

## Chapter One

### Are We Living in a New Age?

That we live in a new age seems an incontestable fact. Almost everything nowadays, especially since the beginning of the twentieth century, has proclaimed the new-ness of this age as a fact.

In 1899 Charles Duell, the director of the U.S. Patent Office, is said to have written to President William McKinley recommending that the office be abolished. "Everything that can be invented," he stated, "has been invented." At that time, virtually every invention that we associate with modern civilization was either unknown or in such a rudimentary state of development as to seem, today, either comical or endearingly quaint. The world at that time had no paved highways, no speeding cars, no airplanes. It lacked a veritable host of other items that have become commonplace in our age: radio, television, voice recorders, refrigeration, washing machines, computers — to name only a few things that we today take entirely for granted.

The greatest change that has occurred has been in our perception of reality. This change began with the discovery, barely ten years after Sri Yukteswar published his book, that matter is actually composed only of vibrations of energy, a discovery that has forced the conclusion that energy is the reality behind everything man-made that we see around us. This reality underlies not only material things, but also institutions and ideas.

A number of people still claim that when the oil resources of our planet eventually become exhausted, we'll be thrown back to medieval times. Those forecasters of gloom overlook something important: It would be impossible for man at this stage of his development to turn back, for the simple reason that the world has become not only energy-dependent, but also energy-*conscious*. We today perceive everything in terms of energy.

It wasn't the discovery of oil that gave us the modern age. It was an already-manifesting awareness that *energy is a reality*. Energy-consciousness, in the first place, was what led to oil's discovery.

My father, an oil geologist for Esso, was posted by his company to Romania. He told me that oil was first discovered seeping out of the ground in that country — an oddity that had been occurring for centuries, but that had long been considered only a nuisance. When energy itself became recognized as a global need, oil was recognized as crucial to civilization's further development. Men like my father were sent to Romania and elsewhere to help develop those resources.

Whenever mankind is ready to take a new step in his advancement, that step will — indeed, *must* — appear as if "out of the blue." Penicillin, a product of bread mold, was unheard of as a medicine until mankind was ready to discover its practical uses. Every new step in civilization's advancement may have developed from facts that had been staring everyone in the face for centuries. It wasn't so much the

new discoveries which produced the change as the fact that man was ready to make use of those discoveries. Once mankind was ready, the discoveries became not only possible, but inevitable.

The shock waves generated by the realization that matter is only a vibration of energy have led some physicists to suspect that energy, too, will in its turn prove to manifest even subtler realities.

Ancient Indian tradition gave the underlying concept the much simpler name: consciousness.

A New Age? Traditionally, the chronology of civilizations has been reckoned from earthly events: from the birth of Jesus Christ; the death of Buddha; the emigration of Mohammed to Medina; the assorted reigns of kings and emperors. By any objective reckoning, however, the time through which we are now passing is so radically different from any previous one that it seems reasonable to define it for all mankind as a *New Age*.

For new scientific insights are threatening to grow to the dimensions of an avalanche. In view of this fact, it seems pointless to try to reconcile present times with past history.

The old order began crumbling centuries ago, even before the increasingly powerful onslaughts of modern science. The first sledgehammer-blows, delivered in the West, were soon felt throughout the world. The new spirit of inquiry gave birth to the Italian Renaissance, to the Protestant Reformation, and almost simultaneously to the voyage of Christopher Columbus to the New World and the consequently "shocking" revelation that the world is round.

The same spirit led to other discoveries, including the fact that high civilizations co-existed with our own, and that still others, at least as high, existed in ages past. Western civilization, clearly, is far from unique. To the extent that it is special — and the people of certain other, older cultures may have defined us as "those revolutionary Western barbarians, shaking up everything!" — Western science has merely anticipated findings that were bound to be made anyway. The major blows to tradition came, certainly, through the findings of Kepler, Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton. They were followed by a swelling number of scientific pioneers, most of them Western, whose findings fundamentally changed man's approach to reality.

Indeed, for more than a century now it has been almost a fad for thinking people to challenge the validity even of traditional morality.

Science has given us an entirely new way of looking at matter, at life — at everything! Whereas in the past it may have sufficed in the West, particularly, to reach conclusions by logic, the criterion for acceptance today is experience — which, scientifically speaking, is to say, experiment. The German philosopher Georg Hegel stated, "All that is real is logical, and all that is logical is real." On this premise virtually all of Western civilization rested.

What, indeed, is one to make of the discovery which resolved the long-standing debate as to whether

light is a particle or a wave? The answer? It is both! What, then, of even subtler, more abstract questions such as the existence of God? Back when logic ruled Western thinking, scholastic theologians stretched the unprovable to the point of absurdity by arguing logically the question, How many angels could stand together on the head of a pin? Modern science refused even to consider such questions, dismissing them not necessarily as absurd, but as imponderable.

Interestingly enough, that decision led eventually to serious consequences. For, having avoided all seemingly imponderable questions for centuries, scientists ended up demoting them finally from irrelevance to non-existence. The modern “scientific solution” to the question about the existence of God was reached — however, and of course — by default, not at all by the vaunted scientific method.

The new approach to reality, based on demonstrated facts, has created an upheaval in people’s thinking, and has produced a profound sense of confusion. A story — no doubt apocryphal, but nevertheless suggestive of confusion as to what does and does not constitute proof — illustrates delightfully the ensuing bewilderment. A Hindu in the Indian city of Benares is said to have assured an American tourist, "With all the archaeological investigations that have been conducted in my country, not a single wire has been discovered. This *proves*," he concluded triumphantly, "that in ancient India they had the wireless!"

Nevertheless, the new ways of thinking, based on experiment, have come to stay, and need, therefore, to be understood. Nothing in the scientific approach to reality says that man must limit himself to experimenting with material instruments — particularly now, when matter itself has been found to consist only of vibrations of energy.

Formal religion — not the high spiritual teachings of Krishna, Buddha, and Jesus Christ, but the outward forms that clothe religion everywhere — no longer holds deep appeal in the minds of growing numbers of thinking people. There remains in many such people, however, and perhaps more insistently today than ever, a deeply felt need to understand what life is all about. I number myself among them, at least in my past. I had a deep longing for that inner security which religion ought to bestow. Lacking today is a perception of how to fulfill that need by bringing it in line with present-day understanding.

Old-fashioned ways of looking at life and of expressing oneself no longer exert, these days, the same appeal as they did in their own day. We are, for one thing, immersed in the ebb and flow of rapid movement and instant communication. The old ways were more leisurely than ours are today. Yet, beneath their longer, more placid rhythms, old human realities were basically the same as today's. The present hustle and impatience are merely garments that cover a human nature basically the same everywhere, even if people no longer display courtly manners or conscious elegance in their speech. Thus, there remains a need to understand motivations which people often hide, even from themselves.

Is mankind, as many aver, sliding rapidly into moral chaos? Or is this age simply more challenging in the demand it makes of all men to live more energetically? If this truly is a new age, fresh ways of thinking must be sought for whatever deeper insights they may provide into reality.

What faces us today is much more than a revolutionary perception of the universe. It is, potentially, a deeper perception of divine truth itself. The change in thinking that mankind is undergoing is not limited, moreover, to any nation or culture: it is worldwide.

To begin with, it seems reasonable to say that, whether we like it or not, the times we live in are indeed different — radically so — from any within known history. Consider only a few examples:

In literature, everyone writes in greatly shortened sentences. Reviews of Jane Austen novels of the early 1800s often praise her style; yet who today could write that way even if he wanted to? It is more than the fact that we no longer use quill pens, fountain pens, or even typewriters. Computers now enable us to set down on paper our most fleeting thoughts in the full knowledge that it will be easy to correct and polish as we go. We don't even need, if a page contains a mistake, to type out the whole page laboriously again. A simple change, and our electric printers give us the new page within seconds. Even our thoughts race ahead of us at a speed that might have been unnatural, and perhaps impossible (judging by the way people seem to have spoken), in Austen's day.

In the composition of music, computers have made it possible to write quickly and legibly while remaining in the natural flow of one's inspiration. Music synthesizers, too, have obviated the need to learn to play many instruments, and have thereby opened the field for composers to remain even more completely in the flow of the inspiration they receive.

The same may be said of countless other fields of endeavor. In business, it is now possible to conclude transoceanic agreements with a single telephone call. Gone is the need to write long letters, then wait months for a reply. On the other hand, if a face-to-face confrontation is required, one can hop on an airplane and arrive at one's destination in a few hours — or, if physical contact isn't necessary, convey one's thoughts by a variety of methods: fax, e-mail, and direct communication by video phone. So far-reaching in their impact are these changes that one no longer needs to affirm that this is a new age. The facts stare one in the face from virtually the moment he awakes every morning.

Is there, then, some explanation for these revolutionary changes?

Interestingly, an explanation was published more than a century ago, in 1894, before any shift toward energy-consciousness was even suspected, and five years before the director of the U.S. Patent Office is said to have written the President recommending that his Office be abolished. In a sense, indeed, that recommendation was valid, for everything that could be squeezed out of old ways of doing things had, quite possibly, been manifested already. Virtually every invention that has been made since then has been powered by energy. The old ways were formally buried in the year 1900, with the beginning of the new age.

The task facing mankind today is to understand even better the implications of this new energy-consciousness.