

Not-so-new age

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [September 8, 1999](#) issue

Chesterton said that when people stop believing in God they do not believe in nothing, they believe in everything. That dictum is well illustrated in postsecular America. "Flying saucers have become big again," Ehud Sperling, president of Inner Traditions, told *Publishers Weekly* (June 14). "There is renewed interest in psychedelics. Sex, drugs and rock and roll are still with us in a very big way. . . . The search for meaning is the fundamental modus operandi."

Sperling, who claims to have invented the term "New Age" (to replace the "Occult" signs in bookstores), pioneered the field in 1978 with a book on aromatherapy. Now he sells a book on magnet therapy—a hot topic in other New Age catalogs.

"Religion and spirituality is one of the top categories at Amazon.com in unit sales," says the company's religion and spirituality editor, Douglas McDonald.

"Parapsychology has been quite strong," as is pagan religion, Wicca and witchcraft. He thinks Wicca appeals to those "who are concerned about the environmental crisis, and I think that's because the monotheistic religions haven't really addressed the issue." People "create their own personal spirituality with a patchwork religion drawing from a variety of sources."

Von Braschler of Llewellyn observes, "We're seeing interest in the fairy world, in the unseen world of nature spirits, also in Celtic myth and magic, which ride that wave. There's a searching for a new spirituality—as opposed to religion—an interest in answers that work in today's life." The "two most popular categories are witchcraft and magic," with first printings of books in these fields in the 30,000 range.

"Witchcraft fits in part because it's a broad, nature-based folk religion that includes magic shamanic practices from around the world. It celebrates the feminism of spirituality as well as its masculine aspects. Witchcraft is the largest growing religious practice in the U.S." (Tell that to the Mormons.)

"The daily life that Buddhism teaches is universal and speaks to a nonwhite audience," says the director of Viking Penguin's Arkana imprint, which is marketing Buddhism-for-blacks books. A trade-show producer advises, "It's good to pull in the

entire family with things like readings and classes." A HarperSanFrancisco director notes: "We find that the college market is increasingly interested in the goddess movement, in alternative health, yoga, tai chi and so on." The trend is to the middle of the road: "You're hitting a much more mainstream market now, not just people who believe in UFOs."

"New Age books creep across category boundaries like kudzu. Subjects like sports, architecture, science and business are today rife with New Age titles," *Publishers Weekly* reports. A Denver bookseller predicts, "Eventually, people will want to go deeper into some of the niches [such as crystals, healing, astrology and UFOs] and New Age will break out as its own category again."

Marilyn McGuire, a "recovering Episcopalian" who is the director of the New Alternatives trade association, says, "What we're seeing is more and more people waking up and becoming conscious and responsible and loving. 'Loving'—it sounds kind of 'woo-woo'—maybe I'll just say 'caring.'" (Now *that's* original.)

Still, the books don't sell themselves. To reach new markets, McGuire says, publishers package their books in "things that glitter and sparkle." Indeed.