

New Age Ideas and the Christian Faith

A housewife prepares a carefully-formulated herbal tea mixture; a teenager is listening to special spiritual music on a radio station; an executive of a large company is attending a seminar on "whole brain thinking in the workplace; and a young couple has joined a yoga meditation group. There are differences in age, sex, interest, and social situation, but they share one common denominator -- they are part of what is termed, the "New Age" movement.

New Age has been compared to a gigantic mansion with countless doors one can enter in order to become a part of its household. Among others, such doors include bookstores, health food stores, radio stations, and seminars. But what is it that is so powerful about the New Age movement? After all, various forms of it now claim adherents in the hundreds of thousands, many of whom are also members of Christian churches.

One cannot gloss over lightly the attraction of New Age ideas as it were just a passing fad. Too many are becoming too deeply involved for us to assume that kind of attitude. They are getting involved because they feel a void in the traditions of their lives and thus look for something new. If traditional medicine has not helped their illnesses they are turning to acupuncture, holistic practices and herbal formulas. If traditional business practices have not brought them success, they are turning to wellness or visualization processes designed for the corporate world. If traditional religious beliefs have left them spiritually dissatisfied they are turning to channeling and Zen Buddhism. So the underlying word which might be used to explain the popularity of New Age practices is the word -- "void." People feel a void, something is missing in their lives and they want to fill it.

But are they? Should a Christian seek to participate in New Age activities, or if nothing else, give a blanket nod of approval to all those who do? That's a question with more than one answer. In fact, the answers are almost as numerous as the many outlets of New Age itself.

There are certainly aspects of the movement which thoughtful church members may support without feeling any conflict with religious faith. For example when I hear New Age "philosophers" talk about the need for all of us to move away from divisiveness to wholeness, from individualism to connectedness, and from disharmony to harmony, I'm ready to jump on the bandwagon. After all, isn't that one of the messages clergy try to take to members of their congregations on a weekly basis? How much more effective churches would be, so say nothing of the church as a whole, if we only made a concerted effort to pull together. As a Christian, I have no problems with these proposals.

Then too, as a chemist I find certain features of their holistic health care views to be most appropriate. Independent scientific investigation has shown that at least some of the formulas prescribed from botanical sources do have a sound medical basis and a long history of effectiveness. In many cases, no problems here. Having said all this, there are some real problems which do prevent me from a wholehearted identification with the New Age movement.

A Higher Self?

First of all, the contention of the New Age philosophy is that beyond the individual phenomenal self there is a higher self which links a person to others, to the world, and even to God. Discipline such as yoga, deep breathing, crystal concentration, etc. are aimed at raising the consciousness in order to have a more harmonious relationship to a higher self. This leads to the doctrine of reincarnation or the belief that after our bodies die we are reborn. This belief is popular in Hindu thinking but has no basis for support in the Scriptures.

To get in touch with a higher self through consciousness-raising in order to tap a power that will change a person's life makes New Age thinking extremely attractive to people, especially those who are going through a change in life or who are trying to dig themselves out of deep problems. At this point I must decide whether I can find meaning to life by basing my hopes on connecting with some supra-individual power or whether the God of Scripture who comes to me in the Person of Jesus Christ is what I need. And if I am to seek assistance to deal with life's daily problems, do I follow the directions of the guru who has some ideas about my searching for a higher self or do I reach out beyond myself to find the Saviour whose love for me led Him to the Cross? With those kinds of options it shouldn't be difficult to arrive at a decision. How feeble are my efforts, how weak are my thoughts when compared to the Father's eternal love for me and His acts on my

behalf from the Incarnation all the way to the Resurrection.

And there lies another major area in which New Age ideas come into conflict with my Christian faith -- in fact with the most fundamental point of it; the Person of Jesus Christ. Oh, to be sure, Jesus is quite popular in New Age thinking, but He does not come out looking like the Jesus which Christians know. He is not pictured as the Savior, the forgiver of sins, or the bestower of resurrection to eternal life. Rather He is the great guru, the great example of a human being who has achieved full consciousness of His higher self and thereby realized His oneness with God. According to New Agers people can do what Jesus has done if they put forth the effort.

This presents a serious problem with which I must deal. New Agers understand the human predicament as caused by ignorance and not by sin, and they seek its cure through knowledge, not through the Cross. But our Christian experience has taught us that it is not lack of knowledge that is at the heart of the human predicament. It is possible for people to know the difference between good and evil, and still choose to do evil. All the consciousness-raising in the world cannot eliminate sin and its painful consequences. The answer to that comes through the crucified and risen Christ.

We need what we get in Jesus Christ, namely an act of God's grace whereby sins are forgiven and people are promised resurrection into God's kingdom. The New Agers simply underestimate the power of sin and give a naive view of human problems. Both the strong points and the serious weaknesses of New Age teaching cannot be avoided in Christian congregations. They need to be discussed openly and with sensitivity. We dare not ignore the New Age and thereby force spiritually hungry people to go outside to seek religious counsel. Taking St. Paul's advice, we need to "speak the truth in love" and then leave the results of such an encounter to the domain of the Holy Spirit. TP

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