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# Looking at the New Age

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The New Age is not a unified system of clear-cut propositions so much as a loose collection of beliefs, attitudes and tendencies. Because the movement is so diverse and diffuse, it does not lend itself easily to analysis. Those who make superficial assessments based on oversimplified data do us a disservice.

Christian comment on the movement has used a variety of approaches. Philip Seddon's study 'circle(s) round the territory, zoning in at ever deeper levels'.<sup>1</sup> Alice and Stephen Lawhead<sup>2</sup> take us on a number of 'Tours': the Cosmos, the Self, the Family, the Body, the Arts, the Mind and finally the Kingdom. In this article I shall simply identify some recurring themes from a sample of the many books which are available, both from New Age sources and from Christian books about the New Age.

Among books which aim to promote the New Age I refer to the following:-

Marilyn Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy - Personal and Social Transformation in the 1980s*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1981;

Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point - Science, Society and the Rising Culture*, Fontana, London 1983;

David Spangler, *The Rebirth of the Sacred*, Gateway Books, London 1984;

Donald Keys, *Earth at Omega*, Branden Publishing Company, 1985;

Leonard Orr and Sondra Ray, *Rebirthing in the New Age*, Celestial Arts, Berkeley 1977 and 1988;

George Trevelyan, *A Vision of the Aquarian Age: The Emerging Spiritual World View*, Stillpoint Publishing, Walpole 1984;

For Christian comment on the movement I refer mainly to:-

Loren Wilkinson, 'New Age, New Consciousness and the New Creation', in Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, ed., *Tending the Garden: Essays in the Gospel and the Earth*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1987;

Russell Chandler, *Understanding the New Age*, Word, Milton Keynes 1988;

Alice and Stephen Lawhead, *Pilgrim's Guide to the New Age*, Lion, Tring 1986.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Seddon, *The New Age - An Assessment*, Grove Books, Bramcote 1990, p3.

<sup>2</sup> Alice and Stephen Lawhead, *Pilgrim's Guide to the New Age*, Lion, Tring 1986.

### The Age of Aquarius

The symbolism of the New Age is drawn partly from astrology. In astrological terms we are leaving the Piscean Age which roughly coincides with the Christian era, and entering the Age of Aquarius which is characterized by love and light.<sup>3</sup>

The New Age requires what Ferguson calls, in language borrowed from Thomas Kuhn, a paradigm shift, i.e. a new way of looking at reality. The new paradigm sees humankind embedded in nature.<sup>4</sup> Capra also writes of the need for a new paradigm, a shift from a mechanistic to a holistic view of reality. Indeed, he believes that a paradigm shift is already taking place which, combined with the decline of patriarchy and the end of the fossil fuel age, is producing far-reaching changes in our society. Capra makes extensive use of the idea of cyclical fluctuation between yin and yang, as expounded in the I Ching. He sees the Judaeo-Christian tradition as supporting an emphasis on the yang values of patriarchy and the exploitation of the earth. In the current change, he thinks, the yin values are asserting themselves.

### The New Physics

Capra, a physicist, points out that the approach based on the philosophy of Descartes, the mechanistic world-view of Newton, and the scientific method of Bacon has been modified by Einstein's general theory of relativity and the formulation of quantum physics. Many physicists now see the world in terms of an organic system or a cosmic process, in which every part is influenced by the whole. At the smallest scale events are governed by probability rather than certainty. Matter is 'in a continuous dancing and vibrating motion'.<sup>5</sup> Mass is a form of energy, while space and time are seen to be 'a four-dimensional continuum'.<sup>6</sup>

Capra shows that modern physics leads to a 'systems' view of the world, in which different concepts may be used to describe different levels of reality, without reducing the phenomena of any level to those of another.<sup>7</sup> Systems thinking postulates a network of interlocking concepts and models.<sup>8</sup> Although living organisms do function in some respects like machines, they also function as open systems, exchanging energy and matter with their environment.

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3 Ferguson, *op.cit.*, p 19.

4 *Ibid.*, p 30.

5 Capra, *op.cit.*, p 79.

6 *Ibid.*, p 81.

7 *Ibid.*, p 89.

8 *Ibid.*, p 285.

Capra goes on to show how 'systems' thinking can be applied to biology and medicine. The Cartesian analytical approach has been successful and fruitful in various ways, but some problems can only be solved by looking at an organism as a whole, or 'system'.<sup>9</sup> In particular Capra suggests that the biomedical approach to mental illness is unable to provide full healing, since it is only able to deal with symptoms and cannot take account of the complex interactions of mind, body and environment. Capra finds that conventional psychology, and even psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, depend on models derived from Newtonian physics. A systems approach to psychology is holistic and dynamic, including recognition of emotional, social and cultural factors.

The Hippocratic tradition with its emphasis on the correlation between mind, body and the environment, and the Chinese science of healing which approaches diagnosis holistically, can point the way to a technique which enables the individual to regain autonomy and integrate with the environment. Homoeopathic and Reichian therapies are said to restore the patient's natural energy patterns to a healthy state. Techniques aimed at relaxation, and biofeedback which enables a person to control bodily functions which are normally unconscious, are claimed to play a part in this model of healing. Solving underlying emotional problems can bring wholeness to those who suffer even from apparently physical diseases such as cancer. Mental health consists not in the absence of irrational or non-ordinary experiences, but in the ability to integrate such experiences with other aspects of life.

Education in the new paradigm, says Ferguson, will be 'transpersonal', involving the exploration of all aspects of consciousness, testing the limits of the self.<sup>10</sup>

### **Economics and Ecology**

Current economics is also, in New Age perspective, inadequate because it is based on narrowly selected data, leaving out of account social and ecological factors and assuming that unlimited economic, technological and institutional growth is both possible and desirable. In fact such growth is impossible because of the limitation of resources, and undesirable because of the mounting cost to human health and to the environment. In a chapter entitled 'The Dark Side of Growth' Capra gives one of the best summaries I have read of the many-sided ecological crisis which our methods of industry and agriculture have brought upon us, including a devastating critique of the plausible madness of nuclear technology.

A healthy state of the economy depends on a condition of dynamic balance within recurrent fluctuations. The only viable kind of economy, Capra thinks, is one based on various forms of solar energy, combined

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 118-193.

<sup>10</sup> Ferguson *op.cit.* p 314.

with a change to less consumptive lifestyles and a more appropriate scale in human organizations. For the period of transition the most suitable form of energy is natural gas, using methane derived from biomass in the form of waste materials from human and other animal and plant sources.

Ecological concern is woven into New Age thinking at many points. Capra is an exponent of 'deep ecology' which is based on an awareness of the union of the individual with the whole of reality. According to Trevelyan, the feeling of insignificance bred by the Copernican Revolution, and modern discoveries of the incomprehensible vastness of the universe, require balancing by a sense of the infinite spiritual importance of the human race at the present moment of cosmic crisis. Only in this way can we begin to discharge our stewardship of the earth.

### Mind in all things

Capra believes that the mental aspect of reality is not peculiar to humanity but is also found universally. He uses the term 'mentation' to refer to the mental element in the universe generally, and 'mind' with reference to human beings. Trevelyan also believes that the Earth is a 'sentient creature'.<sup>11</sup>

With much of what Capra says about the need for a new paradigm it is difficult to disagree. But the New Age is not just about changes which happen objectively outside ourselves. It demands an inner change through which the individual can be aligned with the new paradigm. Such a shift of consciousness would facilitate a transfer of attention from material to inner growth. This transformation will also assist liberation from oppression based on sexual, ethnic or other differences. Capra links systems thinking about reality with mystical traditions whose goal is 'to shed all ego sensations completely and, in mystical experience, merge with the totality of the cosmos'.<sup>12</sup> In writing about holistic health care he mentions shamanistic healers who make contact with forces in the spirit world in order to restore individuals to a healthy state. Transpersonal psychology is 'specifically concerned with the spiritual, transcendental, or mystical aspects of self-actualization.'<sup>13</sup> He describes the state of mind in which an individual possesses a mystical awareness of the whole universe.

The Human Potential movement is a major strand in New Age thinking. Ferguson writes of the need for human relationships to break out of old, traditional structures, so that individuals can develop their own potential without being stultified by destructive rules and prescribed roles. The only absolutes are acceptance and freedom to innovate and grow. She claims that it is this transformed awareness that can finally lead to the overcom-

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11 Trevelyan, *op.cit.*, p 1.

12 Capra, *op.cit.*, p 291.

13 *Ibid.*, pp 405.

ing of hunger in the world and to peace on earth. Keys is emphatic in stating that the movement towards 'Planetization', the unification of the earth community, is integrally connected with the search for personal inner growth. To use his words, there is an 'analogue' between astronautics and 'intronautics'.<sup>14</sup> In a chapter entitled 'The Politics of Consciousness', Keys observes that the consciousness of individuals is fixed at widely differing levels. Those whom Abraham Maslow terms 'self-actualizing' personalities are those who tend to take charge of affairs through their inherent qualities.<sup>15</sup> Keys seems to envisage a time in the future when the human community will be led by such persons, selected intuitively from among humankind, who will work for the good of the whole.

It can readily be seen that the New Consciousness has political implications. Keys is in fact a consultant at the United Nations and identifies Dag Hammarskjöld, U Thant and Sri Chinmoy as 'Three Prophets of Planetary Unity'. Dag Hammarskjöld, formed by the Christian tradition, practised the 'imitation of Christ' in selfless service; U Thant, a Buddhist, sought to follow the Buddhist virtue of tolerance. Both these leaders acknowledged their indebtedness to the writings of Albert Schweitzer and de Chardin. Sri Chinmoy, who is a Hindu, for many years has conducted twice-weekly meditations in the meditation room at the United Nations building.

Together with U Thant and Norman Cousins, Donald Keys founded 'Planetary Citizens', a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) attached to the United Nations, in order to help individuals cross the threshold of consciousness to a global world view, and to forward the process of planetization.

Keys offers a 'Declaration on the World We Choose' produced by a Planetary Initiative Congress held in 1983. The declaration comprises 'A Vision of a Preferred Future', an analysis of the 'Challenges to the Future', and sections on Nuclear War; Ecology, Environment, Energy, and Resources; Economics: International, National, Alternative; Population, Food and Agriculture; and Human Rights and Responsibilities.

### The new world vision: 'Planetization'

Keys's title, *Earth at Omega*, taken from the writings of Teilhard de Chardin, indicates that he sees the earth as having reached a critical point in its history, where the future depends on making right decisions. As the thirteen American States following the War of Independence were enabled by a shift of consciousness to form a Union, so he believes that the nations of the world now need to undergo a similar shift on a global scale. Keys gives an interesting summary of the structures, activities, achievements and limitations of the United Nations, and of the ways in which, he believes, its effectiveness could be enhanced and developed. He identifies

<sup>14</sup> Keys, *op.cit.*, p 108

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p 112

some of the obstacles to progress in international relations, such as unwarranted perceptions of threat, distorted images of other nations, fear, and psychological insecurity. These obstacles, he thinks, can only be removed through personal transformation. He holds that research into psi-phenomena (formerly known as parapsychology, psychic phenomena or extrasensory perception), based on study of the electromagnetic characteristics accompanying altered states of consciousness, leads to the view that the 'Earth system' is 'a field of energies in which we are embedded'.<sup>16</sup> A disturbance anywhere will have an effect on the whole system.

Trevelyan also writes that a true stewardship of the planet includes not only ceasing to damage our environment in physical ways, but also '*the channelling of love, light and spirit into the body of the Earth*'.<sup>17</sup>

In similar vein Spangler embraces a new world vision which is holistic, androgynous (affirming both the masculine and feminine components in human nature), global, mystical and creative. He claims that it receives support from the work of scientists such as David Bohm with his belief in the unbroken wholeness of an 'implicate order'; Karl Pribram with his holographic model of consciousness; and Rupert Sheldrake with his theory of 'morphogenetic fields' connecting all members of a species.

Spangler sees the outline of an emerging new planetary culture which will be integrated with regional cultures; a world agency which will not inhibit local initiative; a new economy based on the individual's creativity and production; a recovery of healing arts which will enable individuals to promote their own health and a planetary spirituality, which will embrace the underlying truth of all religions, as well as harmonizing with science and technology.

According to Ferguson, when enough individuals have undergone the paradigm shift, they will carry the whole mass of humanity with them into the new age. Similarly Keys speaks of the requirement of a 'critical mass' of people - and ultimately of nations - who have adopted good will as their guiding principle.

### A conspiracy?

Keys speaks of attempts being made by some who have embraced the new culture to transform existing institutions by infiltrating them. Such persons, he believes, need to have the quality of 'world warriors'. Orr thinks that government should be self-government, but also that the rule of the 'spiritual aristocracy' is inevitable.<sup>18</sup> Because of ideas such as these, and perhaps with encouragement from the title of Ferguson's book, *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, some people have seen the New Age as a sinister

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p 109.

<sup>17</sup> Trevelyan, op.cit., p 119 (original italics).

<sup>18</sup> Orr and Ray, op.cit., p 220.

conspiracy. However, the very diffuse nature of the movement largely invalidates the conspiracy theory. Christian writers such as Russell and also Elliot Miller<sup>19</sup> have discounted the more sensational conspiracy theories of writers like Constance Cumbey.<sup>20</sup>

The exponents of the New Age find their precursors in such thinkers as the German mystic Meister Eckhart, in William Blake and the American Transcendentalists; Carl Jung, A.N. Whitehead and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin among many others are also seen as adumbrating the thinking of the New Age. Trevelyan states in his foreword that he and those who think like him are recovering 'the Ageless Wisdom of the ancient Mysteries.' He traces this 'ageless wisdom' from the ancient mysteries of Chaldea, Egypt and Greece, through the Gnostic sects, orders like the Knights Templar, Rosicrucians and Masons, to modern sources such as Blavatsky, Annie Besant, Steiner and Alice Bailey. All of these dealt in esoteric ideas not directly accessible to the general public except in the 'safe' form of myths and legends.

### Psychotechnologies

How, we may ask, does an individual come to undergo this change of consciousness? The answer, according to Ferguson, is that almost anything can trigger it, including physical exertion, intellectual struggle, techniques of meditation, or even psychedelic drugs.<sup>21</sup>

Orr gives a list of spiritual practices which aim at spiritual purification. They are associated with air (connected breathing), fire (putting ordinary food into the fire), water (bathing in warm water), and earth (forming a conscious relationship with the planet by means of sports, manual labour and the like). Other practices are Japa (silently repeating the names of God), fasting, thought (changing the negatives into positives), and unconditional love (of yourself!).<sup>22</sup>

Trevelyan advocates meditation, lovingness and proximity to the soil as means for advancing personal transformation. The rediscovery of arts and crafts, the sacramental and the ritual, all have their part to play. Through meditation, Trevelyan asserts, we can create a centre of quietude and stillness within ourselves, which can be flooded with light from the higher planes. In this meditation mindfulness of breathing is most important, coupled with a posture which is both alert and relaxed. In the process of transformation, character must be developed as well as knowledge acquired, and in this way safeguards are provided against 'dark occultism

19 Elliot Miller, *A Crash Course on the New Age Movement*, Monarch, Eastbourne 1990.

20 Constance Cumbey, *The Hidden Dangers of the Rainbow: The New Age Movement and Our Coming Age of Barbarism*, Huntingdon House, USA 1983.

21 Ferguson, *op.cit.*, p 32.

22 Orr and Ray, *op.cit.*, pp 143 ff.

which seeks personal power'. Meditation can be a means of reconstituting our self under the guidance of the Higher Self.

According to Keys, the examination of priorities and habits, and the breaking of self-imposed limits, all are important. The practice of 'quiet times' of whatever form, the practice of 'recollection', a sufficiently detached attitude, and intuition are all emphasized. In the emerging new consciousness, which is 'a-rational' or post-mental, feeling and reason are co-ordinated. In it people see things whole and discern their essence or quality. The post-mental consciousness leads to the development of empathy, and to the growth of teams and support groups - all of which are seen as forwarding the cause of world harmony.

Orr and Ray place much emphasis on rebirthing, which means reliving (and thus, as it were, 'exorcizing') one's birth trauma. It may or may not involve the use of redwood hot tubs. A special breathing technique known as hyperventilation appears to be essential to rebirthing, which is called 'a biological experience of God'.

Ferguson attributes much importance to the different functions of the two halves of the human brain. The right brain is holistic and intuitive, the left brain analytical and logical. Western civilization appears to emphasize 'left-brain' thinking, while in the thinking of the East the right-brain function predominates. 'Psychotechnologies' can help to bring about a transcendent harmony between the two halves of the brain.

Ferguson refers to recent scientific studies which seem to point to a mysterious unity in the universe, and to Karl Pribram's view that the brain functions in a manner analogous to a hologram, so that consciousness is one and indivisible. As a hologram is constructed when the appropriate light beams fall on a photographic plate, so the brain constructs reality by the interpretation of a transcendent realm.<sup>23</sup> The holographic universe, in which the whole transcends the sum of the parts, is related to holistic thinking and the enlarged consciousness to which meditation techniques give access. Psychic phenomena, she asserts, are by-products of the primary reality to which human minds have access under certain conditions.

Subjectivism is of the essence of the New Age and can be illustrated from the work of Orr and Ray, with their emphasis on 'affirmations'. Affirmations implanted in the consciousness can supplant the 'specific negatives' which lead to failure in life. Specific emphasis is given to negative attitudes stemming from the 'parental disapproval syndrome'.

These authors offer a number of affirmations which are aimed at general aliveness and enrichment, 'youthing', or health and body consciousness. Creative thought and rebirthing can make you rich, transform the financial and economic system, and even enable you to eat whatever you like without becoming fat. Simply by affirming something you make it true:

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<sup>23</sup> Ferguson, *op.cit.*, p 198.

'you make your own reality'. Orr even asserts that scientific truth is created by scientists because they believe it.<sup>24</sup>

According to Orr and Ray physical immortality - indefinite continuance on this earth - is open to anyone who does not believe that death is inevitable. In the Bible Enoch, Elijah, and Jesus himself are quoted as examples of people who defeated death *in this sense*. Eve could have lived for ever if she had not allowed her attention to be deflected from the tree of life towards the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And does not John 3:16 say that whoever believes in the Son of God shall have everlasting life?<sup>25</sup>

### Nature spirits, advanced beings and gurus

In Trevelyan's view, the stewardship of the earth demands not only organic husbandry, but also co-operation with elemental beings and nature spirits in order that the earth may be saved, while Spangler was for a time closely connected with the Findhorn Community, a New Age Community in Scotland where plants and vegetables of prodigious size were said to have been produced in the most barren soil through communication with nature spirits.

Spangler claims to have mystical experiences of unity with his own deeper self, a continuing spiritual being which endures throughout countless reincarnations. Through his deeper self he also claims to enjoy a working relationship with an 'advanced being' who calls himself John.

Channelling is the term used in New Age circles for the reception of guidance from 'advanced beings'. This assistance is sought in order to understand and serve the world. Channelling is thus said to be distinct from mediumship, which seeks contact with the spirits of the dead for the benefit of their relatives. Chandler describes *A Course in Miracles*, a compendium of New Age thought in which Jesus speaks in the first person. The book claims to be the product of an 'inner voice' heard over a seven year period by a Jewish psychotherapist named Helen Schucman. The teachings of the course are admitted to be incompatible with Christianity because they assert that God did not create the world; that Jesus was not the only Son of God; and that he did not suffer and die for our sins.

Others in the New Age movement seek guidance from earthly spiritual guides such as Eastern gurus. Orr and Ray are much influenced by a yogi called Abubabaji, who is believed to be an incarnation of Babaji, the 'yogi Christ of India...the eternal manifestation of God in human form'. Babaji is seen as the teacher and 'power source' of Moses, Elijah, Melchizedek and even of Jesus, and the Creator of the universe.

Others again are unsympathetic with the trend to follow Eastern gurus, and criticise many popular gurus for their ostentatious lifestyles. From a

<sup>24</sup> Orr and Ray, *op.cit.*, p 56.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p 158.

Christian point of view it must be said that those who claim to be Christs, or new manifestations of Christ, become by definition Antichrist figures. Tal Brooke presents a convincing picture of certain Indian gurus as Antichrist figures, and of their so-called 'Enlightenment' experience as a total form of demonic possession.<sup>26</sup>

### The New Age world views

Clearly a route exists from the New Age way of thinking and feeling, to involvement with the occult. New Age thinking also predisposes some people towards various forms of witchcraft. The main issue for Christians is whether everything connected with the New Age is automatically occult and antichristian, or whether the matter is more complex than that. Loren Wilkinson endorses the warnings of writers such as Cumbey concerning the dangers of the occult element in the New Age, but at the same time thinks that this element is not as prominent as they assert. Russell Chandler also appears to think that the main dangers of the New Age lie elsewhere. Nevertheless the occult dangers are greater than some New Agers will admit. Writers like Spangler and Trevelyan do indeed warn of these dangers, but may not be aware how far they themselves may be subject to occult influences.

Behind the New Age outlook is the view that all is one, and therefore good and evil must be integrated. In writing of the devil Trevelyan follows Steiner who distinguishes two evil principles: Ahriman<sup>27</sup> or Mephistopheles, the spirit of materialism, and Lucifer the spirit of inflated egoism and lust for power. These are both to be held in balance through 'the presence of the divine impulse in the heart'.<sup>28</sup> This state of balance is represented by a wood sculpture carved by Steiner, depicting Christ holding both Lucifer and Ahriman in check. Steiner foretold that Ahriman would incarnate in a physical body ('perhaps as an occultist', we are told). On the other hand Lucifer can pervert genuine spiritual impulses so that they become evil. Trevelyan sees examples of his activity in Nazism, but also in drug abuse and black magic. (Spangler also sees Nazism as a corruption of an ecological spirit and a desire for transcendence.)

Reincarnation is a staple doctrine in all New Age thinking. Trevelyan quotes Thomas Traherne, Wordsworth, Yeats and Coleridge in support of the idea of the pre-existence of human beings.<sup>29</sup> Reincarnation is governed by the principle of karma, the law of compensation. Trevelyan believes that karma is not an inexorable law but can be 'dissolved' by love. He thinks that people probably incarnate in groups, and that reincarnating spirits choose their parents.

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<sup>26</sup> Tal Brooke, *Riders of the Cosmic Circuit*, Lion Publishing, Tring, 1986.

<sup>27</sup> Ahriman is derived from Zoroastrianism.

<sup>28</sup> Trevelyan, *op.cit.*, p 143.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 34ff.

To Trevelyan death is the 'Great Adventure', in which the spirit passes through a Borderland formed by its preoccupations and preconceptions formed on earth, to a Summerland, a plane of fulfilled desires. While they are in the Borderland the departed spirits can be nourished by the spiritual thoughts of those on earth, especially during sleep. In sleep, it is said, the astral body and the spirit withdraw to spiritual worlds and are linked with the physical body and etheric body ('a network of vital forces') by the 'silver chord' which is broken at death. Traditional concepts of hell are to be rejected, although the departing spirit will experience the pain of remorse for the wrongs and failures of this life. The task required to prepare us for this journey is to merge our lower self into the higher self.

Reincarnation is one of the points at which the difference between the New Age and Christianity is most clearly seen. Even Matthew Fox, whose 'creation spirituality' appears almost indistinguishable from New Age teaching at many points, does not embrace the doctrine of reincarnation.<sup>30</sup> There can be no possible accommodation between the Christian expectation of death followed by resurrection and judgment, and the New Age prospect of repeated reincarnations. Russell suggests further that the idea of karma is fundamentally unjust. Since the personality of Hitler, for instance, no longer exists, how can it be just that some other personality, in which Hitler's spirit is reincarnated, should pay for his misdeeds?

New Age thinking assumes that God is entirely immanent, the unifying power behind everything, but not at all transcendent. Nothing and nobody, according to the New Age, is outside God. Indeed, according to Orr and Ray, the original sin is not believing that you are God!

### New Age attitudes to Christianity

Because they hold many beliefs which are opposed to biblical and traditional Christianity, it is not surprising that New Age writers tend to use Christian doctrines and concepts in ways which are alien to Christianity itself. In Orr's interpretation of the Trinity, the Father is the thinker, the Son is the thoughts generated by the Father. Since you are God, this means your own thoughts. The Holy Spirit is your own personal reality!<sup>31</sup> Orr also gives a reinterpretation of the Ten Commandments which can only be described as a serious distortion.<sup>32</sup> For example, *Thou shalt have no other gods before me* means that, since you are God, you should have no other gods before the intuitive perception of your own being; in the fifth commandment honouring your father and mother means understanding the thoughts they gave you; the sixth commandment teaches us not to in-

<sup>30</sup> Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing - A Primer in Creation Spirituality*, (Bear and Company, Santa Fe 1983). Compare Margaret Brearley, 'Matthew Fox: Creation Spirituality for the Aquarian Age', *Christian Jewish Relations*, vol.22, no.2, 1989.

<sup>31</sup> Orr and Ray, *op.cit.*, p 55

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 249-258.

dulge in a mortal mentality, and adultery means the adulteration of your thoughts!

Trevelyan also uses biblical images and ideas in a context alien to orthodox Christianity. He quotes John 15:4-5 ('Abide in me, and I in you...I am the vine, ye are the branches...without me ye can do nothing') and applies it to the 'new birth' which comes from union with the higher self. The 'many mansions' of John 14 refer to levels of consciousness on the journey back to the Godhead, absolute being. Quoting at length from Matthew 24, Trevelyan applies the expectation of the Parousia to the 'great evolutionary change' which may represent the movement from the Piscean to the Aquarian Age,<sup>33</sup> while the 'clouds' represent 'the etheric plane which becomes visible to us as our vision expands'.<sup>34</sup> The visions of the Book of Revelation, he thinks, also set forth the destruction of materialism and the coming of the New Age.

Orr exhorts his readers to go back to their churches, rid themselves of their 'religious conditioning', and use their 'divine power' to 'free' others.

### Incompatible doctrines

I hope that this summary has made clear the incompatibility of New Age theology with Christian doctrine. Chandler draws attention to the fact that New Age thinking seeks transcendence by looking within, but has rejected the true transcendence which consists in the fact that God is outside creation as well as within it. He quotes James 3:17: Christians seek the wisdom from above, not the wisdom within. Chandler also points out that the first three chapters of Genesis trace the progress of our alienation from God through doubt of God's word to the denial of sin and death and on to disobedience - all noticeable features of the New Age theology. Chandler presents Christ as 'The Man for All Ages', the true fulfiller of human aspirations.

The Lawheads point out that humans are not God, but made in his image, fallen but redeemed in Christ. The self is given by God, and is discovered not only in isolation and introspection but also through the knowledge of God and in relation with others. In opposition to the New Age, the Lawheads also point out that marriage is not a contract to be adhered to as long as it delivers self-fulfilment, but a covenant which endures regardless of its success. Families are not to be discarded if they conflict with the claims of self-actualization, but are an important part of God's plan for human life. The body is important, but people are spirit as well as body and this body does not last for ever. Artists should be accountable to their public, and self-expression does not in itself legitimate all forms of artistic work.

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<sup>33</sup> Trevelyan, *op.cit.*, p 128.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p 130.

The Lawheads place the Christian squarely in the supernaturalist rather than the naturalist camp. This appears to mean that the Christian believes in the existence of that which cannot easily be proved by scientific methods. But the antithesis, natural/supernatural, needs supplementing with the New Testament opposite flesh/spirit, which refers to the presence or absence of the Holy Spirit of God as ruler and informer of the human personality. In the New Testament it is the 'flesh' and not the 'natural' which is opposed to the Spirit.

### Neutral aspects

The possibility remains that to some extent the New Age reflects a theologically neutral change in our perception of the world. The Copernican revolution was initially distasteful to the Church, but was eventually seen to be theologically neutral. Similarly the new paradigm posited by the New Age may be a neutral phenomenon to which erroneous theological ideas and spiritual practices can become attached, as to any other culture. In that case it would be incumbent on Christians to produce their own spirituality and theology for the New Age. Loren Wilkinson writes of 'a major shift in consciousness, values, and epistemology occurring in our time,...an almost unavoidable, irresistible cultural pressure.'<sup>35</sup> Just as cultural pressures led to the reformulation of Christology in relation to new questions at the Council of Nicaea, so we are being forced to reformulate the Christian faith in relation to new questions about creation.

There can be little doubt that our culture is undergoing a 'paradigm shift' under influences such as modern global communications (the 'global village'), the advent of space travel ('Spaceship Earth') and modern developments in physics (quantum mechanics). A 'systems' approach to reality and a 'holistic' approach to, for example, medicine and the environment can reveal aspects of truth which cannot be seen in other ways. If we are to preserve life, and the earth which God has entrusted to us, it is essential that we see ourselves as part of nature as well as being set apart from it - in terms of Gen. 1, as being created along with the other creatures as well as being made in the image of God. It is modern Western culture, not the Bible or the Christian tradition, which has divorced body and spirit, religion and nature. A rediscovery of our relation with the earth, and of our bodies, by manual labour, walking, running and the like can open the way to new dimensions of human experience and Christian discipleship. If these are aspects of the New Age, Christians can heartily endorse them. Likewise, some aspects of the human potential movement can also be helpful: many have been assisted by counselling and psychotherapy, especially if administered by Christians, which draw on some insights of writers such as Freud and Jung, without following their theological conclusions. The reinstatement of intuitive thinking is necessary, although, as

<sup>35</sup> Wilkinson, *op.cit.*, p 27.

Chandler remarks, right-brain impressions need checking by left-brain analysis. Many of the gifts of the Holy Spirit mentioned in the New Testament appear to operate on an intuitive level. However, the spirits must also be tested.

### The gospel for the New Age

The changing culture demands differences in the way we articulate the gospel. The idols of the New Age are not materialism and physical might, but spiritual arrogance and the worship of the self. New Age spirituality is a modern kind of gnosticism. In it salvation is thought to come from a new way of knowing, a new consciousness. Because this spirituality tends to reject or ignore the transcendent God, it also tends to worship either lesser supernatural beings, or else the self.

The heresy which is attacked in St. Paul's letter to the Colossians shows some close similarities to the thinking of the New Age. There also people were preoccupied with intermediate spiritual beings. They were warned: '...do not let your minds be captured by hollow and delusive speculations, based on traditions of man-made teaching and centred on the elemental spirits of the universe and not on Christ.' (Col. 2:8) Spiritual arrogance and 'angel worship' were in evidence in their spiritual milieu also (2:18).

Against this background Paul asserts the primacy of Christ, the Image of God (1:15). The fulness of the Godhead was pleased to dwell in him (1:19, cf. 2:9). All things are held together in him (1:17), and he is therefore the principle of unity in all reality. Everything, including the supernatural spiritual powers, was created in him, through him and for him (1:16). (However, Eph. 6:12 speaks of the supernatural powers as being now hostile to the Kingdom of Christ).

Christ is not only the Lord of creation but also the reconciler of all things. The achievement of his cross is not only to reconcile individual people, nor even only the Church, but the whole universe to God. Reconciliation is therefore not the fruit of long years of meditation on our part leading to a merging with the infinite, but the achievement of Christ on his cross leading to a true humanity which is renewed in the image of its Creator (3:10). This reconciliation is total and final (1:22), conditional only on our faith in the hope offered by the gospel (1:23). The revealed secret (*mysterion*) of God is Christ himself, not some esoteric knowledge. All wisdom and knowledge (*gnosis*) are hidden in him (2:2-3). The essence of the Christian life is therefore relatedness to Jesus Christ (2:6-7).

Christ on his cross triumphed over the powers and authorities, discarding them (along with his own earthly body?) when he 'made a public spectacle of them and led them as captives in his triumphal procession' (2:15). Christians, therefore, having died with Christ, are beyond reach of the elemental spirits of the universe (2:20), and are not to acknowledge rules dictated by human teaching.

The sovereignty of God in creation and redemption is the true gospel for the New Age. Without this faith, belief in higher spiritual beings becomes demonic, and spirituality easily degenerates into occultism. The transcendence which the New Age seeks so desperately is to be found in the transcendent, cosmic Christ. Repentance, in this age as in all others, consists of turning to him, present in creation but also sovereign and transcendent over it.

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