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Astrology as Religion: Theory and Practice

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Abstract

Astrology can be understood as religious in both its principles and practices. A standard definition of religion is used to track astrology's theoretical, practical, and sociological components. Theoretically, astrology's Western foundations come from Plato and his story of creation, *Timaeus*. In establishing a relationship between the larger world of God (macrocosm) and the smaller world of humankind (microcosm), astrology illustrates the Greek concept of an interconnected cosmos. The practice of astrology as a nature religion arises from astrology's literal, metaphorical, symbolic, and perceptual links to nature. The intersection of time and place at each person's birth establishes an 'axis of placement' connecting each person to the natural world. Astrological practices include tracking the movement of the sun, moon, and planets; ritual participation in the cycles of nature; and honoring nature as sacred. Sociologically, astrology has an amorphous organizational structure, lack of a clear doctrine, and few identifiable institutional partnerships.

Introduction

Astrology links heaven to earth and comprises a worldview that is religious in both its principles and practices. Yet in modern Western society astrology is often dismissed as being little more than fortune telling and superstition. This is largely because people are more aware of the daily horoscope in their local newspaper than what constitutes the theory and practice of astrology, especially the religious base upon which astrology rests.

This article is intended to meet two goals. The first is to describe why astrology is religious. The second is to describe why it can be understood as a nature religion. Astrology, which means the 'study of the stars', entails the calculation of the position of the Sun, Moon, and planets in our solar system at the time and place of an event, such as a person's

birth. Those planetary positions are plotted onto a map called an astrological chart using a series of symbols. These symbols constitute a symbolic language that is then translated and interpreted by an astrologer to gain an understanding of the event from various perspectives, including physical, spiritual, and psychological.

Although there are astrological systems in other parts of the world, the focus in this article is on Western astrology. Western astrology started in Mesopotamia at least three thousand years ago with the observation of the movement of the stars and planets; was systematized in Greece twenty-five hundred years ago with the mapping of the heavens by mathematical methods; classified by Ptolemy eighteen hundred years ago as a set of physical laws; taught with natural philosophy and medicine in European universities six hundred years ago; and practiced by Kepler five hundred years ago as an indicator of mathematical and celestial harmony.

When astrology developed during the two millennia that stretched across the Greek classical era through the Renaissance, there were no definite boundaries between philosophy, religion, and science. Its proponents were what we today would call 'multi-disciplinary'. To name only a few: Plato (c. 427–347 BCE) was a philosopher who studied mathematics; Ptolemy of Alexandria (130–170 CE) was an astronomer and mathematician; Masha'Allah (762–816) was a Jew and historian; Al Kindi (c. 801–866) was a Muslim, philosopher, and mathematician; Albertus Magnus (1200–1280) was a Catholic Bishop, scholar, and scientist; Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) was an Aristotelian and Christian theologian; Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) was a physician, philosopher, and Catholic priest; and Johannes Kepler (1571–1630) was a Lutheran, mathematician and astronomer (Whitfield 2001). The split between philosophy, religion, and science occurred in the Scientific Revolution. Astrology, which cuts across these disciplinary boundaries, fell through the cracks. Since astrology was based on natural laws and mathematical constructs, it was pejoratively called a 'pseudo-science'. And since astrology tracked predictable cycles of the heavenly spheres and related them to events that took place on Earth, it was called divination and branded as fortune telling. And although at one time astrology was accepted by the Christian church as an instrument and indicator of God's intervention, it was later labeled determinism and a usurper of God's free will. [1] Astrology,

1. Thomas Aquinas wrote: 'Since a heavenly body is a moved mover, it has the quality of being an instrument, acting through the power of a principal agent. Hence a heavenly body through the power of its mover, which is a living substance, can be a cause of life. The movement of a heavenly body belongs to its nature not as active but

once heralded as a comprehensive system of cosmic order that descended from the Greeks, became shunned. [2]

Astrology at first glance does not seem like a religion. To anyone who has studied it, astrology is more an intellectual enterprise. Astrology as it is practiced today is not theistic; it is not designed to accommodate the worship of a deity. (Although in India the planets are worshiped as deities, this is not the case in Western astrology.) Neither is astrology about the veneration of a sacred person. Nor is astrology about mysticism, as there is no attempt to use astrology to lose individual consciousness and become mystically absorbed. A practitioner of astrology does not typically meditate, chant, pray, worship, or venerate. There are no communal gatherings, supernatural realms, ancestors, or sacred texts. The concentrated focus in astrology is on mathematics, astronomy, computers, symbols, and tables of planetary calculations. Yet it is religious nonetheless.

This leads to that unsettled question among academics: 'what is religion?' For the purposes of this article I will use the definition by Robert Ellwood and Barbara McGraw in *Many Peoples, Many Faiths*. This is an excellent introductory text on world religions first published thirty years ago. It has stood the test of time and in 2005 entered its eighth edition. Ellwood and McGraw state that the main component of any religion is that it situates the focus of life beyond the ordinary, mundane, physical existence and places it instead on a larger, extraordinary reality of 'something more'. This 'something more' can be a transcendent reality outside of our physical world, or it can point to an expanded significance of the world or the universe we already inhabit (Ellwood and McGraw 2005: 4). Astrology is an example of the latter in that it describes the integrated connection between God and nature.

Using Joachim Wach's (1898–1955) three forms of religious expression, Ellwood and McGraw divide religion into the theoretical, what is said; practical, what is done; and sociological, what are the societal connections. They place these three features into a chart of the 'fundamental

as receptive, i.e., it is responsive to being moved by an intelligence' (Aquinas in Charlesworth 1964: 125). Further: 'Most men follow their passions, which involve changes in sense-desire, and in these changes the heavenly bodies can play a part. On the other hand, those wise enough to be able to resist these passions are few and far between. Consequently, astrologers are able to foretell the truth in the majority of cases, especially in a general sense. However, they cannot do so in particular cases, for nothing stops a man from resisting his passions by his free-will. Thus these very astrologers say that the wise man is master of the stars in that he is the master of his own passions' (Aquinas in Charlesworth 1964b: 107).

2. The multiple factors that led to the decline in astrology's prestige are complex and go beyond the scope of this article.

features of faith' that they use as a guide to show patterns in religious expression and to compare world religions (Ellwood and McGraw 2005: 23). For instance, all religions seem to ask and answer similar questions such as: How is the universe set up? How does it work? Who are we? How do we fit in? Where did we come from? What is our destiny? How should we live? Using these three forms of religious expression, I will illustrate how these questions are addressed in astrology. First, I will examine the theoretical base of astrology, which begins with the ancient Greeks and one of their foremost philosophers, Plato. Second, I will look at the practice of astrology, which I argue constitutes a nature-oriented religiosity. And third, I will examine the sociological components of astrology and its intersection with the public.

Theoretical

To understand the importance of astrology as a system that connects us to the universe we must go back to the ancient Greeks. Although it was the Mesopotamians who developed astrology as early as 1000 BCE, it was the Greeks in the fifth century BCE who systematized it. Greek thought in general, and Plato in particular, provided the philosophical and religious foundations of astrology. For the Greeks, the universe was ruled by a coherent intelligence that provided an underlying order and meaning to the world. The Greeks perceived that they were part of a universe that was alive, interconnected, and harmonious. They called it the 'cosmos', which means 'order'. Woven together in an unending web, humans, Gods, and nature all interacted as parts of the same system, a system that was comprehensible to human reason.

Plato, one of the most influential philosophers of ancient Greece, wanted to understand how this cosmic system worked. In his story of creation, the *Timaeus*, he describes a creator God, a craftsman, who made the orderly universe, or cosmos, from disorder, or chaos.[3] This creator

3. Plato writes: 'Let us therefore state the reason why the framer of this universe of change framed it at all. He was good, and what is good has no particle of envy in it; being therefore without envy he wished all things to be as like himself as possible… God therefore, wishing that all things should be good, and so far as possible nothing be imperfect, and finding the visible universe in a state not of rest but of inharmonious and disorderly motion, reduced it to order from disorder, as he judged that order was in every way better. It is impossible for the best to produce anything but the highest… [I]n fashioning the universe he implanted reason in soul and soul in body, and so ensured that his work should be by nature highest and best. And so the most likely account must say that this world came to be in very truth, through god's providence, a living being with soul and intelligence' (Plato in Lee 1977: 42-43 [*Timaeus*, par. 30-31]).

took the four elements of life—fire, earth, air, and water—and from that mixture made the universe—the planets, stars, and all the creatures, including men and women.[4] The creator first put reason and soul into the Sun, Moon, and planets, making them intelligent beings, that, while not eternal like himself, would never die. After creating the planets, God took the left over soul-matter he had used for the planets, diluted it a bit, and used it to craft the souls of men and women. This immortal soul was combined with a mortal body to create humans, setting humanity on its cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (Plato in Lee 1977: 57 [*Timaeus*, par. 41]).

Plato thought that the heavens, which included the Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, and the starry firmament, were evidence of a creator God.[5] Plato believed that the heavens were a changeless, perfect, intelligible system, and the planets were powerful gods in their own right. For Plato, the mathematical perfection of the universe was clear and indisputable evidence that there was a God. Plato described God's creation of the universe using his theory of Ideal Forms, a concept that is at the heart of astrology's relation to both religion and nature. Ideal Forms are like thoughts in the mind of God. For Plato, God was transcendent, perfect, eternal, and never-changing. This perfect transcendent realm of God was in stark contrast to the immanent, imperfect, temporal, and always changing world of nature. Plato made a dualistic distinction between a perfect Ideal Form of something that exists in a transcendent realm, and that which is manifest physically in concrete reality. Ideal Forms are not intellectual abstractions, but actualities that are fully realized in another realm of reality.

These Ideal Forms that exist in the transcendent realm of God become manifest as concrete reality in the physical world. For example, the Ideal Form of beauty is crafted in the physical world as a beautiful flower, or a beautiful sunset, among many other beautiful things. This concrete manifestation of Ideal Forms is referred to by a variety of metaphors to indicate the process that links the transcendent and physical realms. One example is that the transcendent realm is reflected, or mirrored, in the physical realm. Another is that the transcendent realm is projected into the physical realm. To carry the metaphor of projection further, imagine that the Ideal Forms of God are like a film that is projected as an image onto the screen of a movie theater. In the theater the movie appears real;

4. Plato writes: 'So god placed water and air between fire and earth, and made them so far as possible proportional to one another, so that air is to water as water is to earth; and in this way he bound the world into a visible and tangible whole' (Plato in Lee 1977: 44 [*Timaeus*, par. 32])

5. These are the heavenly bodies that can be seen with the naked eye. Uranus was discovered in 1781, Neptune in 1846, and Pluto in 1930.

it evokes real emotions and thoughts. But it is real only in direct relationship to the film that is moving through the projector. If the projector stopped, the image in the theater would stop as well. The movie being viewed by the audience therefore has no existence separate from the projector and the spool of film. Likewise, the physical world of matter has no existence apart from God and Ideal Forms.

Religion is often discussed as encompassing two distinct realms. These paired realms have been variously described as extraordinary/ordinary; sacred/profane; heaven/earth; spiritual/physical; and transcendent/immanent, to name just a few. Regardless of the name, these two realms of reality, whether considered separate or concurrent spheres, are not in isolation from each other. These two realms are in contact with each other through boundaries, which, like doorways, are porous and passable. Ellwood and McGraw state: 'Words and people pass through those invisible doors, and the world is full of places and occasions that are like windows to the other side. This porous borderline, where the action is, is the sphere of the religious' (2002: 5). Astrology names these two religious realms macrocosm/microcosm, and they represent the link between the larger transcendent world of God (macro) and the concrete world of physical matter (micro).

Astrology is based on this understanding that the macrocosm of God is reflected in the microcosm of our solar system. The *Timaeus* states that God made the universe as a living model of God's perfection and harmony.[6] The macrocosm of God is also reflected in the microcosm of humans. *Genesis* states that God made men and women in His/Her image.[7] In astrology, the heavenly bodies are seen as intermediaries between God and humans. Astrology exemplifies the process of God's creation, which, according to *Timaeus* and *Genesis*, occurred first with the creation of heavenly bodies, and was then followed by the creation of humans.[8] To explain further, let us return to the metaphor of the film and

6. Plato writes: 'When the father who had begotten it perceived that the universe was alive and in motion, a shrine for the eternal gods, he was glad, and in his delight planned to make it still more like its pattern; and as this pattern is an eternal Living Being, he set out to make the universe resemble it in this way too as far as was possible. The nature of the Living Being was eternal, and it was not possible to bestow this attribute fully on the created universe; but he determined to make a moving image of eternity, and so when he ordered the heavens he made in that which we call time an eternal moving image of the eternity which remains for ever at one' (Plato in Lee 1977: 51 [*Timaeus*, par. 38]).

7. Gen. 1.27. 'So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them' (in Metzger and Murphy 1991: 3).

8. The story of creation from Gen. 1.1-31 is summarized as follows: On the first day God made light and separated Day from Night; on the second day God made the

the projector. Light enables the film to be shown, passing first through the lens of the projector, and then onto the movie screen. Likewise, God enables the Ideal Forms to be manifested, passing first through the lens of the solar system, and then on to humanity. The astrological chart is a map of the solar system at the time and place of each individual creation. By mapping the position of each planet at the time of any event, the chart in essence becomes a map of the microcosm of God's larger macrocosm. It establishes each person's place in the cosmos and represents a connecting link between humans and God.

This macro/micro relationship also links astrology to nature. It has been said that God created two books—the book of the Bible and the book of Nature. Astrology is reading God's book of Nature as it is written in the stars. God is manifested in nature (which includes humanity), and nature provides one avenue of connection to God.

In spite of this integral relationship between God and nature as seen in the macro/microcosm, and in spite of astrology as a conduit and mirror of this relationship, astrology and the whole macro/micro construct have been considered by some to be anti-nature. This is due to Plato's ambiguous attitude towards the natural physical world. Plato wrote over many years of his life, and his attitude towards the relationship between Ideal Form and physical matter differ in his writings at different stages of his career. Plato's attitude about God and nature ranged from an interconnection between the two, to a dualistic separation where material reality was a mere mirror image of a greater transcendent Ideal.[9] Plato could be

dome of the Sky; on the third day God made the Seas and Earth, and had the earth put forth vegetation; on the fourth day 'God said, 'Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth'. And it was so. God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, to rule over the sky and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day (vv. 14-19); on the fifth day God made the living creatures of the air and sea; on the sixth day God made animals of the earth and humans; on the seventh day God rested (in Metzger and Murphy 1991: 2-3).

9. In *Timaeus* the image of weaving together the transcendent and material world is given in the following passage: 'And when the whole structure of the soul had been finished to the liking of its framer, he proceeded to fashion the whole corporeal world within it, fitting the two together centre to centre: and the soul was woven right through from the centre to the outermost heaven, which it enveloped from the outside and, revolving on itself, provided a divine source of unending and rational life for all time. The body of the heaven is visible, but the soul invisible…' (Plato in Lee 1977: 5 [*Timaeus*, par. 37]).

read as downgrading, or even dismissing, nature as only a reflection of some greater transcendent reality, rather than being real and having value on its own (Tarnas 1991: 11-12).

The writings of Plotinus, a third century CE neo-Platonist, reinforced this idea that Platonism created a dualistic separation between the superior transcendent realm and the inferior immanent realm. Plotinus described the process God used to manifest reality as one of emanation. Emanation is like a champagne fountain at a wedding, where the champagne flows strongest from the top and then moves downward through a series of basins. As each basin fills, it in turn overflows and then fills the next one down. According to emanation, the One Godhead is at the top and God's energy flows down to the divine intellect, then to the world soul, and so on, diminishing as it moves down successive levels, until it ends at the world of nature. The world of nature is the bottom basin and the one furthest from the original source of God. God's essence flows only in one direction—downward—and weakens the further it is from its source. This system is called 'the great chain of being', although a more accurate name might be 'the great hierarchy of being'. Plotinus thought that our souls, which were trapped in the limited physical realm of matter, struggle to go back to their source, struggle to go back to God. Plotinus, in his theory of emanation, essentially turns Plato's macro/microcosm into a hierarchal ladder with nature relegated to the bottom rung, a place from which we seek to escape.

Additionally, the Christian theologian St. Augustine (354-430 CE) was influenced by the writings of Plotinus and Plato. Augustine used Plato's ideas to help him understand questions about the universe, particularly the question of good and evil. Augustine agreed with Plato that a transcendent God had created the world of nature. For Augustine, nature could not be evil, since a good God created it. However, humans were evil due to their fall from grace and original sin. The body, sex, and nature were all temptations to sin and, therefore, hindrances to salvation. For Augustine, God would not be found in the world of the senses, which was corrupt. Only God's grace could save humans from sin and damnation that lurk in the material world (Tarnas 1991: 143-48).

Plotinus and Augustine have done what many scholars and philosophers have done throughout the millennia, and that is to use Plato's writings to help them comprehend the universe and God's role in it. However, they should not be considered the final arbiters of Plato's ideas, and we should not exclude other interpretations on the relationship between God and the cosmos. Plato provided the philosophical and religious base to astrology. But a base is a foundation upon which structure can be built. Astrology need not remain bound by a construct which

seeks to limit its expression; in this case the belief that the macrocosm and microcosm define an antagonistic relationship between a superior transcendent and inferior concrete realm.

Astrology does work as a macrocosm/microcosm paradigm, but it is a paradigm of interconnection, not separation. God and nature are interwoven together like an intricate web, creating a system of integration and wholeness. There is a dualism, a distinction between the world of spirit and the world of nature. Anyone who has seen a person die can attest that at the moment of death some quality of life, some essence, leaves the body. The now lifeless body is still present in the material world, but something clearly is gone. The interconnection between spirit and matter is so complete that when they do become disengaged, the life-form created by their combination no longer technically exists. Rather than a 'great chain of being', astrology understands the cosmos as a nested, pulsating, breathing, life force that moves from the center to perimeter and back again in an eternal rhythm that could be called the breath of God. A good visual metaphor for astrology is the image of the Ptolemaic universe, where the earth is nested in the center of concentric circles of the Sun, Moon, planets, and stars. The planet earth at the center becomes our point of view, our ground, our place of contact. The universe is alive and every tree, every animal, and every human are an interconnected part of its existence.

Practical

In addition to the macrocosm/microcosm interconnection between God and nature, there are several other ways astrology is connected to nature. According to Bron Taylor in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, nature religion is 'religious perceptions and practices that despite substantial diversity are characterized by a reverence for nature and consider nature sacred' (Taylor 2005: 2661). The diversity of nature religions can be understood as existing along a continuum. At one end is the worship of nature as divine. At the other end is a perception that has become integrated into our daily lives that nature is sacred. Somewhere along the middle of this continuum is the descriptive use of metaphorical and symbolic language that is rooted in the natural world.

The practice of astrology seems to stretch along the whole length of this continuum. Although the theoretical base of astrology does not include the worship of nature, per se, it does define the connection between humans and nature as more real than simply metaphor, symbol, or perception, although it also uses those means of association. The literal link between astrology, humans, and nature is based on the time

and place of a person's birth; for example 23 January 1955 at 5.05 pm Central Standard Time in Chicago, Illinois, USA. This intersection between time and space at the moment of birth creates what I call the 'axis of placement'. To use Mircea Eliade's terminology, birth creates an *axis mundi*, the link between heaven and earth, the sacred and profane. Birth is, in effect, a *heirophany*, a manifestation of the divine (Eliade 1959). The astrological chart is a temporal and spatial map of this event. A person's birth, as mapped in the birth-chart, locks in the axis of placement on earth by rooting him/her to a specific time and place.

The birth-chart also purports to show how human beings belong to the larger universe that surrounds them. The birth-chart is a template that represents the planet earth. It is drawn as a 360-degree circle divided by a horizontal and vertical axis, separating it into four main quadrants. Again, Eliade comes to mind with his model of the *hierophany* and *axis mundi* expanding outward to four directions. The horizontal line represents the horizon where the stars rise (the ascendant) and set (the descendent). The vertical line represents the sky above (the zenith) and the earth below (the nadir). In addition to this broad division of the earth, there are also twelve smaller divisions, called houses, which represent different arenas of physical life; for example, self identity, values, communication, home, creativity, service, partnership, sexuality, education, career, aspirations, and spiritual life. This birth-chart template becomes the basic map upon which the Sun, Moon, and planets at the time and place of birth are plotted. The birth-chart shows the link between the sky to earth, the macrocosm to the microcosm. This quality of belonging to the universe is an example of the 'spiritualities of connection' that can be used to characterize nature religions (Taylor 2005: 2666; cf. Taylor 2001). Formally recognizing the time and place of birth by calculating the birth-chart is the central ritual of astrology. Birth announcements and birth certificates also acknowledge the importance of the axis of placement by giving the time and place of birth. But an astrological birth-chart goes much further by literally and symbolically linking each person to the macrocosm.

From this literal connection to nature, the practice of astrology moves along the continuum to the center, where astrology's rich symbolic and metaphorical language is associated with the natural world. For example, in astrology each person is considered part of an interconnected cosmos, a relationship symbolized by the concentric circles of the solar system.[10]

10. Although the sun-centered Copernican system replaced the image of the earth-centered Ptolemaic system in the sixteenth century, the centered earth continues to be an accurate metaphor for the perceived placement of humans in the universe—

Another metaphor relates to the twelve constellations, which are the zodiac signs such as Aries and Taurus. It has become a cliché to ask someone 'What's your sign?' But hidden at the heart of this ubiquitous question is the entire astrological worldview that infers that such a question has meaning and importance. Astrology is built around the four elements of fire, earth, air, and water that, according to the *Timaeus*, were used by the creator to make the cosmos.[11] Each zodiac sign is described by one of the four elements; for example, Taurus is an earth element and Leo is a fire element. People can be referred to by elemental features, such as she is an 'earth mother' or she has a 'fiery temper'. The names of the planets, such as Venus and Mars, represent universal principles of human nature, such as love and war.

From this central point on the nature religion continuum the practice of astrology moves to the other end, where a perception of nature as sacred is integrated into daily life, both through the way the world is viewed, and as part of a daily practice. Religion provides a sense of belonging to something much greater than oneself, something which gives meaning and significance to life. Religion also creates links to this larger and more meaningful world through specific behaviors and rituals. Religion, in short, needs to be practiced. A practitioner of astrology includes not only an astrologer who can calculate and read the astrological chart, but also someone who accepts the integrated cosmological worldview that astrology contains.

The central worldview of astrology is that each person is part of an interconnected cosmos that contains God, nature, and humans. Some think that this integrated worldview began to disconnect with the Judaism and Christianity-grounded notion that nature was a tool for God to use for the redemption of humanity; humans then lost their role as one part of the intricate web of life and were given a new role as dominant ruler of nature.[12] In the past when humans needed nature to survive, they maintained close ties to the rhythms of the Sun, Moon, and planets that not only set agricultural cycles but also acted as a chronometer to

surrounded by and interconnected to the greater whole. The geo-centric system is still the working construct of astrology, which tracks the planets from a terrestrial, rather than solar perspective.

11. The theory of the four elements as the constituents of the material world was first put forth by Empedocles in 460 BCE. It was a fairly common theory at the time Plato wrote the *Timaeus* and was also accepted by Aristotle.

12. Gen. 1.26-29. 'Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth' (in Metzger and Murphy 1991: 2-3).

measure the days, months, and years. But today advanced technology provides ever new means to control nature. In the summer, people move from their air-conditioned houses, to their air-conditioned cars, to their air-conditioned offices, barely breaking a sweat. Dependence on the mechanized clock cuts the cord to the natural world since there is no longer any need to look to the heavens as a chronometer to set daily, monthly, and yearly rhythms.

A practitioner of astrology seeks to restore awareness of the interconnected cosmos that over time has become lost. This restoration occurs through a mindful, deliberate practice. While there are many ways to practice astrology in daily life, I will focus on three central ones—tracking the movement of the Sun, Moon, and planets in our solar system; participation in the recurring cycles of nature; and honoring nature and the four elements as sacred.

Tracking the movement of the Sun and Moon is done by paying attention to the location of these luminaries in the sky. The Sun and Moon can be tracked on a daily basis without any sophisticated understanding of the universe, a telescope, or the ability to read planetary tables. The movement of the Sun throughout the seasons can be observed by the lengthening and shortening of the days, and the corresponding sunrise and sunset. Most newspapers give the time of sunrise and sunset in the daily weather report. More formal practices can be included. For example, the yoga position 'Sun Salute' is a salutation to the sun and is done facing east at sunrise. Prayers and meditations can be timed to dawn and dusk. The positions on the horizon where the Sun rises in the east and sets in the west can also be noted. This position will change throughout the year as the Sun moves from the winter solstice, to the spring equinox, to the summer solstice, to the fall equinox. This simple act of following the Sun is one of the earliest religious rituals. Neolithic humans aligned the burial tomb at Newgrange, Ireland c. 3000 BCE to the winter solstice; and c. 2800 BCE the megalithic monument at Stonehenge in England was built according to the summer solstice (Kagan 2005: 30). As the field of Archeoastronomy can attest, many other archeological sites have solar or planetary alignments.

Tracking the Moon is also simple, and like the Sun, it is easy to note when and where it rises and sets. The Moon has the additional feature of changing its appearance in the sky; it grows (waxes) from a tiny sliver, to a half crescent, to a full circle, and then shrinks (wanes) back to a half crescent, to a tiny sliver, and then to nothing at all. The phases of the Moon have been noted to correspond with women's menstrual cycles, and so for women, tracking their menses by the Moon is one of the easiest practices to follow.

The movement of the planets is a bit more difficult to track than the Sun and Moon, but not by much. Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and even Saturn can be seen with the naked eye. Newspapers will often mention the position of the planets, and many calendars provide an overview. There are guides available that point out the constellations and major star groups. Astrologers use planetary tables called an Ephemeris. A telescope is a nice addition, but not necessary. Of course, with light pollution from the cities, it is becoming more and more difficult to see the starry canopy of the night sky. Fewer people have witnessed a night filled with thousands of stars, or seen the glittering road known as the Milky Way. This loss of the night sky is another reason for the disconnection between people and the cosmos. Many people have forgotten that behind the smog and lights of the modern world, there lies a magnificent display of light and dark. Yet, even in most cities today we can find a few of the major star groups, including The Big and Little Dippers, Orion and a few of the zodiacal constellations including Gemini, Taurus, Sagittarius, Leo, Scorpio, and Virgo.

While this may seem like a lot of paying attention, it can actually become an integrated part of daily (and nightly) life. In the same way we drive through traffic to get to work every day without thinking much about the route or the movement of all the other cars, we can find ourselves sailing through the cosmos without much effort at all.

After tracking the movement of the Sun, Moon, and planets, the second practice is to participate formally in these recurring cycles of nature. This is often done in a ritual context, sometimes with a group of people. The most central ritual is the celebration of the day of birth, which in astrology is known as the 'solar return' since it is when the Sun makes its full cycle and returns to the same position it was at a person's birth. The new and full Moons are often celebrated, as is the new Sun (winter solstice) and the full Sun (summer solstice). While many people think of these types of nature rituals as pagan, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all use the cycles of the Sun and Moon to mark major ritual events. To give just a few examples, most Christians celebrate the date of Easter, which changes every year, on the first Sunday following the full Moon after the vernal equinox. Muslims keep a lunar calendar, and their festivals advance through the seasons. The month of Ramadan begins when the first sliver of the new Moon has been sighted. The Jewish day begins and ends at Sunset, with Shabbat (Sabbath) starting at Sundown on Friday and lasting until Sundown on Saturday (Bowker 1997: 187-88, 301).

The third practice of astrology is to honor nature as a creation infused with God. A simple way to do this is to recognize the four fundamental elements of fire, earth, air, and water that combine to make the environ-

mental structure of nature. God is seen in the entire ecosystem—every animal, mineral, and vegetable—and therefore all of earth is seen as alive, conscious, and sacred. Astrology is a reminder that people are not separate from the natural world but instead are connected to a larger cosmos that includes not only Earth, but other planets in the solar system as well. What happens to the cosmos, from the earth all the way to the ends of the galaxy, affects all of us.

Astrology is one of the few religious systems that directly expands ecological responsibility from what happens on the planet earth to include our actions in space. Exploratory journeys throughout the solar system demonstrate that what constitutes our sphere of ecological influence is much larger than we tend to think. On 19 January 2006, NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) sent a spacecraft to Pluto, the last unexplored planet in our solar system. The unmanned New Horizons will take ten years to complete the three-billion mile mission, and, at a top speed of 47,000 mph, it is the fastest spacecraft ever launched. After it leaves the Earth, it will sail past the Moon in nine hours and arrive at Jupiter in thirteen months, where it will slingshot around Jupiter's gravity and continue on to Pluto. There are some environmental concerns about the possible risks of this launch since it is powered by twenty-four pounds of radioactive plutonium (Tobin 2006). Another planetary environmental concern is the amount of trash orbiting the Earth. There are over nine-thousand pieces of space debris orbiting between 550 and 625 miles above Earth. This trash now weighs over five tons, much from satellite fragments, and more is expected to accumulate every year. There is no plan to remove these objects from space even though they can create problems for commercial flights and other space activity (CNN.com 2006). Another troubling issue is the deployment of weapons in space, a project on which the Pentagon has already spent billions of dollars. In 2002 President Bush withdrew from the thirty-year Antiballistic Missile Treaty which banned space weapons, and there is a push by the Air Force to establish space superiority (Weiner 2005).

While there are huge technological and financial hurdles to overcome, the push for deployment of weapons in space could start a space arms race, a terrifying thought since a space weapon would have the possibility of striking anywhere in the world within ninety minutes. This is not some science fiction future but more like a return to the past. In 1969 the $25 bn Apollo project, which put a man on the Moon, was referred to as a 'race to the Moon', pitting the USA against the Soviet Union during the threat of the Cold War (Wilford 1989).

Sociological

Ellwood and McGraw direct their attention to how religions are sustained from an insider perspective, including such issues as organizational structure, promotion of doctrine, and interaction between leaders, adherents, and antagonists. They also look at religions from an outsider perspective, including religion's interface with major social institutions and society at large. In western culture centuries past, astrology was incorporated into religious, educational, and political structures. But hundreds of years of ideological attacks on astrology have taken their toll, and astrology is deficient in the legitimate institutional partnerships that are often seen as necessary for full societal integration. Astrology also lacks the clear, hierarchal, organizational structure of other religions; it has no single leader, church, worship, doctrine, or dogma.

This does not mean that astrology should not be considered religious. Rather, this lack of structure is typical in nature religions. Catherine Albanese, in *Nature Religion in America* (1990), states that one of the hallmarks of nature religion is its failure to organize or institutionalize. Like many nature religions, the societal aspects of astrology are amorphous and loosely-connected. Astrologers are linked together by professional organizations, educational conferences, and training opportunities.

The lack of an easily recognized organizational structure may have limited astrology's role on the religious stage. Still, it is evident that there is a public interest in astrology. A 2003 poll found that 31 percent of the American public believes in astrology (Taylor 2003). There are many solo practitioners of astrology, as well as thousands of books on aspects of astrological theory and practice. Most newspapers have the daily horoscope reading, which, if nothing else, indicates the public's interest. It could be seen as especially fitting that the religion of cosmic interconnection finds its strongest presence on the internet, the tool of social interconnection. Perhaps this is a post-modern reading of a new macrocosm/microcosm. A Google search on 'astrology' brought up 99,700,000 hits, more than a search on 'Christianity' at 81,400,000.[13]

Conclusion

Ellwood and McGraw's fundamental features of religion as described in *Many Peoples, Many Faiths* (2005) have provided a solid guide to situate astrology in its religious context. I have examined astrology by applying Ellwood and McGraw's theoretical, practical, and sociological

13. Search done on 23 January 2006.

framework. The theoretical base of astrology is ancient Greek's intellectual legacy of a comprehensible cosmos in which nature, humans, and God are interconnected. In practice, astrology can be associated with nature religion due to its perception of nature as sacred. Additionally, the symbolic language of astrology is rooted in natural metaphors. The astrological world view is integrated into the life of its practitioners through an awareness of the movement of the Sun, Moon, and planets in the solar system; participation in the recurring cycles of nature; and honoring nature and the four elements as sacred. Sociologically, astrology is fluid and amorphous; and like other nature religions, astrology is not defined by its organizational or institutional structure. If we accept Ellwood and McGraw's definition of religion, then astrology deserves its place alongside other world religions. I have limited my examination of astrology to Western astrology as associated with Western European history and North American practice. Expanding this discussion to astrology as practiced in India, China, Tibet, Thailand, and many other cultures, would only support my position. By acknowledging its religious base, one of the oldest and most sophisticated cosmological systems can be examined in a new light.

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