

# Family Resemblance Categorisation Theory

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Exploring a Wittgensteinian theoretical basis to the sociology of Christian-New Age relations,  
with particular reference to a family resemblance mode of definition. December 1996

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## Abstract A

The core of this paper is an exploration of Ludwig Wittgenstein's family resemblance theory as a proposed means of reconciling diverging categorisations of New Age given by scholars, New Agers and critics. The discussion is then widened to consider previous attempts by scholars to apply family resemblance theory to a definition of religion, and as a general sociological mode of description. However, consideration of family resemblance theory in the context of Wittgenstein's life and work, may despite the promise of many insights preclude a more comprehensive use of the philosophical tradition (other than family resemblance) named after him as a theoretical basis for a non-partisan evaluation of Christian-New Age relations. It is concluded that family resemblance theory, in so far as it elucidates my research interest (the sociology of Christians in the New Age), is better employed without invocation of the Wittgensteinian name.

## Family resemblance theory B

Family resemblance theory was outlined by Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations* (1994/1953), and forms an integral part of his later philosophy of language. Stripped of its wider significance, its basic functions may however be simply summarised with a tabulated example: below are three distinct items under consideration in rows numbered 1 to 3, and characteristics observed in columns lettered a-g.

	<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>c</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>e</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>g</i>
<i>1</i>	✓	✓	✓				
<i>2</i>			✓	✓	✓		
<i>3</i>					✓	✓	✓

Items *1* and *3* have no characteristics *a* to *g* in common. They initially appear dissimilar. However, a middle term, item *2*, has characteristic *c* in common with item *1* and characteristic *e* in common with item *3*.

Items *1* and *3* may therefore be seen to have a family resemblance through the middle item *2*, despite *prima facie* dissimilarity.

A development of family resemblance theory is to have a shortlist of items considered typical to the family. This 'common core' holds the benchmark criteria for family resemblance, and would be represented in the above table by item *2*. Items for possible inclusion in the family are first

compared and contrasted with the core members, and admitted according to the significance of the relationships.

### **The problem** - divergent similarity

C

I started my research with a simplistic picture of two divergent Christian assessments of New Age: hostile evangelicals and sympathetic liberals. While these opposing camps are the main features of the terrain, there are also many similarities and exchanges between the two Christian reactions which are not captured by such a map.

In parallel fashion Paul Greer's PhD thesis on the New Age (1994; cf 1995) provides a typology within New Age of two opposite 'poles' or 'tendencies' of patriarchal and ecological spirituality. The examples he uses (1995) are respectively Lectorium Rosicrucianum, Trevelyan, Ramtha; Creation Spirituality and Wicca. His aim was to provide "a framework which highlights and explains many of the fundamental contradictions of the movement" (1994:ii), and his early observation that New Age is difficult to characterize is reflected in his final qualifications that the typology is to be used as a sliding continuum.

There are a number<sup>1</sup> of problems with Greer's proposed solution which could be circumvented with a family resemblance approach. The main problem is that his framework is not philosophically neutral but favours one end of the continuum - the approach is explicitly ecofeminist (1994:ii), so other possible continua within New Age are neglected or distorted: for example, his consideration of Fox does not adequately explore the interesting continuum between Creation Spirituality, Wicca and the Churches. A wider problem is whether it is helpful to frame the thesis in terms of "contradictions" in the New Age movement: not only does this supply an implicit value-judgement (self-contradictory therefore false), but at a fundamental level is inappropriate for consideration of a movement which explicitly rejects such Aristotelian logic.

A preliminary survey of definitions of the New Age movement by Christians, New Agers and non-partisan observers (Kemp 1996a) has revealed wide divergences both in abstract theorising as to what sort of thing New Age is, and in specifically cited concrete examples. For example, Douglas Groothuis (1986, 1988, 1990) and other Christians antipathetic to the movement detail specific New Age credos; whereas authorities such as Michael York avoid a "doctrinaire" approach (1995:35). The examples of New Age given by sympathisers differ not only from those rather more inclusive *indices* given by conspiracy theorists like Roy Livesey (1983, 1987, 1989, 1990), but also from those of other so-called 'insiders': this is significantly evident in comparing examples cited in two works widely regarded as seminal, Marilyn Ferguson's *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (1980) and William Bloom's *The New Age* (Bloom ed 1991).

Fieldwork in progress suggests similarly divergent definitions of New Age among respondents<sup>2</sup>. For example, Fr Adrian B Smith, who holds retreats on the subject, does not think of New Age as a movement or religion but as a wider 'natural' cultural process of consciousness evolution<sup>3</sup>. Conversely, a Catholic retreat leader at a Christian New Age community speaks of a sinister leaderless "network"<sup>4</sup>. I have not yet encountered first-hand a Fundamentalist Christian who thinks New Age an orchestrated conspiracy, but respondents at an Anglican evangelical church<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Only the most relevant problems are mentioned here. See my term paper of Sept 96 for further detail.

<sup>2</sup> In fact, the most remarkable conclusion from the pilot case study was that despite the community's reputation for New Age Christianity, respondents had only an abstract understanding of New Age derived largely from secondary sources, and could often not give concrete examples.

<sup>3</sup> Interview: 21 November 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Interview: 2 October 1996.

<sup>5</sup> Interviews: 4 March 1996; 16, 22, 24 August 1996; 3 September 1996.

tend towards such a definition of New Age more than other Christians interviewed to date. These three types of definition of New Age are not easy to reconcile in a singular definition.

### **The proposal - New Age defined on family resemblance lines**

D

I have suggested (Kemp 1996b:18) that primary literature on New Age is best considered in three groups: antipathetic, a-pathetic and sympathetic - which correspond to Chrissie Steyn's antagonistic, protagonist, descriptive<sup>6</sup>. It is conceivable that one could construct three general definitions of New Age for each of these categories, clustering around the more extreme divergences, without application of family resemblance theory. Referring back to the table above, these would be represented by the *prima facie* dissimilar items 1 - 3.

Together with the divergence in definitions of New Age, though, are many overlaps between these three cluster groups, represented in the table in columns *c* and *e*. A non-family resemblance mode of definition into three distinct categories would hamper inclusion in the analysis of these aspects of similarity. A family resemblance mode of categorisation would allow clear presentation of both similarities and differences between the varying definitions of New Age - and would also facilitate evaluation of the similarities and differences between New Age, Christianity and other traditions.

The distribution of examples of New Age in the literature and given by respondents appears to be a centrally-weighted normal bell curve. A limited number<sup>7</sup> of focused interviews has suggested common core examples of New Age - which include Shirley MacLaine, crystals, astrology, Findhorn, reflexology - and a survey questionnaire is under preparation to give statistical backing to such a common core of consensual examples of New Age.

A previous attempt at a characterization of New Age along similar lines has been published in *Cultic Studies Journal* by Dole et al (1990, 1993):

... two panels of experts, one consisting of scientific skeptics and the other consisting of cult researchers, were asked to rate 340 items deemed at least remotely related to the concept "New Age". Subsequent ratings and statistical analyses permitted the identification of six statements that appear to characterize the "New Age". ...

- \* "An eclectic collection of psychological and spiritual techniques."
- \* "Inadequate scientific data regarding effectiveness."
- \* "Create zealous promoters."
- \* "Rooted in eastern mysticism."
- \* "Idealization of a leader who claims founding transformative vision."
- \* "Contradict my beliefs."

(Dole et al 1990:69,74)

Despite claiming to have culled their 340 statements from the literature and to have approximated a scientific approach, the common core statements identified (particularly the sixth) and the rejected characterizations appear overly biased to an antipathetic approach to New Age. There is need for a less biased survey.

Such a family resemblance common core definition of New Age could for my purposes be conducted among self-identifying New Age groups, Christian groups and academic ("expert") groups. The resulting definition would be a contemporary benchmark of consensual usage of the term 'New Age'. This could then be employed in the theoretical analysis of the sociology of

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<sup>6</sup> Steyn, 1994, *Worldviews in Transition: An Investigation into the New Age Movement in South Africa*, Pretoria, University of South Africa - as reviewed by Michael Perry, 1996, *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 11 1 111.

<sup>7</sup> Over 30 interviews had been conducted in the period December 1995 - December 1996.

Christians in the New Age before further family members for inclusion in the common core could be identified from this theoretical analysis, to provide the ultimate answer to the question: What is the New Age?

Such a family resemblance mode of description simply provides an explicit theoretical basis for categorisation of phenomena; it does not in any way provide or predetermine a typology of these phenomena. To use an analogy, the language of Wittgensteinian family resemblance provides a typology in German, while the language of Aristotelian essentialism provides a typology in Greek; the same typology can be described in both languages, but one language may be better suited in vocabulary and structure to provide a concise description of the phenomena. Although the typology of New Age is not my concern in this paper<sup>8</sup>, two examples illustrate the way in which explicit family resemblance categorisation can replace the usually implicit essentialist categorisation, and provide a more appropriate theoretical basis for a sociological typology.

Bryan Wilson's suggestions on typifying sects according to their response to the world are difficult to apply to the New Age. In *italics* I suggest a New Age phenomenon for each type:

- |                 |   |
|-----------------|---|
| conversionist   | - "You create your own reality"                             |
| revolutionist   | - <i>The Aquarian Conspiracy</i>                            |
| introversionist | - <i>Gnostic Studies (aka Esoteric Psychology)</i>          |
| manipulationist | - <i>affirmations</i>                                       |
| thaumaturgical  | - <i>crystal work</i>                                       |
| reformist       | - <i>Gaia hypothesis</i>                                    |
| utopian         | - <i>Natural Law Party (TM)</i>                             |
| acceptance      | - <i>New Age businesses and management training courses</i> |
- (from 1975:21f *my annotations*)

Aspects of New Age can be seen to manifest aspects of all Wilson's proposed divisions, but there is no immediately apparent "typical" typification of the New Age *in toto* according to Wilson's typology. In this light, one must emphasise the qualification in Michael York's general acceptance of Wilson's typology (below), if it is to provide the basis for a comprehensive definition of the New Age:

*Although the New Age ... reveal[s] several elements that belong to other types of sects ... [it] conform[s] in general to the Thaumaturgical and, especially, the Gnostic/ Manipulationist sects.*  
(York 1995:320 *my emphasis*)

Similarly, Roy Wallis (1984), presented a popular typology constructed, like Wilson's, according to orientation to the world:

- |               |   |
|---------------|---|
| rejection     | - <i>rejection of science and technology</i>              |
| affirmation   | - <i>prosperity workshops</i>                             |
| accommodation | - <i>adapting traditional rituals to New Age settings</i> |
- (from York 1995:293 *my annotations*)

Yet again, while the New Age can generally be said to be world-affirming, there are necessary qualifications:

Although the New Age Movement and the New Age religions in general will be seen to conform to Wallis's world-affirming type, in many cases there are important world-rejecting features as well (eg millenarianism, inner elite corps, charismatic leader, etc) and even, in some cases, elements of the world-accommodating movement.  
(York 1995:294)

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<sup>8</sup> See Kemp (1996a), from which the following material taken.

In both these examples, an essentialist basis to a typology of New Age would eliminate aspects of divergence from analytical view. In practise, York employs a family resemblance basis of categorisation in his qualifications of these typologies. My proposal is to make this practise an explicit part of the methodology of my study of Christians in the New Age.

### **An Example**

E

An example of the workings and benefits of the family resemblance approach in analysis of Christian-New Age relations can be seen in consideration of charismatic and New Age healing traditions, in this case Anglican Renewal Ministries, a Christian Healing Centre and National Federation of Spiritual Healers<sup>9</sup>.

- (1) The Anglican evangelical asks God to heal His child. The literature emphasises the power of Jesus, the bestowal of charismatic gifts at a time of renewal, and sin as a cause of ill health. Rationalisations seek to assure the recipient of healing that God does not punish His children with ill health, that He cannot be coerced into healing a sinner, and the healing power comes from Jesus and not other spirits which are by definition demonic. The sinner approaches an appointed healing minister after a general invitation for healing at a church service and asks for prayer, and the two retire to a quiet corner together with a fellow healer of the opposite sex (to avoid possible claims of sexual abuse). One or two hands, palms face down, are held about five centimetres away from the back to top of the sinner's head. Prayers asking God to heal mind, body and spirit are said in a quiet voice by the active healer, varying in specificity according to how much the healer has just been told or already knows of the nature of the sinner's request. The fellow healer is passive, possibly touching the arm of the sinner for reassurance, until the active healer finishes praying and the healers switch roles. The sinner usually closes the eyes, but may cry or sob.
- (2) The founder of a Christian Healing Centre asked the Holy Spirit to use her as a channel of his love. The literature emphasises the miraculous nature of the founder's healing, and the reality of the spirit world. Rationalisations sought to assure the recipient that the healing power comes from the Holy Spirit and not from other spirits which may nevertheless be beneficent. The recipient approaches a healer of the centre after a general invitation for healing at a church service and asks for prayer, and the two exchange brief words on the nature of the request as the visitor kneels at the altar rail. Two hands, palms face down, are held on or near the top of the visitor's head. Prayers asking God to heal mind, body and spirit are said in a quiet voice by the healer, varying in specificity according to how much the healer has just been told or already knows of the nature of the visitor's request.
- (3) The NFSH member asks the Life Force to heal the imbalance. The literature emphasises the reality of the spirit world, the unity and harmony of everything, and the ancient history of the healing tradition. Rationalisations seek to assure the recipient of healing that ill health is not a natural state, that healing is not an automatic event, and the healing power comes from the One Universal Ultimate Being, or whatever the client believes in. The client approaches a certified healer after seeing an advertisement at a public library and asks for healing, and the two retire to a corner in a room with other healers and clients. One or two hands, palms face down, are held about five centimetres away from various parts of the client's body. No words are spoken during the healing, but before and after the healing the client may outline the problem and the healer may suggest a possible cause, for example in repressed memories or disturbed aura. The client has been asked to close their eyes, but may cry or sob.

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<sup>9</sup> Participant observation at an Anglican Renewal Ministries course, May-September 1996 and interviews 16 and 22 August, 3 September 1996; historical interpretation of the literature of Burrswood Home of Healing, supplemented by participant observation and interviews with present and former visitors and staff May-September 1996; negotiated observation at an NFSH centre and interviews 22 May, 10 July, 25 July 1996.

These accounts have been simplified to draw attention to both the similarities and differences between the healing traditions, and are further simplified and tabulated below.

	<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>c</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>e</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>g</i>	
<i>1</i>	✓	✓	✓					Items <i>1</i> and <i>3</i> have no characteristics <i>a</i> to <i>g</i> in common. They initially appear dissimilar. However, a middle term, item <i>2</i> , has characteristic <i>c</i> in common with item <i>1</i> and characteristic <i>e</i> in common with item <i>3</i> .
<i>2</i>			✓	✓	✓			
<i>3</i>					✓	✓	✓	

- 1* Anglican Renewal Ministries
- 2* Christian Healing Centre
- 3* National Federation of Spiritual Healers

- a* Literature is concerned with charismatic gifts, demons and sin.
- b* Emphasis on power of Jesus.
- c* Self-identification within orthodox Christianity, boundary maintenance from Spiritualism.
- d* Founder of the healing tradition is revered for her miraculous recovery.
- e* Literature is concerned with telepathy, psychic links, auras.
- f* Emphasis on harmony of Gaia.
- g* Self-identification within New Age tradition, boundary maintenance from Fundamentalism.

Items *1* and *3* may therefore be seen to have a family resemblance through the middle item *2*, despite *prima facie* dissimilarity.

The Christian Healing Centre briefly described here would only be included as core family descriptor of New Age, if it was in comparison with other possible members of the family considered to be typical. In fact, for various historical reasons in the development of the Centre from a proto-New Age community to an evangelical hospital, this Centre would not be a useful common core member. But the advantage of the family resemblance approach of definition is that this exclusion does not mean the Centre is forgotten in subsequent analysis of the New Age movement; it will be relevant in direct proportion to the significance of its family relationships of similarities and differences with the selected core members.

This section considers academic authority for the proposal that Wittgenstein's family resemblance theory is appropriate for defining various religious and social movements and religion in general. (1) Some seem to invoke an implicit family resemblance theory without drawing attention to its Wittgensteinian ancestry (eg Walter 1993:134; Hanegraaff 1995b:16) while others seem to invoke Wittgenstein's authority for family resemblance without evaluation of its appropriateness (eg Barker 1992:189; McGrath 1994:18). (2) Extended considerations of the application of the theory to religion are in Clarke & Byrne eds (1993:11-16) and to mysticism in Stace (1961/1960:45f). (3) There is furthermore one PhD thesis employing family resemblance theory as a methodology for analysis of a new social movement: Mattausch, J, 1986, "A Commitment to Campaign: A Sociological Study of C.N.D.", PhD thesis: Edinburgh.

(1) Implicit Wittgenstein

Implicit or unevaluated use of family resemblance theory seems to occur when scholars wish to study *prima facie* diverging religious phenomena under one pre-existing label that might otherwise seem inappropriate to critics. This may unnecessarily weaken their argument, as my contention in this paper is that family resemblance theory is a justifiable philosophical basis for analysis.

Tony Walter uses an implicit family resemblance theory in a paper on "Death in the New Age" in order to justify consideration of various seemingly disparate groups under the New Age label.

My delineation below of New Age 'core beliefs' about death is not a delineation of a creed or dogma, and there are vast differences within the New Age orbit between ...  
[various groups]  
(1993:134)

Walter concentrates on one core belief, that of an "inner essence", the bases of this belief being located in "various religious sources" and "near (or 'after') death experience" and having "core practices: care of the dying" (ibid:136-89).

Wouter Hanegraaff has confirmed to me<sup>10</sup> that his use (1995b:16) of Snoek's cluster association of contiguity is based on Wittgensteinian family resemblance. His concern is to analyse New Age literature with a philosophical basis that does not predetermine

whether it will be possible to speak of *one* New Age movement on the basis of association by similarity (of beliefs).  
(1995b:16)

Alistair McGrath writes just *one* sentence on his application of the theory:

Differences between American and East Asian, or English and East African, evangelicals often reflect deep-seated cultural differences, rather than fundamental differences concerning the gospel itself. The importance of such disagreements must not be overestimated. They exist, but are not seen as identity-giving. *There is, to use Wittgenstein's helpful term, a clear 'family resemblance' among the various types and styles of evangelicalism.*  
(1994:18 *my emphasis*)

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<sup>10</sup> Conversation, April 1996.

## (2) Explicit Wittgenstein

Explicit consideration of Wittgensteinian family resemblance is in both these examples for reasons of allowing for divergence in an otherwise unitary definition. Clarke & Byrne's (1993) use of the theory stems from their perception of the inadequacy of essentialist (whether functionalist or substantive) definitions of religion (cf Byrne 1980). Stace (1960) seeks to refute the idea that all mystical experiences are identical, while retaining use of the label 'mysticism' to refer to experiences related to a common core of mystical experiences. The following features of a family resemblance definition of religion are noted:

- (a) There will be a characteristic set of features to be seen in the examples of religion ...
  - (b) Over and above the fact that they are religions, there will be no single feature or set of features to be found in each and every example of religion.
  - (c) There [12] will be no limits to be set in advance to the kind of combinations of characteristic features newly discovered or developing religions might be found to exemplify, nor will there be absolute limits to the additional features such new examples could add to the set.
  - (d) The various examples of religion will be related by a network of relationships rather than shared possession of necessary and sufficient conditions for membership of the class.
  - (e) The meaning of the word 'religion' will nonetheless be projectible: that is, having rehearsed the characteristic features of religion in an inclusive family resemblance definition or having become acquainted with some central examples of religion, one will be able to say of newly found examples whether they are religions or not.
- (Clarke & Byrne 1993:11-12)

## (3) Wittgensteinian social inquiry

Mattausch (1986) likewise rejects previous accounts of his new social movement (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament - "CND") for relying on a "covert" "essentialist theory of categorisation" (1986:32): "In this paradigm, there lurks the presumption that there will be a common explanation for the activists' behaviour ... terms such as 'CND' and 'Movement' ... appear as the name for something ... [whereas] CND is a social praxis and not an entity ..." (1986:35 original emphasis).

At this point Mattausch unnecessarily jeopardizes his application of family resemblance methodology by describing CND according to Wittgenstein's notion of *Lebensform*, 'form of life' (1986:38). (In the next section it will be argued that, despite the many insights that can be gained from consideration of social movements under Wittgenstein's many and varied suggestions, such wider application of his philosophy is likely to bias sociological analysis, which is thus better limited to the family resemblance approach.) As with much of Wittgenstein's philosophy, there is some debate as to the precise meaning of *Lebensform* (eg Finch 1977:89f; Kerr 1986:31f) and in fact Mattausch's (otherwise defensible) retranslation of the word as 'way of life' (1986:39) suggests that his usage does not accommodate the complexities of what he calls "a technical use of the term" (1986:52): the notion of *Lebensform* may offer little more to Mattausch's description of CND than the everyday notion of 'way of life'.

Mattausch summarises the approach as follows:

In this study, CND will be considered as a form of life and it will not be assumed a priori that CNDers possess a common characteristic. Instead, similarities and differences are stressed and any commonalities will be understood as a question of non-essentialist family resemblance. Furthermore, CND will be shown to consist of a composite of only partially complementary ideologies, commitments, practices, etc. However, the CND form of life is not discrete, it is part of the wider British society. To make the Campaign

sociologically intelligible requires an appreciation of the ways in which the CND form of life is imbricated<sup>11</sup> within other prevalent social practices.  
(1986:39)

Mattausch's detailed presentation and analysis of a sample of 62 life-history interviews at two CND groups bear out the usefulness of this approach. Three groupings of supporters are suggested (welfare state employees, non-welfare state employees, and elected office holders) and within and between these groups both similarities and differences are highlighted for consideration. In conclusion, Mattausch points out that the family resemblance approach is more suited to providing description than causal explanation (1986:236, 287), but claims to have illustrated "the feasibility of social inquiry based upon the spirit of Wittgenstein's philosophical position" (1986:288).

It clear therefore that academic authority exists for the application of family resemblance theory to religious and social movements. Groups particularly suited to the approach appear to be, firstly - a movement that is widely known under a label that other academics may consider discredited, perhaps because it appears to include phenomena that are *prima facie* dissimilar; and secondly - a movement that is widely considered as a unitary with a label that the scholar may consider obfuscates important dissimilarities. It happens that both these reasons apply in certain respects to the New Age movement.

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<sup>11</sup> "Imbricated": overlapping as in tiles or scales, especially in a regular order.

It was seen above that, if family resemblance theory is to provide a theoretical basis for sociological categorisation, there may be a temptation to widen this theoretical basis to include some of Wittgenstein's other suggestions. This section (1) glimpses at the fruit of wider application of Wittgensteinian philosophy to the sociology of Christians in the New Age, and acknowledges the possible insights before (2) conservatively advising root and branch avoidance of such a wider theoretical basis, on the grounds that Wittgenstein was a 'proto-New Ager'.

(1) Further Insights derived from Wittgenstein

Wittgenstein is famous (or infamous) for reducing philosophical problems to problems of language. "Wittgenstein's understanding of forms of life ... covers ... all social or cultural behavior *in so far as it is meaningful*" (Finch 1077:90). One possible explanation of Christian interest in New Age is that it makes traditional religion meaningful to modern life. Consideration of Wittgenstein's aphorism, "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him" (Finch 1977:97) and the hypothetically unintelligible foreign language (Wittgenstein 1994/1953:82 §207)<sup>12</sup> suggests that New Age language may not be fully understood by a Christian, and vice versa. For example, a New Ager may defend an action with reference to a past life, and in doing so make syntactical sense which a Christian can nevertheless not understand. Continuing with Wittgenstein's analysis, because New Age language is intuitive or spontaneous and may differ with each situation, there is not enough regularity for sociologists to call it a 'language'.

The Wittgensteinian understanding that language is does not pre-exist but arises within the context of life belies the claim (often encountered in New Age) that all mystical experiences are at a fundamental level identical: mystical experiences occur within specific cultural language games (Canfield 1975:406). (I am not sure whether Stace (1960) also consciously derived this conclusion from Wittgenstein, or whether his use of Wittgenstein was limited to family resemblance; either way, it is evident that wider application of Wittgenstein can bias conclusions.)

Kenny (1984) has shown how Wittgenstein's refutation of the notion of private languages in which he undermined the Cartesian separation and description of mind and matter, can also undermine Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's notion of the *within* of inanimate matter. Kenny's Wittgensteinian analysis of (patriarchal) de Chardin provides a suggestive extension of Greer's ecological-patriarchal contradiction in New Age: both poles of the continuum are concerned with Descartes' separation of matter and consciousness, but whereas the ecological tendency rejects both Descartes separation and description of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, the patriarchal tendency rejects only their separation but retains their Cartesian description.

The general problem with a whole-heartedly Wittgensteinian approach to sociology is that philosophers diverge widely on the interpretation of Wittgenstein's arcane notebooks, and a sociologist may not wish to jeopardize a methodology with a potentially controversial interpretation. For similar reasons, the detail of these varying interpretations have not been

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<sup>12</sup> "Let us imagine that the people in that country carried on the usual human activities and in the course of them employed, apparently, an articulate language. If we watch their behavior, we find it intelligible, it seems 'logical.' But when we try to learn their language, we find it impossible to do so. For there is no regular connection between what they say, the sounds they make and their actions; but still these sounds are not superfluous, for if we gag one of the people, it has the same consequences as with us; without the sounds their actions fall into confusion - as I feel like putting it. Are we to say that these people have a language: orders, reports and the rest? There is not enough regularity for us to call it a "language."'" (Wittgenstein op cit: §207)

considered here. Family resemblance theory as described above in artificial isolation from the rest of Wittgenstein reduces the risk of such challenges.

(2) Wittgenstein: 'proto-New Ager'

A more specific problem with a whole-heartedly Wittgensteinian approach to the sociology of Christians in the New Age is that Wittgenstein would today probably with some justification be considered a 'New Ager'; he certainly does not provide a neutral yardstick for understanding Christian-New Age relations. Aristotelian logic, the stock academic yardstick of the *sociological* canon, has ramifications of covert bias no less than Greer's (1994) branching into radical ecofeminism (see above). Nevertheless, academic inertia may necessitate retention of an Aristotelian framework but not preclude suggestions from, for example Wittgensteinian and ecofeminist approaches, as comparative measures. Family resemblance theory as described above in artificial isolation from the rest of Wittgenstein is compatible with a traditional theoretical approach.

Wittgenstein was born to a wealthy Viennese family in 1889, studying in Berlin in 1906 and Manchester in 1908 before going to Cambridge in 1912. He was a contemporary Adolf Hitler (b 1889 in Upper Austria) and Carl Jung (b 1875 in Basel, Switzerland). His philosophical debts are open to interpretation, but beyond doubt is the influence of Oswald Spengler (Bloor 1983:160f) and William James (Kerr 1986:5)<sup>13</sup>.

It is reasonably well documented that Wittgenstein did have a spontaneous mystical experience.<sup>14</sup> He apparently experienced the kind of world-transforming unity central to such so-called mystical religions as Zen, Sufism, contemplative Christianity, and so on.

(Canfield 1975:406<sup>my footnote</sup>)

Subject to a full consideration of his biography, it is plausible to suggest that Wittgenstein was influenced by what James Webb (1977) has described as the 'Progressive Underground' and Richard Noll as the 'Asconan neopagans' (1996/1994:107) that emerged at this time from Monte Verita, Switzerland<sup>15</sup>. It is from these circles that many historians place the origins firstly of the Swinging Sixties and through that of contemporary New Age.

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### **Family Resemblance without Wittgenstein**

H

These final considerations of the wider context of Wittgenstein's life and work indicate that, unlike family resemblance theory *in se*, a whole-hearted Wittgensteinian philosophical basis to a sociology would favour New Age over Christian interpretations. The promising insights of a full-blown Wittgensteinian approach to the subject are acknowledged, but must be recognised as at least partly an artefact of his proto-New Age bias. In order not to jeopardize the whole theoretical basis of the sociological enquiry (as an ecofeminist/Christian basis jeopardizes Greer's thesis (1994)), it is proposed that family resemblance theory be artificially divorced from its full Wittgensteinian context.

A family resemblance theory of categorisation merely offers an explicit theoretical basis for further sociological consideration of the phenomena. A simplified example of the workings of this approach illustrated its benefits, and a proposal was outlined for a statistical justification of a common core benchmark shortlist of New Age phenomena. Family resemblance methodology is

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<sup>13</sup> Fellow student Jill Smith first drew James to my attention here.

<sup>14</sup> Canfield here cites Waismann, F, 1965, "Notes on Talks with Wittgenstein", *Philosophical Review* LXXIV.1 xxx-xxx; and McGuinness, BF, 1966, "The Mysticism of the *Tractatus*", *Philosophical Review* LXXV.3 xxx-xxx.

<sup>15</sup> cf also Goodricke-Clarke (1992) and Godwin (1994).

not entirely original or without academic authority, and has also been seen to function covertly in existing studies of New Age.

\* indicates citation for reference purposes only

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