

What's New with the New Age? Why Christians Need to Remain on Guard against the Threat of New Age Spirituality

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Introduction

New Age spirituality is fast-food religion perfectly suited for a postmodern culture like ours. It offers a quick-and-easy feeling of satisfaction with almost no real nourishment for the soul, while it contains additives and artificial ingredients that are actually harmful to true spiritual health. But you can still have it *your* way. There are no dogmas, few demands, no sense of self-denial, and little need for faith. This is a kind of *anti*-religion: a spiritually oriented worldview for people with an intuitive sense of the sacred, but who are wary of organized religion.

As a matter of fact, the so-called *New Age movement* is nothing like any organized religion. It has no headquarters, no central hierarchy, no holy book, no recognized clergy, no common set of doctrines, and no confessional standards. It is not, technically, a religious cult or even a formal “movement” (which implies structure and membership and mission).

And yet the most outstanding features of the New Age phenomenon seem very much like distinctives that properly belong to a cult or a movement. “New Age” is, after all, mainly an approach to *spirituality*—a way of viewing and interacting with the spiritual realm. It has spawned an enormous publishing and

retail industry, major conventions, countless seminars and programs, and a very large community of people who identify with one another and share common ideas and concerns. In fact, those publishers and those conferences serve as the backbone for a vast but informal network of many small sects, cottage industries, and social groups all populated by individuals who practice various forms of spiritual self-exploration and who are absolutely convinced that we are living at the dawn of a New Age.

In that sense it is fitting to speak of the New Age phenomenon as a “movement”—and a *religious* movement at that. The clergy of the New Age are usually called *practitioners* rather than priests or pastors. Their influence varies, as does the content of their teaching, because one of the distinctives of New Age spirituality is that it recognizes no authority higher than one's own personal experience. This is indeed a kind of religion, but it is a classic expression of the postmodern preference for religion as experience, not dogma.

Of course, the New Age phenomenon is much *more* than a religion. It is also a social and cultural current that has endured for two or three decades and has had profound effects on western lifestyles. The New Age movement has engendered such

diverse trends as holistic medicine, natural diets, and a unique style of instrumental and electronic music. The widespread fascination with crop circles, UFOs, earth's mysteries, crystals, alchemy, and ancient forms of superstition; the popularity of astrology, pseudo-science, and environmentalism; and the burgeoning interest in Native American culture are all common side effects of New Age spirituality. These things and others like them have become badges of New Age identity.

Because of the diversity of belief among New Age enthusiasts and the amorphous nature of the New Age network, a formal, succinct definition of the New Age movement is practically impossible. But it will nevertheless be helpful to begin with a simple thumbnail description of the New Age phenomenon. We will then look more closely at some of the major elements of this simple description in order to consider why the New Age movement ought to be a matter of concern for biblical Christians.

The New Age movement is a diverse and eclectic approach to spirituality that stresses individual self-exploration through a variety of beliefs and practices borrowed from a wide array of extrabiblical sources and non-Christian belief systems, ranging from astrology to eastern mysticism to science fiction, and beyond. Notice the key characteristics: New Age spirituality is wildly eclectic and therefore radically syncretistic; it is individualistic and therefore ultimately man-centered; and it is almost purely subjective and therefore devoid of any sense of absolute authority. As such, it is inherently hostile to virtually every distinctive element of a biblical worldview.

The Background of the New Age

The expression "New Age" refers to a belief that earth's history is currently

in a major transition pertaining to the signs of the zodiac. As a matter of fact, the position of the earth relative to the constellations does actually shift slightly over time, owing to a kind of slow wobble in the earth's axis. This phenomenon is known to astronomers as "the precession of the equinoxes," in which the position of sunset at the vernal equinox gradually moves in a westward circle, at a rate that would make a full rotation approximately every 25,800 years. As the shift occurs, the backdrop of the sun at sunset moves almost imperceptibly from one constellation to another, in rhythmic transitions that occur roughly every 2,000 years.

One such transition occurred around 4,000 B.C., as the location of sunset at equinox moved out of Gemini and into Taurus, the bull. Then around 2,000 B.C., Taurus gave way to Aries, the ram. About 2,000 years later, the backdrop of the equinox moved out of Aries and into Pisces, the fish. And a similar transition is currently underway as the precession of the equinoxes moves the sunset-point from Pisces to Aquarius.

New Agers generally believe that this movement through the constellations marks the ages of human history and religious belief. During the age of Taurus, the bull (which lasted from antediluvian times until the era of Moses), calf worship was popular. The shift to the age of Aries, the ram, supposedly accounts for the rise of Judaism, with its stress on the ritual sacrifice of rams and sheep. And the dawn of Pisces, the fish, corresponds to the start of the Christian era. That is supposed to explain why the fish has always been one of the church's favorite symbols and remains so today. In the words of one New Age writer, "Our theology is not played out so much in books and literal earthly

dramas, but rather in the heavens as the Sun makes it's [*sic*] passage through the signs of the Zodiac."¹

So the most basic of all New Age ideas is rooted in astrology—specifically, a belief that human history is now at the dawn of a whole new era: the Age of Aquarius. That, of course, was the message of the opening song of the 1967 Broadway musical, *Hair*, a song that became, in effect, the anthem of the New Age and first introduced millions to the concept.

New Age spirituality is a postmodern phenomenon with gnostic, pagan, and metaphysical roots. It is impossible in such a short article to trace all the spiritual tributaries to such a diverse movement, but it should be noted that the New Age is a direct successor to some of the metaphysical cults that became popular in the nineteenth century, including New Thought, Swedenborgianism, Theosophy, Science of Mind, and even Christian Science. New Age practitioners liberally borrow language and ideas from all those sects, freely adapting and reshaping them according to personal preference.

Jungian philosophy is another major factor in the popularization of New Age spirituality. Jung, of course, coined the concepts of "the collective unconscious," "the god within," and mind-expansion techniques. Wouter Hanegraaff wrote that Jung "sacralized psychology, by filling it with the contents of esoteric speculation. The result was a body of theories that enabled people to talk about God while really meaning their own psyche, and about their own psyche while really meaning the divine. If the psyche is 'mind,' and God is 'mind' as well, then to discuss one must mean to discuss the other."²

Wouter Hanegraaff's reference to "esoteric speculation" hints at another major

stream of New Age influence: Gnosticism. The fundamental idea that unites all gnostic and New Age thought is a belief that the key to real understanding lies in some mysterious, ancient body of hidden knowledge available only to enlightened minds. Normally, the way to gain enlightenment is by being initiated into whatever group claims to be the guardians of the secret knowledge.

Add a distinctly postmodern brand of subjectivity to this eclectic blend of astrological, metaphysical, psychological, and gnostic influences, and you can begin to get a sense of the milieu in which New Age spirituality has flourished. It would probably be fair to characterize the rise of the New Age movement as the spiritual side of the postmodern paradigm shift.³

Typical Beliefs and Practices of New Age Spirituality

New Age thinking is so diverse, so fluid, and so unique to each individual practitioner that it is probably not possible to make any general statement about the religion of the New Age that could not be challenged by someone pointing out significant exceptions to the rule. Nevertheless, a few common features dominate so much of New Age spirituality that they need to be highlighted as key characteristics of the mainstream of the movement.

Pantheism, for example, is the common belief of many, but not all, in the New Age movement. This is the view that God is everything and everything is God. (God is immanent in this view, but not transcendent.) Thus the universe itself—all of nature—constitutes the true God, so that there is no valid distinction between the Creator and creation.

Other New Agers would hold instead to *panentheism*, the belief that God is *in*

everything and everything is *in* God. The difference here is that panentheists retain some notion of a kind of divine transcendence, so that God is thought to be Someone or (more likely) something—an impersonal force—bigger than the universe.

Either way, the New Age concept of deity is rooted in *monism*, not biblical monotheism. Scripture teaches that God is distinct from his creation, and the New Testament reveals Him as a Trinity—three distinct divine Persons yet one in substance. He is immanent—he pervades and sustains the universe. But He is also *truly* transcendent—separate from, not part of, and not subject to the limitations of, the material universe.

Monism, by contrast, claims that God and the universe are all of one essence (or one substance, or energy, or principle). In effect, monism eliminates not only the essential distinction between Creator and creation, but also every significant difference between one kind of being and another. The individual and the universe are ultimately the same. All beings, God included, are ultimately one with the universe itself.

This belief in monism is one of the key differences between New Age spirituality and classic Gnosticism. Gnostics were predominantly dualists, believing that everything in the universe is reducible to two fundamental, opposite realities: mind and matter, good and evil, spirit and flesh, yin and yang, or whatever. New Age spirituality is a kind of neo-Gnosticism, combining the esotericism of early Gnosticism, together with handpicked beliefs and superstitions borrowed from ancient gnostic sources, but blending those with a fundamental commitment to monism.

That's why in New Age spirituality the

stress is on harmony, global unity, and the oneness of all things. If everything that has ever been or ever will be all flows from a single energy source, everything is ultimately capable of being harmonized.

Accordingly, New Age thought has little room for the concepts of evil, sin, and redemption. Those have given way to the therapeutic language of addiction and recovery, positive energy, holistic health, and the notion of love as a tolerant and always-affirming state of mind (rather than the more biblical concept of love as the giving of oneself for another).

Holism is the New Age movement's preferred term for expressing the spiritual aspect of monism. Holism, in popular terminology, is the view that the whole of any complex system is greater than the sum of its parts. The person with a holistic perspective is convinced that the best way to understand anything is always by seeing it as a whole, never by breaking it down and examining the parts. New Agers apply that theory to the entire universe, which, by their monistic way of thinking, *is* God. The goal of New Age spirituality, then, is to become one (or rather to appreciate one's true oneness) with the universe and thereby be in harmony with God.

Such harmony, in turn, supposedly unleashes the divine energy in the New Ager's own experience. Empowerment such as this is the goal and the object of New Age spirituality. In the words of one practitioner: "New Age Spirituality is all about getting your power back. Not that you ever lost it. Sometimes you gave your power away, misplaced it, or forgot you had power in the first place."⁴

The means of this empowerment are as diverse as the history of human superstition. Various New Age practitioners have

borrowed freely from practically every occult and mystical source ranging from ancient religions such as Zoroastrianism to modern science fiction.⁵ Tools of the trade for New Age practitioners include synthesized music, health food, holistic medicine, incense, aromatherapy, candles, and crystals. (Crystals are supposed to help achieve harmony with the universe because of the way they vibrate at a constant frequency).

Other common features of New Age spirituality include even darker occult practices, such as tarot cards, divination, the use of magical potions and incantations, numerology, graphology, and, of course, astrology. New Age practitioners often function as mediums, channeling “spirit guides” who claim to be angels. (The ubiquitous angel-themed greeting-card and gift-shop paraphernalia are prompted mainly by the New Age movement’s superstitious obsession with angels and other spirit beings, rather than by any widespread interest in biblical teaching about angelic activity.) Many believers in the New Age have delved into wicca (a modern form of witchcraft), spiritism, shamanism, Sufism, yoga, Druidism, and various other forms of neopaganism. New Agers have also borrowed, adapted, and popularized several familiar doctrines from Hindu and Buddhist sources, including belief in reincarnation, karma, the chakra, and Nirvana. These ideas are all often blended with quasi-Christian and gnostic terminology so that the language of New Age spirituality can at times have a biblical ring to it. (Celtic Christianity is also a favorite source for some New Agers.)

But of course New Age spirituality is not biblical. At its core, it is anti-Christian. It moves freely in and out among vari-

ous occult, gnostic, and pagan themes. It seems to favor fringe religious ideas and “alternative” beliefs, which are lavishly borrowed, modified, and adapted from these sources. It replaces the doctrine of Christ’s deity with belief in the divinity of nature itself—and finally teaches the divinity of every individual. It eliminates the significance of good and evil and thereby obviates the entire concept of redemption. And it is wholly reliant on a blend of practices and beliefs borrowed from an almost boundless array of extra-biblical, occult, and pagan sources.

New Age spirituality is therefore at odds with every classic division of Christian doctrine. With regard to *hamartiology*, New Age selfism all but does away with the biblical concept of sin. New Age *anthropology* starts with a denial that humanity is in any way uniquely above the rest of nature. As far as *Christology* is concerned, New Age beliefs utterly eliminate the uniqueness of Christ.

And when it comes to *soteriology*, New Age beliefs overthrow the gospel itself with a completely different message. Of course, the heart and soul of biblical soteriology is the doctrine of the atonement. The forgiveness of sins, the imputation of righteousness to the repentant sinner, and a host of truths regarding justification by faith all flow from that.

By contrast, the centerpiece of New Age spirituality is individual self-fulfillment and empowerment. It is actually a kind of anti-soteriology. As a matter of fact, it is the very quintessence of every kind of works-religion, because if New Age spirituality is correct, *I’m* the one I have to please. *I’m* the only one who can chart my own spiritual journey. *I’m* the one whose standards I have to live up to. And *I’m* the one I ultimately have to turn

to for help.

The inevitable result is the systematic deification of self. And the quest for individual self-deification is the very essence of the single most destructive religious lie of all time. As numerous Christian critics of New Age spirituality have already pointed out, the whole New Age belief system flows from the same falsehood the serpent enticed Eve with in the garden: “You will be like God” (Gen 3:5).

The Rise and Decline of New Ageism

The New Age movement began to ferment in pop culture in the 1970s, an offshoot of 1960s counterculture. As we have noted, it was introduced to millions at the end of the 60s by means of a popular song heralding the dawning of the age of Aquarius. Belief in the New Age grew quickly and somewhat quietly in the 1970s to become a major force by the end of the decade.

The movement first seemed to catch the attention of the major mass media in America when actress Shirley MacLaine stepped forward at the end of 1983 to become its best-known and most colorful proponent with the release of her book *Out on a Limb*.⁶ The book (dramatized in a 1987 television miniseries starring the actress herself) chronicled Ms. MacLaine’s quest for New Age enlightenment and self-discovery, as she dabbled in the occult arts, had an out-of-body experience, attempted communication with spiritual and extraterrestrial beings, and explored various new-age fads such as crystals and channeling. She described how in one of these channeling experiments a being who identified himself as “John,” who said he had lived on earth in the time of Christ, told her through a medium, “You

are God. *You* know you are divine.”⁷ MacLaine believed the message. In a book two years later, delving even more deeply into her New Age interests, she wrote, “I am God, because all energy is plugged in to the same source. We are each aspects of that source. We are all part of God. We are individualized reflections of the God source. God is us and we are God.”⁸ “I am God in Light” was the mantra she said she chanted during her yoga exercises.⁹

MacLaine may have done more than any other single celebrity in the 1980s to popularize the New Age movement, but her eccentricities and her apparent willingness to believe almost any superstition also helped spark something of a popular backlash against the culture of the New Age. The expression *New Age* when used in popular media and entertainment began to take on negative connotations of gullibility and shallowness. The trendiness of New Age culture became the brunt of derisive comedy sketches and the luster faded from the movement.

Meanwhile, a steady stream of books from both evangelical and secular critics attacked New Age ideas as unbiblical, unsound, dangerous, and sometimes just plain ridiculous. Constance Cumbey’s *The Hidden Dangers of the Rainbow: The New Age Movement and Our Coming Age of Barbarism*¹⁰ was one of the first books to critique the New Age movement from an evangelical perspective. Cumbey (an attorney and an evangelical Baptist) portrayed the New Age movement as a vast and well-organized conspiracy—ultimately a plot to bring the Antichrist to power. Her sensational claims appealed to many, and a few writers, including Dave Hunt,¹¹ echoed Cumbey’s conspiracy theory.

Several more sober Christian apologists who took on the New Age movement were

highly critical of Cumbey's conspiracy theory. These included Douglas Groothuis of Denver Seminary¹² and Elliot Miller of the Christian Research Institute.¹³ These authors pointed out that there is scant credible evidence of any highly organized, centrally-coordinated plot for the New Age movement as an organized entity to take over governments or destroy established religious structures. Christians should oppose New-Age *ideologies*, but they need to do it on spiritual and biblical grounds. Because the conspiracy-theory mentality itself demands such a high level of blind credulity, it may in fact be a hindrance to effective apologetics work, they pointed out.

Influential secular books analyzing the New Age movement included Marilyn Ferguson's *The Aquarian Conspiracy*.¹⁴ Despite the impression given by the title, this book is nothing like Cumbey's treatment. Ferguson was wholly sympathetic to most of the ideals of the New Age, and the kind of "conspiracy" she described was open and more or less coincidental, rather than the sort of clandestine and dark scheme Cumbey envisioned. *The Aquarian Conspiracy* was nonetheless one of the first popular volumes to reveal the widespread influence of New Age ideas, and its title may have inadvertently raised some alarms about the aims and intentions of the burgeoning movement.

Another important (and more recent) book on the subject from a non-evangelical perspective is *The New Age Movement: Religion, Culture and Society in the Age of Post Modernity*, by Paul Heelas.¹⁵ Heelas gives a careful and dispassionate history of the growth and development of New Age spirituality in a critical but academic context. A still more recent scholarly book worth mentioning from a non-evangelical

perspective is Steve Sutcliffe's *Children of the New Age*,¹⁶ in which New Age spirituality and terminology are subjected to thorough deconstruction in vigorous postmodern fashion.

Evangelical publishers, who in the late 1980s and early 1990s were producing critiques of the New Age movement at a rate faster than most people could possibly read, have turned for the most part to different genres of books. In the wake of the astonishing success of a few mega-bestsellers like *The Prayer of Jabez*, *Wild at Heart*, and *The Purpose-Driven Life*, Christian publishing has seemed to favor books that are non-polemical. Furthermore, with the Emerging Church movement lately becoming the focus of so much dialogue and debate within the evangelical movement, the New Age movement seems to have all but faded from the agenda.

Is The New Age Just Old News?

Some Evangelicals might be tempted to think interest in New Age spirituality is waning—that the movement itself is on the decline. But that would be a mistake. According to data published by George Barna, people holding New Age beliefs already outnumbered evangelical Christians a decade ago. Survey data released in 1996 showed that 20 percent of American adults followed New Age teachings. About half that number could be classified (even in the broadest possible terms) as biblical Christians.¹⁷

ReligiousTolerance.org, an Ontario-based nonsectarian website that collects and publishes survey data regarding religious trends of all kinds, says that today, "Interest in new religious movements (e.g., New Age, Neopaganism) is growing rapidly. In particular, Wiccans are doubling in numbers about every 30

months.”¹⁸

The New Age movement is by no means a dying influence. If anything, many New Age beliefs have simply become so mainstream that they no longer seem as unconventional or as spiritually menacing as they once did. Both the language and the ideology of the New Age have gradually become so familiar in the culture of American religion that evangelicals simply do not pay much attention to the New Age anymore. The whole subject has the feel of yesterday’s news.

Meanwhile, the Emerging Church movement and other postmodern streams of influence within the evangelical movement are challenging historic evangelical convictions with the same kind of epistemic deconstruction that gave rise to the New Age movement in the first place. The Emerging Church movement has raised the serious question of whether certainty of any kind is warranted by Christian belief. The authority of Scripture, the importance of doctrinal clarity, the exclusivity of Christ, the reality of divine wrath against sin, and the objectivity of revealed truth have all recently come under fire within evangelicalism in the context of “the Emerging Conversation.”

Few would deny that the evangelical movement itself has grown increasingly superficial and pragmatic while moving away from its historic doctrinal moorings. Evangelical churches today are often more concerned about their philosophies of ministry than about their statements of faith.¹⁹ Unfortunately, evangelicals too often follow the trends of secular society rather than confronting the culture.

As a result, the contemporary evangelical movement has become more susceptible to mysticism, relativism, and subjectivity. Evangelicals are more likely

than ever to regard intuition as divine guidance, and less certain than ever that Scripture is authoritative and objectively true. As these trends, together with streams of feminist and postmodern influences, gain more and more momentum in evangelical circles, the evangelical drift actually seems headed in exactly the same direction as the New Age movement.

George Barna noted in 1996 that as American religion becomes more diverse and syncretic, many people are seeking “a new perception of religion: a personalized, customized form of faith views which meet personal needs, minimize rules and absolutes, and bear little resemblance to the ‘pure’ form of any of the world’s major religions.”²⁰ That very thing now appears to be happening at an accelerating pace *within* evangelicalism. Evangelicals have shown a willingness to embrace and absorb almost any trend from popular culture, while casting off their historic distinctives. The evangelical movement appears to be abandoning every safeguard against the tide of New Age influences.

In a 1992 symposium titled *New Age Spirituality: An Assessment*, Andrew Canale wrote,

[New Age author David Spangler] suggests that it is possible to have inclusive visions that value all people and strive to bring them to community and hope. His is a “high road” view of the New Age, a longing for a compassionate world in which hunger and poverty are alleviated, creativity is invited, deep change allowed to unfold, and exclusivity rejected. None of these values is inconsistent with Christianity. In fact, Christianity at its best lives by the same principles. Viewed in this light, Christianity and the New Age movement need not compete. Rather, they need to cooperate with each other for the sake of the desperate ones.²¹

Evangelicals accustomed to the postmodern climate of today may very well find it hard to resist an argument such as that. The appeal for dialogue, the quest for common ground, and the plea for peace with New Age spirituality are all perfectly consistent with the approach to handling religious differences many evangelicals have already begun to favor.

But those committed to biblical authority and historic evangelical principles will likely see things differently, and remain vigilant.

ENDNOTES

¹Dennis Diehl, "Washed in the Water of Aquarius and Not the Blood of Aries: A New Paradigm," n.p. [cited 20 December 2006]. Online: <http://ezinearticles.com/?Washed-in-the-Water-of-Aquarius-and-Not-the-Blood-of-Aries---A-New-Paradigm&id=143295>.

Diehl is a former minister in the Worldwide Church of God who became disillusioned when leaders of that sect began to modify their doctrines. He embraced New Age spirituality and now uses biblical imagery as allegory for New Age teachings. One of his online articles is titled "The Bible God—Trading Up—We Can Do Better" (See http://ezinearticles.com/?expert_bio=Dennis_Diehl).

²Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 513.

³I have outlined a simple description of postmodernism in a seminar for pastors titled "A Beginner's Guide to Postmodernism." An audio recording of that seminar is freely downloadable at: <http://www.swordandtrowel.org/PJ-CDA14.htm>.

⁴Elaine Murray, "New Age Spirituality," n.p. [cited 20 December 2006]. Online: http://www.sideroad.com/New_Age_Spirituality/new_age_spirituality.html.

⁵The Church of Scientology, started by science-fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard and based on ideas he experimented with first in his novels, promises a classically New Age version of enlightenment and empowerment through pseudoscientific means.

⁶Shirley MacLaine, *Out on a Limb* (New York: Bantam, 1983).

⁷*Ibid.*, 209.

⁸Shirley McLaine, *Dancing in the Light* (New York: Bantam, 1985), 339.

⁹Shirley MacLaine, *Going Within* (New York: Bantam, 1989), 57.

¹⁰Constance Cumbey, *The Hidden Dangers of the Rainbow: The New Age Movement and Our Coming Age of Barbarism* (Shreveport: Huntington House, 1985).

¹¹Dave Hunt, *Understanding the New Age Movement* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1988).

¹²Douglas Groothuis, *Unmasking the New Age* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1986).

¹³Elliot Miller, *A Crash Course on the New Age Movement: Describing and Evaluating a Growing Social Force* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989).

¹⁴Marilyn Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (Los Angeles: Tarcher, 1980).

¹⁵Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: Religion, Culture and Society in the Age of Post Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

¹⁶Steve Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age* (Oxford: Routledge, 2003).

¹⁷George Barna, *The Index of Leading Spiritual Indicators* (Dallas: Word, 1996), 22.

¹⁸"Trends Among Christians in the U.S.," n.p. [cited 20 December 2006]. Online: <http://www.religioustolerance.org/>

chr_tren.htm.

¹⁹Cf. Elmer L. Towns, *An Inside Look at 10 of today's Most Innovative Churches* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1990), 249.

²⁰Barna, *The Index of Leading Spiritual Indicators*, 130.

²¹Andrew Canale, "The Cry of the Desperate: Christianity's Offer of a New Age," in *New Age Spirituality: An Assessment* (ed. Duncan S. Ferguson; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 6.