

HIDDEN DANGERS OF THE NEW AGE

'For there shall be a time, when they will not endure sound doctrine; but, according to their own desires, they will heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears: And will indeed turn away their hearing from the truth, but will be turned into fables.' (from St Paul's second letter to Timothy, chapter 4, verses 3 and 4)

Fifteen years ago a journalist summed up the accelerating emergence of New Age beliefs and practices in these words: *".....traditional forms of paganism are prospering in the West. In the midst of skyscrapers, computers, television and jets we find flourishing altars of Pantheism, nature worship, Buddhism, astrology and witchcraft.we find spiritual supermarkets full of ready-wrapped, do-it-yourself meditation religions."* Today, not only are all those activities still prospering, but they are also more widely available. They are accepted as legitimate alternative expressions of 'spirituality'. They have become part of mainstream culture.

In 1993 Pope John Paul II issued a warning about New Age spirituality referring to it as *"a vague vision of the world expressed in myths and symbols."* When he was Cardinal Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI defined the New Age concisely by describing it as *"a multiple and changing phenomenon."* In 2003 the Vatican issued a document entitled *Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life - A Christian Reflection on the 'New Age'* - in which the following observation is made: *"Western culture has taken a step beyond tolerance to a conscious erosion of respect for normality. Normality is presented as a morally loaded concept linked necessarily with absolute norms. For a growing number of people absolute beliefs or norms indicate nothing but an inability to tolerate other people's views and convictions. In this atmosphere alternative life-styles and theories have really taken off....."*

But, you might say, surely most New Age beliefs and practices are quite harmless, so why do we need to bother about them? A brief and simple question like this deserves a brief and simple answer. However, unfortunately, where the so-called New Age is concerned, brevity and simplicity are rarely possible. It is not just a matter of 'yes' or 'no'. For example: 'Is there such a thing as the New Age Movement?' Well, the answer to that is 'yes' and 'no'. Why? Because it depends what is meant by the words 'New' and 'Age' and 'Movement'. To explain this we need to look for a moment at the history and aims of what has come to be known as the New Age Movement.

First - it is not 'New'. It goes back to the Garden of Eden with Satan tempting Eve to the forbidden knowledge which would make her like God if she followed his - that is, Satan's - instructions. In the Book of Genesis, at the beginning of the third chapter, we have the account of his infamous lies: *"You shall not die..... your eyes shall be opened.....you shall be as Gods, knowing good and evil."* In other words: you will have the power to decide what is right and what is wrong; what is good and what is evil. Secondly - the 'Age' referred to in the term 'New Age' is the so-called Age of Aquarius which we have supposedly entered at the beginning of the third millennium. The astrological Aquarian Age is said to represent the age of the spirit and liberated mankind. New Agers see it also as the end of Christianity.

In this context it is worth recalling the musical 'Hair' in the late nineteen-sixties and its theme song 'Aquarius'. The lyrics of this song imprinted themselves on the minds of a whole generation in North America and Western Europe:

"When the Moon is in the Seventh House, and Jupiter aligns with Mars, then Peace will guide the planets and Love will steer the Stars. This is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius...Aquarius....Harmony and understanding, sympathy and trust abounding; no more falsehoods or derision; golden living, dreams of visions, mystic crystal revelation and the mind's true liberation. Aquarius....."

Those words sum up what, from then on, began to become known as the New Age.

And the word 'Movement'? This does not refer to any structured organisation - it has no headquarters, it has no central committee, it has no constitution. To quote again from the Vatican document mentioned above: *"New Age is not a single, uniform movement, but rather a loose network of practitioners whose approach is to think globally but act locally."* Around the world millions of men and women are involved in hundreds of groups and activities in which they, with other like-minded people, are promoting beliefs and practices that are in direct opposition to Divine revelation and Christianity. They are opposed to Sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture and the Teaching Authority of the Church. So, in that sense it *could* be called a 'Movement'.

About a year ago BBC Radio Four broadcast a discussion about why - as the presenter put it - why religion appears to be giving way to 'spirituality'. In fact, the term 'a spiritual revolution' was used. To all intents and purposes it *is* a revolution - a radical change in the way the world is viewed. Of course, to anyone involved with New Age beliefs and practices (knowingly or otherwise) the word 'spirituality' is unlikely to mean the same as it does to a Christian. For the Christian, the spiritual life means the *"life of the Holy Spirit, dwelling in the souls of the faithful and enabling them to praise and love God and serve Him in the practice of virtue."*

However, for those involved in the New Age it is more likely to imply an esoteric perception of the world, an altered state of consciousness (such as transcendental meditation) or some vague concept of 'enlightenment'. In this context we are likely to hear the words 'paradigm shift'. This phrase relates to the whole range of beliefs, values, and techniques shared by members of any given community - and it involves a complete change of perspective, a different view of the world. But, as one writer has put it: *"...the insidious danger of the New Age is its view of the nature of reality, which admits to no absolutes. History provides evidence that relative standards of morality breed chaos and - ultimately the downfall of society."*

It should be pointed out that although the term 'New Age' only became part of common parlance in the mid-seventies it was a term used some fifty years earlier by Alice Bailey, a New Age 'guru' and founder of the Lucis Trust (formerly the Lucifer Trust). The Lucis Trust shares the aims of the Theosophical Society (established in 1875) which is committed to bringing about a universal brotherhood, a one-world religion and the development of the psychic powers in man.

These objectives are known collectively as the Plan. It is interesting to note that when the Plan was drawn up in 1875 the founders of the Theosophical Society decreed that it should be kept secret for one hundred years. And that is exactly what happened.

To see how the New Age manifests itself in relation to our faith we need look no further than Modernism, which became known as such in the late nineteenth century and was condemned by Pope St. Pius X in 1907. Modernism rejects objective revelation and regards religion as essentially a matter of experience - personal and collective experience. Faith is from within - a part of human nature hidden and unconscious - a natural instinct belonging to the emotions - a sort of *feeling* for the divine. Clearly, this is at odds with the Catechism of the Catholic Church which teaches that faith is a supernatural gift from God enabling us to believe without doubting all that God has revealed. Modernism therefore, by the definition just given, can be seen as one of the means by which New Age ideas can infiltrate the Church.

Alongside this we have the present-day liberality of Secular Humanism which focuses on the self-reliance of man and dispenses entirely with the divine and supernatural. It calls for a secular system of world law and order as well as freedom of choice in matters such as abortion, divorce and sexual exploration. This is the false 'creed' which leads to despair and emptiness for many young people - as a result of which they are an easy target for New Age 'spirituality'. For most of them, sadly, organised religion is seen as irrelevant.

Another '...ism' that should be mentioned here is Gnosticism, that heresy which was widespread in the second and third centuries, and which has re-surfaced repeatedly ever since, albeit under different disguises - the present one being the New Age Movement. (Incidentally, Gnosticism is also the 'religion' of the Da Vinci Code which is currently doing irreparable harm to the faith of millions - young and old alike - by means of both the book and the film).

The writings of many New Age authors contain Christian terminology and quotations from Sacred Scripture. This gives the writings a cloak of authenticity which they do not deserve. An example of this is a programme called 'A Course in Miracles' promoted by the Institute for Teaching Inner Peace. They have an impressive website offering a range of books, CD's, DVD's, audio and video tapes and a free quarterly magazine. The purpose of this self-study course is to change one's perceptions. The late author, Dr Helen Shucman, claimed that the course was given to her as an inner dictation. Some of it is written as though the words come directly from Jesus. The unwary may be taken in by this, but the 'Course in Miracles' has been described as a modern version of Gnosticism. It is counterfeit Christianity.

It is interesting to note that in Volume One of his 'History of the Church' Philip Hughes states that the Gnostic movement became '*a rich and confused amalgam of rituals and beliefs, magical practices and theories, which attracted many followers.*' That would be a suitable description for much of the New Age Movement today.

Those whom we might call 'New Agers' share a conviction about many of the characteristics of Gnosticism: a suspicion of tradition; a distrust of authority; a dislike of objective statements of faith; the need for 'freedom' from the 'stifling effects' of doctrine and dogma; and the claim that orthodox Christianity, by being too rigid, keeps people from making their own choices about good and evil. In other words, it prevents them from making up their own minds about truth and falsehood. So, we are back to Satan in the Garden of Eden again. Add to that the promise of enlightenment that goes beyond normality, and we have the New Age in a nutshell. The Vatican document, referred to earlier, mentions '*a widely-held perception that the time is ripe for a fundamental change in individuals, in society and in the world.*'

Clearly, then, if this perception is coupled with evidence of a desire for a fulfilling and healthy existence for the human race and for the planet (and through the media we are bombarded with the so-called 'evidence') then the stage is set for New Age beliefs and practices to flourish. Contrast that with just one traditional reference point: the beautiful Novena in Honour of the Holy Ghost. The opening meditation for Day One reminds us that: "*Only one thing is important - eternal salvation. Only one thing, therefore, is to be feared - sin.*" Compare that to what many of our young people are being told in their Catholic schools today. There, it is much more likely to be: 'Only one thing is important - saving the Earth. Only one thing, therefore, is to be feared - pollution.' Or, for 'pollution' perhaps 'population growth' might be substituted.

There are two key characteristics which are present to a greater or lesser extent in all New Age aims and activities: Evolutionary Divinity and Global Unity. These twin ideas suggest that the human race is evolving spiritually towards a unified global 'consciousness'. The idea of Evolutionary Divinity includes: altered states of consciousness; spirit guides; visualisation; reincarnation (the law of rebirth) and karma (the law of cause and effect). Evolutionary divinity claims that the essential nature of man is good and divine - therefore, no sin; no need for confession or forgiveness; no need for salvation. We create our own reality, and our own heaven.

The idea of Global Unity embraces: creation-centred spirituality - now becoming more widely known as 'greenspirit'; the pantheistic belief that God is everything and everything is God; and, of course, the universal brotherhood envisaged by the Theosophical Society. In this concept there is no distinction between Creator and creature - we are one with nature and man is god.

So, why has interest in the New Age grown so rapidly and spread so effectively? That is a question addressed by the Vatican document which tells us that the New Age operates more often than not on the level of feelings, instincts and emotions.

That, of course, ties in with the work of the Modernists and plays into the hands of the promoters of many New Age ideas, beliefs and practices.

But, in charity, it has to be said that most people who are involved in the New Age have little, if any, conscious awareness of potential dangers of the activities in which they are participating. Activities such as Yoga and Reiki - virtually unheard of forty years ago - are now regarded as almost essential for a healthy, balanced lifestyle. No danger is seen in the spiritual philosophy upon which such activities are based, although it is clear that New Age beliefs and practices are incompatible with Christianity.

Is yoga a suitable activity for Christians? The simple answer to that question is - no! Why?? Because the practice of yoga could undermine the Faith of any unsuspecting Christian.

There are many forms of physical exercise which can be undertaken without putting oneself in regular contact with a practice which is based on, and rooted in, a non-Christian, Eastern spiritual philosophy and lifestyle. In this, as in all matters concerning the Faith, the authoritative voice of the Church must be heard and acted upon. Remember the Penny Catechism question: *"Of which must you take most care, your body or your soul? Answer: I must take most care of my soul."*

'Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life' traces the development of the New Age movement and the current widespread acceptance of many elements of New Age 'spirituality'. In the part headed 'New Age Spirituality' it states:

'Some of the traditions which flow into the New Age are: ancient Egyptian occult practices, Cabbalism, gnosticism, Sufism, Druidic lore, Celtic Christianity, mediaeval alchemy, Zen Buddhism, Yoga and so on.' And in the same section it is pointed out that: *'There is talk of God among New Age practitioners but it is not a personal, transcendent God. Nor is it the Creator and sustainer of the universe, but an 'impersonal energy' with which it forms a 'cosmic unity'.* This is the spiritual 'philosophy' of which yoga is a part.

The following quotation is from the 2003 partwork called 'Enhancing your Mind, Body, Spirit' (currently being re-published): *'The physical postures that form the core of any Yoga session, invigorate the body and mind. These physical exercises are called 'asanas'. The word 'asana' means 'steady pose' (each posture is meant to be held for some time). The Asanas help to redress the body's harmony by helping to align the spine and head, improve blood flow, induce a state of relaxation, energise glands and organs and enhance well-being. This is the result of the seven major centres of energy (the Chakras) being brought into balance.'*

In the programme of the 2005 National Conference of the 'Call to Action' organisation (a dissident 'Catholic' group) in Milwaukee, USA there was this announcement: *'Carol will lead morning prayer of gentle yoga and pranayama. Yoga is a sacrament, a symphony of soul and motion that emerges from the inside out. We bless the new day through sun salutation, half moon, mountain and other yoga postures.'* (n.b. 'pranayama' means breathing)

Referring back to the 'Mind, Body, Spirit' partwork we read that: *'The Sun salutation is a sequence of 12 Yogic postures performed in a continuous flowing motion, punctuated by six deep breaths. It can be thought of as a slow Yoga dance - almost a meditation in its own right. Saluting the Sun originates from the ancient practice of divine prostration - an act of bowing down in homage to the Sun, the creative life-force of the universe that exists within all of us.'*

Whether one realises it or not, Yoga is a combination of physical exercises and the spiritual. No part of yoga can be separated from the philosophy behind it.

One commentator on the New Age - someone who was deeply involved in New Age practices - says this: *'Often it is thought that Hatha Yoga (the physical exercise form of Yoga) is benign and somehow disassociated from the rest of the total Yoga system. This is a potentially dangerous fallacy. Hatha Yoga is part and parcel of the whole of yoga, with many of the same dangers. In addition, it also functions as a door through which the curious sometimes walk to explore other aspects of the New Age.'*

Another example is Reiki - a practice which is becoming very widespread in private clinics - and in the Heath Service. Here is an extract from the programme of a clinic in Berkshire which offers medical and surgical rehabilitation combined with, what they call, holistic excellence. The clinic claims that its programme is accredited by The Royal College of Nursing:

'Reiki is a Japanese word that means Universal Life Energy. As children we know this source, we are one with it, but as we grow up we forget and feel separated. One of the gifts of Reiki is a feeling of being reconnected. Reiki is neither a religion nor a belief system. It opens the way to new depths of spiritual experience and understanding. Once you have been initiated, Reiki is activated by placing your hands on yourself or another person. The Reiki energy is then drawn through the body and will go to the level where the energy is blocked, charging it with loving energy and raising the vibrational frequency.'

Reiki is said to have been developed by a Buddhist monk by the name of Mikao Usui in the latter part of the nineteenth century. He claimed to have spent many years evolving a healing system based on ancient Buddhist teachings written in Sanskrit, the ancient and sacred language of Hindus in India. Mr Usui spent the rest of his life practising and teaching this method of healing. It is claimed by practitioners that Reiki raises our 'vibrational frequencies' and, as more and more people become initiated and attuned, so our planet's 'vibrations' are lifted also.

Now, it is obvious that this practice is not compatible with Christianity and should be avoided. But, in case we needed any further convincing, we can refer to a warning intended for health professionals and patients that was circulated three years ago by a team of nine highly qualified doctors and a mental nurse. Their joint statement makes sombre reading. Among other things, they point out that: 'Reiki is an exclusively spiritual technique which connects the recipient to spiritual powers or 'spirit guides' whether they realise it or not.' And that: 'recipients are usually unaware that the practitioners are spiritist mediums who channel spiritual powers in the same way as mediums in seances.'

New Age beliefs, practices and products are no longer regarded as 'fringe', 'weird' or 'eccentric'. In the main, they are accepted unquestioningly by modern Western society. They are promoted widely through magazine and newspaper articles, radio and television programmes and in the many public exhibitions and shows. Workshops encompass 'personal growth', 'spiritual awareness' and training in complementary therapies, whilst exhibitors offer crystals, hypnotherapy, meditation, numerology, reiki, tarot, yoga and much more.

The annual 'Mind, Body, Spirit' Festivals, which were launched in London in 1977, have spawned many smaller 'psychic fairs' around the country enabling clairvoyants, spiritual healers and mediums to have direct contact with the unsuspecting public in cosy local surroundings. This year, for the first time, six 'Mind, Body, Soul' exhibitions are taking place in London and the Home Counties. Another 'first' for 2006 is the two-day 'Mystic Arts Show' at Olympia which covers "*mysteries transcending ordinary human knowledge*" and includes stands for exhibitors featuring: shamanism, divination, channelling, spells, wicca, cosmic energies and reincarnation.

The New Age Movement has even attempted to hi-jack the angels. Typical New Age books on angels refer to 'energy fields', astrological connections, the healing power of colour and luck management techniques such as Feng Shui. Most large bookstores now have many shelves stocked with books on the development of psychic powers, casting spells and learning witchcraft. These are often low-cost, how-to-do-it books easily accessible to impressionable teenagers whose curiosity has been aroused by films, television programmes or magazine articles. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, of course, specifically forbids all forms of divination and magic as sins against the First Commandment (paras. 2115-2117).

Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life reminds us that: "*New Age 'truth' is about good vibrations, cosmic correspondences, harmony and ecstasy, in general pleasant experiences. It is a matter of finding one's own truth in accordance with the feel-good factor.... relative to one's own feelings and experiences.*"

It is clear that many New Age practices seem, to those involved in them, not to raise doctrinal questions. But these practices communicate, directly or indirectly, a mentality which can influence thinking and lead to false beliefs - beliefs which are opposed to the Truth of Divine Revelation as expressed in Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition and the Teaching Authority of the Church.

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