



The New Age: A Call for Dialogue

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Integrity! If I had to select a single word to convey the spirit of the New Age movement, “integrity” would be it. Does that surprise you? If you are familiar with New Age spirituality only through hearsay, TV sitcoms, or the New Age “unmasking” rack at your average Christian bookstore, a thousand words might leap to your mind—but “integrity” would hardly be one of them.

As editor of *Christian*New Age Quarterly*,¹ a journal of dialogue between Christians and New Agers, the degree of reciprocal misunderstanding never ceases to amaze me. We coexist in a society that offers easy access to the resources of the other. Still, the Christian-New Age relationship is mired in layers of derisive caricatures and factual distortions. While most New Agers highly esteem all religious vantages, there festers a curious resentment toward conventional Christianity, which is typically dismissed as hypocritical and dictatorial—though, ironically, it is the heritage from which most New Agers hail. Correspondingly, in an era when most mainline denominations hope toward greater rapport with non-western traditions, a widespread, transformative movement in our own hemisphere is often disparaged as a cult, even satanic deception, or trivialized as a silly fad. Is it just odd, or might it be telling, that proximity breeds such friction?

Although the dynamics of the Christian-New Age relationship are complex, the chief obstacle to authentic understanding might be tagged, “obstinate ignorance.” While a dimly intentional obfuscation serves both camps in different ways, let’s zero in on the Christian contribution to this standoff. Simply, when it comes to the New Age movement, most Christians formulate opinions *about* it in absence of real contact *with* it! And we come up with plausible, well-circulated theories—which widely miss the mark. I am reminded of Carol Wright’s quip in her review of a theologian’s New Age treatise,² “it was interesting to see these teachings misunderstood in sane theological terms.”³

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²While the title critiqued, *The Cosmic Self*, by Lutheran theologian Ted Peters (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) is one I heartily recommend to Christians as a springboard to further inquiry, the author, to be commended for fairness and facts, filters his interpretations through Christian theology and so fades at delivering the much needed glimpse of New Age spirituality as it sees itself.

³“What’s New...,” *NAPRA* (New Alternatives for Publishing, Retailing, and Advertising) Trade Journal (ABA, 1991) 43-44.

Let's unpack one typical reaction, voiced in the October 23, 1991, issue of *The Lutheran*. Questioned about New Age theories on Jesus, "Since You Asked" columnists Norma and Burton Everist advised, "It is best to ignore these works!" (p. 40).

Ignore? Can we legitimately ignore a movement sweeping our social environment? Whether we recognize it or not, New Age lingo has seeped into contemporary language and its concepts underlie much of today's thinking. Given our common concerns—ecology, global cooperation, ethical lifestyle, and, foremost, the realization that life's purport transcends secular interpretation—it becomes imperative to comprehend a paradigm which, in part, we share.

Since the New Age movement is rife with all sorts of ideological platforms, we might wish to ignore it because of its complexity alone! Even among New Agers there is little consensus about what they believe. Amazingly eclectic, a kaleidoscope of spiritual insights and awareness techniques, the movement's trends dissolve as fast as they form. On the surface, there is no shared belief system, much less homogeneity.

But beneath the surface, there is a centralizing integrity, a way of viewing life as intrinsically meaningful, sacred, and interconnected. Reminiscent in some ways of the mystic strain of our own Christian heritage, New Agers court the sublime in everyday experience, drawn into a dance with the divine. Rightly seen as more than the sum of its diverse components, the New Age community is united by an ineffable identity, a cohesive flavor.

If we choose to dialogue with New Agers, rather than proliferate our theories about them, we might find ourselves declining to be party to its quasi-gnostic, monistic elements and its convictions regarding reincarnation. Yet we may be taken aback to realize how deeply Jesus Christ is revered and honored; though seldom seen in traditional ways, he is the center of much focus and empathy.

Still, the reward of dialogue is not accord, but exchange. We need not agree as long as we listen—and listen with respect for our differences. And if we are versed in our Christian faith, facile in our handling of the Bible and the teachings of our tradition, why would we wish to avoid the opportunity to converse with a spiritually excited community? I suspect our resignation to how ill-equipped most Christians are for discussing their faith, or even for discerning what is Christian from what is not, accounts for the cry, "Ignore!"

At times I wonder if the exuberance we lack is not at the crux of the matter. More than dismayed at their ideas, are we chagrined by New Age excitement over spirituality? As mainstream denominations struggle to hold their ground in a secular society, and the adversary we confront is more the apathy within than any persecution without, does the unbridled enthusiasm of the New Age network, in the very domain of western spirituality we call our own, unnerve us? Then, may I suggest, we need the challenge of the New Age movement. We need to listen to their vibrant delight at "things spiritual," catch hold of their vitality and claim it *for* Christ. We can be renewed for their presence. Rest assured, the only contagious aspects of the New Age movement are that excitement—and that oddly ineffable integrity.

The New Age: Called to Grace

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“New age” has come to refer to an amazing variety of phenomena. It appears to include things as diverse as goddess worship, schools of body work and holistic healing, the recovery movement, men’s work, the use of crystals, transpersonal psychology, and past lives therapy. What may seem to many on the outside a welter of politically correct, chic novelties draws, with varying degrees of knowledge and integrity, on spiritual and healing traditions of great antiquity—yoga, Buddhist and Hindu philosophy, ayurveda, shamanic practice, and Native American religions, to name a few. Practitioners and students see in these pursuits not simply returns to the past but manifestations of the dawning of a new age of the spirit, human and divine.

What typically do New-Agers do? A New Age center near where I live offers the help of, among others, a “body/mind therapist,” who “assists clients in their integration process through the use of massage, guided imagery, chakral energy balancing and therapeutic touch,” and a “ritualist,” who helps “people to spiritually mark significant transitions in their lives.” Their programs include “Creating Rituals,” where you “learn how to center and ground yourself” and “create a sacred space to enhance the intimacy you have with yourself and your body,” and “A Women’s Ceremony of Empowerment,” which includes “symbolic rituals of cutting bonds that limit, burning beliefs that disempower, washing away layers of old skin, and planting/watering new seeds.” Over the next two months you could also participate in “Earthcentered Approaches to Spirituality,” “Trance Dancing,” “Spring Equinox Ritual and Potluck,” and “Praying with Our Bodies.”

It is apparent that these programs are directed to people who are suffering from some kind of deficit—resulting perhaps from the dynamics in their family of origin, illness, cultural structures and societal expectations, or shame. There is clearly in all this a longing for redemption, a hunger to know and be known, to move boldly into the future instead of remaining a hostage to the past, to cherish rather than surmount the bodily nature of human existence.

New Age spirituality has been ridiculed for its feel-good message of success and self-satisfaction, but within its own ranks thoughtful critics have denounced this simplistic approach to human transformation. Marc Barasch, the former editor-in-chief of *New Age Journal*, in an article on illness as spiritual journey, writes:

Spirituality, as repackaged for the new age, is too often a sticky confection of love and delight, purified of pilgrimage and penance, of defeat and descent, of harrowing and humility. There is a tendency to see classic spiritual failings like anger as disease-enhancing, and traditional virtues like joy and love as “healing feelings.” This picture is too neatly framed. If there was one psychological “sin” the people I spoke with most often seemed to suffer from, it was *accidie*—a failure to become as one put it, “all that I might have been.” If there was a single path to wellness, it was expressed by a Japanese shamaness: “Healing means to become your real self.”

Though each person I spoke with did rediscover the power of values we usually consider religious—forgiveness, faith, compassion—they had to draw them up,

hand over hand, from their own inner wells. They discovered that healing is most often found where the country songs have always insisted: *Deep. Down. Inside.* (Or, as the ancient Taoists held, in the low, dark, and small.) In the broken places, where the real self leaks through.¹

For a Christian reading this passage, there are echoes of the theology of the cross and of the divine hiddenness in what is weak, even shameful, in the eyes of the world. There is the acknowledgment of human failure; there is repentance and then the commitment to a new life of discipline. But note that the word sin is in quotation marks. At most the problem is weakness, laziness, ignorance—a failure to become all that one might have been. This is a matter of unrealized potential rather than treacherous rebellion, a loss of nerve rather than a lack of love. Even in their somber forms, the New Age movements seem to rest upon the reassuring, powerful belief that the cure for what ails me lies within me. The well is not dry, or even worse, polluted. Hand over hand I can draw out of myself the wherewithal to overcome the past and secure for myself a future of ever-expanding possibilities.

An advertisement for the Vedanta Press and Bookshop, which appears regularly in the *YogaJournal*, shows the word sin inside the international symbol for prohibition (a circle with a diagonal slash through it) and states: “It is a sin to call anyone a sinner. It is a standing libel on human nature. Vedanta does not believe in sin, only error, and the greatest error is to think you are weak” (a quotation from Swami Vivekananda).² I find this to be representative of New Age thinking. For Christians the denial of sin makes the New Age search for redemption perilous and undermines its summons to hope and joy. What, after all, is my real self? It is not something hidden to be discovered; the templates of authenticity do not lie down deep at the bottom of the well of the psyche to be uncovered and realized. Rather, the self is always in the making; we can become any number of selves. And we discern the way to go not by first consulting “our inner wisdom,” which cannot be simply trusted, but by attending to the possibilities of service to others, through which God calls us out of the bondage to self. No one of us will reach our life’s end without having to acknowledge the failure to become “all that I might have been.” Yet the burden is not on us to do our “work”—men’s work, ritual work, body work, recovery work, or whatever—in order to know the power and peace of redemption and spiritual transformation. These come through the grace of Jesus Christ, who forgives sinners and uses their lives, even when fractured by unresolved grief and shame, to establish his kingdom.

¹Marc Barasch, “The Healing Road to Oz,” *YogaJournal: For Health and Conscious Living* 101 (1991) 55.

²*YogaJournal: For Health and Conscious Living* 100 (1991) 86.