

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO THE NEW AGE

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THE EMERGENCE AND SUCCESS of the New Age Movement (NAM) in the last decade have generated a lot of discussion among Christians of all denominations. Because the New Age world-view seems to permeate all aspects of culture, it has raised many theological and pastoral issues which must be addressed. There is no doubt that Christians should be legitimately concerned about the influence it might have on their faith and morals.

The Christian response to the NAM is especially difficult because it is by no means easy to specify what the New Age is all about. Descriptions of the New Age by adherents¹ and scholars² alike tend to be idealistic, highlighting its more acceptable ideological aspects. But when one looks into its specific beliefs and practices, one is overwhelmed by the diversity and complexity of its theological views and ritual practices.³ And because the New Age is characterized by a lack of a central organization, a rather diffuse leadership, and different types and degrees of involvement and commitment, a uniform Christian reply to the NAM as a whole may not even be feasible. Unfortunately, Christian replies to the NAM have often been determined by the consideration of some of its more negative features that are assumed to be typical of its ideology and ritual.

One of the main reasons why the NAM has encountered so much opposition is not only because it proposes an alternative religious world-view that cannot be easily reconciled with Christianity, but also because it endorses a reinterpretation of several major Christian themes, such as the nature of Jesus Christ and his place in the history of religions. Moreover, many New Age writers tend to depict Christianity as a spiritually bankrupt and intolerant religion that is more interested in safeguarding doctrine than catering to the real needs of the people.⁴ Such attacks are bound to elicit apologetic arguments in defence of traditional faith and reciprocal charges against the New Age itself.

Christian fundamentalist response to the New Age

The initial and most vociferous rebuttals of the NAM have come from fundamentalist or evangelical Christians⁵ who have interpreted its

popular appeal and success as a significant threat to the survival of Christianity. Two broad approaches to the New Age can be detected among these Christians. The first, spearheaded by Constance Cumbey's⁶ and David Hunt's⁷ virulent denunciations of the movement, can be described more accurately as a hysterical tirade against all New Age ideas and activities, irrespective of their worth.

Cumbey assures her readers that the NAM is not only a serious deviation from orthodoxy, but also a demonic conspiracy aimed at destroying Christianity itself. She lumps the movement with Nazism and secular humanism and condemns it as the antithesis of Christian belief and morality. Apparently oblivious to such pitfalls as historical anachronism, she subsumes under the New Age everything she disagrees with, including the ecumenical movement, holistic health centres, humanistic psychology and the Montessori schools.

This approach has become typical of many Christian arguments against the New Age. Additional and unsubstantiated charges are brought forth in support of the theory that the New Age is a demonic conspiracy to destroy Christianity by infiltrating all aspects of human life, be they political, educational or religious. Christians themselves are being subtly inundated with New Age ideas. The leaders of the movement are sometimes judged to be self-consciously in league with Satan.⁸ Some writers⁹ hold that New Agers are 'immoral' because of their belief in reincarnation which is wrongly linked with witchcraft. Others¹⁰ go as far as to accuse New Agers of performing bloody human sacrifices.

The second fundamentalist technique to counteract the teachings of the NAM concentrates on the theology of the movement and endeavours to evaluate it in the light of biblical teachings. This strategy is also apologetic, but it refrains from making preposterous accusations against the New Age. It strives for a more balanced and fair evaluation of the movement. Douglas Grootius, a leading representative of this approach, spends some time analysing New Age theology and concludes that it is characterized by a monistic world view that is in sharp contrast with orthodox Christianity. By postulating that the movement has sociological roots in the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, he de-emphasizes the theory that it is a satanic plot to overthrow Christianity. And by remarking that the NAM does offer hope in a hopeless world, he indirectly suggests that it has some beneficial features that may account for its popularity and success.

Other writers¹¹ continue the traditional fundamentalist approach to contrast the teachings of the NAM with those of the Bible and discover,

to nobody's surprise, that the movement's religious ideology deviates from biblical texts. And while the tendency remains to condemn the movement lock, stock and barrel, some have admitted, however, that it has focused our attention on a number of issues that Christians have lost sight of or misunderstood.¹² Most fundamentalist writings on the NAM spur Christians to counteract its activities belligerently, although a few have advised Christians to be more prudent and less confrontational.¹³

The fundamentalist assault on the New Age contains some valuable critique of the New Age.¹⁴ But this critique is frequently overshadowed both by the polemical tone of its writings and by poor scholarship. Unfortunately, to many fundamentalist writers, the New Age has become a convenient label for what they have judged to be not only unorthodox but also inherently evil. Christian apologists often portray little understanding of the causes of the movement and show even less talent for discriminating between its laudable and faddish elements. They are reluctant to recognize that the movement has positive features and that discrimination between, for instance, its desire to preserve the environment and its magical rituals is necessary. Moreover, their emotional outbursts and angry recriminations have little pastoral value. Their persistent and repetitive outcries are not likely to convince New Agers to return to their previous religious affiliations nor to help Christians in their task of making their faith relevant in the fast-changing socio-economic conditions of the end of the second millennium.

Mainline Protestant responses

The mainline Protestant Christian reaction to the NAM has also been preoccupied with its teachings. Like the fundamentalist perspective, it has drawn attention to the gnostic elements of the movement and stressed their incompatibility with traditional Christian doctrine. Mainline Protestant writers, however, tend to ignore or reject the satanic conspiracy theory. Their responses are geared to make Christians reflect theologically on, rather than react emotionally against, the presence and influence of New Age ideas and practices. They further see some benefits stemming from the movement.

Richard Thompson, reflecting a United Methodist Church perspective, acknowledges that the New Age preaches hope in confusing times and that it has 'come rushing in to fill the void left by the decline of Christianity and secular humanism'.¹⁵ He berates its evolutionary credo and is more concerned with pointing out how it radically differs from Christianity. He never specifies what answer a committed Christian can give to the movement, though it is apparent that he leans towards confrontation.

More thoughtful evaluations of the New Age, however, have led several commentators to abandon the idea that it epitomizes the antithesis of Christianity. Philip Almond,¹⁶ for example, writing in an Anglican magazine, states that the movement is a revival of the western esoteric tradition which has sometimes existed in creative tension with orthodox Christianity. The New Age's concern for the environment is based not only on its pantheistic slant, but also on a millenarian vision of a world in which all living creatures exist in perfect harmony.¹⁷ When seen as 'a reaction to the technological rationalism and materialism of late twentieth century culture', and as a religious movement that 're-establishes the connection between the mundane and the transcendent',¹⁸ the New Age has something to teach those Christians who have been swept away by the secularization process in western culture.

One of the most elaborate and comprehensive Christian attempts to deal with the New Age is that of Ted Peters, who teaches at the Lutheran School of Theology in Berkeley, California. Peters suggests that four propositions or theses should guide Christians in their encounter with the NAM. He asserts that: 1) 'modest dabbling in New Age spirituality is probably harmless; it may even be helpful'; 2) 'the New Age vision is a noble and edifying one'; 3) 'pastors, theologians and church leaders should take the New Age movement seriously'; and 4) 'the gnostic monism at the heart of the New Age teaching is dangerous because it leads to naïveté and to a denial of God's grace'.¹⁹

Ted Peters' treatment attempts a balanced assessment which, while recognizing the New Age's merits, pays attention to those teachings that make it a distinct religion. His approach is more ecumenical. Though still worried about doctrinal matters, it avoids hysterical outcries and fearful condemnations. Besides recognizing what is good in the movement, it looks for areas where Christians can learn from, and co-operate with, those involved in the New Age.

Catholic responses

The Catholic answer to the New Age has been varied and contradictory. Some Catholic writers have, in fact, embraced the method and tone of Christian fundamentalists who repudiate anything connected with the NAM and who find little or nothing in it that can benefit Christian theology and/or spirituality. Rejecting in spirit, if not in word, an ecumenical perspective, they envisage the New Age largely as a threat to orthodoxy and orthopraxis.

Among the most comprehensive Catholic conservative assessments of the NAM is that of Ralph Rath.²⁰ He starts by providing a broad picture

of the various elements that comprise the New Age scene. He then proceeds to detect the inroads the movement has made in the fields of cults, religion, education, politics, science, health, business and entertainment. Finally, he proceeds to outline a Christian rebuttal that is aimed largely at those New Age doctrines that are in conflict with Christianity.

Rath is one of the few commentators on the New Age who refers to inter-religious dialogue. Yet he exhibits little understanding of the requirements of dialogue and even less appreciation of the fact that dialogue is basically a relationship between individuals who have embarked on a religious quest. At one point he states that 'the New Age is based on deception. This is certainly allied to the satanic.'²¹ Such statements reiterate the familiar anticult rhetoric that indiscriminately lumps together all non-Christian groups (such as Transcendental Meditation, Yoga, contemporary paganism and satanic cults). They are definitely not conducive to dialogue. Rath, moreover, fails to find any points of contact between the New Age and Christianity. In his final two chapters on basic Christian teachings and evangelization he relies completely on fundamentalist literature. Although he correctly draws attention to the fact that the New Age religion differs from Christianity in doctrine, he overstresses the pantheistic element in the former and fails to make any reference to Christian teachings on the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and divinization. And he omits any reference to the rich tradition of Christian mysticism. Apparently unaware of the changing cultural and religious world-view of the late twentieth century, his response to the New Age is bound to be unconstructive and ineffective and is likely to achieve nothing but to buttress the convictions of those who already share his opinions.

A similar, though much more personal, approach to the New Age is that of Mitch Pacwa²² who appears to have embarked, for a while at least, on a conversion career²³ from involvement in drugs, to astrology, the Enneagram, and other New Age fads. His final conversion to the charismatic movement led him to realize that all his previous experiments were completely opposed to Christian doctrine. While some of Pacwa's critical remarks, for example, those on astrology, Jungian psychology, and Matthew Fox's creation spirituality, are valid, they are deficient for the precise reason that they make no mention of their attractive features that can be reconciled with Christian doctrine. He does not follow the official procedures of dialogue that the Catholic Church has adopted since Vatican II. The way he deals with Jung is typical of the method that builds walls of separation rather than bridges

to understanding. Pacwa rightly reminds his readers of Jung's personal antipathy to Christianity and mythological interpretation of the major Christian articles of faith. He then adds: 'My problems with Jung do not necessarily stem from the psychological insights he offers. In the hands of a professional, these can be useful for personal growth.'²⁴ Surely, this is the very area that requires further study and development.²⁵ It is Jung's original psychological insights, his appreciation of spiritual matters, and his sensitivity towards the individual's religious quest that account to a large extent for the revival of interest in his works.

Both Pacwa and Rath, together with the majority of Catholic writers on the NAM, explicitly reject the satanic conspiracy theory, even though a few indirectly seem to admit that satanic influence is present. They are convinced that the movement is the antithesis of Christian belief with few, if any, redeeming qualities. Their approach revolves around the identification of false doctrine conceived as a list of static propositional truth statements. These authors tend to evaluate New Age teachings in the light of conservative Catholic theology. They write as if theological development has already come to an end. They consequently make little attempt to discover and build on common ground.

In contrast to Rath's and Pacwa's somewhat superficial handling of, and response to, the New Age, David Toolan's erudite and highly sophisticated analysis²⁶ is in a class by itself. Toolan, like Pacwa, was personally involved in the New Age scene, but on a deeper and more intellectual level. He considers the quest for meaning and healing, which is central to New Age consciousness, as being rooted in both Eastern and Western contemplative and mystical traditions. He, therefore, sees a continuity between Christian thought and some philosophical and theological trends in the New Age. Uniting modern developments in philosophy, psychology, physics and cosmology, Toolan looks towards future developments in Christian theology that would incorporate the best elements of the New Age.²⁷ He faults the New Age for its idealism and self-centredness and accuses the movement of having a 'claustrophobic, inbred quality characteristic of sects concerned only with saving club-members' own skins'.²⁸ In agreement with many Christian and non-Christian critics, he dismisses the crystals gazers and psychic channellers as 'the lunatic fringe'.²⁹

Writing for a much more general audience than Toolan, George Maloney³⁰ adopts an ecumenical perspective to the influx of New Age ideas. Like Toolan, he is willing to learn from the NAM. He accepts some basic insights from Jungian psychology on which, he believes, a Christian spirituality can be built. Rather than advocating a total

rejection of the New Age, he looks for areas of agreement with the Christian tradition. He thinks that the New Age's holistic vision of the universe and the role of humanity in it can be harmonized with Christian thought. Moreover, certain elements of the New Age, like the stress on good nutrition, the avoidance of drugs and respect for matter, can all be grounded in Christian theology. He berates the New Age's view of Jesus and its pantheistic theology. But he points out that several aspects of New Age theology are redirecting Christians to traditional theological themes that have been neglected. New Age theology points to the Christian doctrines of Christ the *logos* and the immanence of God. The New Age is fulfilling an important function: it is helping Christians rediscover the richness of their tradition.

The most comprehensive official response to the NAM is probably Cardinal Godfried Danneels' pastoral letter on new religious movements, a letter that includes a large section on the New Age, which is called a 'new religion'.³¹ While criticizing the New Age for its egocentric world view and its syncretism, the pastoral letter does not link it with satanism and much less with a satanic conspiracy. It admits that

the New Age also offers good things: a sense of universal brotherhood, peace and harmony, raising people's awareness, a commitment to bettering the world, a general mobilization of energies for the sake of good, etc. Nor are all the techniques they advocate bad: yoga and relaxation can have many good effects.³²

The letter's tone suggests that the New Age gives alternative answers to humankind's religious quest. It hints that there are several points of contact, such as mysticism, between the New Age and Christianity. It concedes that the New Age criticism of Christianity may not be completely unfounded.³³ Its stress, however, is still on those doctrinal issues that make the New Age incompatible with Christianity. And it offers little speculation on what the New Age can contribute to Christian theology and spirituality.

A similar approach is taken by Archbishop Edward A. McCarthy of Miami. In a pastoral instruction entitled 'The New Age Movement', he asserts that 'many of the elements of the New Age Movement are altogether incompatible with Christianity'.³⁴ But he then explicitly recognizes many of the movement's positive features and observes 'that actually the Catholic Church offers many of the answers which New Agers are seeking'.³⁵ The New Age's reaction to scientific rationalism, its integration of matter and spirit and its stress on mystical experiences are solidly based in the Church's tradition. Spiritual seekers need not

look outside the Church in their quest for peace, harmony and union with God.

Towards a Christian response to the New Age

An effective and relevant response to the New Age must be compatible with the principles of interreligious dialogue. Dialogue, while admitting that there are doctrinal and moral differences between diverse faith perspectives, seeks understanding and co-operation and avoids confrontations and harangues.

Whether the current apologetic attacks against the NAM are having a measurable impact on its popularity is debatable. The refutation of its philosophical and theological premises and the ridiculing of its magical beliefs (like those concerning the healing powers of crystals) and practices (like channelling) are probably having little effect on those already committed to them. Livid condemnation of New Age ideas, blanket accusations of satanic involvement, and emotional tirades against its ritual practices are more likely to reinforce New Agers' dislike of and attacks on Christianity.³⁶ The reasons why the popularity of the New Age has already peaked and might also be waning is due more to the problems endemic to the movement itself than to outside factors.³⁷ There is no doubt, however, that even if the NAM will not survive, it has already left its mark on contemporary religion and culture. Thus, for example, Jungian psychology and holistic health, both of which are an integral part of New Age, have been incorporated in retreat programmes and have influenced many Christians seeking growth in their spiritual lives.

A Christian evaluation of the New Age must be guided both by understanding and discernment. The following guidelines should contribute to a better assessment of New Age ideas and practices:

1. Critique of NAM must rely on informed sources and must be conducted in an academic manner. The need to clarify, explain, and defend, when necessary, Christian doctrine must be attended to. But the Church's pastoral ministry must devise more positive ways of relating to and influencing those individuals attracted to the New Age.

2. Refutation of New Agers' arguments that certain beliefs (such as reincarnation) are compatible with Christianity has its proper place. It is also important, however, to point out that many New Age ideas are hardly alien to Christian theology.³⁸

3. General condemnations of the New Age as a whole should be avoided and its good features recognized.

4. Stress must be placed on those elements of the New Age that can be harmonized with Christian doctrine and spirituality. For instance, in

spite of the theological problems inherent in Matthew Fox's creation-centred spirituality, there are some elements in this spirituality that can be based on a Christian theology of creation.³⁹

5. Efforts must be made to imbue some New Age practices with the Christian spirit. Thus, for example, the environmental movement to preserve the earth need not be based on a pantheistic viewpoint. It could easily be founded on traditional Christian theology.

6. It should be recognized that the Church is in constant need of renewal and that the New Age may be pointing to those areas where reform and renewal are most required. 'Spiritual innovation', writes William Dinges,⁴⁰ 'is more often than not an indictment of organized religion and its failure to respond in creative and dynamic ways to new cultural trends.' Official Catholic reactions to the new religious movements have admitted that more can be done for the pastoral needs of the faithful.⁴¹

The New Age as a 'sign of the times'

In conclusion, the advent of the New Age can be seen as a mixed blessing for Christians who are called upon to respond in faith to the presence of new religions towards the end of the twentieth century. While the New Age may be drawing away from traditional faith many who have embarked on a personal religious quest, it might also be doing a service to Christianity by encouraging Christians to delve deeper in their religious tradition and rediscover its treasures.

Rather than being an indication of satanic conniving or an omen of impending apocalyptic doom, the New Age, like all new religious movements,⁴² is 'a sign of the times' calling Christians to self-examination and reform in the light of the gospel.⁴³ The New Age religion presents an excellent opportunity for the Christian Church better to understand and execute its mission, to adapt and react more meaningfully to the changing needs and conditions of the modern age, to express its teachings clearly to an ecumenical audience and to reform and renew herself in the spirit of the gospel.

NOTES

¹ David Spangler, *The New Age* (Issaquah, Washington: Morningtown Press, 1988), p 3.

² J. Gordon Melton, *New Age encyclopedia* (Detroit: Garland, 1990), p xiii.

³ For an insider's view of the many practices that can be included under the New Age, one can consult *The New Age catalogue: access to information and sources*, by the editors of *Body, Mind, and Spirit* (New York: Doubleday, 1988); the *New Age sourcebook*, by the editors of *The New Age Journal* (Brighton, Massachusetts: Rising Star Associates, 1991); and Marcia Gervase Ingenito (ed), *National New Age*

yellow pages (Fullerton, California: Highgate House, second annual edition, 1988). For a scholarly description see J. Gordon Melton, *The New Age almanac* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1991).

⁴ See, for instance, Shirley MacLaine, *Out on a limb* (New York: Bantam, 1983), pp 50–51, who gives a rather mild criticism of Christianity.

⁵ For surveys of the Christian fundamentalist approach to the New Age Movement see James R. Lewis, 'The New Age movement: a bibliography of conservative Christian literature' (Santa Barbara, California: Santa Barbara Centre for Humanistic Studies, 1989) and Irving Hexham, 'The Evangelical response to the New Age' in James R. Lewis and J. Gordon Melton (eds), *Perspectives on the New Age* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp 152–63.

⁶ *The hidden dangers of the rainbow: the New Age and the coming age of barbarism* (Shreveport, Louisiana: Huntington House, 1983).

⁷ *Prosperity and the coming holocaust: the New Age Movement in prophecy* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 1983).

⁸ Texe Marrs, *Dark secrets of the New Age: Satan's plan for a one world religion* (Westchester, Illinois: Lion Publishing, 1986).

⁹ See, for example, Dave Hunt and T. A. MacMahon, *The seduction of Christianity: spiritual discernment in the last days* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 1985), p 213.

¹⁰ Such as Paul de Parrie and Mary Pride, *Unholy sacrifices of the New Age* (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1988).

¹¹ For example, Russell Chandler, *Understanding the New Age* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1988).

¹² Karen Hoyt (ed), *The New Age rage: a probing analysis of the newest religious craze* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell, 1987), p 12.

¹³ Consult, for instance, Walter Martin, *The New Age cult* (Minneapolis: Bethany House), pp 97ff.

¹⁴ Cf, for example, Hexham, *op. cit.*, pp 157–58.

¹⁵ 'A look at the New Age movement', *Military Chaplains' Review* (Fall 1989), p 20.

¹⁶ 'Towards an understanding of the New Age', *St Mark's Review* no 144 (Summer 1991), pp 2–5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p 5.

¹⁹ *The cosmic self* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), pp 194ff.

²⁰ *The New Age: a Christian critique* (South Bend, Indiana: Greenlawn Press, 1990).

²¹ *Ibid.*, p 273.

²² *Catholics and the New Age* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Publications, 1992).

²³ See, for instance, James Richardson, 'Conversion Careers', *Society* vol 17, no 3 (1980), pp 47–50.

²⁴ Pacwa, *op. cit.*, p 68.

²⁵ Towards the end of his book, Pacwa (*op. cit.*, p 198) counsels Catholics to 'look for good in their [i.e. New Ager's] ideas and relate it to the truth that God has already revealed'. He disappoints his readers, however, by not following his own advice.

²⁶ *Facing west from California's shores: a Jesuit's journey into New Age consciousness* (New York: Crossroad, 1987).

²⁷ In a similar approach, Bede Griffiths outlines some of the positive impact the New Age can have on both Christian theology and practice. See his *A new vision of reality: Western science, Eastern mysticism and Christian faith* (Springfield, Illinois: Templegate Publishers, 1989).

²⁸ 'Harmonic convergences and all that: New Age spirituality', *The Way* vol 32, no 1 (1992), p 42.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p 35.

³⁰ *Mysticism and the New Age: Christic consciousness in the new creation* (New York: Alba House, 1991).

³¹ An English translation of this section on the New Age appeared under the title 'Christ of Aquarius?' in *Catholic International* vol 2, no 3 (May 1991), pp 480–88.

³² *Ibid.*, p 485.

³³ *Ibid.*, p 483.

³⁴ *Catholic International* vol 3, no 7 (1–14 April 1992), p 335.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Paul McGuire, *Evangelizing the New Age* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Publications, 1989), p 66.

³⁷ J. Gordon Melton, 'Introductory essay: an overview of the New Age Movement' in *New Age encyclopedia* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1991), pp xxx–xxxii.

³⁸ Consult, for example, Paul Collins, 'What's new about the New Age?', *St Mark's Review* no 144 (Summer 1991), p 14.

³⁹ See the whole issue of *The Way* vol 29, no 1 (1989), which is dedicated to 'creation-centred spirituality'.

⁴⁰ 'Aquarian spirituality: The New Age Movement in America', *The Catholic World* (May/June 1989), p 141.

⁴¹ Cf my essay 'Vatican response to the new religious movements', *Theological Studies* vol 53, no 1 (1992), pp 3-39.

⁴² This view was expressed by Cardinal Ernesto Corripio Ahumada in his report to the 1991 consistory of Cardinals. Cf *Catholic International* vol 2, no 13 (1-14 July 1991), p 618.

⁴³ The phrase 'sign of the times' occurs near the beginning of *Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican II's 'Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World'. See Walter M. Abbott (ed), *The documents of Vatican II* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966), p 201.