



Briefing

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The Dawning of the Age of Aquarius

An overview & appraisal of some central themes in New Age thought

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INTRODUCTION

Perhaps even ten years ago, a book or article on the "New Age movement" would have attracted very little attention - very few people would have heard of it, let alone had any knowledge of it. How things have changed. Today, most book and music retailers will have well-perused sections of shelf space devoted to the genre. Again, the flood of television and radio programmes dealing with recognisably New Age themes are never short of devoted viewers and listeners - it seems to matter little whether the material is fictional (e.g. *XFiles*) or factual (e.g. *Desperately Seeking Something*). Indeed, the significance of the New Age is demonstrated by the very fact that, after such a short period of time, it would now be very difficult to find a person who has not heard of it or encountered it in some form. Its broad range of philosophies, practitioners and treatments can be found in almost every area of western culture. Such has been its impact as a spiritual and cultural force that it has been likened to the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and "spiritual revivals in the West since the sixteenth century." The point is that the New Age cannot be ignored by those who want to understand the contemporary western world - an understanding which should be a fundamental aim of the Church.

PICK AND MIX

For many, one of the attractions of the New Age movement is that it has no founder, no central prophet, no binding creed and no headquarters. Indeed, it should not be understood as a "religion" or a "cult" at all. Rather it is perhaps better understood as a super-market in which spiritual shoppers may browse and take whatever they feel might contribute to their general wellbeing - "if you like it, take it; if it works, use it." That is to say, the New Age is essentially an umbrella term for a collection of philosophies and practices from which a person can pick and mix. One only has to visit "The Festival of Mind, Body and Spirit" to see a tangible manifestation of such a New Age supermarket. Likewise, Channel 4's *Desperately Seeking Something* (a good title for a programme on the New Age) presented viewers with a colourful selection of what is on offer in Britain. Shamanic practitioners, Druids, Taoist priests, the Fellowship of Isis, the Golden Dawn Occult Society, the Aetherius Society, Wicca, Qabalists, the Barefoot Doctor and a host of other groups and individuals were brought together with a variety of alternative therapies such as rebirthing, Kahuna massage, soul restoration and aura-soma colour therapy. All this and much, much more is conveniently covered by the term "New Age."

THE EMERGING WORLDVIEW & COSMIC EVOLUTION

Having said that, it is important to understand that the "New Age" is not simply a convenient term for a collection of disparate beliefs and practices. It is rather, in the words of one New Age writer, "a useful term because it describes an emerging worldview..."³

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The argument is that the various philosophies and therapies are simply manifestations of an evolving consciousness. Although it is variously understood, it is a fundamental presupposition of New Age thought that people are starting to think differently as a consequence of an all-embracing spiritual, material and intellectual evolution of the cosmos. The popularity of mystical interpretations of "the new physics", holistic medicine and creation-centred spiritualities all indicate this fundamental shift in thinking. In astrological terminology (commonly used by New Agers), the sun is setting on the old machine age of Pisces, and the new spiritual age of Aquarius is dawning. The rationalistic way of thinking which has produced the characteristic features of the modern world (including Hiroshima, Nagasaki and the eco-crisis) is passing away before our very eyes as are all authoritarian, patriarchal, sin-obsessed religious traditions - particularly mainstream Christianity. As the New Age emerges, we are starting to use the more intuitive right half of the brain rather than primarily relying on the rationalistic left half as has been the case up until now. New Agers are convinced that "we are evolving to be better, more advanced beings and that our age is the one in which humanity will take the next major leap forward in conceptual evolution and transform ourselves and our world."⁴ However, this is not the evolution of Darwinist biology but rather a guided process. Although few, if any, New Agers would make direct reference to a personal "God", there is frequent reference to some guiding principle or energy such as "the Spirit" or "the Life Force". Hence, the feeling is that, whether people like it or not, the New Age *will* emerge.

"NO MAN IS AN ISLAND"

This belief that new patterns of thought are bound up with the evolution of the cosmos rests on another fundamental presupposition, namely, the interconnectedness of all things. In the words of the influential New Age physicist, Fritjof Capra, the universe is "an interconnected web of physical and mental relations whose parts are only defined through their connections to the whole."⁵ This basic interconnectedness, often termed "holism", rejects the analytical methodology of much modern science which seeks to understand things by breaking them down into their constituent parts. Rather, understanding is gained by looking at the whole. For example, holistic medical practitioners will not simply view your body as a machine with a couple of

faulty parts but will seek to treat the whole person-body, mind and spirit. Hence, New Age healing almost always involves some degree of and some variety of spiritual therapy.

However, holistic thought cannot be content with the healing of human persons. For true healing to take place, we also need to think about the well-being of the planet - which is generally understood as a single, self-regulating organism, Gaia. Although he has explicitly distanced himself from many New Age interpretations, the intriguing Gaia hypothesis was formulated by the British scientist James Lovelock to describe the interconnectedness of human beings with each other and with the complex processes of the ecosystem. Incorporating this hypothesis into a holistic understanding of the planet, New Agers have added to it a spiritual dimension even talking of "Gaia (or planetary) consciousness." Indeed, being the Mother Earth goddess of ancient Greek mythology, many understand Gaia in terms of the divine feminine. Again, since it is generally assumed that masculine images of "God" underlie the passing rationalistic era, it is felt that the evolving cosmos is, so to speak, bidding farewell to "God the Father" and welcoming in "the Earth Mother." The point is that Mother Gaia must also be included in the healing process. John Donne was right, "No man is an island." Each person's well-being is bound up with the next person's and ultimately with the well-being of the planet. This is why many New Agers have a keen interest in environmental issues and have been instrumental in the development of what is called "deep ecology" - an influential form of environmentalism based on an interpretation of the Gaia hypothesis.

THE BASIC ONENESS OF THE UNIVERSE

This brings us to a feature of Eastern, particularly Indian, thought which has informed many New Age spiritualities. Capra leaves his readers in no doubt as to what this feature is: "The most important characteristic of the Eastern worldview...is the awareness of the unity and mutual interrelation of all things and events, the experience of all phenomena in the world as manifestations of a basic oneness."⁶ Although it doesn't fit neatly into all New Age belief systems, most (perhaps without thinking through the implications) would agree with Capra's insistence on "the unity of all things." That is to say, underlying much New Age thinking is the belief in some form of "monism" - the

philosophical idea that everything is reducible to a single essence or reality. Although, in the final analysis, it is doubtful whether much New Age thought could strictly speaking be described as thoroughgoing monism, there is certainly a strong monistic tendency. It is not simply that humans are interconnected with the other constituents of the cosmos, but that, in some mystical sense, they are One. Hence, exploring what he understands to be fundamental connections between the new physics (the theory of relativity and quantum theory) and the monistic philosophies of the East, Capra insists that "the basic oneness of the universe is not only the central characteristic of the mystical experience but is also one of the most important revelations of modern physics." On the basis of this thesis, he seeks to construct a holistic worldview in which science and theology, the physical and the spiritual, mind and matter are brought together.

Furthermore it goes without saying that "God" is not exempt from this monistic worldview. In the words of a Pennsylvanian crystal dealer, "The entire universe is God. We are part of that God energy." This belief is known as "pantheism" - God is everything and everything is God. However it should be said that some, perhaps most, New Age thought is in the final analysis not pantheistic but "pan-en-theistic" - God is in everything and everything is in God. Whilst insisting that God is not "out there" but always and only fundamentally united with creation, panentheism, conceptually at least, subtly distinguishes God from the created order. For example, the Dominican priest and New Age writer Matthew Fox tells us that "everything that exists is bathed in God, is enveloped by God, who is round-about us all, enveloping...Panentheism is a mature doctrine about the presence of God, about the deep wilderness of God." Indeed, although Fox uses the term "God", generally New Agers feel happier with terms such as "the Life Force", "the Spirit" or "God energy", since these fit more comfortably into a pan-theistic/panentheistic worldview.

This monistic pantheism/panentheism means that, for many New Agers, an experience of "God" is basically an experience of "a higher dimension" of oneself. As Marilyn Ferguson (a leading exponent of New Age ideas) says, "All souls are one. Each is a spark from the

original soul, and this soul is inherent in all souls...You are joined to a great Self ... And because that Self is inclusive, you are joined to all others." Hence, the belief in the basic unity of the universe not only means that all are one, but also that all is "God" and that therefore I am "God".

SOME CHRISTIAN REFLECTIONS

Although much New Age thought is difficult to reconcile with Christian belief, Christians should not resort to paranoid blanket condemnations of everything that seems "a bit New Agey." As Philip Seddon has pointed out, "Ideas should not be rejected simply because they have been lumped under the New Age umbrella by opponents or hi-jacked by New Age writers. Those Christians who reject the New Age *en bloc* need reminding that God...can speak through 'men of strange lips and with an alien tongue' (Isaiah 28.11)." Indeed the impact of the New Age has, in some cases, been beneficent. For example, although the philosophy underlying much New Age environmentalism is fundamentally at odds with Christian theology, the concern for, the careful thinking about and the hours of active involvement that many New Agers put into protecting the environment is commendable and something from which the Church could learn. Again, there seem to be no theological reasons why a holistic model of the planet might not be developed by Christians. Surely, as is increasingly the case in contemporary science, one can work with a holistic ("Gaia") hypothesis without adopting the spiritual baggage that has been added by New Agers. Finally, whilst the Church should be careful to distance itself from its spiritual underpinnings, the move away from the traditional "biomedical" models of medicine towards more holistic approaches to healing should not be shunned. Although there are a host of bizarre and overtly occult therapies, there is nothing intrinsically evil within herbalism, homeopathy, aromatherapy and acupuncture, for example. As to whether Christians should make use of such therapies, it should be remembered that, as John Drane notes, "the scientific materialist basis of conventional medicine is neither more or less Christian than the monistic worldview of alternative therapists."

On the other hand, Christians should not be naive. The personal, loving God revealed in Jesus Christ is not the "Life Force" of the New

Age. The biblical doctrine of creation explicitly rules out any form of pantheistic monism or panentheism. God created the cosmos and exists independently of that cosmos. Having said that, holding firmly to a trinitarian understanding of God, Christian theology seeks to hold together both God's independence of creation and, by his Spirit, his intimate involvement with it.

Whereas the Church can agree that we are living in a new age ushered in by God and permeated by the Spirit, the important difference for Christians is that it is not the Aquarian age animated by an impersonal "Life Force" but rather the age that began with Jesus Christ and the outpouring of his Holy Spirit. Moreover, this is not an age that is passing away, but rather it is an age that is coming to a climax.

Pantheistic monism and New Age holistic spirituality produce two conflicting views of humanity both of which are fundamentally antagonistic to Christian thought. Firstly, although the notion that humans are essentially divine appeals to the selfish individualism of the West, it is not Christian. It has produced a narcissistic worldview in which people become obsessed with their own importance.

Realising one's divinity and maximising one's happiness has led

some to concentrate on personal fulfilment at the expense of concern for others and social justice - something the Bible would never sanction. Secondly, as is the case with some New Age environmentalists, monism leads to a denial of the particular value of humanity - all creation (animate and inanimate) is of equal value. Logically, killing mice or even the burning of crops is on a par with the holocaust. The biblical understanding of humanity made in the image of God opposes all such muddled thinking. Whilst teaching that God values the whole of his creation and that humanity is to care for it on his behalf, the Bible makes it clear that humans have a unique worth in the eyes of God. Hence, unlike the devotees of the New Age, the followers of Jesus Christ are called to be self-sacrificially philanthropic.

Finally, monism means, as Capra says, going "beyond the world of opposites" - "good and bad, pleasure and pain, life and death, are not absolute experiences belonging to different categories but are merely two sides of the Same reality; extreme parts of a single whole." Needless to say, the Bible stands opposed to any denial of the reality of evil, pain and death - a denial which has immense implications for a person's moral integrity.

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¹¹P. Seddon, *The New Age: An Assessment* p.3

¹²J. Drane, *What is the New Age Saying to the Church?* p.160

¹³F. Capra, *The Tao of Physics* p.157

FURTHER READING

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