The New Age Movement: An Outline and Assessment[1]

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The aim of this article is to provide an introductory account of the New Age movement and to offer a brief Christian assessment of it. I have divided my material up in the following way: in the first part I deal with the question, 'What is the New Age?'; in the second part I introduce and assess New Age theology; and in the third and final part I suggest a Christian response to the movement.

1. What is the New Age?

In a recent television series entitled 'Faith in the Future', which considered the rôle and prospects for religion in Britain, one of four programmes was devoted to 'The New Age'. The New Age is an umbrella term for a wide diversity of beliefs and practices, broadly of a spiritual nature, which have come to the fore in recent years, and which while being religious in character, do not conform to traditional Christian teaching. The New Age movement can be described as 'an alternative spiritual tradition', that is, an alternative to the more familiar, and until recently in the West, the culturally dominant, Judaeo-Christian tradition.[2]

The immediate origins of the New Age movement are to be found in the hippy sub-culture of the nineteen-sixties, the so called 'beat-generation', with its emphasis on freedom, spontaneity and self-expression. Alongside these (what were perceived to be) positive aspects was a rejection of traditional patterns of behaviour and authority, and of course *traditional* religion, with its commitment to conservative political values and an austere personal ethic.[3] Yet the rejection of religion was not complete, for within the hippy movement, as is well known, there was a widespread desire for religious or transcendent experience: religious experience divorced from orthodox religion, which many were encouraged to believe could be gained by psychedelic or mind altering drugs,[4] and religious experience which consciously looked to Eastern forms of religious expression and spirituality for inspiration.[5]

While the hippy movement, and the broader Counter-Culture of which it was an important part, has not survived in anything like its original form, some of its distinctive emphases and values have been incorporated

into mainstream culture and society. The widespread interest in peace groups and organizations, opposition to nuclear power and preoccupation with conservation and green issues are all concerns which came to the fore in the late nineteen-sixties and were originally part of the Counter-Culture's critique of a materialistic and consumer orientated society. Yet there are other factors at work which have prepared the way for a new radical alignment between society and religion, that is, religion in the form of the New Age movement. One could mention the increasing disenchantment with the established political order, the desire for community, and the hope that new patterns of work and leisure will emerge which can overcome the sense of alienation which is a characteristic feature of much modern urban life. But perhaps foremost of the factors which have ensured that New Age teaching has received a favourable hearing and gained an immediate following is the widespread search for self-fulfilment and self-acceptance. In a world where we are increasingly subject to stress, and where the most natural of relationships are commonly insecure, the quest for inner experiential knowledge and self-understanding becomes paramount. A loss of identity and meaning in the external world throws us back on our own internal resources and experience. This search for meaning within ourselves, and the associated dissatisfaction with a narrow scientism which threatens to subsume personality under impersonal causal laws, found expression, during the nineteen-seventies, in the popularity of the humanistic and transpersonal psychologies of Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, Jean Houston and others. It is at this point that New Age teaching and the cultural and philosophical heritage of the Enlightenment converge: in the thinking, experiencing, autonomous self, who is the measure of all things.[6].

The whole history of philosophy since Descartes has seen an increasing focus on the subject of experience, the human self. The all-important question becomes 'What can I know?', with the emphasis on the 'I', and truth becomes what I believe; truth for me, and truth which may not necessarily be truth for anyone else: simply, truth becomes relativized. This individualistic and relativistic understanding of truth was reinforced by the Enlightenment ideal of human autonomy, according to which all external authorities should be rejected in favour of that authority which comes from within: that which is justified on the basis of one's own experience. Kant is typical of Enlightenment thought, when he concluded that it was unacceptable for God to reveal his purposes, even moral purposes, to us, for this would compromise our essential rational and moral freedom: modernity becomes synonymous with human autonomy.

It is against this intellectual context that New Age teaching has to be considered. In many ways the search for self-fulfilment and personal achievement, characteristic emphases of the New Age movement, fit in with the individualistic spirit of the modern age. The irony is that this preoccupation with the self and its powers is beginning to be questioned in

some academic circles. There is a new appreciation of the social and contextual character of knowledge and of the way historical religious traditions, such as Christianity, have nurtured a sense of community, while simultaneously providing a context for the assertion of the individual's worth and value. In other words, the narrow focus of much modern thought on the individual, experiencing self, a focus which is the point of departure for New Age teaching, is increasingly beginning to be viewed as untenable philosophically and undesirable socially.[7]

I have said something on the roots of New Age thinking and those aspects of our modern intellectual life which make it attractive to some. But what exactly is New Age thinking? There is no simple or straight-forward answer to this. Part of the difficulty is that the New Age movement has no single founder and no official creed or articles of belief, rather it draws inspiration from a number of different historical and contemporary writers and individuals. Moreover, it is unlikely that there is any single belief common to all those who explicitly identify themselves as 'New Agers'.

How does one proceed then to a better understanding of the New Age position? One method, and it is the one I shall follow, is to take a broad sweep of things and list some of the individuals, organizations, practices and expressions which are commonly associated with the movement. In this way some appreciation of the diversity within it should be grasped, while at the same time, an overall picture of the character and nature of the movement should also begin to emerge. However, before doing this I shall say something on the self-designated title of the movement: the *New Age*.

The term 'New Age' expresses the movement's hope and explicit purpose of inaugurating a new era in human history which will be marked by universal brotherhood and a new harmony between man and nature. Within the movement there is a conscious desire to change the world for the better, a noble and legitimate aim in itself, except that it is frequently allied to the conviction that this 'new age' can be achieved only by a rejection of the traditional values and religious ideas of this present age and the adoption of a new religious order which will serve as the foundation for the establishment of a new political, social and economic world order.

This desire for a new era to emerge for humankind is typically optimistic, and part of this optimism relates to the claim made by some astrologers that we are about to enter the Age of Aquarius. According to astrology, the earth is on a twenty-six thousand year cycle, and approximately every two thousand one hundred years there is a purely astrological shifting of the vernal equinox through a new constellation of the zodiac: each particular star constellation exerting a different influence over human affairs. Therefore, human history reveals a pattern conforming to the influence of the different star constellations. On this scheme of

things, the Age of Pisces, for which Christianity was the appropriate religious expression (the fish being an early symbol of Christianity because its letter in Greek were taken as an acronym for a number of prominent New Testament titles of Jesus), should now be giving way to the Age of Aquarius, 'the water bearer'. In the popular musical of the nineteen-sixties, *Hair*, we find the words: 'when the moon is in the seventh house, and Jupiter aligns with Mars, then peace will guide the planets, and love will fill your hearts'. The Age of Aquarius is to be characterized by love, universal brotherhood and the full realization of our natural spiritual powers. The hope of the New Age movement for a new era in human consciousness and history to emerge finds support from astrology; and astrology in turn provides a doorway into New Age ideas and practices.

Prominent advocates for the New Age movement are the actress Shirley MacLaine,[8] the physicist Fritjof Capra,[9] Sir George Trevelyan, founder of the Wrekin Trust,[10] the North American theologian, Matthew Fox,[11] the writer Marilyn Ferguson, author of the influential *The Aquarian Conspiracy*,[12] spiritual teachers, David Spangler, Peter and Eileen Caddy, founders of the Findhorn Foundation,[13] near Forres in Scotland, and the political commentator and strategist, Mark Satin.[14] The movement also looks for inspiration to earlier thinkers and writers whose ideas have now, as it were, come of age. In this connexion one can mention Helena Blavatsky (1831–91) and Alice Bailey (1880–1949): in an earlier generation the writings of both would have been referred to as theosophical.[15] One prominent twentieth century theologian whose ideas have been appropriated by New Age thinkers is the French palaeontologist, Jesuit and philosopher-mystic, Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955).[16] His unlikely marriage of evolutionary theory and Christian theology, which culminated in the view that Christ was the organic centre of the cosmos, with his body being equivalent to the cosmos itself, is regarded by many as providing a new theoretical basis for conservation of the environment: students of comparative religion will recognize that Teilhard is here echoing the thought of the eleventh century, Hindu philosopher, Ramanuja, who also regarded the universe as the body of God.[17] The final figure I want to mention is the Swiss psychoanalyst, Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961). Jung was as unorthodox in psychology and psychiatry as Teilhard de Chardin was in theology. Much of his work and writing can be described as the search for the spiritual within the self. He developed a theory of the collective unconscious or subconscious, to which he traced the striking similarity of symbolism and mythology which is utilized by the different world religions and spiritual communities; within this realm he also found the origins of telepathy, the use of mandalas, the true ground of the self, and the like.[18]

I have already mentioned the Wrekin Trust and the Findhorn Foundation, both of which are British, as examples of New Age organizations; others are World Goodwill and its publication arm, the Lucius

Trust, Planetary Citizens, which like World Goodwill is concerned with advancing the movement at the political level, the Unity and Diversity Council, which co-ordinates the work of a large number of small organizations and groupings through the world, the Movement of Spiritual Inner Awareness, the Sufi Order in the West, and so we could go on.[19] However, the New Age movement should not just be thought of as an umbrella term for a number of different organizations with broadly similar aims, that is, if organization is interpreted to mean some kind of formal, institutionalized structure of leadership and authority. Part of the movement is structured in this way, but part of it is not; this other part is comprised of small informal groups, gathered round a particular spiritual teacher or practice; such groups may operate independently of each other, and may not even explicitly identify themselves with the movement.

Some recent commentators have suggested that the New Age movement is best thought of as a network: a web or network of interconnected groups, organizations and individuals, bound together by overlapping goals and objectives. We can think of the various New Age organizations and their membership as the centre of the web. A little removed from the centre would be more informal groups, while at the periphery would be those individuals who are interested in New Age ideas and practices, but who stop short of any real commitment or association. It follows from this that it is difficult to be precise about where the boundary between members and non-members should be drawn or to assess accurately the movement's influence upon society at large.[20]

One other way of characterizing the New Age movement is to focus on the spiritual practices and activities associated with it. Again there is the problem of selection, for most of the practices are not new or unique to the New Age position. New Age thinkers typically draw on that long contemplative tradition of spiritual exercises and training, propounded and practised by adherents of the different religions, and particularly prominent in the Eastern religions of Hinduism and Buddhism and their various esoteric and philosophical schools. Practices and activities that seem to be characteristic of the movement are: astral projection, automatic writing, astrology and the use of horoscopes, channelling and the claim to have Spirit guides, colour therapy, divination, perhaps in the form of consulting the *I Ching* or Tarot cards, dream analysis, mind altering techniques such as chanting and yoga, some of the practices connected with alternative medicine, say the use of crystals and acupuncture.[21] A small number within the movement would advocate more openly pagan (for the most part reviving pre-Christian religious practices) and occult practices, such as earth healing rituals and the practice of black magic. There are any number of New Age activities, some of which, divination for example, are clearly incompatible with Christian belief (see Deut. 18:9–14), and others, which while being religiously neutral in themselves, can sometimes lead into other less religiously neutral New Age practices. In this category I

would place herbalism, feminism, science-fiction, ecological concerns, among others.[22]

I shall conclude this section by briefly noting some of the words and phrases which are associated with New Age thinking. Some of the terms will be familiar to Christians, though as used by proponents of the New Age they will have gained a different meaning. In this way New Age beliefs have been able to enter and influence the Church: the use of a familiar and common vocabulary initially suggests that the content is the same. Only by looking deeper and carefully considering the words in their new context will it be recognized that a subtle change of meaning has occurred. Familiar New Age terms and expressions are: *self-realization, at-one-ment, personal and social transformation, cosmic consciousness, the Christ principle, Cosmic Christ, spiritual awareness, inner harmony, reconciliation* and *the Higher Self within.*

2. New Age Theology

Although there is great diversity within the New Age movement there are common emphases: a dissatisfaction with the materialism and secularism of much modern advanced industrialized society; an equal dissatisfaction with conventional religion; a holistic approach to life and health; a shared vision of a new world order; and the conviction that each of us has a natural human and spiritual capacity to effect change in ourselves and in the wider world. But can one go further than this and identify a characteristically New Age worldview? A certain amount of caution is needed here. For one thing the movement is in its infancy, so perhaps we should not expect the kind of carefully thought out comprehensive vision of things which only comes with maturity and time for reflection. Again there is the issue of diversity: could any single framework make sense of it all? However, if we are prepared to admit that some degree of simplification is necessary and that any syncretistic interpretation of the New Age movement is bound to be inadequate at some points then, given these limitations, we can begin to see the outline of a fairly comprehensive interpretation of reality emerging. This judgment that there is a New Age vision of things would be endorsed by many within the movement itself. The writings of such prominent New Age figures as Matthew Fox, Fritjof Capra, Eileen Cambell, Starhawk,[23] and others, are properly read as attempts to develop a distinct New Age theology. But what is the New Age worldview? Essentially, it is the belief that the world and the human self participate in God and are to be regarded as expressions of God: all is one, and all is divine.

The belief that everything that exists is, in some sense, divine is usually referred to as pantheism: from the Greek words for 'all', *pan*, and for 'God', *theos*. In the West pantheism is chiefly associated with the Stoics, Spinoza, Hegel, and F.H. Bradley. In the East pantheism is associated with the Vedanta school of Hinduism, Mahayana Buddhism and philosophical

Taoism. The tendency in the West has been to present pantheism as a somewhat intellectual philosophy of life, rather than as a religion for common consumption. In the East this distinction between philosophy and religion does not obtain, and expressions of pantheism invariably have an explicitly religious orientation and make provision for the common practices and associated beliefs of popular religion. When everything is thought to subsist in the divine, then anything can become a focus for the divine; though of course some activities and objects are more transparent to the divine or more relevant to particular individuals than others. On this understanding, religious practices and activities can be graded according to the extent to which the inherent divinity of all things is recognized. The more rudimentary and simple one's religious awareness is, the more the divine is confined to particular objects and locations: the more advanced one's religious awareness is, the more inclusive one becomes in identifying objects, practices and locations with the divine. In this way simple, and even superstitious, religious practices can be accorded a positive religious function; as steps on the way to a deeper understanding. The attractiveness of this position to New Age thinkers is obvious: Eastern pantheism is at once both theoretical and practical; it provides a theoretical framework for interpreting reality, and within this framework the practices and activities of popular religion can be accommodated. A further reason is that pantheism is believed to be justified by reference to mystical experience, and this comports well with the emphasis upon experience, and the exaltation of the self and its powers, so characteristic of New Age thinking, and of course modern thought in general.

Although much more could be said on the New Age's indebtedness to Eastern philosophy and religion, and in particular its indebtedness to Hinduism, one also needs to be careful not to overemphasize the connexion, for the New Age movement has not been entirely uncritical in its appropriation of Eastern ideas. For one thing, those who identify themselves with the New Age movement, by and large, exhibit a concern with social, political and environmental issues which contrasts markedly with the quietistic and ascetic emphases, commonly associated with Eastern religion. In Hinduism, for example, the traditional path to enlightenment entails withdrawal from worldly interests. The things of the spirit are set over against the things of the world: to pursue the one is to renounce the other. At this point, the New Age movement is indebted to the values of Western social and political liberalism, rather than those of traditional Indian spirituality.

The influence of Western thought, as against Eastern, is also seen in the New Age movement's stress upon the person and *personal* fulfilment. Although there are philosophical schools in the East, such as Dvaita Vedanta within Hinduism, where the enduring personal nature of salvation is emphasized, the dominant philosophical schools of both Hinduism and Buddhism regard personal categories of being as provisional: in mystical

union human individuality is transcended and the personal self loses its identity in the infinite, impersonal Absolute. This notion of the annihilation of the self is not attractive to New Age thinkers who are heirs to the intellectual legacy of the Enlightenment. The Western stress upon personal autonomy and fulfilment is, if anything, accentuated, rather than diminished, in the New Age movement.

Towards the beginning of this section, I spoke of pantheism as the doctrine that the universe and the human self participate in God and should be regarded as expressions of God. Defined in such terms, the designation 'pantheism' is clearly descriptive of the religion and theological orientation of the New Age movement. However, some writers have drawn a distinction between pantheism and what they call 'panentheism', and their usage suggests that my original definition is too broad, for it subsumes under it two positions which would be better distinguished.[24] Thus, pantheism refers to the belief that God and the universe (with its constituent physical and mental aspects) are identical. Panentheism refers to the belief that the universe (with its constituent physical and mental aspects) is a part of God; but God consists of more than the universe. The latter, it is maintained, because 'God consists of more than the universe', makes provision for God's transcendence in a way denied to the former. On this basis panentheism is often taken to be religiously and theologically superior to pantheism. In fact, this particular criticism of pantheism points back to a more serious objection; as Walter Stace has expressed it:

> . . . if pantheism means nothing but the identity of God and the world, this is the same as saying that the pantheist means that 'God' is just another name which some people chose to use—for some very odd reason—for what most people call the world.[25]

Basically, how is reality any different if pantheism is true than if it is false and there is no God? The difference would seem to be merely verbal: what one calls the world/universe, the other calls God. Spinoza admits as much when he characterizes the divine as *deus sive natura*—'God or nature'. Hence, it should not surprise us to discover that in the history of thought Spinoza is described by some commentators as 'God intoxicated' and by others as an atheist. Beyond the statement 'God is the world or universe', pantheists on this understanding affirm nothing that is denied by atheists. Some might contend that pantheism entails a different attitude to the world, say a sense of reverence. But is it appropriate to speak of reverence when the object to which reverence is directed is not personal? And is reverence appropriate to the destructive and malignant aspects of nature? More importantly, do any *practical* differences follow from a pantheistic attitude to the world which do not follow from an atheistic and humanistic perspective or attitude?

Panentheism seeks to combine the positive features of pantheism and theism while supposedly overcoming the negative features of both. It

overcomes the dichotomy between God and the world/universe, accredited by some to theism, by maintaining that the world participates in God, and in this way gives positive content to the immanence of God. It overcomes the difficulties which attend pantheism's exclusive identification of God with the world, by maintaining that the world is only a part of God, and in this way gives positive content to the transcendence of God. Yet to say, on the panentheistic scheme of things that God transcends the world/universe is problematic, for it amounts to saying that God transcends himself. Now this does seem an odd way of speaking, and in order to make such speech more readily intelligible, proponents of panentheism distinguish between two poles of God's being (hence the description, bipolar theism). Different terms can be used: Whitehead distinguishes between God's primordial nature, signifying God's transcendence, and God's consequent nature, signifying God's identity with the world and human experience.[26] Others refer to God's absolute nature and his relative nature.[27] Both ways of speaking are common among process theologians, who have been the chief philosophical champions of panentheism.[28] However, panentheism is not confined to process thought, for a careful reading of New Age writers and sources reveals a broadly similar commitment; and although some New Age thinkers should more properly be described as pantheists, the majority are panentheists; where these two terms are distinguished in the way set out above. Certainly, the technical vocabulary of process theology is largely absent from New Age writings, but the same basic identification of God with the world and the same postulation of an aspect or pole of God which transcends the world are found. A popular New Age way of giving expression to panentheism is to refer to the world/universe as the body of God: a description also used by process theologians. On this understanding, the transcendent or absolute pole of God is related to the world/universe in a way analogous to each individual self's relation to his or her body; thus the world is God's body. God both transcends the world and is the world, just as the self transcends the body and is the body. Accordingly, within this theological scheme there is a distinction between individual selves and the selfhood of God, as well as a distinction between both and the material world; both these distinctions, though objectively real, fall within the inclusive totality of God.

What are Christians to make of the suggestion that the human self and the natural world participate in the reality of God and that both should be regarded as the body of God? It has been suggested that such an interpretation would provide a new theoretical basis for human co-operation and conservation of the environment. A straight-forward Christian objection to construing the world as the body of God is given in the following argument:

1. The content of the Christian Scriptures is revealed by God.
2. This revealed content is accordingly true,
3. Part of this revealed content is that God is ontologically distinct from the world. Therefore:

4. The world is not God's body.

I acknowledge that the first premise needs further clarification, but I shall not attempt this here. The second effectively draws out what is implicit in the first. Within the overall argument, the truth of the third premise depends upon whether the Scriptures teach that God is ontologically separate from the world or not: the third is not analytically related to the first in the way that the second is. On the basis of such passages as Gen. 1; Is. 40:12–31 and Rev. 4:11, I shall assume that the third can be established by reference to the Christian Scriptures. Therefore, the world is not God's body and human selves are not essentially divine.[29] This form of argument could be adopted to defeat a number of New Age beliefs and associated practices by the simple substitution of a relevantly different third premise. For example, Christians could reject the doctrine of reincarnation—a popular New Age belief—on the basis that it is not endorsed by the Christian Scriptures. An appropriately relevant third premise could read:

> 3. Part of the revealed content [of the Christian Scriptures] is that the individual enjoys one life on earth, followed by a continuation of existence after death and then judgment by God.[30]

The above argument sets out the traditional form of Christian polemics: beliefs are tested as to their adequacy and truth in the light of those (other) beliefs which are endorsed by the Christian revelation in Scripture. However, there are limitations to this approach. For one thing, this form of argument applies chiefly to Christians; for it is presumably Christians who accept the authority of the Bible and accord it the status of revelation. Those who are not Christians would, for the most part, escape the force of an appeal to the Christian Scriptures! Secondly, on some subjects there is honest disagreement between Christians, perhaps because the subject is not considered in Scripture, or because it is simply aired in such a way for its meaning to depend on wider interpretative issues, which are themselves controversial and disputed. In any case, a negative verdict on the truth of panentheism does not depend solely upon arguments and considerations which are internal to traditional Christian faith, for in addition to theological objections, there are philosophical objections which do not presuppose the truth of canonical theism.

Philosophical objections to regarding the world/universe as the body of God tend to focus on the issue of its coherence. The suggestion being that if the world is God's body, then the being, who is related to and expressed through the world in this way, is neither worthy to receive our worship nor to bear the title 'God'; a being cannot be both a fitting object for worship and include the universe within itself. If God has a body, then by the principle of analogy, we would expect him to act through it and express himself in much the same way as we act through our bodies. But to suppose this is not without difficulty. In an interesting aside to his discussion

of 'the argument from design', Richard Swinburne has drawn attention to the fact that if God always acts through the instrumentality of his body (a view it is natural to associate with panentheism), he cannot be the ground of those laws and regularities (in his own body, the world) which make his own activity possible.[31] This is because those laws and regularities which govern the movement of God's body are necessarily prior to such movement and are consequently unexplained by God—some more ultimate principle is then required to explain causal laws and regularities within God's body/the world. An argument which ends in the same conclusion that the world as God's body carries implications which are incompatible with other attributes which are essential to the divine nature can also be drawn from the reality and existence of evil within the world. If we say that the world is God's body, evil seems to be an aspect or characteristic of God's being. This surely conflicts with God's supposed 'perfect' nature; God is, after all, traditionally thought of as the source and supreme example of moral goodness.

In an interesting reply to this criticism, Grace Jantzen, who has defended the idea that God is embodied in the world, has suggested that the location of evil within God creates no more problems for the panentheist, than the existence of evil poses for the traditional theist. This is difficult to sustain. While acknowledging that evil does constitute a problem for the canonical theist, surely it constitutes more of a problem for the panentheist. If the world is God's body its imperfections can be directly predicated of God, whereas (if God is ontologically distinct from the world) the imperfections of God's world cannot be directly predicated of God. On this latter account, there is the possibility of explaining evil as a consequence of man's freewill, or as a necessary element in any environment where certain positive values can be cultivated and exhibited. This position sufficiently distances God from the world to make any straightforward transfer of evil in the world to God difficult; but where God is identified with the world, and includes its evil, the problem becomes more obdurate. Dr. Jantzen seems to acknowledge this, for in an effort to distance God from the evil in the world she distinguishes between 'saying the evil is in God and that God himself is evil'.[32] Given her premise that the world is God, this cannot be sustained. A similar solution is pursued by Ramanuja (the eleventh century Hindu philosopher and mystic briefly referred to above), who distinguishes between God as he is in himself and God as part of the world. Accordingly for him, evil is not properly of God: God is essentially good, it is only in relation to the world that evil attaches to God, and thus contingently so. But this admission surely compromises Ramanuja's belief that God *is* the world. If the world is contingently related to God, in what meaningful sense is it God? The considerations I have adduced seem to suggest that there is a basic incoherence at the heart of panentheism when it affirms that God is all good and that the world is a part of God, while simultaneously acknowledging that evil is real and present in the world.[33]

3. A Christian Response to the New Age Movement

In the early nineteen-sixties some social commentators, cognisant of the decline of church membership and church attendance, confidently predicted that by the end of the century, religious belief would be virtually non-existent in the West, except perhaps in some of the remoter regions, further removed from centres of industrialization and commerce. Religion, as it were, would exist in isolated pockets, in cultural backwaters. Loss of belief in God and religion were regarded as the inevitable accompaniments of economic and social progress. Ironically, a number of theologians, seeking to perpetuate faith in this 'world come of age' (to use Bonhoeffer's phrase), reinterpreted religion so as to divest it of any reference to the divine or to any supernatural realm of existence beyond this world. Only in this way, they believed, could religion and religious faith survive.

Twenty years on, predictions of the demise of religion in the modern industralised world seem to have been premature. There is ample evidence that interest, and even participation, in religion is if anything increasing rather than on the wane. Of course, a lot depends here on the definition given to religion. It is true that participation in organized forms of traditional Christianity is still in decline, but if religion and religious activities are defined more broadly to include those who report some kind of spiritual or even psychic experience and those who engage in spiritual practices which lie outside conventional religion, then quite a different picture begins to emerge.[34] Indeed, as the rise of the New Age movement itself witnesses, there is a new openness to religion and spirituality within society at large.

What undoubtedly has changed in the last twenty years or so is that it can no longer be assumed that Christianity will remain the dominant religious tradition in the industrialised West. The privatisation of belief, which has been a slowly evolving consequence of both the Industrial Revolution and the Age of Reason, the Enlightenment, and a host of other factors, has produced a new cultural context in which Christian belief is one religious option among many. The churches as institutions are for the most part politically irrelevant and church membership no longer confers social advantage. We live in a pluralist society, where individuals are free to choose from a rich variety of religious options. The Christian Church's response to this new situation should be two-fold. First, there is a need for Christianity to commend itself at the highest intellectual level. The credibility of the Christian interpretation of reality over against other religious and non-religious worldviews needs to be demonstrated. Secondly, and perhaps of greater relevance to those involved in the New Age movement, the Christian Church must show that it has the ability to meet the religious needs of the individual. Christianity has never commended itself solely on the basis of its superior explanatory power over other positions. More fundamentally, it has commended itself as a religion with the ability to satisfy

the individual at the point of his or her deepest religious or moral need. It is this aspect of Christianity which distinguishes it from a philosophy of life and other non-religious ideologies, and indeed gives a uniqueness to it among the religions. Christianity speaks not just of a revelation from God, but equally of a reconciliation to God: revelation *and* reconciliation are the twin focuses of Christian faith. God has both revealed himself to us and has reconciled us to himself in Christ. The New Age movement witnesses to the longing of the human spirit for communion with God. The challenge to the Church is to show through its life and service that man's intellectual and spiritual needs are met in Christ in a way that they cannot be met elsewhere.

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NOTES

1. This paper was originally read to the Belfast Presbyterian Clerical Association on 21 September, 1992.
2. As background reading to an understanding of the New Age movement, although neither is exclusively concerned with it, I would recommend Eileen Barker, *New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction* (London: H.M.S.O., 1989), and Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe, *Understanding Cults and New Religions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986); both are sociologically sophisticated and do much to correct some of the popular misconceptions which frequently attend discussions of new religious movements and their adherents.
   For those who want to familiarise themselves with New Age thinking and ideas at first hand the best place to begin is probably Marilyn Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy: Personal and Social Transformation in the 1980s* (London: Granada Paladin, 1982). An interesting collection of New Age sources is brought together by William Bloom, under the simple title, *The New Age: An Anthology of Essential Writings* (London: Rider, 1991). A good bibliographical guide to the movement is also to be found in *The Aquarian Guide to the New Age*, by Eileen Cambell and J.H. Brennan, who both identify with the movement (Wellingborough: Aquarian Press, 1990).
3. A good account of the intellectual roots of the Counter-Culture movement of the nineteen-sixties, from a Christian perspective, is provided by Os Guinness, *The Dust of Death* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973). The same period is analyzed from a sociological viewpoint by Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969). Roszak's study was largely sympathetic to the aims and ideals of the Counter-Culture movement, and in later writings he explicitly identifies himself with what is now called the New Age movement; see his *Where the Wasteland Ends: Politics and Transcendence in the Post-Industrial Society* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1973), and *Unfinished Animal: the Aquarian Frontier and the Evolution of Consciousness* (London: Faber, 1976).
4. Important sources for the link between drugs and religious experience, where religious experience is equated with mystical experience, are Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* (London: Chatto & Windus Ltd., 1954), Timothy Leary, *The Politics of Ecstasy* (New York, Paladin, 1970), and Walter N. Pahnke, 'Drugs and Mysticism', *International Journal of Parapsychology* 8, 1966, pp. 295–320. An important Christian reply to Huxley was made by R.C. Zaehner, a then well-known authority on mysticism; *Mysticism: Sacred and Profane* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), and again in *Zen, Drugs and Mysticism* (London: Collins, 1972). A number of philosophers have

examined the issues involved. Huston Smith's 'Do Drugs have Religious Import?', *Journal of Philosophy* LXI, 1964, pp. 517–30, is sympathetic to the use of drugs to occasion religious experience, if the subject already has religious faith. My own position is similar to that of Robert A. Oakes, 'Biochemistry and Theistic Mysticism', *Sophia* XV, 1976, pp. 10–16, who argues that, given the theistic God's nature, the ingestion of a drug cannot be a causally sufficient condition of an experience of God.

5. An historical account of Western interest in Eastern religion is given by Terence Thomas in 'West turns East', in T. Thomas (ed.), *The British: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices 1800–1986* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 72–100; and also by Harvey Cox in *Turning East: The Promise and Peril of the new Orientalism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977). Another useful source is Robert S. Ellwood, Jr., *Alternative Altars: Unconventional and Eastern Spirituality in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979).
6. The increasing focus on the self and self-fulfilment within psychology is discussed from a Christian perspective by Paul C. Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977); also pp. 64–113 of Mark P. Cosgrove, *Psychology Gone Awry: Four Psychological World Views* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1982). An excellent account of the historical roots and contemporary expression of the wider focus upon the self within modern culture is Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (London: Sphere Books, 1980). Two Christian critiques of reductionism in the human sciences, and the associated devaluation of personhood and human dignity (what I have called in the body of the text 'a narrow scientism') are: C. Stephen Evans, *Preserving the Person* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977), and Keith Ward, *The Battle for the Soul* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985).
7. Modern thought's preoccupation with the self who is the subject of knowledge, and the priority of what is called the 'first person perspective', can be traced back to Descartes. Both later Continental rationalism and British empiricism stand in this tradition of affirming the epistemic priority of the first person: one begins the quest for knowledge from within, either with the innate ideas of the mind or with internal sense impressions. This whole tradition of philosophising began to be questioned in the twentieth century with the publication of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958). Wittgenstein's later philosophy drew attention to the public and social nature of knowledge by underlining the essentially public and social nature of our language; and knowledge presupposes a linguistic medium. Thus there has been a shift from a 'first person' to a 'third person' perspective in the understanding of the nature of knowledge; this shift is very clearly documented in Roger Scruton, *A Short History of Modern Philosophy: From Descartes to Wittgenstein* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981). A more recent study which tells much the same story only more explicitly focusing on the centrality of the self and subjectivity in modern philosophy is William Barrett, *Death of the Soul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). The implications of this shift of perspective for philosophy and theology is only beginning to be appreciated; see Fergus Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).
   The narrow focus on the autonomous self in much modern ethical thought, and the associated undermining of social and community values, is criticized by Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981); his positive proposals for the renewal of our moral traditions and the construction of a new social ethic are to be found in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988), and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (London: Duckworth, 1990). A similar position has recently been advanced by Jonathan Sacks in his 1990 Reith Lectures, subsequently published as *The Persistence of Faith: Religion, Morality and Society in a Secular Age* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991).
8 *Out on a Limb* (London: Elm Tree Books, 1983), and *Dancing in the Light* (London: Bantam Books, 1986).
9 Capra is a prominent advocate of Taoist mysticism, which he believes is supported by recent advances in the field of theoretical physics; see his *The Tao of Physics; An*

Exploration of the Parallels between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism (London: Fontana Flamingo, 1983). Another scientist who has attempted to marry 'new physics' and Eastern mysticism is Gary Zukav, *The Dancing Wu Li Masters* (London: Fontana Flamingo, 1982). For criticism see R.K. Clifton and M.G. Regehr, 'Capra on Eastern Mysticism and Modern Physics', *Science and Christian Belief* 1, 1989, pp. 53–74; and Ernest C. Lucas, 'God, GUTs and gurus: the new physics and New Age ideology', *Themelios* 16, 1991, pp. 4–7. More recently Capra, in a book co-authored with Charlene Spretnak has turned to green issues and attempted to show how Eastern mysticism, *i.e.*, Eastern pantheism, provides a theoretical foundation for conservation of the environment; *Green Politics* (London: Paladin, 1985).

10 *A Vision of the Aquarian Age* (London: Coverdale, 1977).

11 Fox is a Dominican priest who is Director of the Institute of Culture and Creation Spirituality in California, as well as a major author and speaker on New Age themes. He is greatly influenced by the German mystic, Meister Eckhart (1260–1329), and stresses a 'creation-centred spirituality'; see his *Breakthrough: Meister Eckhart's Creation Spirituality in New Translation* (New York: Doubleday, 1980); other books include *On Becoming a Musical Mystical Bear* (New York: Paulist Press, 1972), *Original Blessing* (Santa Fé, New Mexico: Bear & Co., 1983). In his most recent book, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), he suggests that Jesus was a mystic who recognized the divine in us all.

12 (London: Granada Paladin, 1980).

13 Peter and Eileen Caddy are spiritual teachers rather than writers; their talks are distributed in cassette form. David Spangler, has now moved from Findhorn, Scotland to North America; he has written *Revelation: The Birth of a New Age* (Findhorn: Findhorn Publications, 1977), and *Towards a Planetary Vision* (Findhorn: Findhorn Publications, 1977).

14 *New Age Politics: Healing Self and Society* (New York: Dell, 1978).

15 Bibliographical details of Blavatsky and Bailey's writings can be found in Elliot Miller, *A Crash Course on the New Age Movement* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), p. 242. Theosophy and spiritualism no longer receive much Christian attention so one has to turn to older Christian books for criticism: G.W. Butterworth, *Spiritualism and Religion* (London: S.P.C.K., 1944), is an important substantial study.

16 In the late nineteen-sixties and early seventies Teilhard de Chardin enjoyed a brief period of popularity within academic theology; his influence continued in progressive Roman Catholic circles until the early eighties, when allegiances shifted to Rahner and Lonergan; the optimistic, mystical and holistic aspects of his thought are attractive to New Age thinkers. His chief work is *The Phenomenon of Man* (London: Collins Fontana, 1965); important devotional and spiritual works are *Le Milieu Divin* (London: Collins, 1960) and *Hymn of the Universe* (London: Collins, 1965). Major interpretative works are Henri de Lubac, *The Religion of Teilhard de Chardin* (London: Collins, 1967) and Emile Rideau, *Teilhard de Chardin: A Guide to his Thought* (London: Collins, 1967), both of which are sympathetic to his position. A good, though reasonably short, evangelical critique is D. Gareth Jones, *Teilhard de Chardin: An analysis and assessment* (London: Tyndale Press, 1969).

17 See Anne Hunt Overzee, *The Body Divine: The Symbol of the Body in the Works of Teilhard de Chardin and Ramanuja* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) for exposition and commentary. I consider the idea of the world/universe as the body of God below.

18 *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1933), *Answer to Job* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954), and his candid autobiography, which provides an excellent introduction to his main ideas, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (London: Collins Fontana, 1967).

19 A guide to New Age organizations is appended to Eileen Cambell and J.H. Brennan, *op. cit.*, pp. 339–348.

20 One Christian commentator who has described the New Age movement as a network is Elliot Miller, *op. cit.*, pp. 14–16; The term is quite widely used by New Age writers themselves; for example; Jessica Lipnack and Jeffrey Stamps, *Networking* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1982).

21 A Christian estimate of most of the practices listed here can be found in Douglas R. Groothuis's excellent trilogy, *Unmasking the New Age* (1986), *Confronting the New Age* (1988), and *Revealing the New Age Jesus* (1990), all published by Inter-Varsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois. Particularly helpful on alternative and holistic medicine is Paul C. Reisser, Teri K. Reisser and John Weldon, *The Holistic Healers* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983).

22 Mary Daly is one whose commitment to feminism has resulted in a shift of allegiance from Roman Catholicism to the New Age movement (as that term is understood in this article): note the contrast between *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968) and *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Woman's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973). A British example of someone whose commitment to feminism has caused her to leave the Church, in this case the Church of England, and move in the direction of the New Age, is Daphne Hampson; see her *Theology and Feminism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

23 See above for references to books by Fox, Capra and Cambell. Starhawk or Miriam Simos. She is one of the high priestesses of the American witchcraft movement who relates shamanism/wicca to belief in a female Goddess who is latent in all things: *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979).

24 For example, W.L. Reese, *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion: Eastern and Western Thought* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1980), pp. 407–410.

25 *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 211.

26 *Process and Reality* (New York: Macmillan, 1929).

27 For example, Shubert Ogden, *The Reality of God and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

28 For criticism of Process Thought and panentheism see Ronald Nash, *The Concept of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), and the relevant parts of H.P. Owen, *Concepts of Deity* (London: Macmillan, 1971).

29 According to the traditional Christian doctrine of creation, God created the world 'out of nothing' (*ex nihilo*). This excludes the idea that God imposed form on pre-existent matter (Plato, Whitehead), and equally the notion that the world is the last in a series of emanations from the Godhead (Plotinus).

30 See Mark Albrecht, *Reincarnation: A Christian Critique of a New Age Doctrine* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1987). As I see it, the chief philosophical difficulty besetting reincarnation/metempsychosis is to explain how any cycle of births could be initiated in the first place. If one's present life situation and circumstances are determined by one's former choices in a previous life then what initiated one's first birth or incarnation? And if some exception from the Law of Karma is allowed for the first incarnation (as it must be), then why should this exception not be allowed for present births: the hypothesis of reincarnation is simply superfluous.

31 'The Argument from Design', *Philosophy*, 43, 1968, pp. 199–212.

32 *God's World, God's Body* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984), p. 92.

33 We can speak evil of this criticism of panentheism as 'the logical form of the problem of evil and suffering'. Although the same criticism has been levelled by some philosophers, J.L. Mackie, for example, at orthodox or canonical theism, it is now generally accepted that it is unsuccessful: see Alvin Plantinga, 'The Free Will Defense', in *Philosophy in America*, edited by Max Black (London: Allen and Unwin, 1965), pp. 204–220. For an extended critique of pantheism/panentheism see David K. Clark and Norman L. Geisler, *Apologetics in the New Age: A Christian Critique of Pantheism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990).

34 See David Hay, *Religious Experience Today* (London: Mowbray, 1990).