out of what Griscom has described as an "emotional body" - a result of the "separation of our egos from the divine self." The "emotional body" and the feelings of humans arise and are developed in context of or in response to this separation and all apparent following separations. (13 and 136) The fear, which arises from this ever present gloominess, causes long term sickness in people and alienates them from each other - not only personally, but also and rather distinctly political.

"The Healing of Emotion," according to Griscom, is, however, possible: "Fear can be exposed as a lie of the body of emotions." (123) This is actually the first of the allegedly crucial separations, the "separation of the individual consciousness from the unity of consciousness," which should be reversible, attainable and ultimately as well a "lie." People have simply forgotten or unlearned to direct or to contact consciously their own "divine self," their own "higher self." (26 and 29) It is not a matter that "feelings are suppressed or repressed," rather a matter of "developing higher emotions" and to liberate oneself from the so-called "dark feelings": "When the heart is full of happiness, feelings swing to unimaginable heights." (109 and 195) This happiness is only revealed to those, who "go beyond themselves or go deeper experience one's own feelings" and in such a way - for example within meditation - would find "participation in totality, which [is] greater than the Self." (195 and 89)

The "search" for "totality," for a "a new age unity," as Griscom describes and contends, developed into one of the central characteristics of the "New Age" - the "search" for a "new age unity" as an established "religious," "spiritual," "mystic," "cosmic," or "emotional wholeness." [4] In the same sense, Griscom spoke of the "Religion" of the "New Age" as a "re-connection" (26). It is necessary then to understand the title picture of the book: a circle as a sign of "wholeness" and "healing", which emerges from the "darkness" and is transferred to the "light."

In this sense, the "New Age" was not aimed - as it is often claimed - at the individualization of people or feelings, rather - almost the reverse - at the sacralization and emotionalization of the self: "It is about the self-realization, not selfishness" (165). This "self-realization" is important to experience steadily and advance



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"holistically," not in the context of traditional ideas of individuality, but rather in the course of phantasmatic authenticity claims. People thus expect or desire from this "search" for their "true," "actual", "higher" self, but this search must remain unavoidably interminable. Due to varying practices or techniques, the desired "wholeness," which was not about an individual in its individuality, could always be understood or sensed in changing and - as with speculation and hope - better ways.

Through this "becoming whole," "Healing of Emotions" actually resembled a task which could never conclusively be fulfilled. Setbacks and failures were to a certain extent inevitable. Incidentally, Griscom recognized this herself: "The process of becoming whole is commonly quite complicated and lengthy" (180). The self should, but ultimately could only, be inadequately realized and was only in this context - as a consistently amendable and consistently in need of development - produced and distinct.

The "New Age" in the seventies and eighties purveyed varying arguments and developed different instruments to enable - and require - the permanent and intensive working on one's "self" and "own" emotions. Because the goal was a "search" in the purest sense of the word, this work knew no end.

In the eighties these arguments and instruments achieved a stronger media presence and prevalence among the public, and beyond the Federal Republic of Germany. They flocked from the alternative-milieu into the so-called mainstream and were represented in the forms of not only meditative practice, but also yoga courses, alternative medicine and relationship counseling, organic grocers and creative seminars, all of which were varied and lasting appropriations.[5] It is clear at this point how the contemporary history of emotions and the contemporary history of the self are closely knit, and how religion in this context can play an important role.[6]

Against this backdrop, the book "The Healing of Emotions" remained neither the only nor the first of its kind. The "New Age" unleashed a veritable flood of advice literature, which accepted feelings, in particular, as well as the body, medicine or politics in general. More often than not "self-realization" and "wholeness" stood at the center of interest.

One should not conclude from these self-help books, that those seeking its guidance were usually successful in getting their emotions to soar to unimaginable heights. Yet such self-help literature continually confronted its audience with the attainment of or the struggle for feelings and they developed a firmly growing reservoir of practices and techniques, supposedly in order to produce and solidify one's "inner connection to the higher self" - failure and disappointment included. Strictly speaking, in this sense self-help literature, such as "The Healing of Emotions," establishes more a way of *trying* emotions than a way of *doing* emotions.[7] Trying emotions in this case means two things: the unceasingly praised "higher emotions" could as a rule not or only temporarily be realized, let alone ever be stabilized; but nevertheless the followers of the "New Age" believe that they must perpetually try.

Further Reading

- Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture. Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).
- Daren Kemp and James Lewis, eds., *Handbook of New Age* (Boston: Brill, 2007).
- Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement. The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Oxford, MA: Blackwell 1996).
- Pascal Eitler, "Körper - Kosmos - Kybernetik. Transformationen der Religion im 'New Age' (Westdeutschland 1970-1990)," *Zeithistorische Forschungen* 4 (2007): 116-136.
- Marilyn Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy. Personal and Social Transformation in the 1980s* (Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher 1980).

[1] Chris Griscom, *Die Heilung der Gefühle. Angst ist eine Lüge* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1988) (engl.: *The Healing of Emotion. Awakening the Fearless Self* (Galisteo: Light Institute, 1990)).

[2] For a broad overview see James Lewis and Gordon Melton, eds., *Perspectives on the New Age* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992); Christoph Boehinger, *New Age und moderne Religion. Religionswissenschaftliche Analysen* (Kaiser: Gütersloh, 1994); Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture. Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1996); Daren Kemp and James Lewis, eds., *Handbook of New Age* (Boston: Brill, 2007).

[3] See also www.lightinstitute.com [29.05.2013].

[4] See also Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement. The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Oxford. MA: Blackwell, 1996); Pascal Eitler, "Körper – Kosmos – Kybernetik. Transformationen der Religion im 'New Age' (Westdeutschland 1970-1990)," *Zeithistorische Forschungen* 4 (2007): 116-136; Franz Höllinger and Thomas Tripold, *Ganzheitliches Leben. Das holistische Milieu zwischen neuer Spiritualität*

und postmoderner Wellness-Kultur (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012).

[5] In the case of Yoga classes see also Jennifer Lea, "Liberation or Limitation? Understanding Iyengar Yoga as a Practice of the Self," *Body and Society* 15 (2009): 71-92.

[6] See also Sven Reichardt and Detlef Siegfried, eds., *Das Alternative Milieu. Antibürgerlicher Lebensstil und linke Politik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und Europa 1968-1983* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2010); Sabine Maasen et al. (eds.), *Das beratene Selbst. Zur Genealogie der Therapeutisierung in den 'langen' Siebzigern* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2011).

[7] Pascal Eitler and Monique Scheer, "Emotionengeschichte als Körpergeschichte. Eine heuristische Perspektive auf religiöse Konversionen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 35 (2009): 282-313, 293.

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