

# Chapter 73

## Golden States of Mind: A Geography of California Consciousness

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### 73.1 Introduction

California holds a unique position in the vast and complex cartography of American religion—a position that can seem, depending on the angle of approach, at once central and marginal. On the one hand, California—from its economic opportunities to its world-changing media and culture industries to its quasi-mythological status as a site of personal and collective transformation—has played a dominant role in developing and broadcasting American culture and identity, including diverse forms of American religious culture and identity. At the same time, this influence has oftentimes proceeded at the margins and edges of American culture—and nowhere as obviously as in matters of the spirit. For though mainline religious traditions have played crucial roles in the development of California’s religious landscape, and though Los Angeles alone is arguably the most religiously diverse city in the planet (Orr 1999), what stands out as the most influential and globally significant of California’s many religious currents is that restless, intense, faddish, and often heterodox religiosity—or “spirituality”—that compels both mockery and fascination. We call this current “California consciousness” (Davis 2006): an imaginative, experimental, eclectic, heretical and sometimes hedonistic quest for human transformation that, while principally rooted in Anglo-American sensibility, has manifested as a highly diverse and recombinant set of sects, “cults,” lifestyle movements, cultural practices, ontological beliefs, psychological systems, and personal attitudes. In invariably broad brushstrokes, this paper will attempt to map five of the

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major strands of California consciousness: *nature religion, esotericism, counterculture, east-west hybridity, and human potential.*

Defining California consciousness is no easier than defining the New Age, with which it shares a great deal. Though world faiths like Buddhism and Christianity have marked the West Coast's alternative spirituality in fundamental ways, many of the paths that criss-cross California fall into that increasingly popular claim of being "spiritual, but not religious" (Fuller 2001). But even the word *spiritual* barely suffices, since some expressions of California consciousness fuse and confuse sacred and profane and are so embodied as to appear indistinguishable from exercise routines or hedonistic revelry. The loss of boundaries sought by some seekers marks the object itself. To take Los Angeles as an example, as early as 1913—well before the occult boom of the 1920s—the writer Willard Huntington Wright was already claiming that:

No other city in the United States possesses so large a number of metaphysical charlatans in proportion to its population. Whole buildings are devoted to occult and outlandish orders—mazdaznan clubs, yogi sects, homes of truth, cults of cosmic fluidists, astral planners, Emmanuel movers, Rosicrucians and other boozy transcendentalists. (Davis 2006: 107)

One way to generalize about the heterogeneous phenomenon of California consciousness is to underscore its profoundly phenomenological dimension. California seekers could be said to have taken the bait that William James dangled in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, where he famously defined religion as "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (1961: 42). For James, personal experience was the cornerstone of the religious life, rather than dogma or institution or even belief. Prophesying modes of religious experimentation that would characterize California, James opened up the *wunderkammer* of consciousness and embraced mysticism, the occult, and psychoactive substances as valid points of departure. Experimenting with peyote and nitrous oxide, James argued that exalted states of consciousness had to be integrated into any philosophy worth its salt. Though James' approach hardly exhausts our understanding of religion, it certainly helps illuminate the centrality of cognitive and perceptual experience to California consciousness. His key word "solitude" is also telling, for the very informality and restlessness of California consciousness underscores the singularity of the individual seeker, whose sectarian commitments are often transitory and who inhabits what Colin Campbell calls a "cultic milieu" out of which more sectarian identities crystallize and dissolve (Campbell 2002: 14). The emphasis on phenomenology articulates what amounts to one of the few explicitly ideological strands of California consciousness: the insistence on personal experience as fundamental to religious perspective. But it also creates a basis for the sort of comparative methodology found in the history of religions school, where shared experiences allow commonalities—dominant themes, practices, and controlling images and "myths"—to be traced and constructed through fields of strong diversity of scale and expression. Our five strands arise from such an application.

What is particularly significant for a geography of this religious imagination is how rooted California consciousness is in a certain cartographic self-awareness, a geopolitical “position” that might be approached by way of Walt Whitman’s poem “Facing West from California’s Shores.” A patriarch of America’s unchurched spirituality, Whitman never actually visited California, at least if you leave aside whatever phantasm appeared to Allen Ginsberg in “A Supermarket in California.” But Whitman intuited that the state’s identity, and perhaps its spiritual destiny, lay in space. Speaking with his most expansive poetic “I,” Whitman imagines a single being that moves westward from Asia until finally arriving at the Pacific (Whitman 1897: 95):

Facing west from California’s shores,  
 Inquiring, tireless, seeking what is yet unfound,  
 I, a child, very old, over waves, toward the house of maternity, the land of  
 migrations, look afar,  
 Look off the shores of my Western sea, the circle almost circled.

Here Whitman announces two geographic myths that collide. In one, the West heads west, as Euro-American civilization expands until it metaphorically runs aground in California. At the same time, perhaps sensing California’s location on the bubbling Pacific Rim, Whitman folds this finality back towards Asia and its ancient traditions. The circularity of the planetary sphere unveils the utopian possibility of return and reunion at the very apogee of escape. Whitman ends the poem by asking a question that goes to the heart of the region’s restless spiritual imagination: “But where is what I started for so long ago?/And why is it yet unfound?”

The seeker orientation that lies at the center of California consciousness is bound up with the economics of the state, including postmodern capitalism—a new socio-economic order that, as the example of Silicon Valley alone proves, California played a privileged role in creating. California’s robust “spiritual marketplace” led to a diverse production of social spaces which furthered the flourishing of new and hybridized religious offerings in ever-evolving and profoundly mediated forms. These spaces vary tremendously; from the bohemian enclaves of the Haight-Ashbury or Venice Beach, to the religious landscapes of Tassajara Zen Mountain Center or San Jose’s Rosicrucian Park, to the innumerable psychic fairs, desert full-moon raves, online communities and other more transient spaces erected to cater to the needs of the restless and recombinant California spirit. Nature itself—in the form of mountains, woodlands, deserts, the coast and hot springs—is revered, but also transformed into new socially produced sacred (and profane) spaces, which along with their urban counterparts serve to both reflect and reinforce the significance attached to them, in an unending dialectic of social processes and individual experience. In this way California becomes not just the place where currents come together to form a new and globally visible socio-spiritual template, but a landscape of modern religious innovation itself, a “visionary state” (Davis 2006).

## 73.2 Nature

One wellspring for California's unusual spiritual culture lies in the state's diverse and inspiring natural environment—its dramatic topographies, bioregional heterogeneity, beauty, and often ideal climate. As California grew into a national myth in the minds of nineteenth century Americans, the state's epic wilderness catalyzed an imagination of place infused with religious forces. The very notion of wilderness was, of course, already a feature of the American religious imagination, an ambivalent dimension marked at once by Puritan demonization and the Transcendentalist reverence voiced by Emerson and Thoreau, who unveiled what Catherine Albanese calls "an environmental religion of nature" (Albanese 1990: 80–105). In the case of California, it is this organic Transcendentalism that came to the fore. One example is the reverent awe with which early Anglo-American visitors regarded the Sierra Nevada's groves of giant sequoias, the first and most charismatic symbol of the California wilderness, and one which has routinely inspired religious language—especially comparisons to Gothic cathedrals.

In the Sierras, this ambient nature religion found its voice in John Muir, California's first great prophet of the wild. In his writings, Muir combined Transcendentalist intensity, naturalist detail, the prophetic rhetoric of the Bible, and a strong vein of pantheism. Revising the language of the Gospel of John, for example, Muir once famously wrote "Now we are fairly into the mountains, and they into us" (Albanese 1990: 99). Based in part on his own extraordinary experiences, including a famous climb up Mt. Ritter where Muir felt a preternatural spirit aid him as he negotiated a particularly dangerous passage, Muir's writings were in turn inspirational. They encouraged Americans to retreat to nature as a respite from the "galling harness" of civilization and to discover for themselves a naturalized framework for unchurched and sublime experience. Tracing the specifically religious dimension of Muir's legacy is not easy. Given its informality, interiority, and naturalistic leanings, the religion of nature is sometimes difficult to isolate from hiking, surfing, and other practices of outdoor leisure. At the same time, earth-based and "pagan" sensibilities are also found throughout California counterculture, whose "back to the land" communes, wilderness vision quests, and natural food practices are clearly imbued with green spirituality.

Though the founding of the Sierra Club and Muir's battles to preserve wild places were achievements of governmentality rather than religion, Albanese reminds us that "it was the presence of the religion of nature that gave to preservationism its vital force" (Albanese 1990: 95). Throughout the twentieth century, the religion of nature continued to inform American environmentalism, much of whose theory and practice—from Greenpeace to eco-psychology—was developed up and down the West Coast. Movement texts surrounding the aggressive and militant Earth First! campaigns in the 1980s and 1990s, which included the defense of old growth redwoods in Northern California, were rich with Neo-paganism, and the rallying cry of "Back to the Pleistocene" suggested a pantheistic anti-modernity (Taylor 2009: 71–102). The influential Californian witch Starhawk embraced anti-nuclear activism

in the 1980s as a holistic element of her pagan spirituality. Perhaps the most charismatic and media-genic exemplar of Muir's legacy in recent decades was Julia Butterfly Hill, a young activist from Arkansas who, in 1997, climbed 180 ft up a Humboldt County redwood named Luna and remained there until the Pacific Lumber corporation agreed to save the tree. Like Muir, Hill had found her calling after a traumatic, life-changing accident, and though she insisted that she was no saint, her self-performance and language were deeply shaped by American religion, and by the American—and Californian—quest to leave religion behind and discover spirit in the world at hand.

California's environment marks the state's spiritual culture in more grounded ways as well. In Southern California, especially, the mild Mediterranean climate encouraged sunshine living and a measure of ease that stirred up fantasies of a paganish "return to Greece." Indeed, the first of the nation's outdoor Greek Theaters was built in 1901 by the Theosophical Society at Point Loma near San Diego, where Shakespeare and Theosophical dramas were performed in flowing white robes. Meanwhile the burgeoning agricultural industry cemented images of a California Eden of outsized fruits and vegetables, deepening the association of California with nature even as rapid industrialization marked the state. Particularly significant for spiritual culture were the tens of thousands of consumptives, asthmatics, and other invalids who came to Southern California in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, drawn by the promise of health-restoring climate and lifestyle (Frankiel 1988: 59–61). In 1895, one census suggested that Los Angeles featured the largest number of doctors per capita of any city in the world (Baur 1959: 87). Many of these doctors did not practice allopathic medicine, which led one medical examiner at the time to dub Los Angeles County "the Mecca of the quack" (Baur 1959: 81). While alternative medicine was a complex, dynamic, and frequently religious force throughout the United States, Southern California developed, at the dawn of the century, a back-to-nature culture of health food, vegetarianism, raw foodism, and inventive mind-body practices that remain strong to this day (Kennedy 1998). The strong spiritual dimension to healing in Southern California not only sets up the later rise of "holistic health," but also helps explain the earlier runaway success of Christian Science and New Thought in the Southland and eventually throughout the state. It may also lie behind the subtle but significant differences between the spiritual temperament of Northern and Southern California, with the latter arguably more renowned for its embodied expression and commercial exuberance.

California's culture of the spiritualized but hedonic body defies easy divisions into sacred and profane. A good example of this ambiguity is modern yoga, a world and national phenomenon that fuses spirituality and physical culture, and was partly engendered by the California experiment (Syman 2010). In the 1950s, for example, the innovative bodybuilder Walt Baptiste opened the first comprehensive yoga studio with his wife Magana, who had studied with the legendary Hatha yogi Indra Devi in Hollywood; beginning from an ethic of fitness, Baptiste yoga gradually transformed into a more explicitly spiritual expression. Another hedonic spirituality, even less explicitly religious but certainly more grounded in place, is surfing. Though the modern resurrection of the sport began with Hawaii's Duke Kahanamoku,

it spread early to Southern California. In Los Angeles, the legendary Tom Blake not only revolutionized the sport with lighter, hollow boards but articulated an explicitly spiritual approach to the practice, one informed by his creed “Nature = God.” Despite a sometimes aggressive and adolescent culture, the rituals, ethos, and fluid phenomenology of surfing have made it, in a variety of ways, a particularly informal but influential expression of what Bron Taylor describes as “dark green religion,” a pagan pantheism in which sensual experiences in nature constitute a “sacred center” (Taylor 2009: 103–126). And the legacy of Muir remains; Taylor explains that for many surfers their experiences of pleasure, challenge, and flow lead directly to “ethical action in which Mother Nature, and especially its manifestation as Mother Ocean, is considered sacred and worthy of reverent care” (Taylor 2009: 104).

### 73.3 Esotericism

Over the last few decades, scholars of Western religion have begun to pay increasing attention to esotericism, a frequently disguised and counternormative stream of religious and occult ideas and practices associated variously with gnosticism, hermeticism, alchemy, freemasonry, and ceremonial magic. While definitions of esotericism differ, Antoine Faivre established an influential check-list that includes the idea of enchanted nature; the notion of mystic correspondences (as in the cosmic connections that underlie astrology); the mediating power of the imagination; and the experience of transmutation, or, in more contemporary terms, transformation (Faivre 2010).

Esoteric currents coursed into America from the colonial period onwards (Horowitz 2009). Perhaps the most influential esoteric body in America was the Theosophical Society, an organization cofounded in New York in 1875 by Colonel Henry Olcott and the Russian writer and seer Madame Helena Blavatsky. Weaving together occult Neoplatonism, parapsychological practices, and often rather bowdlerized philosophical ideas from the East, Theosophy helped create the template for today’s New Age, which Wouter Hanegraaff characterizes precisely as a secularization of esotericism (Hanegraaff 1996). Theosophy played a role in introducing Buddhism, Hinduism and yoga to the West, and also supported Buddhist and Hindu revival movements in India and Sri Lanka. At the same time, Blavatsky’s writings attempted to reframe the supposedly universal truths of mysticism in the light of contemporary scientific advances, including Darwin’s account of evolution and the discovery of the electromagnetic spectrum, whose “vibrations” provided a ready model for Theosophical accounts of spiritual energy. Blavatsky believed that humanity was beginning to mutate into a new and superior “sixth race,” a transformation that she believed would occur in America (Blavatsky 1888). Annie Besant, another Theosophical leader, believed this would happen specifically in Southern California; Besant claimed that the finest magnetic vibrations in the world were to be found in Pasadena (Davis 2006). In the 1960s, the notion of Theosophical mutation continued into the hippie counterculture with speculation about the birth of a new Aquarian generation (Lachman 2001).

In some ways both women were right: California would become a crucial site in the history of Theosophy, and a principal stage in its transformation into New Age culture. In 1897, Katherine Tingley founded a Theosophical community on San Diego's Point Loma; nicknamed "Lomaland" by the locals, it lasted for over 30 years. The Temple of the People set up its headquarters in Halcyon, near Pismo Beach, while a Theosophical group led by Albert Powell Warrington—and allied with Besant, Tingley's rival—founded the Krotona colony in the Hollywood Hills in the early 1910s. In 1924 Warrington moved Krotona to the remote Ojai Valley near Santa Barbara, a dry green oasis whose name is Chumash for "nest" or "moon." Besant loved Ojai and made it the home of her Happy Valley School—an alternative high school, designed to nurture the coming sixth race, still thriving today.

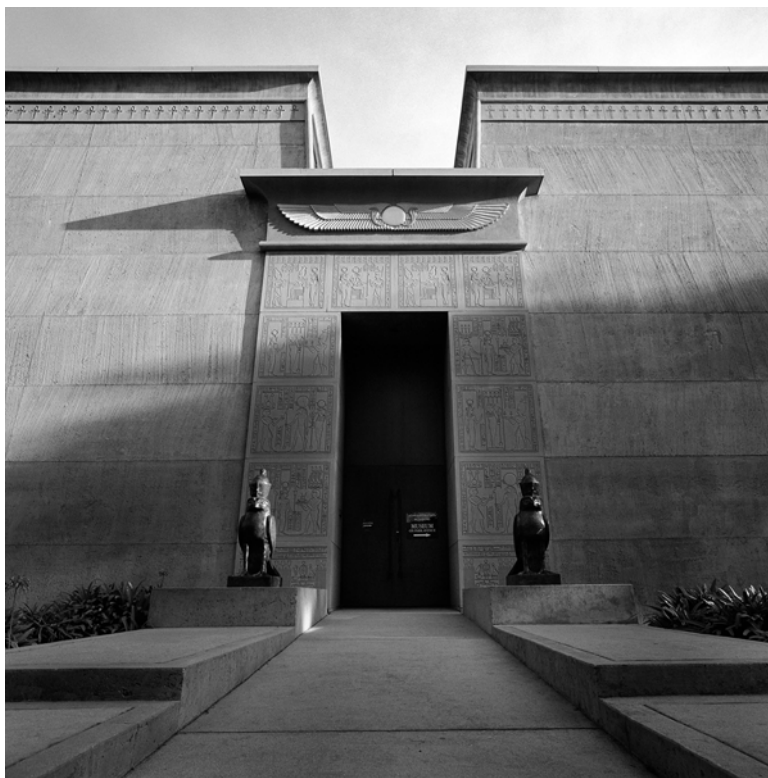
Ojai would also play a transformative role in the life of Jiddhu Krishnamurti, the most significant teacher to emerge from Theosophy in the twentieth century. As a youth, Krishnamurti was recognized by the Theosophical leader Charles Leadbeater as the human vessel for the coming World Teacher—the Theosophical equivalent of the Messiah. In the early 1920s, Krishnamurti and his brother Nitya moved to Ojai, drawn, like so many incoming Californians, by the promise of health, as Nitya had tuberculosis. In the summer of 1922, beneath a pepper tree in Ojai, Krishnamurti had an overwhelming experience of "God-intoxication." He began to question Theosophy, and in 1929, Krishnamurti left the society. Rejecting the whole notion of mystical schools and proscribed spiritual practices, as well as the very concept of the guru, Krishnamurti proclaimed that the spiritual search cannot be organized, that "truth is a pathless land" (Lutyens 1975: 272). Personal friends with a wide range of Southern California intellectuals, artists, and celebrities, from Aldous Huxley to Charlie Chaplin, his astringent message introduced a powerful existential dimension to the emerging New Age, though Krishnamurti, who kept Ojai as his home base throughout his life, remained a popular and influential anti-guru guru.

Other offshoots of Theosophy took a more recognizably cultic form. In 1930, a mining engineer, Theosophy student, and onetime American Nazi named Guy Ballard claimed to have met a mysterious Ascended Master named Count Saint-Germain in the environs of Mount Shasta. Ballard and his wife went on to found the Mighty I AM Religious Activity in Los Angeles, a controversial sect that popularized many of the mystic themes later bandied about by New Ager leaders: a color-coded chakra system, a fringe science of electronic vibrations, and an insistence that individuals create their own reality. For the followers of I AM, this also meant manifesting material prosperity, a theme that also appears in many of branches of the New Thought movement—a parallel development, descending from Emersonian transcendentalism, that believed in the creative powers of the mind.

In the postwar period, Theosophical esotericism also fed into the modern UFO contactee movement, which began in California in 1952 when George Adamski, who worked at a café near Palomar observatory, claimed to have encountered a golden-haired Venusian named Orthon in the desolate Mojave Desert. As in the 1951 Robert Wise movie *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, the space being chastised humans for waging war with nuclear weapons and poisoning the planet. Unlike those who believed that UFOs were nuts-and-bolts crafts, contactees like Adamski,

who had once belonged to a Southern California esoteric group called the Royal Order of Tibet, transformed the Theosophical notion of Ascended Masters into the quasi-scientific idea of the Space Brothers. Saucer sects remained a part of the California spiritual landscape, though not always so optimistically. In 1997, 39 members of the group Heaven's Gate dispatched themselves near San Diego, believing their souls would escape the illusory nightmare of material reality by hitching a ride on a spaceship riding the tail of comet Hale-Bopp (Davis 2006).

Theosophy was not the only source of California esotericism. Perhaps the most important "Rosicrucian" order in the United States, the Ancient Mystical Order of the Rosæ Cross, moved to San Jose in 1927 and built, in addition to their temples, a public park and Egyptian museum that exist to this today (Fig. 73.1). Another local source was the work of Manly P. Hall, a Canadian who moved to Los Angeles as a young man, where he soon authored a remarkable, influential, and beautiful compendium of esoteric lore called *The Secret Teachings of All Ages* and subsequently founded the Philosophical Research Society. Hall's copious books, many lectures, and significant library, including many rare alchemical texts, helped seed Southern California with a myriad of esoteric signs, symbols, and information. The Southland



**Fig. 73.1** Rosicrucian Park, headquarters of Ancient and Mystical Order Rosæ Crucis (AMORC), San Jose (Photo by Michael Rauner, used with permission)



would also play a pivotal role in the legacy of Aleister Crowley, a ceremonial magician and esoteric writer who would eventually be recognized, along with Blavatsky, as one of the most influential occult figures to emerge from the Victorian period. When Crowley died in obscurity in 1947, Southern California's Agape Lodge #2 was the only still functioning center of Crowley's initiatory society the Ordo Templi Orientis. Led for a time by the remarkable Jack Parsons, an innovative rocket scientist who co-founded Pasadena's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, the Agape Lodge helped keep Crowley's mystical religion of Thelema alive until the occult boom of the 1960s (Carter 1999). Though Crowley was unfairly maligned during his life and posthumously as a "Satanist," California did eventually play host to an overtly diabolic initiatory order when Anton LaVey founded the Church of Satan in San Francisco in 1966. Though espousing more of a hedonic and social Darwinist philosophy than a metaphysical one, the Church of Satan did later spawn the Temple of Set when a disaffected member—the U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel and PSYOPS (psychological operations) specialist Michael Aquino—founded a left-hand order with far deeper ties to esoteric ideas and practices. So though the lens of California very much helped intensify the "white light" of the New Age's secularized esoterica, the state also served as a home-grown matrix for what another native Californian, George Lucas, would later dub "the dark side of the force."

### 73.4 East-West Hybridity

Asian religious traditions have played a large role in the development of California's religious landscape and spiritual supermarket. While introduced early on, when Chinese immigrants to Gold Rush California built the first Joss Houses (Taoist temples), it was mainly from the 1920s through the 1970s that Eastern religious and philosophical thought established its pivotal and lasting influence on California consciousness. In addition to a steady stream of teachers from Asia, Theosophists, intellectuals, and countercultural figures were central conduits for this religious dissemination. While east-west hybridization and orientalism far predate this era, at no other time were ideas so utterly non-Western in origin fused so thoroughly into popular culture and thus mass consciousness. While New York and Boston functioned as the primary academic centers for Buddhist and other Asian philosophies in the United States, the cultural and countercultural epicenter of this movement was most broadly established in California.

Orientalism, as discussed by Edward Said, is frequently thought of as a one-sided affair, in which Western depictions of "the Orient" are used to assert the supremacy of Western culture, traditions, and ways of seeing the world; this assertion in turn helps naturalize political, economic, and cultural domination (Said 1978). However, more recent scholarship on Orientalism stresses its role in opening up the West to new heterodox currents of thought that often led to a profound questioning of politics, worldviews, cultural practices, and identity formation in the West (Clarke 1997). This was undoubtedly the case in Orientalist influences on European

Romanticism, in the establishment of American Transcendentalism, and in counter-cultural California. The most important importations have been the non-dual spiritual philosophies found in Advaita Vedanta; in Taoism; and in Therevada, Zen and Tibetan Buddhism; likewise the more applied techniques of self-transformation found in Tantra, Yoga, Vipassana and other meditative traditions. With a move towards charismatic and spiritual leaders (gurus) in the late 1960s, a variety of sectarian movements based around neo- or pseudo-Asian traditions also emerged, most with major California chapters. Yogi Bhanjan's 3HO (Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization), Transcendental Meditation, and the Hare Krishna movements are all well-known examples.

A number of ideas from these traditions strongly impacted California consciousness. One central concept is the non-duality of *Brahman*—the transcendent impersonal reality of unity that lies beyond the world of appearances, found in the Upanishads and most subsequent Hindu philosophy, and in a markedly different form, in China as the Tao. This concept was largely introduced into California through the Advaita Vedanta school of Hinduism, especially in the guise of the Vedanta Society, which founded major centers in San Francisco in 1905 and Los Angeles in 1930 (Fig. 73.2). These centers bear a direct lineage from the celebrated Hindu leader Swami Vivekananda, who modernized the teachings of his guru, the nineteenth century Hindu saint Ramakrishna, founding a Western-friendly “practical Vedanta.” The Hollywood Vedanta Society made a particularly important mark on the British expatriate writers Gerald Heard, Christopher Isherwood, and Aldous Huxley. In addition to his influential religious study *The Perennial Philosophy* (1946), Huxley would also express his Vedantist and perennialist concerns with the experiential unity underlying the world's religions in the insightful essays on his mescaline experiments published as *The Doors of Perception* (1954) and *Heaven and Hell* (1956).

Another significant Hindu influence on California consciousness came from the Indian religious leader Paramahansa Yogananda, who established the Self-Realization Fellowship in California in 1920. Still headquartered in Los Angeles, with temples in Hollywood, Encinitas, Pacific Palisades, and around the world, the SRF espoused an ecumenical philosophy of religion, centered on creating a spirit of understanding and goodwill among the world's faiths. Yogananda was a practitioner of kriya yoga, which seeks to attain states of inner peace and attunement with Brahman through advanced techniques of pranayama and meditation. These techniques were widely disseminated by the SRF, and were also promulgated in Yogananda's best-selling *Autobiography of a Yogi* (Yogananda 1959), which owes some of its popularity to its author's account of extraordinary spiritual experiences.

Though Japanese Zen priests were already teaching in San Francisco in the first decade of the twentieth century, Buddhism was not widely embraced by Anglos until the postwar period, when influential North Beach Beats like Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac turned towards the dharma (Seagar 2000). They, and the many who followed them, were especially attracted to Zen, which had become popular across the country through the writings of D.T. Suzuki and Bay Area-based scholar, writer, and radio presence Alan Watts. Important formal



**Fig. 73.2** Old Vendanta Temple, San Francisco (Photo by Michael Rauner, used with permission)

exchanges between Asian teachers and Western students occurred during this era. Robert Aitken, later one of the most celebrated teachers of Western Buddhism, studied with Nyogen Senzaki at the “Floating Zendo” he set up in Los Angeles following his wartime internment. Another significant transition occurred in 1962, when Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki left his Japanese congregation in San Francisco to found a meditation center specifically aimed at teaching Westerners (Chadwick 1999). Transplanting the Asian traditions of placing monasteries in remote upland settings, Suzuki’s San Francisco Zen Center also built Tassajara—the first Zen monastery built outside of Japan—in a designated wilderness area of the Los Padres National Forest near Carmel. Nowadays, major Zen centers can be found in the San Jacinto mountains near Idylwild (Yokoji-Zen Mountain Center), in the Santa Cruz mountains south of San Francisco (Jikoji), in the San Gabriel Mountains north of Claremont (Mt. Baldy Zen Center), in the hills of Sonoma County near Santa Rosa (Sonoma Mountain Zen Center), and in the urban centers of Los Angeles, San Francisco and San Diego. Chinese Zen temples include the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas in Mendocino County near Ukiah, which competes with the Hsi Lai Temple of Hacienda Height in east Los Angeles County for the honor of the largest

Buddhist temple in the Western Hemisphere. In these various implantations of Buddhist temples into the cultural landscape, we can recognize two regional strands that remain largely distinct: ethnic and often immigrant Buddhist communities with direct ties to Southeast and East Asia, and American Buddhists, often led by Anglos.

Though an increasingly important influence on Western spiritual thought, psychology, and most recently, neuroscience, Tibetan Buddhism was slower to make inroads into California. The first Tibetan site in California, the Tibetan Nyingma Meditation Center, was established by Tarthang Tulku in Berkeley in 1969; later he would build the enormous (and inaccessible) Odiyan Buddhist retreat center, a ritual landscape in coastal Sonoma county. In popular culture, the imagery and basic concepts of Tibetan Buddhism gained exposure after Timothy Leary and his colleagues adapted the so-called *Tibetan Book of the Dead* into an LSD trip guide renamed *The Psychedelic Experience* (Leary et al. 1964), which became a de rigour manual for acid-worshipping acolytes like Laguna Beach's infamous drug smuggling organization the Brotherhood of Eternal Love (Schou 2010). By the early 1970s, a growing number of Buddhist, Taoist, and Hindu texts also became available to the counterculture. As the 1960s drew to a close, many hippies jaded by the degeneration of the scene followed the lead of the Beatles and Richard Alpert (Ram Dass) away from psychedelic Dionysianism towards the other apparent "enlightenments" offered through meditation and guru worship. From the 1970s on new Eastern-themed fads swept the state, which continued to set many countercultural trends, including a rather distorted and sexually-obsessed version of Tantra that some dubbed "California tantra" (Fuerstein 1998). A more broadly significant form of West Coast neo-tantra was identified by the religious scholar Jeffrey Kripal, who argued that the human potential movement centered at Esalen drew its cultural power from the transformations of an essentially erotic energy (Kripal 2007). After ebbs and flows of popularity over the decades, an Orientalized but still body-focused culture of various postural yoga regimens has now become deeply installed in the cultural fabric of the state and the nation.

### 73.5 Counterculture

In the popular imagination, California has long been linked with hedonism, an association that can partly be traced to promotional boosterism and media portrayals. However, the stereotypes of hedonism and the pursuit of liberated pleasure have their origins in a variety of bohemian and countercultural movements that either emerged or took strong root in California. The roots of these movements are also bound up with the unchurched religion of "spirituality," as well as with the new understanding of the human psyche that took hold after the popularization of the Freudian and Jungian models of the unconscious. Motivated by the tireless quest for intense experience and a creative social life, California counterculture drew together eroticism, psychological (and psychoactive) experimentation, and religious practice into a rich set of exploratory currents that embraced both the sensual body and more subtle altered states that could be tapped within.

California counterculture was seeded early in the twentieth century by a number of transplants from Germany who brought with them a romantic proto-hippie philosophy of natural living and mystical seeking associated with the Wandervogel movement (Kennedy 1998). California's spatial and cultural openness was also recognized by Henry Miller, most famous for his erotically charged semi-autobiographical novels written in the 1930s. In 1940, Miller settled in a remote cottage in Big Sur and remained in California until his death in 1980. Miller's work, whose unabashed sexuality and experimentation was complemented by a growing interest in Eastern mysticism, was in turn a pivotal influence for the writers of the Beat Generation, most of whom ended up in San Francisco in the mid-1950s. Exploring new literary forms and lifestyles, the Beats took their cues not only from the frenetic improvisation of bebop, but also from their experimentation with drugs, sexuality, and Zen, the latter of which was a primary interest of the West Coast poet Gary Snyder, who would formally study the religion in Japan in the 1960s and later co-found a Zen center in the Sierra Nevada.

Beat writing was based on the primacy of lived experience, a crucial theme that laid the groundwork for the rapid growth of the hippie counterculture in the 1960s. A crucial figure in this transition was author and countercultural icon Ken Kesey. Given psychedelic drugs at Stanford as part of a CIA-sponsored research program (Lee and Shlain 1992), Kesey helped catalyze the counterculture through the antics of his group, the Merry Pranksters, who spread an anarchic gospel of personal and social experimentation through a series of multi-media psychedelic "happenings" called the Acid Tests (Fig. 73.3). Experimenting with lighting, electronics, music, and "expanded cinema," these events facilitated immersive experiences that broke down social norms and conventional cognitive frames. While the Acid Tests were short-lived, their influence lived on through their house band, the Grateful Dead, who would grow from their Bay Area roots into de facto psychedelic evangelists who inspired a cultlike following of Deadheads across the U.S. and the world.

The counterculture's embrace of psychedelic drugs, particularly LSD and marijuana, meant that an enormous number of young people were experiencing non-ordinary states of consciousness. This dovetailed with the experiential orientation that many believed lay at the heart of both Asian religion and occultism. The result was an "Aquarian" generation who believed that they were creating a new kind of humanity through the embrace of mystical or magical practices within an ethos of human potential and resistance to the "system," represented by consumer culture and the military-industrial complex. An early "spiritual supermarket" emerged in San Francisco's Haight Ashbury, which was saturated with images, ideas, practices, and teachers drawn from Theosophy, Buddhism, Hinduism, Jungian psychology, Sufi mysticism, shamanism, magick and the occult, astrology, parapsychology, and Christianity (Roszak 1976). This "freaky" mystic brew was also communicated to the rest of the world through San Francisco's popular and influential psychedelic music and art. Even as the Haight became an object of media exposure, its very existence provided a space produced by and for the counterculture, a brief that attracted flocks of young people from across the country, reinforcing California consciousness as well as a cultural politics of liberation. New forms of communal



**Fig. 73.3** The Onion, Sepulveda Unitarian Universalist Society, site of a 1966 “Acid Test,” Northridge (Photo by Michael Rauner, used with permission)

living, alternative sexualities, street theater, and anarchist-communitarian politics formed, held in uneasy balance with the more militant wings of the political counterculture typified by Berkeley. By late 1967, however, the Haight had begun to degenerate, filled with homeless teen runaways and a growing street trade in heroin and speed. This fueled a movement away from the urban milieu “back to the land” and to rural communes like Black Bear Ranch, founded in 1968 in Siskiyou County.

From the perspective of mainstream America, the darkest legacy of California’s hippie counterculture was Charles Manson, who was arrested near Death Valley in October 1969, in association with a series of brutal murders in Los Angeles. Initially based in the Haight-Ashbury, Manson maintained control over his young and largely female “family” through a mix of sex, drugs, and a charismatic authoritarianism based on a rhetoric of fear and psychedelized non-dualism. Along with the killing of a concertgoer at Altamont at the hands of an allegedly LSD-dosed Hell’s Angel (Schou 2010), Manson marked the end of the hippie era. However, by this time, the counterculture had itself been heavily mediated through consumer culture, and as its own “counterculture industry” took off in the 1970s—especially

rock music—many of its less radical aspects were incorporated into the cultural mainstream.

The erosion of the 60s dream had a direct influence on American religion by clearing the ground for a variety of new religious movements to take root, many of which proved controversial. Burned out by drugs, hurt by the sexual revolution, and confused by the clash of non-ordinary worldviews, many young people gravitated towards gurus, sects, and sometimes authoritarian groups like the Jesus Movement (its followers referred to as “Jesus Freaks”), Hare Krishna, the Unification Church (“Moonies”), est, Rajneesh, and Scientology. While the fears of dangerous cults and their “brainwashing” techniques loomed large in the public mind, and were intensified with the mass suicide that Jim Jones commanded in 1977 after he moved his People’s Temple from San Francisco to Guyana, these new religious movements also must be seen in the context of a larger and more informal “cultic milieu” of spiritual seeking, occult studies, and human potential psychology that characterizes the New Age.

One non-authoritarian new religious movement that strongly took hold in the 1970s was Wicca. Inspired by the largely vanished legacy of Europe’s own earth wisdom, British aspirants started constructing modern witchcraft in the 1940s, and its polytheistic beliefs and rich magical practices blossomed alongside the counter-culture in England and America, where it frequently was reconceived as part of a larger Neo-pagan current. An obvious site for Neo-pagan developments, California particularly stands out for its feminist focus, as figures like Victor Anderson and especially the Los Angeles-based witch Z. Budapest increasingly focused attention on the Goddess (Hutton 1999). In 1977, the Californian witch Starhawk published *The Spiral Dance*, a best-seller that widely disseminated her feminist, ecological, and deeply engaged form of witchcraft (Starhawk 1979).

The continued countercultural interest in psychedelics set the stage for the arrival of one of the most famous shamans and teachers of the era: the almost certainly fictitious Don Juan, whose gnomic wisdom and challenging practices were disseminated through an enormously popular series of books written by onetime UCLA anthropology graduate student Carlos Castaneda. Despite Castaneda’s academic trickery and his eventual formation of an exploitative sect, his first books beautifully evoked a supernatural world only thinly separated from this one, and helped rekindle a romance of the desert and an imaginative engagement with the visionary traditions of the Americas. Another notable Californian “freak” who studied indigenous shamanism was Terence McKenna. A long-standing figure at Esalen, McKenna later became a spokesperson for the psychedelic revival associated with the rave scene in the early 1990s, encouraging listeners to take “heroic doses” of mushrooms or the intense, short-acting substance DMT in order to visit other dimensions and communicate with entities who dwelled therein. While the rave scene was a global phenomenon, it received a particularly hippyish (and Acid Test-worthy) remix in the vital and influential San Francisco and Los Angeles scenes, many of which also held their events at beaches and deserts, manifesting what McKenna called “the archaic revival” (McKenna 1991).

### 73.6 Mind Science

As Wouter Hanegraaff and others have made clear, one of the definitive elements of the New Age is its embrace of (and parasitism upon) the discourse of science (Hammer 2004). One way to effect this shift is to recode and interpret divine powers as largely untapped forces inherent in our own evolving psycho-physiology—as “human potential” that can be catalyzed through various “scientific” techniques and practices. This concept had already been set in motion within the Theosophical and New Thought movements that preceded the New Age. In the latter, religious or esoteric notions of prayer and sacred power were transformed into the increasingly secular forms of positive thinking. Paradigmatic here is the “the science of mind” announced in 1927 by Ernest Holmes, who founded the Institute for the Religious Science and School of Philosophy in Los Angeles. This loosely “psychological” fusion of religious and scientific aspirations also led to new institutional forms that do not fit comfortably into the familiar sociological triumvirate of church, sect, and cult. Holmes, for example, did not want his Religious Science to take the form of “churches,” but rather of teaching institutions, or “centers.” By reframing religious aspirations and spiritual practices within essentially secular institutional forms (the center, the institute, the seminar), the broad current of the New Age was able to provide a novel and influential sociological ground for its reconfiguring of the relationship between spirit and science.

Many of these developments occurred in California. Certainly the most influential was the Esalen Institute, which was formed on the stunning Big Sur coast in 1961 by two Stanford graduate students named Michael Murphy and Richard Price. Though Murphy had spent 16 months at the philosopher and mystic Sri Aurobindo’s ashram in India, and the bohemian Price had practiced Zen, the two intellectuals were committed to radical psychological development outside of traditional spiritual models of guru-like teachers or religious conformity. In this they were influenced by Gerald Heard and the short-lived Trabuco College that Heard had founded in the 1940s in a remote canyon in the Santa Ana mountains of Orange County. In his own thinking, Heard embraced the possibility of what Jeffrey Kripal calls “evolutionary mysticism,” and wanted Trabuco to be what Heard called a “gymnasia of the mind” (Davis 2006: 164).

Esalen became that gymnasia, although it placed at least as much emphasis on the body as the mind, while, of course, insisting on the holistic connections between them. Esalen became ground zero for the human potential movement, an eclectic and influential blend of psychological therapies and secularized spiritual practices that transformed the American image of the self. Once again, individual phenomenology lay at the core of the work. The psychologist Abraham Maslow’s conception of self-actualization and the “peak experiences” that helped catalyze such transformation were crucial. By the late 1960s, Esalen had become a petri dish in which an enormous number of techniques were explored: Gestalt therapy, meditation, tai chi chuan, psychedelics, Rolphing, primal scream therapy, holotropic breathwork, hatha yoga, biofeedback, Tantra, massage, and the encounter group. At times,



Esalen participants must have felt like they were surfing the edge of human evolution, as if a new kind of person was being birthed. By the end of the 1970s, Esalen's self-developmental therapies and holistic ideas had spread around the world, even as the institute became the flashpoint for attacks on American narcissism and the Me Generation.

Here an evolutionary embrace with human potential inevitably was engaged with parapsychological topics, another privileged site of the crossover of science and the sacred (Kripal 2010). Just how far such mind sciences could penetrate more orthodox research institutes in California can be seen at the Stanford Research Institute, a facility in Palo Alto, sponsored by Stanford University, that has performed high-end research-and-development work for the government and private corporations for decades. In the early 1970s, Russell Targ and Harold Puthoff, two SRI researchers who specialized in laser technology, became fascinated by the hidden powers of the mind, and convinced the CIA to support an in-depth program of remote viewing—the paranormal ability to mentally visualize and describe a distant place or object, like a toy hidden in a box a mile away (or a submarine beneath the ice). Puthoff and Targ focused on so-called “gifted individuals” like the New York artist Ingo Swann, who, like Puthoff and other research subjects in the program, was a Scientologist. L. Ron Hubbard's Church of Scientology, of course, also has a significant foothold in California, and though its institutional form is hierarchical and sectarian, this explicitly “religious” form grew out of the secular and relatively informal practice and theory of Hubbard's Dianetics, which was itself first announced in the pages of a science fiction magazine (Urban 2011).

## 73.7 Conclusion

In this brief chapter, we have attempted to identify some of the main currents and subsidiary streams of what we call “California consciousness:” a diverse, inventive, and frequently eclectic culture of spiritual seeking that straddles the borderlines between religion and lifestyle, science and culture, hedonism and mysticism, mind and body. The restless diversity and even contradictions of this major current of American spiritual quest—what Kripal calls the “religion of no religion” (Kripal 2007: 9)—makes it elusive to define, but that very diversity—and even the contradictions it entails—is part of its substance, Campbell's amorphous “cultic milieu” writ large. The “spiritual supermarket,” which has become an important concept for studies of modern spirituality and one which California singularly embodies, is not only a sociological index of the incursion of market values into religion (Carrette and King 2005). The spiritual supermarket is also a reflection of the diverse knowledges and practices that characterize global modernity as well as the utopian possibilities of a global, radically integral, even planetary view. Arising in a twentieth century melting pot, California consciousness can thus only be approached in the global spirit of religious comparativism.

At the core of this approach is the attention to human experience over and above the specific sociological or conceptual structures of any given religious or spiritual form. Indeed, it is only by understanding the call of subjective experience that many of the specific characteristics of California consciousness—its restlessness, embrace of altered states, and vacillation between hedonism and asceticism—can be understood. For well over a century, countless Californians have embraced the non-rational as if it were a portal into a deeper freedom, opening their arms to everything from nature mysticism to psychedelic rapture, from Pentecostal fire to the “choiceless awareness” of the deeply meditating mind. In many ways, California consciousness sought to question and transcend the quotidian ego, dissolving the small self into the larger frameworks of mind and body and the wilderness within and without.

California consciousness can also be understood in terms of its geographic mythology. A liminal landmass, whose location over some of the most significant faultlines on the planet lend the territory its geological instability, California and the West Coast stages an encounter between East and West. The bounty and beauty of the state have inspired a contradictory vision of Eden and transformative, often technological futurity. This is why, in the American imagination, California’s shores have staged both the fulfillment and decline of the West; its final shot at paradise and its precipitous fall into the sea. That is why the “California dream” encompasses both Arcadian frontier and apocalyptic collapse, particularly in filmic and literary representations of Los Angeles (Davis 2000).

California has long played a unique role in the global imagination, and has served as a major cultural and symbolic node in the networks of unchurched spirituality that have spread across the United States and around the world. But the influences of California consciousness, which already questions the distinction between sacred and secular, also point beyond religion. One secular zone that it has marked is its globally influential information technology industry. In the late 1960s, the leading edge of human-computer interaction was taking place at the Augmentation Research Center at Menlo Park’s SRI (mentioned above). There the visionary researcher Douglas Engelbart developed the mouse, the hyperlink, the graphical user interface, e-mail, and video conferencing; in 1969, the first transmission was sent from UCLA to SRI on the Arpanet, the direct ancestor to today’s Internet. Like many other California mind scientists, Engelbart’s vision was guided by a sense of human potential rooted in the co-evolution of technology and human consciousness, ideas that would also infuse the counterculture (Turner 2006). While at SRI, he also became devoted to est, the Erhard “training seminars” that fused Zen, Scientology, psycho-cybernetics, and Dale Carnegie and that debuted at San Francisco’s Jack Tar Hotel in late 1971. Some of ARC’s fundamental research was eventually reworked by Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak into the first Apple computer. When Jobs passed away in early 2012, his debt to California consciousness became clear. Jobs was a practicing Buddhist, explored alternative medicine, and counted LSD and a youthful wander through India as some of his most formative experiences.

In this sense, California’s enormous role as a global powerhouse of biotechnology, IT, and media culture cannot be separated from the California consciousness

that in many ways resists and challenges the engines of modernity. In fact, they are integrally related. Today we are in the midst of one of the most turbulent and disturbing periods of transformation humans have ever known. The biosphere we depend on is passing through a severe and possibly disastrous shuddering dubbed the Anthropocene by despondent geologists, while molecular engineering, cognitive science, artificial intelligence, life extension technology, and media technology are staging the emergence of a “posthuman” human being. These developments threaten some of our deepest assurances—about progress, about reason, about gender, about the boundaries between nature and technology, about mortality and immortality, about the very definition of human being—and they demand a spiritual response. California consciousness can thus be seen as a prophetic and paradoxical reflection of the global crisis of our times, at once engaging its transformative potential and providing, or at least attempting to provide, visionary alternatives. The inventive rootlessness of California is a call to inventive rootlessness, the state’s shattering and reassembling of traditions a reflection of the loss of tradition and the collectively improvised and emergent tactics that inevitably follow. This process is the moving core of California consciousness.

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