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The Significance of the New Age Movement¹

GAVIN McGRATH

Introduction

Something is seriously wrong with Western society. Pollution, crime, the threat of nuclear annihilation, A.I.D.S., strident terrorism: these are the apparent symptoms of our society's illness. Does anyone or any movement hold out a potential cure for the West as it staggers and reels into the twenty-first century? Is there any hope?

A strong, intriguing and optimistic 'yes' is coming from numerous quarters. Many ordinary, intelligent, sensitive and searching people are thrilled to discover answers. From film stars to lecturers in applied physics to corporate executives to people right in your neighbourhood, the word is out: there is a 'new age' breaking into our world.

What is this new age? This essay is an introduction to what could be one of the significant cultural, intellectual, scientific and spiritual developments in Western culture since the Enlightenment. It is significant because the different expressions of the New Age movement or, as it is also called, the 'new consciousness', are not merely part of a passing fad meriting only a passing nod. In many ways they are a collective expression of our Western culture's intellectual, philosophical and spiritual zig zags over the past one hundred years. Consequently, while a number of recent articles and books on the New Age movement have rightly called attention to the ominous association with the occult, it will be argued below that the greatest threat of the New Age movement comes in the various attempts to change the way Westerners think and, thus, live in the world. In short, it is a challenge of worldviews.

In this essay I only sketch a preliminary picture of the New Age movement into which others will need to add finer details according to their respective disciplines. I will begin by clarifying what is meant by the term 'New Age movement', and present in broad terms its worldview. With this basic definition we will then consider how and where various expressions of the New Age movement are opposed to Biblical Christianity. Finally, I propose some ways Christians can respond to the New Age movement and so prevent many in our generation from running into the painful lies and deceptions associated with the New Age.

1. What exactly is meant by the term New Age movement?

Defining the New Age movement is difficult. There is not any one specific group or philosophy which exemplifies the New Age movement. Whatever else one might say about the New Age movement, it is not confined to a watertight compartment. It is a collective whole which really is greater than the sum of its parts. The New Age can be discerned in music, art, education theories, psychology, politics, health care, sports as well as obvious spiritualities; and the interconnection between these may not be immediately apparent. Thus, more accurate terms for the New Age are, 'movements' or 'expressions'.

Yet, a further step may be taken. The New Age movements should be seen as loosely related expressions of a particular worldview. Russell Chandler, journalist for the *Los Angeles Times* and author of a commendable study of the New Age, *Understanding the New Age*, wrote:

more than anything else, the New Age movement is distinguished by a common vision, a shared worldview about the nature of existence and the purpose of life in the cosmos.²

As the issue of worldviews is central to the argument of this article a definition is in order. James Sire offered a helpful explanation in his definitive work, *The Universe Next Door*:

'A world view is a set of presuppositions (or assumptions) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously) about the basic makeup of our world.'³

Sire argued that a well rounded worldview incorporates an understanding about the following: 1. what is really real? 2. who are men and women? 3. what happens to a human at death? 4. what is the basis of morality? and 5. what is the meaning of human history?⁴

In order to understand the significance of the New Age movement it is essential to appreciate that these various expressions more or less embrace an identifiable worldview which offers men and women answers to the questions identified by Sire. While the various groups and individuals may not necessarily agree with each other on every point, six aspects of the New Age worldview can be identified.

1. **All is One.** This is ultimate reality for the New Age. There is no actual distinction between material objects and persons. You, the chair you are sitting on, a rock and a tree are of a larger whole, and all is one. New Age thinkers and writers sometimes call this a 'consciousness' or 'life force'. The term for this is *monism*. The New Age physicist and philosopher Fritjof Capra has written in his influential book, *The Turning Point*,

'all boundaries and dualisms have been transcended and all individuality dissolves into universal, undifferentiated oneness.'⁵

Sounds complicated, so what does it mean? The subsequent implications best clarify Capra's point.

2. **All is God.** This is essentially pantheism. Everything in existence blends into a cosmic unity and everything is god. It is not that god is person—one can not use the word he or she—rather, god is everything. God is the stuff of existence and the cosmos. From this assumption follows an important corollary.

3. **You are God.** It is not that you as an individual are actually unique—for *you* really do not exist as a distinct and separate entity, for all is one—rather, that humanity is part of the whole, and the whole is god. God is not somewhere out there, god is in here, or in you and is you. Remember, the New Age god is not, strictly speaking, personal but a conscious force.

4. **The Need for Corrected Awareness.** New Age advocates realize that many of their ideas meet initial scepticism. To be told that you are god comes as a rather dizzying surprise. The fact that you may question it (Biblical truths aside for a moment) is because of ignorance. The problem is not sin or anything remotely moral, rather our Western perception of reality is wrong. This is one of the major problems for Westerners, claim many New Age prophets. Our Western concerns for logic and reason are partly to blame. We use erroneous categories, particularly absolute or antithetical categories. For example, I am sitting in a chair which has its own 'chairness' distinct from my desk—the desk does not possess any 'chairness'. In moral terms, for another example, Westerners are used to thinking that what is good or noble cannot be at the same time also evil and immoral (this is antithesis). According to New Age thinking, however, this thought pattern only fragments reality and, thus, we are blind to the essential unity of all. Our problem is that we depend too much on our right brain (or cognitive) thinking; we should defer to our left brain (or intuitive and imaginative) thinking. Yet the real solution is a corrected awareness, or as another prominent New Age writer, Marilyn Ferguson, author of *The Aquarian Conspiracy, Personal and Social Transformation in the 1980s*, has put it, we need a 'paradigm shift'.⁶ A paradigm shift, argued Ferguson, 'is a distinctly new way of thinking about old problems.'⁷

There are a number of ways by which one may grow towards this paradigm shift, or 'new consciousness'. A popular work in the United Kingdom and the United States, *A Course in Miracles*, employs Judeo/Christian terms and redefines them in a singularly novel fashion in order to correct our understanding; so the atonement, for example, has nothing to do with reconciliation between God and a human but 'the correction of perception'.⁸ A corrected awareness could come through a 'channeler'. A channeler is one, who, for a fee, can contact spirit-time travellers who provide spiritual insight and illumination—as was the case for actress and now New Age high

priestess, Shirley MacLaine. One may arrive at 'it' through an *est* (Erhard Seminars Training) session. These emotionally, intellectually and physically tense experiences have led many, including Carly Simon, Yoko Ono, and John Denver, to realize that:

You're part of every atom in the world and every atom is part of you.
We are all gods who created our own worlds.⁹

The human dilemma, therefore, is not moral at all, we are simply not tuned in and aware.

5. **All religions are one.** This is syncretism. In New Age thinking no one religion has all the answers, in fact any religion which claims exclusivity is abhorrent. New Age teachers and leaders, however, draw quite heavily upon Eastern philosophies and spiritualities. The New Age expressions are often based on Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and lesser known sects but wrapped up in Western garb. Through the influence of certain Eastern religions there are strong emphases on reincarnation and *karma* and the Taoist concept of *yin* and *yang*.¹⁰ Yet it must be clearly noted that within many New Age expressions Eastern philosophies are adjusted to accommodate certain Western biases. For example, a man or woman working in a City firm really cannot wear Eastern fashion. They can, however, take a transcendental meditation break to ease tension and feel their creative forces flowing once again. Does this attraction to the East only suggest an Occidental revolution? It is not that Christianity is rejected altogether for Jesus is acknowledged. Jesus, however, is one of many guides. He points the way to 'Christ-consciousness' which is really just another way of saying oneness with the All. This blend of East and West feels a bit more comfortable than embracing a new Eastern name and appropriating a new fashion.

6. **Things are progressing positively.** Here the New Age expressions are appealing to those longing for an alternative to the tired hag—the Christian worldview—and are keen for an optimistic answer for our modern world. Whereas there are prophets of doom in our day, many in the New Age are calling us to hope. On the basis of an evolutionary optimism, derived in part from such writers like Teilhard de Chardin, Jesuit writer and scientist, proponents of the New Age see, through mystic eyes, a cosmic progression towards unity and complete consciousness.¹¹ Humanity might not know it, but things really are improving. This is why reference is made to a 'New Age'.

These are the essential characteristics of the New Age worldview. We must appreciate, however, that the New Age worldview is not one monolithic movement—there are differences and adjusted variations. Still, observers of the New Age expressions notice these common elements. In addition to, and complementing, these six themes are strong associations with the occult, pagan religions of Celtic and North American Indian origin, and popular psychology.

Who is responsible for this worldview? The influential individuals are numerous and come from diverse backgrounds, and not all would agree with the way their thinking has been used. New Age followers have drawn upon such diverse sources as the quantum physics of Einstein and others, the teachings of numerous gurus from the East who have come to the West, the psychology of Carl Rogers and certain advances in the study of human kinesiology. There are sociological and philosophical themes originating in the counter-culture movement of the 1960s. Yet, significantly the New Age movements are the counter-culture come of age, taking into account the situation of the 1980s and 1990s. The primary difference is that whereas the 1960s counter-culture played down the importance of the 'spiritual' and transcendent (the mystical images of hallucinogens not to the contrary), in the 1980s and 1990s humanity's spiritual longings are proving quite insatiable.

This is in part because the New Age movements are responding to the void created by a secular humanism which has run out of steam. Secular humanism, pronouncedly atheist and reductionist, has offered humanity little hope. Secular humanism can deny humanity's spiritual longings but they are unavoidable. Modern men and women are desperate for hope and still possess mystical and spiritual longings, which secular humanism could not satisfy. Nevertheless, the New Age shares one thing at least with earlier secular humanism: the God of the Bible is not desired or considered; the optimistic answer exists within humanity itself. The New Age worldview can be described, therefore, as 'cosmic humanism.'

2. How and where does the New Age movement come into my life?

The gravity of the New Age worldview is all the more alarming when one considers that most of us need not look very hard or far to find it in our daily life. Hopefully, we do not have any direct contact with the overtly Satanic; yet other New Age expressions may be closer to home than we might appreciate. It is also worth noting that the various guises in which the New Age may appear are not all necessarily 'weird' or alien to us. The New Age is promoted by people who know marketing skills and their society.¹² I will identify only five of the more apparent points of contact.

1. **Holistic Health Care.** Alternative medicine is increasingly considered in this country. A growing number of people come close to despair with traditional medicine and so venture to an acupuncturist, osteopath, hypnotist or herbalist. While Christians need not dismiss these practices entirely, certain New Age assumptions about the body and its relationship to the rest of reality are endorsed by some alternative medicine practitioners. A number of holistic health practices are based on eastern views of the relation between body,

mind and spirit. Axiomatic to natural medicine is the idea that the human body is capable of healing itself, it possesses its own intrinsic power. Traditional Western medicine would agree with this, but only up to a point; yet some New Age theories go even further, however, and stress the unity of our minds with a cosmic whole, and, thus, we have the capability of tuning into a recreative power which comes through a unity with the 'All'. Practices like yoga and biofeedback, which may be profitable to a degree, may also be taught with an approach predicated upon the New Age worldview identified earlier. Undoubtedly our generation needs urgent help with the problem of stress, but are the various forms of meditation and relaxation techniques free from the subtleties of the New Age worldview? One must certainly exercise prudent discretion. Check out some of the advertisements and books in your local health food shop or herbalist and you will discover some interesting, if not alarming, publications.

2. **Certain expressions of radical Feminism.** It would be great injustice to suggest that all feminism was either unjustified or part of the New Age: some expressions are legitimate, and Biblical Christians could well find common agreement. Yet within many New Age groups there is an apparent strident feminism. It is argued that as society encounters itself away will go the 'false' and 'oppressive' distinctions between male and female. The crucial point is that since reality is all one such differentiation is quite unhelpful. Instead it is better to speak of androgenous humanoids. Some would claim that it is better to speak of the planet earth and life in female terms: all life springs from that which is feminine. Far more serious is the tendency of some extreme New Age feminists to be attracted to ancient pagan goddesses and even white witchcraft (*wicca*).

3. **The Ecology Movement.** There is no doubt that the ecology and 'green' issues will be a dominant theme of the 1990s. Biblical Christians may rightly refer to an ecological theology. Intriguingly, however, there are some elements within the ecological movement proposed by New Age advocates which are pronouncedly pantheistic. In a slightly different manner some identify the planet as our mother. Through her we are in relationship with every living thing, for we are united in a fundamental unity.

4. **Quantum Science.** Since the early 1900s with the findings of Max Planck, Einstein and others, quantum mechanics has shaken the old Newtonian worldview. Einstein's famous observation that matter gives off energy has challenged the Newtonian distinctions between mass and energy, thus suggesting a greater metaphysical unity than previously considered. Werner Heisenberg's 'uncertainty principle'—namely that an atom cannot be observed without affecting the observation—has been used by New Age advocates to stress the unity of the cosmos. In fact, no actual scientific observation is possible, for the observer and the object are all part of the 'whole'

and thereby indistinguishable. Accordingly, empiricism is dubious. These assumptions have led physicists like Capra, lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley, to blend science and mysticism. In his *The Tao of Physics* he has written,

The further we penetrate into the submicroscopic world, the more we shall realize how the modern physicist, like the Eastern mystic, has come to see the world as a system of inseparable, interacting and ever-moving components with man being an integral part of the system.¹³

Add to this the suggestion that time is relative and there is a unity to all existence, then the mysticism of Zen Buddhism and Tao gains a greater apparent validity. With this, however, one must accept, to be consistent, the indistinguishableness of the external world and the impossibility of objective measurement. By implication one scientist could not pass on his or her findings to another!

5. Global Unity. According to New Age thinking gone are national distinctives and, by all means, national pride. Instead internationalism rules. World peace and social transformation can only come when geographic boundaries are erased and the human consciousness is unleashed. What is needed, say some New Age political advocates like Mark Satin and former 1960s radical Jerry Rubin, is a global unity and spiritual reordering. We are told that the planet is moving towards Teilhard de Chardin's 'omega point', an evolutionary development which will enable the global community to unite for good and well being. With reference to Teilhard de Chardin, Marilyn Ferguson anticipated an eventual, 'conspiracy of men and women whose new perspective would trigger a contagion of change.'¹⁴ In distinctly mystical tones, advocates of this planetization speak of the transformation with references to Messianic figures.¹⁵

It should be apparent to most readers that the New Age movement is not in some isolated corner: if one considers the five areas identified above it is obvious that they touch on a number of the 'hot' topics of our day and relate to some of the issues which interest many thoughtful and sensitive people who are concerned with the quality of our life. Thus, with complexity, it is precisely at these major points that the New Age worldview enters into our day-to-day existence. Stated baldly, wherever contemporary man is questioning his existence in relation to the whole of reality there is the New Age.

It is necessary to add that the worldview is entering through Madison Avenue advertising; certain educational curricula in the United States; management training programmes run by some distinguished and respected companies in the United States and United Kingdom; the influence of 'Space' music in which there is a blend of chanting, Celtic tones and repetitive phrasing; and the various transpersonal psychologies and human potential movements (seen in Eric Fromm and Carl Rogers) in which the paranormal and the

psychic are exalted and moral values are dismissed. Finally, the attested rise in occult activities and neopagan religions suggests that no longer are these restricted to the cranks of society but becoming, frighteningly, *fashionable*.

3. In what ways does the New Age movement challenge Christianity?

At this point one can see the rather obvious and blatant ways in which the New Age worldview disagrees with Biblical Christianity. Yet this is not to say that Biblical Christians should dismiss outright *some* of the arguments of the New Age. To the extent that the New Age movement is attempting to discover why men and women love, appreciate beauty and how they relate to the whole of creation, Biblical Christians can say, 'Oh yes, these questions really do matter; you are right to wonder and search, but you are looking in the wrong direction for you are denying the truth of your creator God.' (See Romans 1.18–23). Furthermore, on the premise that all truth is God's truth, then whether it is ecology, feminism, health, international relations or psychology one should not be afraid to look for elements of God's truth in some of the New Age movement's manifestations. It needs to be added quickly, however, that such an examination demands the spiritual discernment which only comes through the hard work of Biblical thinking; for the worldview of the New Age movement, along with the occult and pagan overtones are seriously and dangerously used by Satan in our generation.

As suggested at the beginning of this article, only when modern Christians are prepared to think with a biblical worldview (and at the local, congregational level) will they be able to offer a proper response—free from both extreme panic and foolish syncretism. Accordingly, a number of points in which the New Age worldview and Biblical Christianity's worldview differ can be suggested.

1. **The nature of God.** New Age advocates claim that we are God. This is at the heart of what the Bible defines as human rebellion. The fall account in Genesis describes this vividly. Equally the Biblical worldview argues that God is not within creation but is the creator. He is distinct from his creation; pantheism is quite mistaken. God is knowable not by looking inside ourselves, but by looking up and receiving His propositional revelation. God is not a force; God is personal, within the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God, however, is not in our image. He is infinite and transcendent. He is wholly other.

2. **The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ.** New Age spirituality acknowledges Jesus but puts him on a par with numerous other emanations from the godhead. Such thinking, however, is wrong. In the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth, God became fully incarnate. Supremely, Christianity does *not* see Jesus as just one of the world's great

spiritual leaders. In the New Testament there is the disturbing and challenging *exclusivity* of Jesus. He alone is Lord over all. He alone is the one who can restore our relationship with our Creator through his death, resurrection and ascension. He alone has been given all authority as judge of the living and the dead and will come again in history.

2. **The Nature of Humanity.** New Age prophets will have nothing to do with the Biblical doctrine of sin. They claim our fundamental problem is ignorance, cured by a change in thinking, or a paradigm shift. The Bible, on the other hand, teaches that our fundamental problem is rebellion. It is not our thinking which needs correction (although it too is profoundly affected) so much as our moral character. At the same time the Bible insists that men and women have an intrinsic dignity: they are unique in the created order because they are made in the image of God. To be sure, humanity is not to ignore the integrity of the created order—Christians also take ecological issues seriously—yet you and I are not on an equal footing with a tree or a squirrel up in that tree.

3. **The nature of the cosmos.** We need not dismiss quantum physics. All the facts and information, however, are not in, and we best refrain from too hasty approval. The Biblical worldview insists that there is a created unity but also a metaphysical diversity. Equally, our understanding of time and its relativity may need further examination. One thinks, just for an example, of C.S. Lewis's treatment of time in *The Chronicles of Narnia* stories. Still, the Bible tells us that there is a goal (*telos*) to human history and even the cosmos. Time, and therefore history, has its intrinsic importance.

4. **Knowledge is possible.** While some New Age proponents would not go so far as to dismiss logic and reason, many give far greater emphasis to the intuitive and the irrational. In a rather fascinating way the New Age worldview claims to be *the* answer yet consistently maintains that one cannot depend upon reason and logic. Yet the Christian must ask, how else can one accept and believe something unless it is also reasonable and rational? The Biblical worldview, while quite supernatural, does not nullify what is reasonable and logical. There are many mysteries which our finite minds cannot begin to fathom but, as created beings in the image of God, we perceive and acknowledge that the fundamental realities are knowable and verifiable. Take this away and humanity is progressively dehumanized; however compelling the mystical experiences of Shirley MacLaine and others, we must be allowed to ask them, 'Yes, but how do you *know* this is the truth?'

4. How should we respond to the New Age movement?

I want to offer some brief and perhaps obvious concluding comments. First, while many of us may have read the rather sensational fiction of Frank Peretti which describes New Age conspiracies taking over small towns and villages in the United States, his work *is* fiction.¹⁶ Thus, undue panic and unbridled censoriousness could prove counter-productive. Above all we must not forget that Jesus is the sovereign Lord. Challenges to Biblical faith have always been around—there are parallels between second century gnosticism and the present New Age movement. Of course we must not be complacent either. Whether there is a human New Age global conspiracy or not, surely Satan is involved in a global and heavenly conspiracy. Responsible prayer and action are required.

Secondly, there must be an appreciation that some elements of the New Age movement reflect the deep pains and confusion of modern men and women. These are people created in the image of God who are deeply disturbed about much in our society and world. They are fed up with the empty secular humanism of the past decades, burnt out with an exploitative and destructive material society and are seriously searching for spiritual realities.

Thirdly, while compassion and practical witness are essential there is an urgency for Christians to view the totality of life with a Biblical worldview. We are to love and show compassion but we must also be prepared to challenge the sophisticated and attractive New Age worldview.

Fourthly, in some contemporary quarters of the Western church there is an attraction to the irrational and anti-intellectual. At the risk of being polemic, theories of evangelism which minimize the rational presentation of the gospel in favour of the irrational will not counter the New Age insistence on the non-logical and non-objective. Equally, meditation techniques which imply emptying ourselves in order to be open to God could not only be harmful to ourselves but assist in the displacing of orthodox Christianity. Liturgies which hope to have a 'green' sensitivity could replace the revealed character of God with a quasi-pantheistic or mother earth kind of deity.

In the end, while confident in our sovereign God and the certainty of his victory, we must rally to the breach which has developed in the wall of Western culture and thinking. The New Age movement is ultimately based on a lie: one need not consider the God who has revealed himself—or as Francis Schaeffer put it, the God who is there. New Age thinking misconstrues what is true and real. Accordingly, it actually minimizes the dignity of men and women. It blinds them from the truth, which in turn leads them into immorality and culminates in further rebellion and rejection of the one true God.

Biblical Christians out of obedience to the Lord Jesus and compassion for our generation must respond. If we fail to respond, or return with an insipid piety, then such failure could well prove to be a fatal appeasement.

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NOTES

- 1 Based in part on a lecture given at Christ Church, Fulwood, Sheffield on 24 May, 1990.
- 2 Russell Chandler, *Understanding the New Age* (Dallas, London, Sydney, Singapore: Word Publishing, 1988), p. 27.
- 3 James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door—A Guide to World Views* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1976), p. 17.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- 5 Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), p. 371 quoted in Douglas R. Groothuis, *Unmasking The New Age—Is There a New Religious Movement Trying to Transform Society?* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p. 19.
- 6 Marilyn Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy—Personal and Social Transformation in the 1980s* (London: Paladin. Grafton Books, 1982), pp. 26–34 offers an intelligible explanation of this paradigm shift.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- 8 *A Course in Miracles* (Penguin/Arkana), Volume I, p. 73.
- 9 Quoted in Groothuis, p. 24.
- 10 Chandler, *op.cit.*, p. 44.
- 11 Groothuis, *op.cit.*, p. 29.
- 12 See Chandler, *op.cit.*, p. 130.
- 13 Quoted in Chandler, *op.cit.*, p. 188.
- 14 Ferguson, *op.cit.*, p. 26.
- 15 See Groothuis, *op.cit.*, pp. 119–20.
- 16 Frank Peretti, *This Present Darkness*. (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1988) and *Piercing The Darkness*. (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1989).