

Jesus Christ, the Bearer of the Water of Life: A Christian Reflection on the New Age (Outline)

Foreword: This is a provisional reflection to help those engaged in pastoral work properly assess this multi-faceted cultural tendency. Note that New Age rejects a rationalistic, materialistic view of humanity, addresses the unquenchable spiritual hunger for transcendence and for life's religious meaning.

1. What sort of Reflection? Invitation to understand and engage in dialogue; not a set of complete answers.

1.1 *Why Now?* Astrologers believe the Age of Pisces is drawing to a close; Age of Aquarius is imminent. Central elements of society are untrustworthy; look inward for meaning and strength, freedom, authenticity, self-reliance. In most cases NA (New Age) is completely fatalistic. Christianity invites us to look outward and beyond.

1.2 *Communications:* Internet is a congenial and fascinating way of acquiring information but also a volatile vehicle of misinformation on many aspects of religion.

1.3 *Cultural Background:* Name gained currency through Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry (18c), dates back to Gnostic groups; involves a progressive rejection of a personal God; acceptance of Darwin's theory; focus on hidden spiritual powers; relativism; antipathy/indifference toward Christian faith.

1.4 *The New Age and Catholic Faith:* Attempts to respond to legitimate longing of human nature run counter to Christian revelation. Appeal of alternative approaches to spirituality; psychological affirmation of individual; esotericism; neo-Gnosticism. A compendium of heterodox positions that distort God's word.

1.5. *A Positive Challenge:* The appeal of NA cannot be underestimated as part of current cultural scene. Root ourselves in fundamentals of our faith; understand the often silent cry in people's hearts.

2. New Age Spirituality: An Overview. NA is a complex phenomenon. Identify elements; indicate inconsistency with Christianity. Not a single movement, cult or sect, but a network of practitioners; an underlying vision diffused through music, films, seminars, workshops, retreats, therapies and other activities and events.

2.1. *What is New about the New Age?* Age of Aquarius is not a theory but a vision of a planetary spirituality integrating science, mysticism, technology and ecology. NA is a syncretism of many ancient traditions. A paradigm shift, a wholesale transformation of perspective, is desirable and inevitable. A total recasting of the life and significance of Jesus Christ. Cf. lyrics "This is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius" (*Hair*).

2.2. What Does the New Age Claim to Offer?

2.2.1. Enchantment: There Must Be An Angel. Spiritualism: fascination with the extraordinary, the paranormal; channeling through mediums; language of light and love. There is no spiritual authority above inner experience.

2.2.2. Harmony and Understanding: Good Vibrations. No distinction between good and evil; creates negativity and fear. We can condemn no one; no need for forgiveness. Love is an attitude not deeds.

2.2.3. Health: Golden Living. Alternative therapies of holistic healing from within (not curing) are popular; a potentially endless cosmic process of evolution and reincarnation.

2.2.4. Wholeness: A Magical Mystery Tour. Overcome all forms of dualism ultimately based on the Judeo-Christian roots of Western civilization; e.g. Creator-creation; man-nature; spirit-matter.

2.3. The Fundamental Principles of New Age Thinking.

2.3.1. A Global Response in a Time of Crisis. A loss of faith in former pillars of consciousness and social cohesion. Implicit pantheism; Christianity teaches that an absorption of the human *I* in the divine *I* will never be possible.

2.3.2. The Essential Matrix of New Age Thinking. An esoteric culture: spiritualism, occultism, theosophy. Collective consciousness: fusion with God and with the cosmos. Eventual goal is gnosis, the highest form of knowledge, the equivalent of salvation. There is a sacralization of psychology.

2.3.3. Central Themes of the New Age. Cosmos is an organic whole animated by an energy, identified as the divine soul, mediated by spiritual entities; ascent to invisible spheres, perennial knowledge.

2.3.4. What Does New Age Say About: The human person? Co-creator of one's own perfectible reality.

God? Neither personal nor transcendent.

The World? Uncreated, eternal, self-sufficient

2.4. *Inhabitants of Myth Rather Than History?* Stress on individual; rejection of organizational. Private quest for self-fulfillment; lacks intellectual cogency; rejects sin/salvation, only addiction/recovery. Reduce the number of those who eat at humanity's table.

2.5 *Why Has New Age Grown So Rapidly and Spread So Effectively?* World is harsh and heartless. Level of feelings, instincts, emotions; exaltation of diversity, erosion of respect for normality.

3. New Age and Christian Spirituality.

3.1 *New Age as Spirituality.* A conscious search for an alternative to Western culture. An inner experience of harmony: denial of time and history = metaphysical component; psychological, experience of psycho-spiritual transformation.

3.2 *Spiritual Narcissism?* Pseudo-mysticism; individuals and groups living out one's own fantasies of adventure and power. Attachment of a private world of ego fulfillment.

3.3 *The Cosmic Christ.* Not the unique historical Jesus, crucified and risen, a divine person; but just a repeatable pattern. There is no possibility of a relationship to a personal God revealed in Christ.

3.4 *Christian Mysticism and New Age Mysticism.* Gift of a personal relationship with God and others, meeting the transcendent God in the fullness of love; not a turning in on oneself to achieve self-redemption, presumptuous and pretentious.

3.5 *The "God Within" and "Theosis."* There is no divine being "out there," distinct from the rest of reality; divinization is simply a recognizing and acceptance of the fact that we are divine. There is no need for a gradual transformation or sacraments.

4. New Age and Christian Faith in Contrast. An overarching framework that permeates its whole thought world: Is God a being with whom we have a relationship or something to be used or a force to be harnessed?

Is there just one Jesus Christ or are there thousands of Christs? Is there one universal being or are there many individuals?

Do we save ourselves or is salvation a free gift from God? Do we invent or embrace truth? Is prayer talking to ourselves or to God?

Are we tempted to deny sin or do we accept that there is such a thing? Are we encouraged to reject or to accept suffering and death?

Is social commitment something shirked or positively sought after? Is our future in the stars or do we help to construct it?

5. Jesus Christ Offers Us the Water of Life. Gospel describes many episodes; meeting the Samaritan woman is a paradigm for our engagement with truth; model for pastoral effectiveness. It is important to acknowledge the sincerity of people searching for the truth! Let them proceed in their own way and at their own pace.

6. Points to Note:

6.1 *Guidance and Sound Formation Are Needed. Either Christ or Aquarius? Fusion breeds confusion; rationality has the advantage of universality; it is freely available to everyone. It is illusory to think we create our own reality: What of suffering and death?*

6.2. *Practical Steps: Do not demonize people and practices. Use Catholic network of pastoral centers more effectively for critical dialogue. Recognize Christian groups which promote care for the earth as God's creation. The beginning of the third millennium offers a real kairos for evangelization: Make the most of the riches of Christian spiritual heritage; traditional religions = cathedral N.A. = world-wide fair. Appeal of Christianity: our witness: trust, calm, patience,*

cheerfulness, concrete love of neighbor, fruit of faith nourished in authentic personal prayer.

7. Appendix:

7.1 Some Brief Formulations of New Age Ideas

7.2. A Select Glossary.

8. Resources.

9. General Bibliography.

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