

# EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 21

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Volume 21 • Number 4 • October 1997

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## 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  
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS

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# Christian Responses to the New Age Spirituality

John W Drane

*Reprinted with permission from Mission Focus: Annual Review 1996  
Vol. 4 pp 13–21*

In this article Dr Drane shows that New Age spirituality and practice is the religious projection of post-modernity. Its origins are many and diverse and its goal is none other than to induce altered and new dimensional levels of human consciousness. Most New Agers identify the church with the failure of western culture and spirituality, and thus if christianity is part of the problem it cannot be part of the solution. The author notes that New Age claims to enhanced mental powers and stress-relieving therapies are attracting the attention of the business world. He urges Christians to respond positively to the challenges of this paradigm shift in spirituality and culture

One of the most obvious signs of the burgeoning spirituality of our day is the growing popularity of the New Age. Most general bookstores have New Age (or Body, Mind, and Spirit) sections, while the New Age identity advertises consumer products ranging from beauty care and fashions to music and complementary health therapies. Moreover, the influence of the New Age is not restricted to popular culture, and the ranks of New Age writers include scientists,<sup>1</sup> as well as social scientists and business professors—while the emergence of transpersonal psychology is also generally recognized as part of this new spiritual search.<sup>2</sup>

But what exactly is the New Age? Some argue the idea has been dreamed up by paranoid Christian fundamentalists, who, with the collapse of Communism, no longer had anything to hate, and therefore needed to create a new enemy for themselves.<sup>3</sup> Even New Agers struggle to define it. Social psychologist John L. Simmons writes: 'I knew something was stirring in the world but I didn't know what', and then adds, 'the signs of the new movement are everywhere . . . millions of people are, in one way or another, becoming unofficially involved in it', and it 'may currently be the most vital information in the world,

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<sup>1</sup> Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point* (London: Flamingo, 1983); Rupert Sheldrake, *The Rebirth of Nature: the Greening of Science and of God* (London: Century, 1990); James Lovelock, author of the classic *Gaia: A New Look at life on Earth* (Oxford: OUP, 1979); Marilyn Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (Los Angeles: I. P. Tarcher, 1980); William Bloom, *The New Age: an anthology of essential writings* (London: Rider, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> R. S. Valle, 'The Emergence of Transpersonal Psychology' in R. S. Valle & S. Halling, eds., *Existential-Phenomenological Perspectives in Psychology* (New York: Plenum Press, 1989), pp. 257–268.

<sup>3</sup> For examples of this approach, cf Constance Cumbey, *The Hidden Dangers of the Rainbow* (Louisiana: Huntington House, 1983); Alan Morrison. *The Serpent and the Cross* (Birmingham: K & M Books, 1994).

with incredible implications for every man, woman, and child alive today.’<sup>4</sup> Others who thought they knew what it was, and who once happily bore the New Age label, now wish to discard it, because of its misuse by racketeers more interested in money than spirituality.<sup>5</sup>

Merely listing the empirical signs of the New Age is of little help, for it embraces an extraordinary diversity of artifacts and techniques whose purpose is vaguely ‘spiritual’. Electronic gadgets claiming to make you a new person via personal colour analysis, aromatherapy, yoga, homeopathy, wilderness retreats, ‘bodywork’ and massage. Therapists offer to put clients in touch with their inner selves, while yet others advertize introductions to personal ‘spirit guides’, and claim the ability to channel messages from whales, dolphins, extra-terrestrials, and even (in one advertisement I came across) Barbie dolls (‘the polyethylene essence who is 700 million teaching entities’).<sup>6</sup>

It is a major challenge even to describe something so multi-faceted, let alone to analyze it in any systematic way. This is not a problem for New Agers, who for other reasons are generally contemptuous of analytical knowledge. The only way to explain how all these things belong together is to invoke something like Wittgenstein’s notion of ‘family resemblances’.<sup>7</sup> A New Age music catalogue, for instance, might contain recordings channelled in from some spiritual world, which, as they are played, will put listeners into altered states of consciousness. But it might just as easily contain Gregorian chants and the music of Graham Kendrick. What is true of the parts is not necessarily going to be true of the whole (and *vice versa*). In reality, the only thing these particular examples have in common is that someone put them in the same catalogue and labelled them all ‘New Age’!<sup>8</sup>

## ORIGINS

It can be hard to take all this seriously. Yet Lawrence Osborn claims that ‘New Age ideas and activities are now virtually coextensive with western culture’.<sup>9</sup> So what is going on?

According to New Agers our culture is undergoing a paradigm shift. The worldview originating with the European Enlightenment—and beyond that, the Reformation and classical Greece and Rome—is in a state of terminal collapse. New Agers are not the only ones to believe that, and a comprehensive account of it takes us well beyond the narrow concerns of theological inquiry, to embrace science as well as politics and financial disciplines. But within this wide frame of reference several things are providing a significant impetus to the development of the specifically religious and spiritual dimensions of the New Age.

First is *astrology*. Astrologically speaking, the age of Pisces (the fish) has lasted for 2000 years, roughly corresponding with the Christian era. Sometime between now and the middle of the next century the age of Aquarius (the water bearer) will dawn. These ages can be correlated with Joachim of Fiore’s dispensations of Law, Grace, and Freedom

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<sup>4</sup> L. Simmons, *The Emerging New Age* (Santa Fe: Bear & Co., 1990), quotations from pp. 7, 12, 14.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., Carol Riddell, *The Findhorn Community* (Findhorn: Findhorn Press, 1991), p. 64.

<sup>6</sup> For examples, cf. New Age magazines such as *New Age Journal* or *Kindred Spirit*. ‘Barbie channeling’ was advertized in San Francisco’s *Common Ground* 72 (1992), p. 80.

<sup>7</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968), sections 65–78.

<sup>8</sup> A more extensive description of the New Age is in my *What is the New Age Saying to the Church?* (London: HarperCollins, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence Osborn, *Angels of Light?* (London: Daybreak, 1992), p. xii.

corresponding to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so as to make the identification Aries = the Father/Judaism; Pisces = the Son/Christianity; and Aquarius = the Spirit/New Age. This Age of Aquarius will bring about many changes, including advances in human potential: 'The paradigm of the Aquarian conspiracy sees humankind embedded in nature. It promotes the autonomous individual in a decentralized society. It sees us as stewards of our resources, inner and outer. It says that we are not victims, not pawns, not limited by conditions and conditioning.'<sup>10</sup> Some claim there will even be measurable physical changes in the way the earth relates to the rest of the solar system.<sup>11</sup> Like Christian eschatology, New Age teaching asserts that though the Age of Aquarius is not yet here in its fullness, its arrival is certain, and those who are spiritually aware will tune in to its values here and now. Most New Age therapies are supposed to provide ways of achieving this, usually by inducing altered or new-dimensional levels of consciousness.

Not totally unrelated to astrology is the fact that the year 2000 will shortly be here. The year 1000 produced intense millennialist speculation, and a similar phenomenon looks set to appear in the closing years of this century. People who would not be attracted by the esoteric side are still attracted by the New Age vision, because it seems to correspond to their own hope that a new millennium will provide the opportunity for a new start.

In addition, there is a deep dissatisfaction with the present western culture and worldview. A typical New Age understanding starts with the conviction that the Enlightenment, along with the science and technology generated by it, has failed. There may have been great advances in, for example, transportation systems and medical science. But at a more profound level, it has not worked. Mechanistic models for understanding human life have created more problems than they solved. Combined with a reductionist approach to knowledge, a rationalist-materialist worldview has produced discontinuities in every area of life, from the depersonalization experienced by patients in modern scientific medicine, to the pollution of the environment. Things are getting worse, not better. Enlightenment philosophy and science promised to equip people to control the environment, rather than the environment controlling them. But today's environmental crisis has unleashed forces that are beyond the capacity of human reason, and for the first time since the middle ages humankind's destiny is controlled by unknown, and probably unknowable, natural forces.

The New Age then is both a response to and an expression of the forces of modernity. Its response to the crisis in modernity is, in effect, a form of post-modernism, projected as religion. This should alert us to the difficulty of finding easy answers to many of the questions it raises. In his perceptive, if intemperate, study of post-modernism, Ernst Gellner speaks for many when he remarks that 'Post-modernism is a contemporary movement. It is strong and fashionable. Over and above this, it is not altogether clear what the devil it is. In fact, clarity is not conspicuous amongst its marked attributes.'<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Marilyn Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, p. 30. Statements like this of course raise serious ethical questions. See further my paper 'Coming to Terms with the New Age Movement', in the *Report of the Board of Social Responsibility* presented to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, May 1993, pp. 54–57.

<sup>11</sup> 'The New Age has begun, but will not be fully recognized as such until the shift of the [earth's magnetic] axis has eradicated some of the evils of the present age ...' (Ruth Montgomery, *Strangers Among Us* (Fawcett Crest, 1979), pp. 30–31.)

<sup>12</sup> E. Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 22. For more on this, cf. my article, 'Salvation and Cultural Change', in D. English, *Windows on Salvation* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1994), pp. 166–180.

## Spirituality

The New Age diagnosis of the problem is, however, quite clear. The present predicament is blamed on a loss of direction by previous generations. Inspired by a rationalist-materialist-reductionist worldview, our forebears devalued spiritual and personal values in favour of a mechanistic outlook. If a loss of spiritual perception is the cause of the problem, then obviously any effective resolution of the present crisis must start with the recovery of spirituality.

Furthermore, if there is a way out of the mess, traditional western sources of spiritual guidance will be of little help in finding it. As part of the old cultural establishment, the church is regarded as incapable of exercising any constructive role in charting a course for the future. Most New Agers have no difficulty in identifying the Enlightenment worldview with the church, and when one part of the philosophical edifice of western culture begins to crumble, that inevitably calls into question its other central components.

We might debate whether Christianity shaped the Enlightenment, or whether it was the other way round, and the church allowed itself to be taken over by essentially secular values.<sup>13</sup> Either way, the practical outcome is the same: if Christianity is part of the problem it cannot also be part of the solution. Consequently, the only place to find spiritual guidance for the future will be in other cultures and worldviews, or within ourselves.

This leads some New Agers towards non-western religions, especially Buddhism. Others gravitate towards ethnic cultures previously displaced by European invasions of the Americas, Australasia, or Africa. This particular route to a new worldview has the added advantage of helping to expiate some of the West's corporate guilt about its past treatment of other cultures.

Yet other New Agers seek spiritual solutions in what is effectively a reversal of history, by looking to the pre-Christian pagan worldview of the West itself. As a result, Celtic mythology, along with all manner of occult and animistic worldviews, are also gaining new popularity and acceptance.

There are others, however, who are still sufficiently influenced by Enlightenment rationalist-materialism to be suspicious of anything that could be called 'religion'. They tend to search for new understandings by exploring the depths of their own psyche, encouraged by the apparent similarities between the techniques of transpersonal psychology and the experiences of mystics through the ages.

Some argue that the New Age has come about as eastern religions have travelled west.<sup>14</sup> But this is too narrow an understanding. Eastern and monistic influences account for only a tiny part of the New Age, and there is a much stronger input from other sources. There is, for instance, a highly dualistic New Age, with a worldview similar to ancient Gnosticism and whose basic conviction is that people do not belong on this earth, but in some spiritual extra-terrestrial sphere. This bit of the New Age specializes in channelling messages from spirit guides and extra-terrestrials, and speculating about the lost continents Lemuria and Atlantis, or legends of Arthurian Britain. Its historical lineage can be traced through people like Swedenborg, Mesmer, Blavatsky, Bailey, and Cayce. Alongside this, however, a different section of the New Age espouses a creation-based spirituality which is either pantheistic or panentheistic, and its heritage is more easily

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks* (Geneva: WCC, 1986) and *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. I. Gordon Melton, *Encyclopedic Handbook of Cults in America* (New York: Garland, 1992 = Garland Reference Library of Social Science, vol. 797), p. 164.

traced through Romantic poets like Shelley, Blake, and Wordsworth, with further connections to the eco-feminist revival of Wicca, and even to more mainstream feminist theology.<sup>15</sup> Such diverse elements clearly do not have one single root, and searching for one is a pointless exercise. But they do have a common motivation, which leads me to conclude that the real driving force behind the New Age in all its forms is dissatisfaction with the cultural *status quo* of the West. In so far as western culture has also been Christian culture, dissatisfaction with Christianity is inevitably a part of that.

New Age unease with Christianity centres on the notion of dualism, and it is not hard to see why. As examples, we might mention how the acceptance of an absolute distinction between people and nature gave permission for destruction and pollution of the environment with no concern for the consequences. Or the way the church perpetuated the idea that confrontation is the way to resolve differences between peoples. Or the abuse and exploitation of women by men. Or the assumption that analytical, logical reason is of greater value than intuition and creativity. The dominance of such dualisms in western thinking forms the basis of Capra's argument that 'This emphasis, supported by the patriarchal system and further encouraged by the dominance of sensate culture during the past three centuries, has led to a profound cultural imbalance which lies at the very root of our current crisis . . .'<sup>16</sup> It is no surprise that many in the New Age find something like a monistic worldview—albeit redefined in a variety of ways, using materials from many different sources—far more relevant to the salvation of our culture than a Christianity which for most of its history has been dominated by dualism in its most extreme form, as originally expounded within Platonism and embraced with enthusiasm by most generations of Christian believers ever since.<sup>17</sup>

### New Age at Work

This search for a holistic spiritual paradigm has surfaced in unexpected places, not least in the world of big business. Attendance at so-called 'New Age' training courses has become a regular part of many people's working life. Much attention has been focused on these courses by the popular media, largely as a result of claims that some of the techniques infringe on human rights. Several successful lawsuits have been brought on such grounds, both here and in the USA, and there is plenty of evidence of what to most people would be bizarre practices within these courses. One might initially think of the use of pyramids and electronic 'mind machines' to expand the human brain, or the study of books like *The Ultimate Super Will Power*, which claims that 'if you simply put this book in your bag or brief case, the eighth dimensional power generated by the book will bring you happiness and good fortune'.<sup>18</sup> But these seem almost normal compared with other

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<sup>15</sup> For this typological analysis of the New Age I am indebted to one of my graduate researchers, Paul Greer, *The Spiritual Dynamics of the New Age Movement* (Stirling University PhD, 1994).

<sup>16</sup> Capra, *The Turning Point*, pp. 21–22.

<sup>17</sup> For an account of Christian history and theology from this perspective, cf. Matthew Fox, *Whee! We, Wee All the Way Home* (Santa Fe: Bear & Co., 1981); *Original Blessing* (Santa Fe: Bear & Co., 1983). Fox's questions are often more useful than his answers, but that should not allow us to dismiss their significance. For critiques, cf. Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Matthew Fox and Creation Spirituality', *Catholic World*, (July/August 1990), pp. 168–172; Andrew Deeter Dreiteer, 'A New Creation', *The Way*, 29/1, (1989), pp. 4–12; Ted Peters, *The Cosmic Self* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), pp. 120–131; Jane E. Strohl, 'The Matthew Fox Phenomenon', *Word & World* 8, (Winter 1988), pp. 42–47; Andrew Walker, ed., *Different Gospels* (London: SPCK, 1993), pp. 155–172.

<sup>18</sup> Katao Ishii, *The Ultimate Super Will Power* (Gardena CA: ESP Science Research Institute, 1986).

courses during which managers might dress up as witches and wizards to create their perfect work environment by casting demons out of their corporate empire, or seek to change the actual nature of reality through techniques like Neuro-Linguistic Programming.

It is easy to dismiss such things as trendy nonsense. But there is a serious side to all this. It was perhaps inevitable that dissatisfaction with the Enlightenment worldview should be strongly felt in the industrial context, for this is where mechanistic assumptions were most often taken to their logical conclusion. Russell Ackoff is typical of a number of management consultants who blame all the evils of the Industrial Revolution on the Christian belief in God as a transcendent creator. As 'a consequence of man's efforts to imitate God by creating machines to do his work, industrial organizations . . . were taken to be related to their creators, their owners, much as the universe was to God . . . employees were treated as replaceable machines or machine parts even though they were known to be human beings . . .'<sup>19</sup> This understanding leads Ackoff to reiterate a familiar New Age theme, that if Christianity is part of the problem it cannot be part of the solution, and therefore we must look elsewhere for the way out of our present predicament. For Ackoff, this is to be found in the monistic worldview of Eastern cultures (in management-speak 'the God of the Systems Age'), or 'God-as-the-whole [who], cannot be individualized or personified, and cannot be thought of as the creator'.<sup>20</sup>

Others find themselves more attracted to neo-paganism as a way of resolving things. These people might describe themselves as 'like the shamans and magicians of the past . . . spiritual warriors', searching for 'a magical elixir to revive the dying dragon child', and thereby establish themselves as 'the initiators and creators of their world'.<sup>21</sup> One such consultant, Lew Tice, is reported as telling his clients: 'You have the power to become the Wizard of Oz. My affirmations are continually that I am a very powerful wizard . . . I bestow upon you the brains and habits to make yourself a better human being.'<sup>22</sup>

It is no surprise that such courses are popular, when they claim not only to make managers better people, but also to enhance the profits of their companies, and even impart the power actually to change the way the world is. The combination of the power of positive thinking with stress-relieving therapies, witchcraft, serious cultural analysis, and (to be honest) a lot of fun, means there is something for everyone in here. Of course, not every 'New Age' management course contains all these elements, and what is true of the parts is not necessarily true of the whole. But the mere fact that this kind of thing is widely perceived as the way forward into the next century underlines the far-reaching nature of the paradigm shift which is taking place all around us.

### **Christianity and the New Age**

Clearly, Christians need to pay urgent attention to all this. For in addition to the theological questions raised by the New Age, those most attracted to it are, in sociological terms, the people who in the past formed the natural constituency of the churches.<sup>23</sup> Many

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<sup>19</sup> Russell Ackoff, *Creating the Corporate Future* (New York: Wiley, 1981). On this, see the whole of part 1, esp. pp. 3–24; quotations are from pp. 25–26.

<sup>20</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 19–20.

<sup>21</sup> For an account of such courses see Rachel Storm, 'Disciples of the New Age', *International Management*, (March 1991), pp. 42–45.

<sup>22</sup> For more extensive discussion of all this, cf. my *What is the New Age Saying to the Church?*, pp. 168–201.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Lawrence Osborn, 'The Gospel in the New Age', *Gospel and Culture* 18, (Autumn 1993), pp. 1–5.

New Agers are indifferent to Christianity, but others are to varying degrees opposed to it and see no possibility of progress unless the traditional Christian worldview is comprehensively abandoned. The rising popularity of the New Age and the decline of the church are but different sides of the same coin, and at least four specific challenges to the church can be identified in all this.

(1) Do western Christians have the courage to live with their heritage and history? Sometimes the record needs to be put straight: Christians have not single-handedly been responsible for everything that has gone wrong in the world, as some New Agers are inclined to claim. But Christians have certainly done plenty for which they bear corporate guilt, and any attempt to rewrite history will be seen for what it is: special pleading and self-justification. Repentance will be a more appropriate response.

(2) The New Age disquiet with dualism is generally well-founded, especially as it relates to Christian understandings of sin and blessing, and the nature of God. Many people (including many Christians) experience the church as an institution which puts them down and refuses to accept them as they are. Have Christians emphasized the wrong kind of dualisms, for example by using concepts of sin to justify themselves and condemn others? And what is an authentically Christian view of both divine and human creativity *vis-à-vis* fallenness?<sup>24</sup>

(3) Further the mystical/supernatural/numinous/spiritual dimension of Christian faith now demands honest reappraisal. Many—though not all—New Agers have a strong belief in some kind of spiritual reality lying beyond this world, and the whole question of direct personal perception of the divine is, in varying ways, of growing importance to an increasing proportion of the population. These people see most Christians as thoroughgoing rationalist-materialists, and for that very reason regard the church as irrelevant to the contemporary debates on spirituality. On the other hand fundamentalists often see engagement with the New Age as ‘spiritual warfare’, and so the issue becomes a battle between one form of dualism and another, and the ‘Christian’ perspective is barely distinguishable from its New Age counterpart. One of the most urgent challenges is for Christians to sort out what they believe about all this.

(4) Most New Agers find Jesus attractive, but believe the church does not address—let alone meet—their spiritual needs. For Jacob Needleman, Christianity is only a matter of words, exhortations and philosophy rather than a matter of practical guidance for experiencing directly the truth of the teachings’.<sup>25</sup> Ian Wray believes Christianity cares only about ‘dwelling intellectually upon the dogma, with a consequent lack of therapeutic, by which I mean the lack of any real body of ideas and practices to help people change. The near total absence of practical aids to human psychological and spiritual growth within Christianity left a vacuum which [New Age therapies] had to fill, based upon principles which [they] had to discover for themselves.’<sup>26</sup>

Needleman goes on to say that his spiritual search is for ‘the Christianity that works, that actually produces real change in human nature, real transformation’. Presumably Christians are looking for the same thing, which is one of several reasons why it makes more sense to regard the New Age as an opportunity rather than a threat. Those prepared

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<sup>24</sup> For more on this cf. my *Evangelism for a New Age: Creating Churches for the Next Century* (London: HarperCollins, 1994).

<sup>25</sup> Jacob Needleman, *Lost Christianity* (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1980), p. 35.

<sup>26</sup> Ian Wray ‘Buddhism and Psychotherapy’, G. Claxton, *Beyond Therapy* (London: Wisdom Publications, 1986), pp. 160–161.



to engage with some of these questions might easily discover there is less distance than they think between Christianity and the New Age.

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# **Communicating the Concept of God in Korean Culture**

Bong Rin Ro

*Reprinted with Permission from Korean Torch vol. 5. No. 1. Spring 1997  
pp. 6–8*

The terminology used for 'God' in any culture always has profound significance for theological understanding and for the practice of evangelism and church growth. Dr Bong Ro shows the importance of this understanding in communicating the concept of God to the people of Korea in the plurality of their religious cultures.

Editor

## **INTRODUCTION**

How can one communicate the God of the Bible to Koreans with totally different concepts of God due to their traditional cultures and religions? How does a Christian interpret the religious experience of prayerful contemplation of a Buddhist in comparison with his own prayer to God? In the rural communities many farmers believe in Shamanism and the power of spirits that control their lives. Are there some common grounds between Christians and non-Christians where they can have religious dialogue?

It is very important for us to gain a proper understanding of the Korean concept of God and how to effectively communicate the gospel to Asians, especially Koreans. In order to achieve this objective the author deals with two principal areas: first, how do we analyse the complex Korean concepts of the deity; and secondly, how do we apply scriptural principles for the purpose of communicating the God of the Bible to Koreans in the context of the 21st century?

## **KOREAN CONCEPTS OF GOD**

Dr. Yong-Bok Rha in his Th.D. thesis at Boston University in 1977, *An Analysis of the Terms used for God in Korea in the Context of Indigenization*, provides useful information on the concepts of God in Korea and lists thirteen different terms for God which this present author divides into three categories. The first category of gods is definitely influenced by Chinese concepts. The second category of gods is related to Korean indigenous shamanism, and the third category has to do with the mythological story of the foremost ancestor of the Korean race, Tangoon.