

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 16

Volume 16 • Number 2 • April 1992

Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from
publications worldwide for an international
readership for the purpose of discerning the
obedience of faith*

EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS



Published by
THE PATERNOSTER PRESS

Understanding the New Age

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Printed with permission from St. Mark's Review, (Spring 1990).

How can we understand the vast variety of disparate phenomena that shelter under the umbrella of the term 'the New Age'? Should we view it sociologically as a rejection of the values of advanced capitalism or effete socialism for a new set of personalistic beliefs and attitudes? Perhaps we should view it psychologically as a refuge for those alienated from themselves and from others. Or, should we rejoice in it as a new Reformation, rekindling the fires of spirituality for so long dampened by the technological rationalism of the modern industrial West? However we interpret it, there can be little doubt that the New Age is playing a significant role in the construction of late twentieth century Western consciousness.

But is it all that new? I want to suggest that the New Age may fruitfully be seen as the resurgence of what may be called the Western esoteric tradition—of neo-Platonism, particularly of its theurgic elements, of gnosticism, of Hermeticism, of medieval magic and alchemy. In short, it is a resurgence of the 'other' in the history of Western thought, often in conflict with orthodox Christianity, sometimes in creative tension with it, occasionally suppressed by it.

SIGNS OF THE APOCALYPSE

The notion of a New Age is an apocalyptic one. From the beginning of the Christian era, the habit of predicting the Second Coming and/or the Millennium had entered the fabric of Western culture. But it was with Joachim of Fiore, a twelfth century Cistercian monk, that the idea of distinctive 'ages' in history that lead, in linear fashion, to a cosmic conclusion took shape. Thus did people for the first time begin to think of themselves as participants in an Age. And thus does the term 'the New Age' symbolize a radical change in beliefs, values, consciousness—an end of one time, and the beginning of a better one.

For some New Agers, being in the New Age is a sign that the end of the world is near. Traditional millenarian expectations are in play. Thus, for example, pop eschatologist Hal Lindsey's *Countdown to Armageddon* was in 1981 the best-selling religious work of the year in the United States. This was traditional apocalyptic guesswork with its linking of contemporary events to Daniel and Revelation. As ill-suited to clear predictions as the books of Daniel and Revelation, the New p. 206 Age fascination with the obscure quatrains of the sixteenth century 'Prophet' Nostradamus is likewise a powerful sign of its apocalyptic trends.

But it would be wrong to suggest that all New Agers are apocalypticists, either in the Christian or the esoteric sense. For there is a strongly secularist edge to much New Age thought. There is often little suggestion of a cataclysmic end to the world through divine intervention. Indeed, in so far as 'God' remains part of the rhetoric of the New Age, it is of a being essentially non-interventionist, conceived both impersonally and personally, and where the latter as both male and female, both Father and Magna Mater.

Be that as it may, remnants of apocalypticism remain in the ideal of the Utopia that would arise, of the Paradise that would return, were the beliefs and practices of the New Age to become dominant. Here, of course is the link between the New Age vision of Paradise regained on earth, a classic image of Western Utopian and Millenarian thought,

and New Age concerns for the Environment. Underlying environmental concerns for both animate and inanimate nature is the vision of a world in which the earth, animals, and humankind coexist in fruitful and mutually beneficent harmony. Nature restored is Civilisation rejected or at least radically reformed.

Such environmental concerns are reinforced also by an inchoate pantheism—a sense that all is divine and the divine is in all. Such pantheism echoes both Hindu and Zen Buddhist concerns, but is most influenced by Chinese Taoism with its emphasis on cosmic harmony, on the creative interplay of opposites necessary to cosmic and individual wellbeing. In short, from traditional Western utopianism, and from Eastern attitudes to nature, the New Age has produced a powerful symbology uniquely suited (certainly far more than traditional Christian symbolism) to Western environmental concerns.

CHANNELLING

It is in the idea of channelling that there resides the experiential core of the New Age. Channelling is, quite simply, the process by which a person (the channel) transmits messages from a source (usually discarnate) external to his or her consciousness. Thus, against the materialism of late twentieth century culture, the New Age boldly declares its belief in the realm of spirit.

The immediate antecedents of channelling can be found in the mid-nineteenth century movement known as Spiritualism. From the Fox family of Hydesville, New York, who purportedly communicated with [p. 207](#) spirits that responded to questions with ghostly rapping and knocking noises, Spiritualism rapidly spread through the United States, England, and Europe, progressively developing more sophisticated techniques for communicating with the other world—with the spirits of dead friends, relatives and ‘spirit-guides’.

Spiritualism, with its cosmology of a universe populated with spirits living and dead was itself a resurgence of a medieval and early modern European world view, one in which the realm of spirit—angelic and demonic—continually interacted with the world of the living. And more broadly, spiritualism and channelling may be seen as one embodiment (so to say) of a universal religious phenomenon—that of communication with the spirit world—typified in shamanic religious traditions.

The New Age too has its shamans, most notably Carlos Castaneda. In a series of works, Castaneda has detailed his encounters with the Yaqui Indian sorcerer ‘Don Juan’ thus becoming heir to a magical tradition that stretches back 500 years to pre-conquest Mexico. Whether fact or fiction, in the writings of Castaneda, the genre of magical autobiography was revived. Magical transformations, esoteric wisdom, mystical initiations, all create for the reader powerful images of an alternative reality imbedded in nature lost to those endowed only with modern Western urban culture, and they conjure a world in which spiritual laws and ancient wisdom provide access to ultimate truth.

Here too is expressed the New Age interest in magic and the occult. The vogue of occultism was created by a French seminarian during the first half of the nineteenth century. It is from the works of Eliphas Levi that the modern interest in the occult has developed. His own writings were an eclectic combination of the Cabbalism of Isaac Luria, of Christian Rosenroth, of Jacob Boehme, and Emmanuel Swedenborg, all of whom were themselves influenced by the resurgence of the occult during the Renaissance, of magic, astrology, theurgy, alchemy, etc.

Of all these resurgent arcane disciplines, the most popular in the New Age is astrology. At one level, astrology enables the mapping of the meaning of the cosmos as a whole—the New Age is the age of Aquarius. But, astrology confers meaning too on individual lives.

True, one's life is determined by the movements of the heavens. But what grandeur! Human life, my life—has a purpose, a cosmic meaning, a pre-established pattern. No longer am I an anonymous individual fated to live out life in a godless, absurd, and meaningless universe.

And of life after life? As nineteenth century spiritualism was p. 208 motivated by a quest for the certainty of post-mortem existence, so also is the New Age in its focus on out-of-the-body and near-death experiences. For these experiences suggest the existence of consciousness in a non-material form, and its continuation after death. Moreover, near-death experiences suggest not only post-mortem consciousness but happiness and contentment beyond the grave. The New Age vision of the after-life is of universal happiness.

An alternative New Age scenario of the after-life is provided by reincarnationism. The New Age provides technologies of past-life regression by which our past lives can be discovered, thus giving an understanding of who we are now by who we have been in previous lives. It does so in a context informed by both the reincarnation ideas of the Eastern religions, and by those of the Western tradition, most notably the seventeenth century Cabbalism of Isaac Luria mediated through the Theosophical tradition. But in contrast to the Indian traditions which view the infinite process of birth, death, and rebirth as that from which one must escape, the New Age views rebirth much more positively. Reincarnation not only reveals the past, it guarantees future lives. It functions then as an alternative immortality.

The provision of technologies is central to the New Age—technologies of meditation, of relaxation, of self-centring, of healing, of massage, of past life regression, of rebirthing, and so on. Generally speaking, the aim of all these is to facilitate one's inner growth, to maximize one's potential, to discover who one really is by piercing beneath the every day self, to harness the resources at the depths of the self, and to 'exorcize' the demons within which curtail one's ability to realise fully one's potential. In short, any ideology and any technology which helps personal development may be utilised.

ECLECTICISM

Indeed, it is the syncretism, or rather the eclecticism, of the New Age that is its most significant aspect. 'I believe in everything' is, to put it simply, the credo of the New Age. It is easy to dismiss this as merely the result of woolly-mindedness or wishful thinking. In part, it is the result of a New Age attitude to truth which defines it in predominantly personalistic terms; to paraphrase Kierkegaard, the truth that edifies is the truth for thee. But also, beneath the propensity to embrace everything—from psychic phenomena to palmistry, from the Tarot to trance, from reincarnation to rebirthing—there is an underlying epistemology that enables us to see the movement as a whole.

Historically, we can see the New Age as the child of the p. 209 Theosophical movement, itself a product of the fascination with mysticism, magic, and the occult during the latter part of the last century. In England it was the age of Esoteric Buddhism, of the Rosicrucian revival, of Cabbalists, Hermeticists, of magic and witchcraft. Palmists and astrologists abounded. Books on magic and the occult sold briskly. Books on the lost years of Jesus in India—'The Life of St. Issa', 'The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ'—provoked controversy.

In this milieu the Theosophical Society found a comfortable home. Founded in 1875 by Helena Blavatsky and her partner Henry Olcott, it was both a product of late Victorian culture, and the conduit of traditional occult Western thought. It is hardly surprising that, with the discovery and, late in the nineteenth century, the publication of the Scriptures of

the Eastern religions, Madame Blavatsky should have stressed the Eastern origins of her teachings. But in the late nineteenth century, the term 'theosophy' conjured up images, not only of Madame Blavatsky's Mahatmas in the snowy reaches of the Himalayas, but also of Cabbalism, neo-Platonism, the Hermetic writings, and the secret wisdom of the Egyptians. And allied to this was the Gnostic notion of specially-initiated adepts with access to secret documents that encoded the key to the mysteries of existence. The Theosophical movement synthesised the 'other' of Western thought. It constructed a unity of alternatives. It did so by maintaining that the same mystical truth lay beneath all the esoteric books, doctrines, beliefs and practices of the occult traditions, and of the sacred books of the East, of the Talmud, the Quran and the Bible. In this notion of a hidden wisdom known only to a few adepts we have the unifying idea which enables the different, the disparate, the contradictory to be held together. Within the context of this synthesis, Theosophy strove to develop what it perceived as human faculties to their highest capacities. Exactly the same may be said of the New Age.

Undoubtedly, the Theosophical Society was instrumental in introducing many Eastern religious concepts to the popular Western consciousness, all of which still resonate in New Age texts: exoteric concepts such as karma and reincarnation, but also more recondite teachings such as those of the chakra system, the bodily aura, the astral body. It spawned other esoteric groups such as the Order of the Golden Dawn to which the New Age owes the forging of the links between Tarot cards, astrology, and the Cabbalah.

The New Age then does draw on ancient traditions—albeit inchoately and generally unconsciously—from both West and East. In that sense it is not new. But its combination of West and East, of the [p. 210](#) esoteric and the occult, of the magical and the mystical, is a very modern phenomenon. It stands above all as a reaction to the technological rationalism and materialism of late twentieth century culture. It is a declaration of spirit over matter, of alternative thought against conventional ideology, of hidden wisdom against accepted truth. Whether it is true or false is beside the point.

What is not beside the point is that it is a religious movement. The New Age movement sacralizes the profane, it re-establishes the connection between the mundane and the transcendent. Religions serve above all to create meaning—through sacred texts, doctrines, rituals, values, and social organizations. All these, the New Age has in abundance. Religions serve to structure the world and one's place in it, to give us a sense of the past, a guide to the present, and a hope for the future, to provide means significantly to transform our lives. All these the New Age does. To understand the New Age is to understand it as an alternative religion, and one which attempts to legitimize aspects of Western religious thought which have been always 'other'.

FURTHER READING

As yet, there is no serious scholarly analysis of the New Age. However, Richard Cavendish's *Encyclopedia of the Unexplained*, (London, 1974) remains a goldmine of information on the background to the New Age. Marilyn Ferguson's *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, (New York, 1980) outlines many of its implicit assumptions—the universe as an organism, the oneness of all people. Shirley Maclaine's *Out on a Limb* gives useful insights into the New Age California-style (a la Monterey, my dear Watson). On Spiritualism and psychic theorising in the nineteenth century, Janet Oppenheim's *The Other World*, (Cambridge, 1985) is essential reading. On Shamanism as a religious phenomenon, Mircea Eliade's *Shamanism*, (Chicago, 1964) remains the definitive work. On the occult traditions in the Renaissance, Frances Yates' *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* is seminal although a difficult read. On nineteenth and twentieth

century occultism, James Webb's *The Occult Underground* (Illinois, 1974), and *The Occult Establishment* (Illinois, 1976) are highly informative and fascinating. A useful introduction to astrology is provided by Christopher Macintosh, *The Astrologers and their Creed*, (London, 1969). Bruce Campbell's *Ancient Wisdom Revived*, (Berkeley, 1980) is a standard history of the theosophical movement. For the New Age novel of the 1980s, one cannot go past Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*.

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Spirituality and an Experiential Approach to Religious Education

Penny Thompson

Printed with permission from Spectrum Vol 23 No 2 (1991)

Spirituality has become an important theme of the National Curriculum. It is intended that attention should be paid to the spiritual dimension of every subject area. The spiritual aspect should be seen to pervade the whole of human experience.

This would seem a welcome development to Christians who have seen their faith marginalized and given less and less room to influence either education or public life in general. However, we need to ask what is meant by 'spirituality'. We may be dealing with a secularized spirituality. On visits to prospective schools for our children we may find headteachers insisting on the importance of spirituality. In one case in the writer's recent experience, the Head was clearly an agnostic with little time for God. The word 'God' did not appear in the school's prospectus and when, in a letter, he needed to mention God the word appeared in inverted commas. Yet he insisted that he considered spirituality to be very important. For him, at least, it would seem that spirituality had little to do with belief in a personal God.

This year's Reith lecturer, the Chief-Rabbi elect of the U.K., spoke of the inability of the society in which we live, dominated as it is by the motive of consumerism, to fulfil the deeper needs of the people. In the wake of the demise of the two great visions of the twentieth century, Marxism and Fascism, there is an emptiness which consumerism cannot satisfy. Perhaps the popular emphasis on spirituality is a reaction to this vacuum. For the Chief Rabbi it is the task of the religions to step in and show the way forward. For those who have rejected traditional religion, however, and I number the agnostic Headmaster among their number, a simple return to religious faith is unlikely to be the answer. For them spirituality may mean something quite different.

Religious words may be used in a way that empties them of theological meaning while retaining a religious connotation. This appears to add depth yet has no base in a real belief about God. In this way, 'Christmas' may come to mean human giving and sharing rather than Incarnation and God's giving to humankind. In a recent lesson, for example, I used a page of the 'Radio Times' in which there was an abundance of religious words such as