

ERNEST LUCAS**A Short Introduction to the New Age Movement**

The following notes were written as background information for participants in a 'Christians in Science' conference on the subject 'Science, Christianity and the New Age Movement' (Regent's College, London, 28 September, 1991). The notes are reproduced here to introduce the central tenets of New Age thinking, other aspects of this movement being analysed in greater depth in three further articles in this issue.

1 What is the New Age?

The New Age Movement (NAM) is not a unified movement nor an organised conspiracy. It is a melting pot of ideas. It has many forms and faces. The common factor is a reaction against the spiritual aridity of secularism which is at the same time largely a rejection of orthodox Christianity. Thus D. Groothuis¹ describes it as

A Smörgåsbord of spiritual substitutes for Christianity, all heralding our unlimited potential to transform ourselves and the planet so that a 'New Age of peace, love and light will break forth'.

(a) Its Roots

Although in one sense a phenomenon of the 1980s, the NAM has quite deep roots.

Sociologically it is an outgrowth of the counter-culture movements of the 1960s. However, while they were largely student-led youth movements, the NAM appeals to a much wider age range and its leading personalities are on the whole people from the world of the media rather than the universities.

Spiritually its roots are in the religions of the East. In particular the NAM can be seen as picking up the baton of the westernized version of eastern religions which gained some popularity in the second half of the 19th century, as epitomised by the Theosophical Society and its off-shoots.

The occult element in the NAM is most obvious in the form of astrology and mediumship ('channelling'). The idea of a New Age has its origins in astrology. For the last 2,000 years the Sun has been in the constellation of Pisces (The Fishes) at the Spring Equinox. In the 1970s it began to move into Aquarius (The Water Bearer). The astrologers claim that this heralds a

¹ Quoted in M. Cole et al., *What is the New Age?* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1990), 6.

change from the dominant spiritual influence of Christianity (associated with the sign of the fish) to the rise of a new, more universal spirituality.

(b) Foundation Principles

Despite the complexity of the NAM there do seem to be some basic ideas that are widely held by those who identify themselves as 'New Agers'. These are largely drawn from eastern religions, but the influence of western secular humanism has left its mark also.

(1) **MONISM** All is one. The tendency is to stress that this oneness is a unified consciousness. Individuals are fragments of this consciousness. Differences we perceive are the result of our ignorant, unenlightened attitudes. Fritjof Capra² says,

All individuality dissolves into universal, undifferentiated oneness in the ultimate state of consciousness.

(2) **PANTHEISM** All is God. Therefore everything is a manifestation of God. Each individual is innately divine. Shirley MacLaine³ says that the giant truth of the NAM is

that one individual is his or her own best teacher, and that no other idol or false image should be worshipped or adored because the God we are all seeking lies inside oneself, not outside.

(3) **RELATIVISM** If all differences in this life are unreal, then there is no place for such distinctions as right/wrong, true/false. Moreover, the unified consciousness is seen as a process of change so that ultimate reality is changing. Therefore personal growth requires constant change. Stagnation comes when one thinks that one has discovered the truth. Marilyn Ferguson⁴ sums up the New Age attitude when she says that New Age 'transformation' will eventually lead to the realization that there are no ultimate answers.

(4) **AUTONOMY** The total freedom of human beings, each of whom is a part of the divine essence. As Jack Underhill⁵ puts it,

You are the only thing that is real. Everything else is your imagination. . . . Accept that and then take the responsibility for making your life what you want it to be.

(c) Manifestations of the New Age

Many of the ways in which the NAM is manifest can be seen to be a natural result of these foundation principles, as the following examples show.

(1) **Monism** leads to support for international peace movements. It also encourages support for environmental groups.

2 F. Capra, *The Turning Point* (Flamingo, 1982), 410.

3 S. MacLaine, *It's All in the Playing* (Bantam, 1986), 172.

4 M. Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (Paladin, 1982), 112-114.

5 J. Underhill, *Life Times* no. 3, 6.

(2) **Pantheism** leads to involvement in various inter-faith events and organisations. It has also encouraged a revival of animistic religions, which see spiritual forces at work in natural objects and events. This is seen in the revival of pre-Christian pagan religions and witchcraft.

(3) **Autonomy** leads to involvement in the Human Potential movement in its many forms. In particular a number of New Age business management training programmes have been developed and widely marketed.

There is a need to avoid both paranoia and naiveté. It is paranoid to regard all those interested in international organisations or green issues as 'New Age'. However, it is naive not to recognize that there are some pressure groups and individuals involved in these areas that are inspired by the NAM.

(d) The New Age and Salvation

Like Christians, New Agers recognize that the world is in a mess. They speak of the need for *transformation* for both the individual and the planet. However, for them the problem is essentially *intellectual* not *moral*. Our problems arise from our blindness to the truth that humans are innately divine and all part of the One who is the ultimate reality. We will be transformed when we *actualize* (make real in our experience) our divinity and unity with the One.

Actualization can be brought about in many different ways. The one thing they have in common is the alteration of our state of consciousness so that we realize our divinity and oneness with all things.

- Meditation (yoga, TM)
- Positive thinking (est, Lifespring, et al.)
- Music
- The occult (channelling, magic)
- Mind changing drugs

Many New Agers accept the Hindu doctrines of reincarnation and karma. Reincarnation is the belief that instead of just one life we have a series of lives. The 'law of karma' says that how we live in this life determines our experiences in the next life. These doctrines expand the time-scale in which actualization can take place. I may not achieve it in this life, but the progress I make can give me a flying start in the next.

Some New Agers seem to be concerned only with their own personal spiritual transformation. Others aim at global transformation. This, they believe, will happen when a 'critical mass' of individuals have experienced transformation.

While many in the NAM are antagonistic to Christianity, or ignore it, some want to claim that Jesus is on their side. They present him as an outstanding spiritual master and teacher who was illumined by the universal 'Christ spirit', which can illuminate us all. Thus he shows that we can all become 'christs'. Jesus is said to have gained much of his

spiritual wisdom from travelling in the East, especially India and Tibet. He supposedly taught the doctrines of reincarnation and karma. The church censored these from the New Testament (NT). Jesus' death was a martyrdom, not an atoning sacrifice.

(e) *The New Age and Truth*

New Agers are critical of enlightenment rationalism and the objectivity of what they call 'Newtonian science'. For them truth transcends the true/false distinctions of traditional western logic. It is subjective rather than objective, a matter of feelings as much as, if not more than, reasoning. This makes it possible to hold apparently contradictory beliefs.

In the area of spirituality in particular, rationality has no place. One simply has to experience the truth to 'feel' that it is right.

2 A Biblical response to the New Age

(a) *Jesus*

The NT makes it clear that Jesus was much more than a great spiritual master and teacher. *Phil.* 2:6–11 provides a good example of NT Christology. Jesus is the incarnation of God. He is given a name ('Lord') which in the OT can be applied to God alone (*Isa.* 42:8). Paul applies to him a text (*Isa.* 45:23) which, in the OT, refers to the God of Israel. The risen Jesus is given worship that is applicable to God alone.

In the NT Jesus' death is presented as far more than another martyrdom. *Rom.* 3:21–26 is one of many places that makes this clear. Jesus' death is an atoning sacrifice which deals with the problem of our sin by meeting the demands of God's righteousness. *Jn.* 14:16 and *Acts* 10:42f state that Jesus is the only way of salvation.

So what is the basis of the New Age view of Jesus?

(1) Some appeal to the Gnostic Gospels found near Nag Hammadi in South Egypt in 1945. They claim to record secret teachings given by the risen Jesus and contain little or nothing about his earthly life. They do contain some ideas similar to New Age teaching. This is not surprising since there are similarities between New Age ideas and classical Greek (pagan) gnosticism. The early church rejected Christianized forms of gnosticism as heretical. What are we to make of the Gnostic Gospels?

(a) They were written in the second century AD or later, in most cases more than 100 years after the NT Gospels and long after the death of the last first-hand witnesses to Jesus. This is another reason why the early church rejected them.

(b) There is no way that they can be historically verified other than by comparison with the NT Gospels. Their teaching differs markedly from that of the NT Gospels, which do rest on the testimony of first-hand witnesses.

(2) A lot is made of Jesus' 'lost years' between the ages of 12 and 30. Various people have claimed to have found evidence that he spent this time in the East. One example is the book *The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ* written by a Russian journalist, N. Notovich, in 1894, based on a book he claimed to have seen in the Hirris monastery in Tibet. All attempts by scholars to trace this book have failed. The chief Lama, who remembered Notovich, denied any knowledge of the book. It is not recorded in the catalogues of books kept in the monasteries of Tibet and China. The account of eastern religions given in the book is incorrect at several points.

(3) Various mediums claim to have had revelations about this period of Jesus' life, e.g., *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus Christ* by Levi Downing. These contain errors relating to the secular history of the time and disagree with each other about the details of what Jesus supposedly did.

(b) Reincarnation and Karma

The NT teaches that after death comes bodily resurrection and judgement, not reincarnation (1 Cor. 15:51ff; Heb. 9:27f). Where is the evidence that Jesus taught reincarnation?

(1) New Agers point, in the main, to three passages.

Jn. 3:3 Surely 'born again' means 'reincarnated'? Not in the light of the following verses.

Jn. 9:1-3 Surely the man born blind could only have sinned in a previous life? Not according to the Rabbis. They believed in pre-natal sin, on the basis of Gen. 25:22.

Matt. 11:14 & 17:12f Surely here John is presented as Elijah reincarnated? Not in the light of Lk. 1:17 & Jn. 1:21.

(2) New Agers claim that Jesus' teaching about reincarnation was removed from the NT by the Council of Constantinople in 553 AD. However, there are several errors in this claim. The Council did not discuss Jesus' teaching, but that of the third century theologian Origen. They did not discuss reincarnation but Origen's teaching about the pre-existence of human souls before they enter the body. Origen himself explicitly rejected reincarnation in his commentary on Matt. 17.

The fact is that there is no evidence that Jesus, or the NT, ever taught reincarnation.

It is often argued that reincarnation and the law of karma solves the problem of the seeming injustices of life. People who seem to get away with evil now will pay for it in their next life. However, there are flaws in this argument. The fact is that, apart from the few 'enlightened' people, people are not aware of their previous existences and cannot relate their present experiences to what they did then. Where there is no continuity of memory is there any real continuity of personality? If Hitler were reborn as the poverty-stricken, deformed child of cruel parents, how would that child know that his/her sufferings were the result of Hitler's crimes against

humanity? How would anyone else know this? Is this justice? Moreover there are other problems. If suffering now is the result of 'bad karma' should I interfere with cosmic justice by alleviating suffering?

(c) God

The God of the Bible is a personal being, not simply a cosmic consciousness. This statement does not rest purely on the many passages which depict God in personal terms. It rests primarily on the biblical claim that the ultimate and fullest revelation of God is seen in a human person—Jesus Christ—not an impersonal force (*Jn. 1:1–18; Heb. 1:1–3*).

There is only one God and he is quite distinct from everything else, which he made. The early Christian theologians recognized that the biblical doctrine of 'creation out of nothing' (*Gen. 1:1; Heb. 11:3*) ruled out pantheism, which they knew in the form of Stoicism. This is because it makes an absolute distinction between the eternally pre-existent and self-existent God and the cosmos which depends on him for its origin and continuance in being (*Col. 1:15–17*). The cosmos is in no sense divine. It reflects his glory, as any creative work of art reflects something of its creator's personality. As such it is to be respected, but not worshipped.

There are a number of philosophical problems with pantheism. The two most important are as follows.

(1) It means that our sense of individual self-consciousness is an illusion. If this is so, all that we experience as part of our self-consciousness is illusory. This means that the New Agers' subjective basis for truth is an illusion—but that is their only basis for belief in pantheism!

(2) The fact of evil is a problem for pantheists. The usual solution is to say that the good/evil distinction is ultimately unreal, like all other distinctions. But if we accept this, the basis for the law of karma is unreal!

The Christian doctrine of God as triune provides a coherent alternative to pantheism which avoids some of the problems which face pantheism. Among other things, the doctrine of the Trinity says that God is personal but that his personality is of a 'higher' order than ours, such that it can contain inter-personal relationships yet remain a unity. The basis for this claim is the revelation of God in Jesus. Jesus claimed to be completely at one with the Father and yet distinct from him (*Jn. 5:17ff*). He recognized the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of God and yet as an entity distinct from himself (*Matt. 12:28; Jn. 14:15–17; 15:26f*). The doctrine of the Trinity grounds the reality of inter-personal relationships between distinct persons in God. It is an aspect of ultimate reality, not an illusion. It also provides a way of holding together God's separateness from his creation and his intimate and continuing involvement in it—through the incarnate Son and the indwelling Spirit (whose activity is not limited to the believer, *Job 33:4; Ps. 104:30*).

(d) Humanness

Humans are made in God's image (*Gen. 1:26f*), able to reflect something of

the divine nature in our personality. However, we are not divine. The root of the sin in Eden was the desire to be like God (Gen. 3:5, 22). Because we were created to live in relationship with God—a relationship of love, trust and obedience towards him—we do not find God by finding ourselves, but find ourselves by finding God (Acts 17:26f). By nature we are all sinful (Rom. 3:23).

New Agers are attracted to pantheism because they think it provides a basis for asserting the dignity of human beings, since everyone is inherently divine. This is presented as an answer to the reductionism of the scientists who see humans as nothing but interacting particles of matter and so of no more intrinsic value than any other piece of matter. However, taken to its logical conclusion, pantheism removes any basis for giving special value to humans as against any other form of life, or non-life. All are expressions of the one ultimate reality and any differences are only a matter of degree, not kind. The biblical teaching that humans alone of all creatures are made in the image of God provides a much more coherent basis for a true 'humanism' than does New Age ideology.

(e) Salvation

The Bible teaches that the problem is not ignorance but sin (Rom. 3:23; 6:23). It is true that our knowledge of God and ourselves is not what it should be, but this is because we live in rebellion against God (Rom. 1:18–23; Eph. 4:17–19). This is a moral matter. Only when that is put right will we be able to know and understand the truth about God (2 Cor. 4:3–6). Salvation does not come by seeking transformation through a changed state of consciousness or esoteric knowledge. It comes about through repenting of our wrong-doing, accepting God's forgiveness through faith in Jesus' work and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 3:38). It is the work of the Spirit in us which leads to our transformation (Rom. 8:13f; 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 5:22f).

(f) Rationality

In the OT the search for knowledge by occult means is condemned (Lev. 20:6) or ridiculed (Isa. 47:12–15).

The strong anti-reason bias of much of the NAM is contrary to NT Christianity. The apostolic preaching of the gospel is characterized in the book of Acts as 'reasoning' with people, and 'persuading' people of the truth. The NT word for conversion (*μετανοια*, 'repentance') means 'a change of mind'. Growth in Christian maturity involves both a moral and an intellectual component (Eph. 4:11–24). True Christian worship involves the use of the mind (1 Cor. 14:13–19).

(g) New Age Spirituality

Central to New Age spirituality is the experience of altered states of consciousness. Many New Agers speak of this in terms of a mystical experience of oneness with the cosmos. It is probably at this point that

evangelicals will have most difficulty in dialogue with New Age adherents. Evangelicalism has not been strong on mystical experience or theologizing about it. What are we to make of the mystical experience of oneness—which, by the way, is not limited to eastern religions but is also found in Islam, Judaism and Christianity? I can only make some tentative suggestions.

The mystic may be experiencing the harmony and unity of God's creation. This can rightly lead to a sense of awe and wonder which stimulates worship of God. However, to go on seeking this experience of oneness for itself is to take the road to idolatry, to put the creation in the place of the Creator. Alternatively, the mystic may have a genuine experience of God, who is one. However, I question whether this is so when the experience is said to lead to a loss of personal identity. As we have seen, the biblical picture of God is of trinity—diversity in unity—not undifferentiated oneness. One biblical picture of our relationship with God is that of human lovers, husband and wife. In such a relationship there is a unity which comes from each giving themselves to the other. But there is also an individuality which results from each accepting and affirming the other's worth. Indeed, as beings made in the image of God we only truly find ourselves in finding a personal relationship of love and obedience towards God. In this we are affirmed in our individuality because we discover how much we are worth to God. His valuation of us has been declared by the sacrifice at Calvary.

The New Age Movement—a Concise Bibliography

General background

- W. Bloom (ed), *The New Age: An Anthology of Essential Writings* (Rider, 1991)
- F. Capra, *The Turning Point* (Flamingo, 1963)
A sustained critique of 'western objectivity and rationalism' covering a variety of cultural and intellectual areas.
- M. Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (Paladin, 1988)
A New Age manifesto.
- M. Fox, *Original Blessing* (Bear & Co., 1963)
The seminal book on 'creation-centred spirituality'.
- S. MacLaine, *Out On A Limb* (Bantam Books, 1983)
A personal testimony by one of the most prominent New Agers. Gives some insight into the attraction the movement has for some people.

Christian critiques of the New Age Movement

- D. Burnett, *Dawning of the Pagan Moon* (Monarch, 1991)
A good survey and assessment of neo-paganism.

A Short Introduction to the New Age Movement

- M. Cole et al., *What is the New Age?* (Hoder & Stoughton, 1990)
A basic introduction.
- D. Groothuis, *Unmasking the New Age* (IVP, 1986) and *Confronting the New Age* (IVP, 1988)
These two books by Groothuis provide a very good survey of the New Age Movement and Christian critique of it.
- D. Groothuis, *Revealing the New Age Jesus* (IVP, 1990)
A very useful discussion and critique of New Age ideas about Jesus.
- E. Miller, *A Crash Course in the New Age* (Monarch, 1990)
Provides what the title claims.
- P. Seddon, *The New Age—An Assessment* (Grove Booklets, 1990)
A brief, but useful, introduction.
- J. Sire, *The Universe Next Door* (IVP, 2nd ed. 1988)
The chapter on the New Age is an excellent introduction.

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