

THE "NEW AGE" MOVEMENT IN THE LIGHT OF TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY*

By Bishop Chrysostomos*

In the last several years, an eclectic "religious" movement has swept the Americas and Western Europe, drawing especially the young and affluent by its promises of "inner peace" and its claims to represent the "trends of the twenty-first century." Under the "New Age" banner, a number of different leaders and teachers have often lured away even traditional Christian believers by their philosophies of self-improvement and an array of humanistic, Utopian promises for a better world. Of late, with the demise of communism, these groups have gained momentum in Eastern Europe, where visions of prosperity and individual happiness immediately appeal to individuals beset by the uncertainties and fears that arise in societies in transition. And there, too, the "New Agers" have peddled their philosophical wares alongside the traditional Christian missionaries — both native Orthodox and Christians from the West — who have been seeking to return Eastern Europe to its pre-communist Christian roots. In the face of these activities, it behooves us to look at the "New Age" movement in a general way, to understand its theological and psychological assumptions, and to come to an understanding of the threat which it poses to traditional Christian teaching, both here at home and abroad.

We must not be careless in speaking of the "New Age" movement as though it were a single thing and an easily identifiable social movement. There are many groups which identify themselves as "New Age" groups, when they are not. "Channeling," for example, is often called a "New Age" religious practice. In fact, its efforts to summon up spiritual guidance from the realm of the dead is simply a rebirth of the old psychic movements and their "mediums" and seances, which

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first gained popularity in Europe and the Americas at the turn of the century. "Channelers" do not specifically seek, in their quasi-religious experiences, the Utopian vision of a single world religion based on humanistic precepts that, as we shall see, is a basic characteristic of the "New Age" religions. Rather, they play on the psychological weaknesses of the bereaved and of those who wish to escape the limitations of human knowledge and to usurp the timeless knowledge of God — who wish to know the future to find firmness in the present. Along with "Channeling," the other purely "psychic" arts (astrology, soothsaying, etc.) should not be confused with the "New Age" movement, despite their claims to that title.

The "New Age" movement is also not "new." It has received tremendous attention in the press in Europe and the Americas in the last few years, since many of the taboos against attacking traditional religious beliefs and institutions in the popular media have begun to disappear in an increasingly secular world. Thus not only is the unorthodox spirituality of the "New Age" religions given a positive treatment in the media, but their humanistic challenge to the religious establishment — and especially the other-worldly emphasis of more traditional Christianity — has served to reinforce the secularism which, as I have noted, underlies much of the contemporary spirit. In reality, the "New Age" movement is as old as Plato, who envisioned an ideal Utopia of philosopher-kings ruling over their moral and intellectual lessers with a wisdom spiced by many of the elements of modern humanism. It is as old as nineteenth-century Mormonism, which endows even the afterlife with the ideal qualities of a here-and-now, worldly Utopia. And it is as relatively old as the "Age of Aquarius," which beckoned the revolutionaries of the 1960s to a new society, free from the "hang-ups" and prejudices of the past. The "New Age" movement is an old idea to be found in almost every part of the world and in almost every civilized society. Contemporary journalism has made of an old spiritual enslavement the "new" cult of a new age of "free thinkers." And thus it has failed to put this movement in proper perspective.

What precisely, then, is the "New Age" movement? First, as I have asserted, it is Utopian in nature. It focuses all of the aspirations of traditional religions — human restoration, salvation, and the attainment of immortality — on man and on the physical world. If humans desire salvation or immortality, according to the "New Age" religions, they must seek after it within themselves and in the present world. God, who is supreme and without limitation, is made manifest in all things and shares His essence with man. Each individual has a "higher self" or a "spiritual identity" which participates in God's essence, as does

the physical world itself. Mankind and the physical world are evolving toward an age when the universe will be totally "spiritualized" (hence, the "New Age"). This Utopian age is realized without the necessity of atonement, since man, being God, is not sinful. Being without sin, repentance and atonement play no role in his eventual "spiritualization." The new age of the Utopian world is simply the culmination of an evolutionary process by which man, taking on immortality (at times through a process of reincarnation), becomes one with God and the physical world takes on a spiritual nature.

Second, the "New Age" movement is eclectic and syncretic in nature. Since, in the view of "New Age" thinkers, all of the universe naturally participates in the essence of God and is evolving toward a new age of spiritualization, it follows that all religious philosophies have, at their core, a "higher identity" towards which they naturally evolve as they leave aside their distinctive doctrines and dogmas. Universal truth, in essence, resides in the eventual union of all dogmas. It is the product of incorporating all religious teachings into one system, retaining all that is common to that system, and discarding all that is foreign to it.

Third, the "New Age" religions inevitably offer their followers a human guide in the spiritual life. A "guru" or "master" who represents the highest spiritual goals of mankind almost always surfaces in these religions, embodying in his person, behaviors, and beliefs all that the spiritual aspirant seeks. In this sense, the "New Age" religions are *par excellence* humanistic, since the traits of divinity and spiritual perfection are made manifest, not through a Divine Being who fills the believer with His Grace, but through a human being who takes on the fullness of the traits of divinity — who manifests the essence of divinity.

It should strike us that the "New Age" religions are primitive. Philosophically, they skirt the very issues which have been at the heart of the development of Christian theology. "New Age" philosophy engenders the following important and difficult questions, which compromise its internal consistency. If man manifests the essence of God, how does God, then, still maintain an essence? And if God has no essence separate from man, how can He be said to exist as a distinct entity? If, then, there is no God who exists independently in essence from man, by what power and with what intelligible guidance was the evolutionary process of the "spiritualization" of man and the world put into effect? How could a God who is evolving determine the goal, scope, and purpose of that evolution? How could an incomplete God — and the "New Age" God is incomplete, since man, who fully manifests God according to "New Age" thinking, is incomplete — rise above his own limitations? And if He cannot, how can He be God, if God is that which is supreme and unlimited?

Indeed, a number of classical philosophical and theological dilemmas, much like those faced by the pre-Christian ancients and resolved in traditional Christian thinking, remain unresolved in the "New Age" religions. One can say, in essence, that they represent the very philosophical enigmas which, until the advent of Christianity, failed to reveal a universal, consistent, and logical statement about the truth, but nonetheless set forth their inadequate, human-oriented, Utopian views of man and the universe as a sure version of truth. It is in this expansive way that traditional Christian believers must see these religions: they are one with all of those philosophical and religious systems which, in rejecting the truth of Christianity, serve the end of establishing on earth a single belief system drawn from every religion and concentrated on God in human manifestation.

Clearly, therefore, Christianity, in its true expression, is diametrically opposed to the tenets of "New Age" religions and rests on a compelling theological response to the philosophical dilemmas and inconsistencies which compromise these religions. In the first place, Scripture and the Church Fathers teach us that God, in His essence, is unknowable to and separate from man. Though man may participate in the energies of God, the divinization or salvation of man by intimate fellowship with God — (*theopotesis*) in the language of the early Greek Fathers — forever preserves the distinction between God the Creator and His creation. Thus man, in being transformed and saved by God's Grace through intimate participation in the "Divine nature" (II Peter 1:4), remains yet man, while God, allowing man to participate in His Divinity, remains nonetheless God. More importantly, Christianity teaches that the human being, as he exists in time and space, is fallen and in need of restoration. Since God is above His creatures and truly unlimited and supreme, He alone can restore mankind. Remaining God and yet becoming man, He condescended to give human flesh the potential to participate in the salvific energies of His Divinity. Remaining God above and manifesting Himself as the *Theanthropos* (God-Man) Jesus Christ here below, the Christian God both directs and participates in human history. Hence, the reality of God, the fallen nature of man, the human potential for restoration, and human divinization are preserved in a logical and consistent cosmology in traditional Christian teaching.

Clarus Backes, in a short article written for the *Denver Post* (May 3, 1987; "New Age Religion," pp. 10-14) and reprinted in the *Social Resources Series* (Vol. 3, article no. 28; n.p.), puts forth some arguments that very much challenge the contrast between the "New Age" movement and Christianity as I have presented it here. He notes that the movement is not fundamentally at odds with Christianity and that it

should not, specifically, be associated — as some have done — with the manifestation of Antichrist. He further argues that it is not a form of devil worship, since “New Age” religions do not believe in the existence of the devil, and that it is not a form of secular humanism. I believe that by addressing Backes’ assertions from the standpoint of traditional Christianity, we can not only come to a better understanding of the “New Age” movement as I believe I have correctly portrayed it, but to some understanding of the possible impact of the “New Age” movement on Christianity itself.

Backes claims that “New Agers” have no qualms about Christianity and that they often “include readings from the New Testament in their services, and revere Christ as . . . ‘the greatest wayshower and spiritually illuminated one in history.’ . . . They just don’t believe that Christ differed in his basic nature from any other human beings.” We might first respond to Mr. Backes by pointing out that, while the New Testament is read in many “New Age” groups, so is the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the *Koran*, and a multitude of other religious books, all as though they were of equal value. Certainly as Christians, we cannot attribute to non-Christian writings the value of Scripture. Nor do we combine readings from Scripture with non-Christian religious readings. More to the point, though, is the fact that Christians believe that Scripture is an inspired account of the whole economy of salvation, reaching full expression, as that account does, in the Incarnation and Resurrection of Christ — God made man — and in His establishment of the Church. Thus, one who attributes mere “spiritual illumination” to Christ, and thus downplays his Divinity, is simply un-Christian.

With regard to Antichrist, Western scholars especially suffer from a certain philological myopia. In English and in most modern Western European languages, a very limited and narrow definition of the Greek word *anti*, or “instead of,” holds forth. It is usually misunderstood to mean “against.” Astonishingly enough, then, even some fairly accomplished theologians make the rather naive error of associating Antichrist with that which is “opposed” to Christ. Thus, Mr. Backes’ notion that, if the “New Agers” are not “opposed” to Christ (“anti”-Christ), they must of necessity have no association with Antichrist. The Fathers of the Church and a more accurate philologic treatment of the word *anti*, however, lead us to quite another conclusion. The spirit of Antichrist is all that which usurps the dominion Christ, which stands in his “stead” (“*anti*”-Christ — “instead of” or “in the place of” Christ). For what other reason, indeed, do we fear the Antichrist as a deceiver, as one who claims the power and dominion of Christ? What is inimical to Christ is not only or primarily what opposes him, but that which falsely presents itself as the universal truth which Christ

alone is. Thus, claims by the “New Agers” that they are God made manifest on earth, that they have no need for Christ, and that they are without sin — are not such claims truly those of Antichrist?

Moreover, Antichrist as a person will, according to Scripture and Holy Tradition, come as a human leader, establishing his kingdom on earth. He will mislead even the elect by taking their hope and faith away from the spiritual realm, from the coming Kingdom of Christ, and focusing it on the earth and on the fallen world around us. Indeed, he will claim to be Christ. His goal will be to proclaim a single world religion and persecute all those whose beliefs are distinct and different — namely, the true Christians. The Utopian, eclectic “New Age” religions, with their frequent emphasis on a human spiritual model, certainly then, if they are not the future religion of Anti-christ himself, at least serve to pave the way for that religion.

“New Agers,” because they do not believe in the devil, are not devil worshippers, Backes maintains. From the traditional Christian standpoint, if one worships anything but Christ, is he not worshipping the devil? Is our Christianity not drenched with the blood of Martyrs who refused to offer incense to the pagan gods of the Roman Empire, who would not confess the prophet of Islam, and who would not give their obedience, in more recent times, to the godless Utopianism of communism? Did these Martyrs shed their blood because they refused to worship *innocent* gods? No, they chose between the one manifestation of the True God, Jesus Christ, and the devil, who is the source of all that claims to be equal to Christ or which usurps His Divinity. One need not worship the devil as such to be demonic. All that deviates from the Divine Will, which is fully contained in Christ, is demonic. And anything that we worship, aside from the Christian God, is the devil. One may not be fully aware of this devil-worship while engaged in it, but such worship is nonetheless just that: the worship of the antithesis of God, the devil. And if the devil is pride, then what greater devil is there than the one that the “New Agers” worship: man as the “essence of God!”

Finally, Backes argues that “New Agers” are not humanistic and secular in spirit, since they believe in God. His argument is maintained only by tautology. Since the “New Age” religions believe that man is God and that the earth is evolving into the spiritual plane, one can, of course, argue that the “New Agers” are neither humanistic nor secular, since the human and mundane are divine in their eyes. However, can it not also be argued that such a formula, equating the divine and the mundane, reduces the spiritual to something worldly, rather than elevating the worldly to something spiritual? Thus, one may contend, for example, that Mormons are not humanists, since they,

like many "New Agers," believe in an afterlife. But what is that Mormon afterlife? It is a vision of this earth (marriage, private ownership, male domination, etc.) imposed on the spiritual realm, much like the "worldly" Paradise of Islam; it is an afterlife reduced to life as we know it here and now. The "New Age" religions share with all other humanistic religions, not a rejection of God, but the creation of God in man's image and the establishment of a "spiritual" realm on the foundations of a temporal world. This is a creation precisely of a humanistic and secular "spirituality."

The Christian view of the fallen world and of the spiritual life, again, is undoubtedly wholly at odds with that of the "New Age" movement, when one examines the matter with care. Why, then, should we Christians even concern ourselves with this movement? Let me answer this query by recalling the frightening and horrible massacre at Jonestown in Guyana some years ago. The Reverend Jim Jones shocked the world when he led many of his followers to their deaths in the Utopian camp which he had established in the jungles of South America. A Protestant pastor turned guru, promising his people a heavenly life here on earth under the guidance of his divine person, Jones represents, perhaps, the less savory side of the "New Age Movement." To the traditional Christian, he should embody the unthinkable. For along with the others who died at Jonestown were many believers reared and formed in conservative, traditional households. In Jones-turned-"guru" we have an image of what Christianity can be under the influence of "New Age" ideology and what it can do to Christian leaders and followers alike.

The "New Age" movement is of importance to us for another reason. Many of the young people who have left mainstream Christian denominations have done so because they claim to find no spiritual content in the watered-down, bland churches in which they were reared. The human desire to reach up to God, to be transformed by His Grace, and to come to a deeper understanding of man and the world — this desire is universal. When Christianity is compromised and reduced to a social religion, rather than a path to human transformation through Christ's Grace, it fails to fill this universal desire. Thus, its adherents are attracted to the ostensibly deeper teachings of the "New Age" cults. This is not because Christianity lacks a profound mystical tradition or an exalted theological witness, but because many of our Churches have succumbed to a Sunday religion of platitudes and empty formalism. The members of these Churches, unfed by their pastors, removed from the Church's refreshing fields, and hungry for true food, wander into the woods and are devoured by wolves. The "New Age" movement, then, challenges us to find the deeper roots

of our Christian heritage, to express that heritage with commitment and involvement, and to reify in our lives those Christian truths which actually render "New Age" thought superficial and our traditional faith triumphant.

Our traditional Christian faith, in conclusion, is incompatible with the precepts of the "New Age" movement. "New Agers" deny, in fact, the basic assumptions of Christian spirituality and its vision of the transformation and restoration of the human person. The "New Age" movement is a threat to traditional Christianity, must be faced with a resolute commitment to the whole of the Christian heritage, and must be resisted with ever-increasing fidelity to Christian belief that speaks both in words and in action. In that way, the threat of the "New Age" may be transformed into a positive challenge to live anew our Christian faith.

