

New Age Spiritualities: How are we to Talk of God?

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What do we mean by New Age Spirituality?

Two autobiographical accounts by American Jesuit priests of their New Age involvement have gained considerable attention recently—David Toolan's *Facing West from California's Shores: A Jesuit's Journey into New Age Consciousness* published in 1987,¹ and Fr. Mitch Pacwa's *Catholics and the New Age*, published last year and already reprinted.²

David Toolan does not, so far as I am aware, attempt to define the New Age movement. But his encounters reveal this 'epistemological revolution' to be an amalgam of Asian mysticism, modern physics, and transpersonal psychologies. Its major proponents are the Esalen Institute, Jean Houston's 'Ritual Theater,' and a host of physicists, psychologists, and naturalists, including Ernest Becker, Stanislaus Grof, Loren Eiseley, David Bohm, and Ilya Prigogine, among others.

According to Pacwa's descriptive (and to my way of thinking very limited) definition, the New Age Movement 'is a loosely structured, eclectic movement based on experiences of monism that lead people to believe in pantheism, with a tendency to hold millennialist views of history' (p. 13). (No one, of course, with the possible exception of some professional philosophers, experiences monism or believes in pantheism or even holds millennialist views of history. What Pacwa means is that some people have experiences that he considers monistic rather than dualistic, or entertain ideas about God that he considers insufficiently distinct from ideas about the world, and who tend to think the world might end soon.)

Components of the New Age Movement in Pacwa's account include the teachings of Teilhard de Chardin, C. G. Jung, and Buckminster Fuller, meditation techniques 'from Hinduism, Zen, Sufism, and Native American religion' mixed with 'humanistic psychology, Western occultism, and modern physics,' 'new fads like crystals, rebirthing experiences, and sensory deprivation...,' as well as altered states of consciousness, astrology, the enneagram, channelling, and reincarnation. Significant proponents of New Age ideas and practices include Shirley MacLaine, Oscar Ichazo and Claudio Naranjo, Elizabeth Clare Prophet, and Matthew Fox (pp. 13–14 and *passim*).

Both Toolan and Pacwa were deeply involved in various aspects of what they call New Age beliefs and practices, both became disenchanted, and both harbour occasional longings for the flesh-pots and onion of their former enthusiasms. Strangely enough, there is very little overlap between the two Jesuits' accounts of what constitutes New Age thinking and practice. Further, Toolan's journey left him disillusioned with Asian spiritualities, but drawn instead to the sober mysticism of Meister Eckhart. Pacwa found refuge in the Charismatic Movement, which now fuels his rather fundamentalist attacks on his former gurus and enthusiasms. Toolan's book is a superbly written and often deeply moving account of spiritual maturation; Pacwa's is not, although it contains some valuable information and insight, especially for anyone comfortable within the narrow certainties of pentecostal Christianity.

Pacwa is right about one thing, at least. The New Age Movement is without doubt loosely structured and eclectic. Christopher Lasch described, or rather catalogued it, ironically but comprehensively as a *mélange* of

Meditation, positive thinking, faith healing, rolfing, dietary reform, environmentalism, mysticism, yoga, water cures, acupuncture, incense, astrology, Jungian psychology, biofeedback, extrasensory perception, spiritualism, vegetarianism, organic gardening, theory of evolution, Reichian sex therapy, ancient mythologies, archaic nature cults, Sufism, Freemasonry, cabalistic lore, chiropractic, herbal medicine, hypnosis, and any number of other techniques designed to heighten awareness, including elements borrowed from the major religious traditions.³

Although exaggerated, Lasch's characterization is not inaccurate.⁴ But to call such a pot pourri a *movement* is to fall victim to journalistic shorthand. Unless, that is, a movement can be a disorganized, internally contradictory, and incoherent conglomeration of ancient religious beliefs, occult sciences, modern physics, alternative medicine, experimental psychotherapies, and left-wing politics. According to my American Heritage Dictionary, the word 'movement' ordinarily refers to the activities of a group toward the achievement of a specific goal: e.g., the labour movement. The fact that a journal exists in the United States called *New Age* is no more evidence that a grand unified movement exists than the existence of a magazine called *Time* indicates that its readers are basically interested in clocks.

Moreover, in so far as Pacwa's definition characterizes anyone with monistic experiences, who has pantheistic leanings, and who tends toward millennial views, it probably extends to Copts, Mennonites, Mormons,

Unitarians, and about half the Irish nation—none of whom would ordinarily identify themselves or be identified as proponents of New Age spirituality.

To conclude this part of my article, as far as my own view is concerned, the following is pretty much what I wrote for *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*:

'New age' spiritualities appeared in New Testament times in apocalyptic and eschatological literature associated with shifts in religious or historical awareness. Montanism in the second century, medieval and nineteenth century millenarianism, and the twentieth century New Age 'movement' typically anticipate an era of peace, love, and prosperity following an interval of social chaos. Contemporary versions reflect the influence of C.G. Jung, who predicted that an 'Age of Aquarius' dominated by true science and world humanism would succeed the present 'Age of Pisces,' the violent Christian era.

Gnostic in tendency, New Age spiritualities emphasize the importance of esoteric knowledge or enlightenment in order to attain salvation or ultimate integrity. Both ancient and modern forms incorporate archaic, arcane, and occult beliefs and practices of Asian, African, and other mythical, religious, philosophical, and magical provenance, such as karmic retribution, reincarnation, extrasensory perception, and nature lore, including elements of Hinduism, Buddhism, Sufism, Cabalism, spiritualism, numerology, paganism and witchcraft.

Characteristic New Age concerns include planetary healing, holistic health, self-improvement, and the rights of women, minorities, and animals. Favouring non-conventional or alternative health care over conventional medicine, New Agers espouse acupuncture, biofeedback, herbal medicine, hypnosis, massage, organic gardening, vegetarianism, and other therapies such as the use of crystals, colours, aromas, massage, and so forth. There is a tendency among New Age adherents to favour psychological typologies such as astrology, the Myers-Briggs Personality Inventory, and the Enneagram over individual uniqueness and personality development.⁵

I am convinced that New Age beliefs are a thoroughly Christian phenomenon. As such it has its origins in late Jewish apocalyptic and certain early Christian expectations. And just as it is the product of a Christian view of the world, its history, and its destiny in relation to God, how we speak about God in the light of today's New Age spiritualities, as well as how we look on the New Age 'movement' itself will reflect our own Christian vision and attitudes.

A Historical Overview:⁶

The belief among early Christians that Jesus would soon return in glory and majesty to judge the nations and inaugurate the Realm of God created not only a crisis but a spiritual theme that has resurfaced regularly at the end of centuries and, it is now safe to conclude, millennia.⁷ Apocalyptic Jewish writings such as the *Book of Enoch* and *2 Esdras* undoubtedly influenced such beliefs, as seen in the epistles attributed to Peter and Jude. It may well have been rooted in Jesus' own teaching as recorded in the gospels (see especially Matt. 24: 29–30, Mark 13: 24–26, Luke 21: 25–27, etc.). St. Paul's exhortations to the Christians of Thessalonika in Macedonia show that he, too, subscribed at first to an immanent *parousia*—the return of Christ in physical, personal presence. Eventually, Paul and his disciples tempered belief in the immanent Parousia with an emphasis on sanctifying life in the present world to prepare for the life of glory to come at the time appointed by God. Christians were urged to redeem the times by works of love and justice (Eph. 5: 16).

Despite such cautions, some early Christians continued to focus upon the day of Christ's return as the goal of faith. Stimulated by the potent symbolism of the *Book of Revelation*, such believers frequently centred their attention on the thousand-year reign of Christ described in Rev. 20: 3–6—the 'Millennium.' Most of these 'millennarians' or 'chiliasts,' including Saints Justin Martyr, Hippolytus, and Irenaeus, maintained that Christ's reign would follow the Parousia. Later, more literal-minded Christians came to believe that the millennial epoch of peace and justice would precede and indeed inaugurate the Second Coming (premillennialism).⁸

Montanism: The New Prophecy

Although opposed by the keenest theologians from the second to the fourth centuries, notably Clement and Origen in Alexandria and Augustine in Carthage, the millenarian theme survived and recurred among radical sectarians. In the second century, a sect of such dissident Christians who called themselves Montanists became a lingering problem for the Church in Asia. From there it spread to some extent into North Africa, mainly because of its appeal to one of the most brilliant apologists of the period, Tertullian of Carthage. Except for his spirited defense of the 'New Prophecy,' as the teachings of Montanus were first called, the heresy would probably have been a minor occurrence.

Montanus was himself a Phrygian and may once have been a priest of Cybele. About the year 160 he became a Christian convert and proclaimed a new revelation centred on the little town of Papuza. By 175, he had gathered about himself a sizable coterie, including two well-to-do women,

Priscilla and Maximilla, who were believed to possess the spirit of prophecy. Their 'New Prophecy' took the form of ecstatic utterances over which they apparently had no control. Their remarks were copied down by disciples, edited, and circulated.

The central teachings of the Montanists asserted that with their new revelation, the third great age of world history had begun. Previous ages had been that of God the Father, encompassing the centuries up to the birth of Jesus, and that of the Christian era itself up to the New Prophecy. But the fullness of revelation began with the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Montanus, who is reported to have claimed 'I am the Father, the Word, and the Paraclete.' All previous dispensations had been rendered null and void. Such a message would become a familiar refrain in the centuries to follow.

Like later revivalists, the Montanists were anti-intellectual, opposing the speculations of the so-called 'gnostics.' They were, further, millennialist—proclaiming the proximate return of Christ, the end of the world, and the descent of the New Jerusalem—conveniently enough at Papuza. And like true enthusiasts of all times, they expected, even demanded, that Christians everywhere accede to their teaching.

Understandably enough, orthodox Christians viewed the happenings in Phrygia with disfavour and ultimately some alarm. Within a few years, Montanus and his prophetesses were excommunicated by a synod of bishops. An untrustworthy legend claims that all three later hanged themselves.

The Problem with Priscillian

The millennialist, 'new age' theme appeared again in the fourth century, when in 385, the Bishop of Avila and several of his principal followers were accused of Manichaeism and sorcery. Extreme ascetics, the Priscillianists were vegetarian, rejected marriage, abstained from alcohol, fasted, observed vigils, and sometimes prayed without benefit of clothing, like the earlier Adamites, who attempted in their style of dress (or undress) to return to the primitive innocence of Eden.

Like many of their contemporaries, the Priscillianists also believed that the world was in the grip of Satan and that Christian commitment required a total separation from secular society. Several of Priscillian's rival bishops, anything but ascetics, brought charges against him that resulted in the first imperial inquisition. He and his immediate disciples, including several women, were tortured, and on the basis of confessions thus extracted, were tried and executed by order of the usurper-emperor of the West, the Spaniard Magnus Maximus. Other followers were banished.

Joachim of Fiore

The millennarian theme reappeared stridently in the Middle Ages. As the year 1000 approached, fear spread through emerging Christendom that the End of the World was near. Again, toward the end of the twelfth century, the apocalyptic writings of a former Cistercian abbot, Joachim of Fiore (1132–1202), excited great attention in southern Europe.⁹ Joachim and his followers (of whom there would be many in the next two centuries) viewed the whole of human history as a Trinitarian epic, in which the Old Testament period was under the aegis of the Father, the New Testament period under the Son, but a ‘new age’ beginning sometime around 1260 would be the era of the Holy Spirit prior to the end of the world. In the coming last age, he predicted, humankind would enter its spiritual maturity, introduced by the appearance of new religious orders. This prophecy would be applied with great latitude in the thirteenth century to a host of unorthodox cults and sects as well as the new mendicant orders, particularly the Franciscans and Dominicans.

For centuries (and today as well), such apocalyptic visions have fuelled the expectations of people weary of ‘ordinary’ religion and longing for a reawakening of enthusiasm. The ‘new age’ is always one in which men and women will worship ‘in spirit and truth,’ unhindered by official regulations and institutional restraints, sharing their possessions freely, and able to express love without taint of jealousy, rejection, or reprisal. Such ‘true believers’ impatiently await an era of peace, freedom, truth, and justice—the Promised Land, the Kingdom of Heaven, the City of God, the millennial ideal of a wholly spiritual church.

As tends to happen in such instances, hordes of disaffected serfs and opportunistic scoundrels as well as high-minded spiritual seekers seized fervently upon Abbot Joachim’s utopian prognostications and soon attempted to hurry things along by social uprisings. In this regard, the legacy of apocalyptic spirituality tended to remain tragic.

The Wake of Reform

The millennarian, ‘new age’ theme arose again during the Reformation period in Germany and Switzerland, when the temptation became all too easy to identify the beginning of the Millennium with what was in fact the inauguration of religious despotism. The result at Geneva and Münster was a reign not of peace and justice, but of terror. Fear and subservience quickly replaced love and freedom. Dissent from the dictates of the leaders became punishable by ostracism, exile, or even death.

In England and America, the apocalyptic fever found new expression in George Fox’s vision as well as evangelical preaching in both liberal and Adventist sects. Again, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth

centuries, a variety of utopian communities appeared in England, Germany, and especially the United States. Most were founded by enthusiastic Protestant Christians imbued with an eschatological fervour to witness the perfect society on earth, if not the Second Coming of Christ. Among the more famous were those at Oneida, New York; the Amana Colonies of Iowa; and the Shakers, whose origins lay in the English Quaker revival of 1747. Led by Mother Ann Lee, the Shakers, 'the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearance,' emigrated from England to New York in 1774.¹¹

Communities of Hutterite Anabaptists that settled in the United States and Canada, as well as Mennonites and Amish groups, shared some characteristics of the more apocalyptic and perfectionist societies. Robert Owen's Indiana commune, New Harmony, and others in Scotland and England embodied the ideal of social perfectionism without a pronounced eschatological spirituality. But expectations of the Second Coming and the immanent end of the world animated the spirituality and activity of many other sects, the most important being the Seventh Day Adventists, founded by William Miller in 1831 in Dresden, New York; the Irvingites or Catholic Apostolic Church, founded in England by Edward Irving in 1832, and the International Bible Students Association (Jehovah's Witnesses), founded in the United States in 1874.

The Twentieth Century

Revivalism and evangelical enthusiasm continued to enliven Protestant churches well into the present century. Despite miscalculations and false alarms, Adventist sects have also survived and in some instances have even expanded. Millennial expectations also surfaced in new forms of Pentecostalism. Tongue-speaking and other charisms had appeared at intervals throughout the Christian era, but the Pentecostal movement would reach a height of popularity, especially among Black Americans, following the San Francisco earthquake in 1906.

By mid-century, even as a new wave of biblical scholarship was emerging at the heart of Catholic renewal, ecstatic spirituality reappeared at the grass-roots level in the form of the 'charismatic movement,' continuing the impulse begun in Protestant Christianity at the turn of the century. Similarly, new interest was rising in Christian hermeticism, Kabbalism, the use of arcane approaches such as the *I xing*, Tarot Cards,¹¹ and numerological schemes such as the 'Enneagram' developed by Oscar Ichazo and Claudio Naranjo, all of which became popular in Catholic circles in the 1980s.

A new current of spirituality was also developing from the scientific speculations and theological writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the

Jesuit paleontologist and mystic.¹² In the years immediately prior to the Second Vatican Council, Teilhard's endorsement of the evolutionary hypothesis as a universal cosmological principle, together with his concern for human social development, helped to reawaken the spirit of scientific humanism dormant among Catholics since the Reformation. Both contemporary interest in 'the new cosmology' associated with New Age spiritualities and today's relative freedom from a strictly creationist view of the origin of the universe are at least partial consequences of Teilhard's teaching, as Mitch Pacwa discovered.

Already in the late 1960s, expectations of a new age of peace, prosperity, and enlightenment, the 'Age of Aquarius' extolled in the popular musical *Hair* and based on a loose reading of Eastern religious texts and the writings of C. G. Jung, began to filter into mainstream consciousness. Suddenly a counter-cultural host of archaic, arcane, and occult practices as well as a new interest in reincarnation, psychic phenomena, and esoteric mysticism (including a resurgence of witchcraft and Satanism in a variety of manifestations, including the *Exorcist* mania) began to preoccupy the younger generation. (It should be noted, however, that despite occasional instances of psychopathology, contemporary Satanism is more pretentious than dangerous. The Earth-mysticism of neopagan 'witches' like Starhawk and others is not only more religiously genuine but far more constructive in its concern with healing the planet and advancing the rights of women and minorities.¹³)

The considerable psychological and cultural energy of this shift in popular consciousness was deflected for a decade by the Vietnam War and worsened economic conditions in the United States and elsewhere. But in the prosperous mid-1980s it erupted again as New Age spirituality.

What seems clear from even a brief historical overview, is that belief in the advent of a New Age has occurred in Christianity at particular moments of crisis, certain turning points in religious consciousness, as well as at the end of centuries and millenia. The calendar is not enough.

The first New Age enthusiasm was the effect of the messianic expectations of the Jewish people at the time of Christ, the fruit of both prophetic and apocalyptic anticipation of the Day of Judgment in the face of the apparent victory of Israel's enemies. Similarly, the resurgence of major episodes of New Age enthusiasm over the following centuries coincided with historical crises in which the Church faced a morally, politically, and theologically ambiguous future —the consolidation of the Christian state in the decades after the Peace of Constantine, the emergence of a unified Christian Europe after the end of the Dark Ages, just before the end of the first millennium, the breakdown of the Middle Ages from the end of the thirteenth century to the sixteenth, particularly

the conflicts between the Holy Roman Emperors and the Popes and the rise of nationalism; the fragmentation of Europe and the Church during the Protestant Reformation; the breakdown of the Enlightenment and nineteenth-century imperialism; and, finally, the spectres of global and nuclear war, global depression, and now ecological catastrophe in this, the last decade of the last century of the second millennium. In the latter regard alone, it would have been far stranger if New Age enthusiasm and millennial excitement had not become major religious phenomena in our time.

In each case, conventional organized religion failed in one way or another to recognize, address, and cope with the crisis mentality of the times. Paradigm shifts did not occur fast enough for church leaders to seize the day. Rather, they more characteristically reacted by denying the manifest symptoms of change and, when they could, suppressing dissent and innovation.

As the end of the present century nears, the rift between increasingly authoritarian forms of religion (whether in doctrine or discipline—or both), and individualistic, antinomian, and ‘free’ movements of religious consciousness is likely to widen. As a result, the mystical potential of the New Age spiritualities may be channelled into ancient blind alleys of elitism, estrangement, and excess, while the vital sense of the presence of God in traditional religion could wither and harden into greater formalism. On the other hand, emerging forms of dialogue might also lead to a recognition of mutual concern for spiritual deepening and growth and with that, a truly New Age of openness and collaboration.

But What Does it all Mean?

As argued for several decades by Keith Thomas, Peter Berger, and other historians, psychologists, and sociologists of religion, when for one reason or another organized religions lose their credibility in the minds and hearts of ordinary believers, they do not cease being believers for the most part, but turn away to different, more satisfying belief systems. Growth in religious understanding and practice usually takes the form of moral, intellectual, and spiritual adherence to a correspondingly higher or more humanely mature form of faith, as James Fowler, Sharon Parks, and other students of faith development have shown.¹⁴ In terms of personal or social stress, however, or when personal maturation is not involved for whatever reason, believers sometimes revert to simpler, more primitive forms of religion.

The persistence of superstition has provided matter for psychological and sociological study for some time now. Essentially, ‘superstition’ refers to those elements of previous belief systems and practices

associated with them which have lost their internal coherence, but survive within the general cultural inheritance. Simply and literally put, superstitions are leftovers which have lost their perceived meaning and purpose—whether fragments, such as four-leaf clovers, rabbits' feet, black cats, horse shoes, Friday the 13th, spilled salt, opening umbrellas indoors, breaking mirrors and the like, or whole systems, such as the survival of voodooan cults in New York City among emigrants from the West Indies, or Macumba, or African or Mexican witchcraft in Los Angeles, Chicago, or London. Some elements within Christianity have acquired a superstitious character by the erosion of original intent and function, such as the uses of holy water, blessed palms, Candlemas candles, pilgrimages, the circumambulation of Croagh Patrick, the veneration of relics, medals, shrines, statues, and similar attitudes and practices.

Please note that I am not saying that any use of sacramentals or ethnically distinctive forms of worship are in themselves superstitious. The opposite is in fact the case. But from a hygienic or functional viewpoint, the survival of vestiges of religious systems has what might be called an economic value, both psychologically and in the ordinary sense: trafficking in superstition is a lucrative enterprise of rather vast proportions and often tragically destructive consequences.

Thus, at the fringes of ordinary religion, there lurks and has always lurked, a fringe of beliefs, practices, and practitioners which keep alive the often dismembered elements of ancient traditions and folklore—spiritual 'advisors,' readers, and other fortune tellers, witch doctors, astrologers, scryers, clairvoyants, religious visionaries, ancient cults, and many others. The same is true in other areas of human knowledge and behaviour, of course, including science and medicine.

There is something at work here like collective memory, a deeply-ingrained cultural impression that ancient wisdom still possesses valuable holdings in its obscure and complex treasury. A case in point is traditional Chinese and Tibetan medicine, including herbalism and acupuncture, which were nearly eradicated by the communists during the Cultural Revolution but are slowly winning recognition throughout the rest of the world.

At this point, it is now pertinent to ask what can the advent, or rather reappearance, of New Age spiritualities teach us about how we should talk about God?

Conclusion:

The degree of attention New Age spiritualities are receiving at this time implies a concern that they are meeting the felt needs of a growing

number of people in the United States and Europe and doing so outside the margins of organized religion. In the long run, that may be their strength as well as value, as increasing numbers of young adults continue to drop out of mainstream denominations but in a direction opposite to that of the new Fundamentalism which is its most vocal opponent and spiritual rival.

In concluding, there are, I think, four major areas to assess, four lessons to learn, if you will: the critical, the mystical, the evangelical, and the ecumenical.

1. With regard to the critical dimension, we can learn from the success of New Age spiritualities how not to talk about God today, that is, abstractly, apodictically, and moralistically. First, our God-talk should not be so academic and conceptual as to be obviously divorced from the problems and possibilities of life today in all its chaos and complexity. A remote and detached God is of no real interest to anybody who is not remote and detached. Or wants to be. If the God we preach is not as real and relevant as this morning's headlines, then we are part of the problem, as the saying goes, not part of the solution.

Second, true spiritual authority is earned, not asserted or imposed. Safely orthodox, mainstream Christians do not have a copyright on the word *God*. And if, as seems to be the case quite often these days, our collective and individual behaviour invalidates what we say we believe about God, about Jesus, about the life of faith, we should be extremely reticent to invalidate the ways in which other people speak about God. This area definitely touches matters of sexism, inclusive language, and the ordination of women.

Third, our God-talk is so often moralistic and weighed down by negativity and disapproval that we tend to make of Christianity a grim and forbidding list of rules and anathemas—perhaps especially when dealing with people who are groping for truth and wisdom in ways we find threatening or offensive.

2. This perhaps too obvious truth leads to my second point, the mystical dimension presented by New Age Spirituality. The quest for religious understanding and growth typical of the New Age Movement is, I think, a valid expression of a deep hunger and thirst for the living God, not some idea of God, or a substitute for God. Ignorance of the great mystical tradition of Christianity on the part of Christian leaders is, I believe, one of the prime factors in the success of non-Christian or heterodox spiritualities today. The direct and immediate presence of God to all, in all, and above all, is, after all, the foundation and goal of all our

God-talk and ministry. What else do we mean by the life of grace?

That critics like Mitch Pacwa can dismiss many of the deeply Christian tenets of so-called New Age spirituality on the basis of alleged pantheism can be explained only because they are so blithely ignorant of their own tradition, which is founded on the teaching of the most orthodox and venerated figures of the early Church.

For instance, in dismissing statements by Jung, Matthew Fox and others that we are one in and with Christ and in fact are called to union with God, Mitch Pacwa writes,

Humans . . . cannot become God. We remain humans forever, though we will live forever. Those humans redeemed by Christ Jesus become adopted children of God (Rom 8:15).¹⁵

But in fact, according first to St Athanasius, 'Why did God become man? So that man could become God' (*De Incarnatione*, 54. PG 25, 192b.). Or in the words of Clement of Alexandria: 'the Word of God became man, that you may learn from man how man may become God' (*Exhortation to the Greeks*, 1:8 (1:9. 9–11). PG 8, 64D).

Other examples include St. Basil the Great: 'man is under a mandate from God to become God'; St. Gregory Nazianzen: 'I am to be buried with Christ and to rise again with him, to become a co-heir with him, a son of God, and indeed God himself' (*Oratio 7, in laudem Caesaris fratris*, 23–24. PG 35, 786–87.); St. Cyril of Alexandria: '. . . our nature is transformed so that we are no longer merely men, but also sons of God, spiritual men, by reason of the share we have received in the divine nature' (*Comm. on Gospel of John*, Lib. 11, 11. PG 74, 559–62.).

The Latin theologians affirm the same teaching in a more subdued form. As St. Augustine wrote,

. . . he who in his divine nature is the equal of the Father assumed the condition of a slave and became like us, and so restored to us our likeness to God. The only Son of God became a son of man to make many men sons of God (*Sermon 194*, 3–4. PL 38: 1016–17).¹⁶

There are two aspects of true Christian mystical theology, the affirmative and the negative. The affirmative, based solidly on statements like the preceding, calls us to recognize and celebrate our profound unity with God in nature, history, scripture, prayer and sacramental celebration. We must not forget the many rich and varied ways in which Christians have thought, loved, and celebrated God's presence, the great range and depth of music, art, literature, dance and gesture that strive but never fully succeed in their attempt to respond to that Presence. A crabbed and

narrow notion of what is permissible robs the gospel of its universal appeal, a lesson we should have learned from the scandal of the Chinese Missions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Nothing truly human is alien to Christ.

Negatively, the ancient theology as a whole reminds us that we know more what God is not than what God is despite all our theological efforts. 'God is ineffable,' Augustine tells us in the midst of perhaps the richest and most lucid writing about God in all of Christian theology. 'We can more easily say what He is not than what he is' (*Enarrationes in Psalmos*, LXXXV, 12). Again, he says,

What then, brothers, shall we say of God? For if you have been able to understand what you would say, it is not God. If you have been able to comprehend it, you have comprehended something else than God. If you have been able to comprehend Him as you think, by so thinking you have deceived yourself. This then is not God, if you have comprehended it; but if this be God, you have not comprehended it. How therefore would you speak of that which you can not comprehend? (*Sermones de Scripturis Novi Testamenti*, LII, vi, 16).

Such negative theology, itself based on Hebrew tradition and the New Testament, reminds us that in our investigations and ministry, we should never forget our very real limitations and consequent need for humility. God is a mystery too great for the human mind to grasp, too elusive for the human will to control, but not too remote for the human heart to love.

3. The third area of learning concerns evangelization itself, which is to say the dimension of catechetical sensitivity and outreach. Here, as always, the task is to announce and expound the good news of salvation as good news and in ways that are honest, open, and genuinely attractive, to provide answers that are satisfying responses to real human questions, not pat answers lifted from what can be described as pre-packaged doctrinal promotion kits.

Evangelization also requires discernment, and there is no substitute for a critical approach, perhaps especially in regard to New Age enthusiasms. In some respects, such as involvement in astrology, reincarnation, nature-worship and the like, Christians must distance themselves from what have been recognized consistently and properly as blind alleys and superstitions. Having been freed from one kind of legalism, it would be foolish to succumb again, as Paul said, to the elemental powers of the cosmos as if they held real promise. An uncompromising stand against obsessional reliance on such palliatives

does not have to be couched in fundamentalist or negative tones, however. Behind the simplistic formulas lie powerful metaphors for some of the deepest spiritual aspirations and longings of the human race.

4. Finally, in respect to the ecumenical dimension, confronting the challenges posed by the reappearance of New Age spiritualities requires a willingness to engage in dialogue, to learn from those who differ from us, to respect their authentically different traditions and approaches to life, and when possible to accommodate them. Beliefs and practices that are not distinctively Christian but which are not in themselves detrimental to the faith should be left to the discretion of individuals, including those we may not personally approve of, such as the Enneagram, yoga, acupuncture and other forms of complementary medicine, herbalism, and so forth. Here the Decree on Non-Christian Religions from the Second Vatican Council is a helpful guide.

Not all New Age spirituality is dangerous, very little is destructive, some is positively beneficial. It is wise to be generous in sifting the wheat from the chaff, given the human propensity towards prejudice. But it is also wise to test the spirits. Uncritical and enthusiastic endorsements of New Age spiritualities are as unhelpful as uncritical and blanket condemnations. What effective evangelization requires is careful discernment: acquiring the wit and skill to distinguish the helpful from the harmful, the symptom from the disease.

It is essential to bear in mind in such critical dialogue that New Age Spiritualities are sometimes very one-sided, superficial, and just plain wrong-headed. Among its paramount weaknesses, and an area where effective Christian evangelization can make a crucial difference, is its failure to address problems of suffering, needless death, social injustice, and oppression. New Age approaches have perhaps always been most attractive to the upper middle classes, with a proportionate insensitivity to the poor. Another dimension in which New Age Spiritualities are also lacking, and where they should be able to gain from constructive dialogue with Christian spirituality is personal depth. The age-old tendency of such fringe movements has been to veer off into the headiness of gnosticism or the sentimentality and emotional shallowness of pietism. Both traditional Christians and New Agers need above all to keep their heads and hearts together.

By praying with the mind in the heart, as the native peoples of my own part of the world have it, we come into the presence of truth, the truth that can and shall set us free.

Diane Duane, a young, American writer, includes the following scrap of dialogue in her excellent Star-Trek novel, *The Wounded Sky*. It

provides, I feel, a suitable finale to this discussion, although I should also warn you that Fr. Pacwa considers Star-Trek to be one of the New Age Trojan Horses which are admitting dangerous ideas into the minds of the viewing public:

‘. . . isn’t it the Vulcans who say that the doors of truth are guarded by Paradox and Confusion . . . and that if you attempt to handle them by turning your back on them, the truth will remain closed behind you?’

‘If we did not say it,’ Spock said soberly, but without that glint leaving his eye, ‘I will see to it that we do from now on.’¹⁷

- 1 (New York: Crossroad 1987.)
- 2 Mitch Pacwa, SJ, *Catholics and the New Age*, (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1992.)
- 3 ‘Soul of a New Age,’ *Omni*, October, 1987.
- 4 For confirmation, one need only consult, for instance, the table of contents a recent anthology, *The Seeker’s Guide: A New Age Resource Book* edited by John Button and William Bloom, with a foreword by Sir George Trevelyan (London: Harper Collins, 1992).
- 5 Ed. Michael Downey, (Liturgical Press, 1993.)
- 6 Portions of the following section have been adapted from my book, *Christian Spirituality: God’s Presence through the Ages* (Chicago: Thomas More Press, 1989).
- 7 On eschatological expectations of the period and later occurrences, see E. R. Chamberlain, *Antichrist and the Millennium* (New York: Saturday Review Press/E. P. Dutton, 1975). On eschatology in general, see R.H. Charles, *Eschatology* [1898–99] (New York: Schocken, 1963), J. A. T. Robinson, *In the End, God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), Edward Schillebeeckx and Boniface Willems, eds., *The Problem of Eschatology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1969 [Concilium 41]), D. S. Russell, *Apocalyptic, Ancient and Modern* (London: SCM Press, 1978), and Zachary Hayes, O.F.M., *Visions of a Future: A Study of Christian Eschatology* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1989) and his *What are They Saying about the End of the World?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983).
- 8 Old Testament and apocryphal influences include Dan 7:13–14, Is. 27:13, the Book of Enoch, and 2 Esdras. Possible New Testament sources include Mt 24: 29–30, Mk 13: 26–27, Lk 21: 25–27, 1 Thess 14–17, 2 Pet 3: 8–13, and Jude 14–16.
- 9 See Bernard McGinn, trans., *Apocalyptic Spirituality: Treatises and Letters of Lactantius, Adso of Montier-en-Der, Joachim of Fiore, the Franciscan Spirituals, Savonarola* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979). For a brief account of Joachimism and subsequent millennial beliefs, see E. R. Chamberlain, *Antichrist and the Millennium* (New York: Saturday Review Press/E.P. Dutton, 1975). Cf. also Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).
- 10 See Robley Edward Whitson, ed., *The Shakers: Two Centuries of Spiritual Reflection* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983) and Edward Andrews, *The People Called Shakers: a Search for the Perfect Society* (New York: 1963).
- 11 See in particular *Meditations on the Tarot: A Journey into Christian Hermeticism*, trans. by Robert Powell (Amity, NY: Amity House, 1985).
- 12 For an important overview of Teilhard’s spirituality, see Thomas M. King, SJ, *Teilhard de Chardin* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1988), and Ursula King, *Towards a New Mysticism: Teilhard de Chardin and Eastern Religions* (New York: Seabury

- Press, 1980).
- 13 See Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982).
 - 14 James W. Fowler *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984); James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981); Sharon Parks, *The Critical Years: The Young Adult Search for a Faith to Live By*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986).
 - 15 Pacwa, *Catholics and the New Age* p. 63.
 - 16 See also Pope St. Leo the Great: 'For every believer regenerated in Christ . . . is reckoned to be of the stock, not of his earthly father, but of Christ, who became Son of Man precisely that men could become sons of God . . .' (*Sermon 6 in Nativitae Domini* 2-3, 5. PL 54, 213-16).
 - 17 Diane Duane, *The Wounded Sky*. (Boston: Gregg Press, 1983, p. 87.)

This is the Lamb of God

Anne Inman

'This is the Lamb of God'. These are the words used at the Eucharist to describe Jesus Christ present in the consecrated bread. Jesus, sacramentally present, is identified with the passover lamb, the sacrifice without blemish, and the dumb sheep of Isaiah 53, representing passivity and acceptance of suffering as in some way redemptive. However, for a fuller picture of what it means for Jesus to be 'Lamb', it is necessary to turn as well to the Book of Revelation. Here we find that, apart from brief references in Chapter 1 to other Christological ideas involving a figure which seems to combine the Ancient of Days, Jesus Christ and an Angel figure, Christ is always referred to as 'Lamb'. The Lamb for the author of *Revelation* is the symbol of power.

The Lamb of *Revelation* is seen in heaven. The action that takes place in heaven is the judgement that takes place upon the world. This is an effective judgement which produces the dramatic events that will take the world through the End time to the End, the last Day of Judgement and the Renewal of the Cosmos, that is through the culminating events of world history in the broadest sense. The action is effected through Christ, represented by the image of the Lamb of God, a slain yet living Lamb.