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# **The New Age:**

## **Finding One's Bearings**

**A Guide to New Age Thinking**

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# Introduction

Everyone has heard about the New Age. At least everyone has read or heard the expression since it crops up just about everywhere. For example, advertisers even promote New Age armchairs! However, the term designates a profound cultural phenomenon, a particular perception of human beings and their relationship with themselves and God. The phenomenon is of interest therefore to all those who teach Catholic Religious and Moral Instruction at the elementary and secondary levels. They need to understand how it relates to what they teach so as to be able to identify similarities and differences.

Even though the New Age is an elusive, ill-defined movement, it is possible to identify its main characteristics and most prevalent forms. Both of these questions are dealt with in the first part of this guide entitled "Understanding the New Age." Some readers will approach this section with the conviction that they know nothing about this movement and have never encountered it in their everyday life. However, as they read on, they will be surprised to realize how common its basic ideas are.

The second part of the guide discusses how to distinguish between concepts associated with New Age thinking and those that are not. Readers will see that it is not always easy to make this distinction and thus clearly differentiate between strictly New Age beliefs and those related to Christianity. Since New Age principles are not always new and original, it is difficult to assert that they are associated with this phenomenon alone. However, while it is true that the boundaries between Christianity and New Age thinking often converge, it is also true that there are profound differences between them. These differences are presented in the guide through two sets of questions. The first calls the concepts of Christianity into question by comparing them with those of the New Age movement, while the second challenges New Age thinking by comparing it with Christianity.

The third part of the guide discusses possible attitudes which Christians may adopt toward the New Age. A distinction is drawn between attitudes that might be assumed when confronted, for example, with people in search of God and those that might be adopted with respect to newly emerging trends. It is one thing to respond to the first situation but quite another to take a stand on certain New Age principles related to such questions as ecology. The third section of the guide concludes with a discussion of certain important aspects of Christianity which, although ignored in recent years, are being revived by the New Age movement.

To make this guide easier to read, an approach has been proposed at the end of the document. A short bibliography listing recent books and articles has also been provided. This document on the New Age movement is but a modest contribution to the subject. It is not intended as a substitute for existing publications but as a summary of certain basic principles that will prepare teachers for further reading.

## **Typical New Age Phenomena**



Although some Catholics tend to think that the New Age movement does not concern them, most of them are in contact with some of its main manifestations. Here are a few examples.

### **Consciousness Raising, Achieving Harmony**

Your sister-in-law tells you that she is taking courses on how to listen to her body. During the conversation, she says that she can cure all her physical and emotional ills by exploring her inner self. She even claims that disease is a product of our own volition, but that we make this decision unconsciously. Relaxation, meditation and alternative medicine have shown her the path to inner harmony. Her enthusiasm is such that she almost convinces you that total self-awareness is all you need to achieve these goals.

### **Thinking Positively, Taking Control of One's Life**

During coffee break a colleague suggests that you read a book on "positive thinking" and self hypnosis. Now that he has learned about the power of positive thinking, he claims that people who really want to make their professional or personal problems disappear can do so. In his opinion, people are destined to take control of their own lives. All they need to do is think positively. They merely have to see their life from a different perspective to eliminate their problems.

### **Feeling Vibrations, Channelling Energy**

A person arrives at a meeting and says, "I feel good vibrations. This meeting is going to go well!" She then takes a stone out of her pocket and puts it in the middle of the table. "This type of stone has energizing properties," she explains, asking everyone to touch it and thereby focus their energy. "It can only help," she concludes.

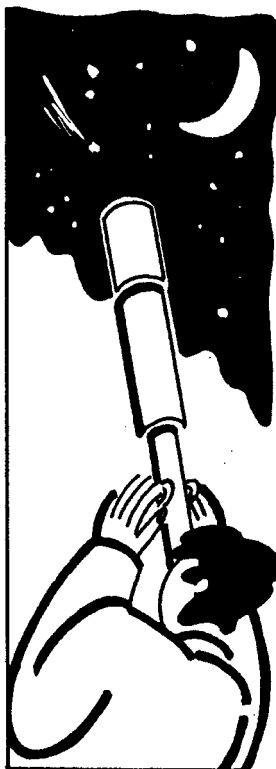
### **Travelling Out of the Body, Attaining Divine Energy**

During a casual conversation, a neighbour alludes to her last "astral projection" or out-of-body experience. Realizing by your reaction that you are totally unfamiliar with this phenomenon, she explains that she believes in this type of existence. She began to learn how to travel out of her body with the help of a spiritual guide. Although she has still not mastered the technique, she is convinced that she can feel very close to the spiritual world.

### **Achieving Global Consciousness, Saving the Earth**

A young member of your family tells you about his ecological convictions. Knowing that you respect the environment he goes on to say that he has joined a group of young people who believe that the Earth is alive and that the universal human being is its brain. He argues that everyone should make an effort to achieve inner harmony, for this is the only way to save the universe. He claims that vegetarianism and natural foods are the key to inner harmony.

### *Putting the New Age into Perspective*



### **Religion without a Church, Spirituality without Dogma**

The New Age movement cannot be compared to a religion such as Catholicism, which has a well defined structure subject to a single authority. In the Catholic religion, each parish is answerable to the spiritual authority of the Pope and its various institutions devoted to the service of the community. Each diocese has the same legal structure, consisting notably of ecclesiastical districts or parishes. Faith is governed by a single credo and a set of dogmas that are essential to fostering a sense of identity with the Catholic Church. The magisterium, or teaching office of the Church, ensures that the Scriptures and various traditions are interpreted appropriately. The New Age movement has nothing in common with this type of religious structure: it has no unique spiritual authority, highly organized institutional structure, or common set of beliefs which must be embraced by all. New Age thinking varies from one person and group to another.

### **An Elusive but Identifiable Movement**

Until the 1980s, New Age thinking could hardly be called a mass movement. Certain authors described it in more general terms, referring to the emergence of a new spiritual trend in the Western world. The New Age was regarded as a cultural, spiritual and religious movement which brought together people and groups rallied by common values and the prospect of a new era. From an organizational perspective, the New Age movement can be considered a "network of networks," in which each group or individual is autonomous but connected to the whole by a common conviction that the world is about to enter a Golden Age.

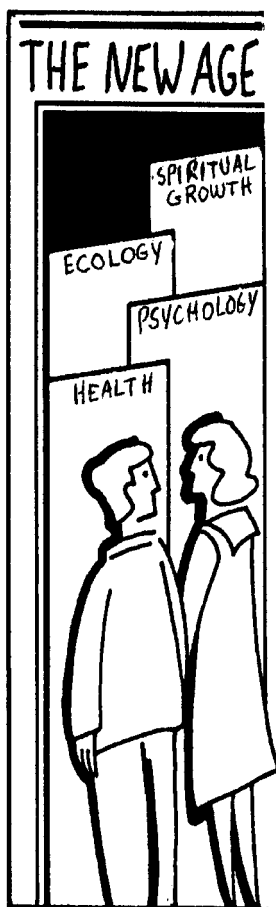
### **A Matter of Conscience**

Structures and even doctrines aside, the New Age is above all a personal matter. Adherents, as defined in this guide, may merely sympathize with New Age values or be deeply committed to changing global consciousness. They are free to choose whatever elements promote their inner awakening. Regardless of the approach they select their basic goal is to raise their level of consciousness, a prerequisite for entering the Age of Aquarius. Adherents' spirituality focuses on their own liberation which they achieve through harmony with themselves, the world and God.

### **A Type of Esotericism**

The New Age movement is a modern form of esotericism. Adherents believe that it holds the key to understanding themselves and the various religions. Esotericism postulates that all religions stem from a common primordial revelation. Knowing the secret elements of a religious tradition makes it possible to trace the latter back to its source. Basically, esotericism focuses on the origin of the universe when, according to this doctrine, all things were embodied in God - all things were God. The realization that everything can be identified with the divine and that the profound consciousness of every human being is part of the cosmic spirit is very reassuring to followers of the New Age.

## Defining the New Age



### A Multi-Faceted Philosophy

The New Age is a bit like a department store in that it has something for everyone. Ecology, nutrition, psychology, astrology, science, and spirituality are some of the questions explored by the various groups adhering to this movement. The New Age was born of a profound transformation of socio-cultural values, the effects of which are having a tremendous impact on all spheres of modern society. On the eve of the third millennium, the New Age offers a world view which seeks to reconsider psycho-social, spiritual and religious realities from a cosmic and planetary perspective.

### The Desire for Self-Realization

The New Age stems from a need for self-realization and harmony. Adherents look to it for ways of rediscovering their identity in a world where people are considered numbers. In its most radical form, the New Age movement attempts to help people make the shift from individual consciousness to global consciousness and eventually merge with the divine. If every human being discovered the path to global consciousness, which is present, although hidden, in every one of us, the universe would undergo a complete transformation and achieve global harmony.

### A Remedy for Social Ills

The New Age movement offers a means of coping with the problems posed by modern life and the factors responsible for the current state of the world. For example, it suggests that people get back in touch with their feelings and emotions to counteract the current trend toward over-rationalization. It proposes new standards of development which are in harmony with nature to offset overly intensive industrialization. Finally, to counterbalance the impact of distant, depersonalizing institutions, it suggests that people give precedence to personal experience and their conscience.

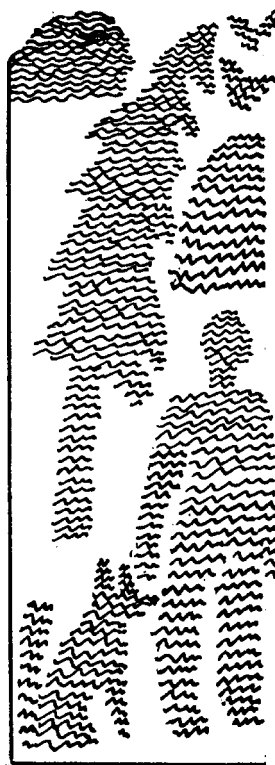
### A Reinterpretation of Religious Heritages

The New Age reinterprets religious heritages by combining past and present-day elements from diverse, sometimes conflicting traditions from both the Eastern and Western worlds. The final product is a more or less coherent set of beliefs which strives to impart new universal meaning to the follower's life. Each group offers its own synthesis, usually based on an esoteric approach. Humanity's religious heritages are thus reinterpreted with the firm conviction that human beings are going through an important stage in their evolution.

### Varied Practices

New Age beliefs give rise to practices which generally fall into four categories: physical health, psychological equilibrium, ecology, and spiritual growth. Various techniques, reflecting a world view usually shared by the different groups, are proposed, including massages, communication with spirits, meditation, vegetarianism, certain forms of prayer, and so forth. These practices usually focus on the individual, who is regarded as the means by which the universe will recover its original goodness and harmony.

## **Prevalent New Age Beliefs**



### **God Is Energy, the Basic Component of the Universe**

For New Age followers, there is a primordial cosmic consciousness which forms the basic energy of the universe. This energy is present in all beings, both human and supernatural. Depending on their level of consciousness, both people and things are more or less perfect parts of divine energy. Although degrees of divinity vary infinitely, everything in the universe is God.

### **All Religions Lead to the Same God**

The New Age 'religion' claims to be a synthesis of Eastern and Western spirituality and of ancient and modern philosophy. All the major past and present-day religions are seen as forming a single movement toward the divine. Jesus, for example, is considered a highly experienced initiate. Like Buddha and Mohammed, he incarnated the Christ of his time. For those who espouse New Age thinking, Christ is a highly evolved entity who will return to Earth to teach the ways of God. In the forthcoming Age of Aquarius, spiritual life will no longer need an institutional framework. The search for God in one's inner self will suffice.

### **Every Human Being is a Part of God**

Every individual is part of the divine. God is immanent present in every person and thing, God is never anything but oneself. To become one with God, we have to tune in to waves of divine energy. The higher a person's level of consciousness, the more radiant and perceptible his or her divine energy. The true spiritual approach involves rediscovering our basic energy and attaining global consciousness. The different schools of modern psychology serve the purposes of the New Age when they propose self-examination as a therapeutic approach.

### **Reality Can Be Improved through Thinking Positively**

Nothing exists outside of the mind. To change alienating situations, people must strive to change their way of thinking. All individuals are responsible for what happens to them. Nothing is a matter of chance. 'When people are confronted with happy or sad situations, they have an opportunity to examine their conscience and discover why they 'wanted' the situation to happen. All events play a role in a person's spiritual evolution. Techniques such as yoga, self-hypnosis and meditation enable us to become aware of this reality and make the necessary changes.

### **Reincarnation: Progressing toward the Divine**

One life is not enough to attain global consciousness and find one's rightful place in the field of divine energy. Reincarnation enables people to regain full possession of capacities lost on account of past mistakes. The New Age philosophy helps them to complete their different life-cycles. Masters, or the most highly evolved beings, share their knowledge with people. Mediums have access to the experience of various spiritual entities, such as angels or spirits. Reincarnation offers an explanation for flagrant injustice and suffering. Ignorance is the only true evil. To remedy it, people must progress and purify themselves through several lives. Ultimately, they will become fully aware of their true nature, which is divine.

### Some New Age Attitudes and Values



Certain attitudes are commonly shared by those who adhere to the New Age movement. These attitudes may be regarded as "symptoms," or the outward manifestation of certain values. It should be emphasized, however, that these attitudes and values are not confined to this movement alone since they are also associated with a certain cultural awareness which is widespread today. Nevertheless, in New Age thinking, certain values are elevated to the status of principles and regarded as norms. The four common values discussed below illustrate this approach.

#### Desire for Spiritual and Physical Harmony

The New Age is attractive in that it emphasizes self-realization and the search for physical, psychological and cosmic well-being. It favours humanistic, trans-personal approaches, which are well suited to satisfying this desire for inner harmony. Self-examination enables adherents to identify what is good or bad for them. Usually, they do not hesitate to reject activities which make them feel uncomfortable in any way, while they are receptive to new experiences which allow them to try out and select activities that are good for them.

#### Desire for Harmony with Others

While determined to achieve harmony in their own lives, New Age followers also care about others. Regardless of their level of consciousness, they show compassion for other people, since human beings are all part of the same divine whole. Their benevolent attitude helps to create an openness conducive to eliminating the barriers which curtail the development of harmony. If people and everything around them radiate harmony, vital energy will circulate more freely. Adherents reject competition and performance, preferring cooperation and mutual aid. They are usually pacifist and non-violent, and sometimes committed to curbing the arms race.

#### Concern for the Environment

Since everything is regarded as one and the same thing, the Earth, the universe, human beings and all the other components of the cosmos are considered part of primordial energy. As a result, followers show deep respect for the environment. It is natural for them to be interested in ecological phenomena of all kinds. Some believe that the Earth is a live organism called *Gaia*. They regard it as a goddess with feminine and maternal attributes. More global, introspective "feminine" values are promoted at the expense of power and strength.

#### The Preeminence of Intuition and Emotion

All those who espouse New Age principles stress the importance of personal experience. The fact that something is meaningful and good for one person does not necessarily mean that it is right for another. Personal experience is a reliable point of reference. We have to experiment and find out what is good for us, "what works." Intuition and emotion take precedence over rationality. In the eyes of adherents, the major moral and religious institutions, associated with rationality and dogmatism, have failed. As people gradually learn to achieve self-realization, they no longer need these institutions to find the truth.

### Some New Age Practices



Like the attitudes of people who adhere to the New Age movement, their practices are not totally different from those of the population as a whole. However, for adherents, these practices and behaviours are aimed at achieving harmony.

#### Choosing a Healthy Diet

In reaction to the large-scale industrialization of processes which introduce elements from the food chain into our diet, a rapidly growing number of people have opted for natural foods since the early 1970s. For New Age followers in particular, this choice is aimed above all at eliminating toxins ingested since childhood. By purifying their body, they are better equipped to absorb the energy which allows them to achieve primordial consciousness.

#### Treating the Whole Individual

Like natural foods, natural or "alternative" medicine has gained tremendous popularity over the past ten years. Acupuncture, therapeutic massages, homeopathy, naturopathy, and so forth have made their own special contribution to preventing disease by helping people to avoid excesses of all kinds and ensuring that the body attains a certain equilibrium. In the New Age, natural medicine is another way of regarding the individual as a unified whole which must be harmonized. Injuries, disease and stress manifest themselves through physical symptoms which limit the circulation of energy essential to achieving harmony. Energy points or *chakras* must be released from the "chains" which the mind has created in the body so as to pave the way for in-depth introspection.

#### Creating an Atmosphere Which Fosters Self-Awareness

A common feature of so-called "New Age" music is its aim to promote relaxation and Inner harmony. A large number of our contemporaries appreciate this type of music which is heavily influenced not only by modern technology, in particular computer science, but also by the rhythms of certain primitive traditions. Composers associated with the New Age movement conduct experiments which they attempt to share through their music. They offer listeners energizing music conducive to introspection and meditation. It also helps listeners to relax and become more open to their inner reality.

#### Caring for the Earth

Composting, which is a domestic version of organic farming, is one of the ecological practices associated with the New Age. Several studies have shown that the chemical products used for decades by the food industry on over farmed land may render it permanently infertile. For those who espouse New Age beliefs, Gaia, or the living Earth, is gradually dying from an overdose of toxins of all kinds. Organic farming is away of preventing the Earth from dying especially since the Earth, like any human being, gives its best when it is treated properly.

## New Age Vocabulary



While attempting to formulate expressions which set itself apart from other movements, the New Age must nonetheless draw on already existing vocabulary. It has borrowed terms from other fields of research, often assigning them a very different meaning.

### Terms Borrowed from Science

There have been a number of great moments in science during the 20th century. Certain scientific and medical discoveries as well as exploits such as walking on the moon and reaching outer space have created the impression that scientific research has no limits. Although the New Age is opposed to the scientific and technical mindset which strives to break reality down into its many components, it nevertheless uses the same vocabulary. The movement has gained remarkable credibility by quoting scholars and scientists such as Einstein. It views reality as a unified whole and studies the relationship between the *spirit* and *matter*. God is the *energy* which weaves the fabric of the cosmos. Terms such as *vibration*, *light*, *entity*, *antiparticle* are used to refer to concepts which characterize the New Age world view. Terms related to astrophysics are very well suited to maintaining the mystery which surrounds New Age thinking. In addition, several scientific theories, such as the law of complementarity, are used to justify the new metaphysics.

### Terms Borrowed from Psychology

Adherents use key phrases such as "I'm responsible for everything that happens to me," "Everything is all right," "There is no such thing as a mistake or an error," and "I can change my reality by changing my ideas." Catchwords such as "positive thinking" have helped to foster the emergence of the "I". "Depth" psychology, which was inspired by the work of psychoanalyst C.G.Jung, also serves the purposes of this individualistic movement. Terms such as *consciousness*, *the subconscious*, *chains* and so forth are used to good advantage by age of Aquarius therapists. *Intuition* and *emotional experience* provide opportunities for introspection, thus allowing followers to discover the light and dark sides of their inner self. Understanding the process whereby limits are imposed on human consciousness is the veritable goal of this psychological approach, for by discovering our hidden motives, we will be able to aspire to liberation, or *harmony* with ourselves, others and the cosmos as a whole. Psychological vocabulary makes it possible to talk about *inner space* in contemporary terms.

### Terms Borrowed from Religion

The New Age movement has also derived some of its vocabulary from the world's religious heritage. Heavily influenced by Eastern religions, New Age does not hesitate to integrate some of the concepts of these religions with those of biblical ones such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam. "Secret" traditions and primitive religions also play an important role, giving rise to new credos whose proponents seek to gain the support of humanity as a whole. Energy is *the whole* toward which all *chakras* strive to converge. Angels are highly evolved *entities* which guide us through our various *reincarnations*. Masters are beings who have attained a high level of *consciousness* and help us to explore our *inner self*. *Suffering and disease* have no *raison d'être*, and sin is non-existent. *Peace, love* and *harmony* are the fruits of an asceticism espoused by the *new mystics*. True spiritual evolution culminates in *union with the divine*, at the end of a process of inner illumination.

### ***The New Age : A Reinterpretation of Religious Heritages***



Most of the groups associated with the New Age movement deny that they are offering a form of religion. They are more inclined to talk about spirituality. Although the theory and applications of New Age spirituality vary, they are all aimed at reorganizing and reinterpreting the principles espoused by the main religions.

#### **A Single Religion for All Mankind**

The New Age claims to offer a well-balanced combination of concepts borrowed from Eastern and Western religions. Adherents may embrace these ideas provided they avoid the institutional framework associated with the main religions. However, even though these institutions are rejected, some of their teachings are adopted. Through a sometimes artificial combination of concepts common to several religions, the New Age offers a form of spirituality which summarizes the main aspects of humanity's religious heritages.

#### **Core Concepts Borrowed from the Mystical East**

In the mid-1960's, the United States reopened its borders to immigrants of Asian origin. Young Americans discovered the attractive, exotic practices of a totally different culture. Transcendental meditation, yoga and certain drugs offered the hippie generation a means of forgetting about the war in Vietnam. Eastern spiritual masters found an attentive audience among young adults. These people have since entered the labour market, maintaining their openness to Hindu and Buddhist spiritual concepts. It comes as no surprise that North Americans in the 30-50 age bracket feel so at ease with New Age philosophies. Present throughout the entire Western world, the New Age movement has inherited its relaxed lifestyle, search for non-violent wisdom and perception of the meaning of human existence from the East.

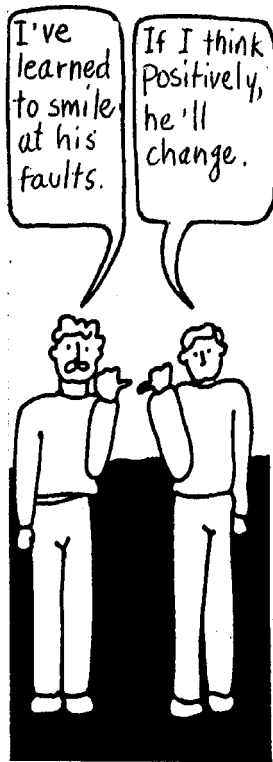
#### **A Reinterpretation of Christian Faith**

Those who espouse New Age thinking consider Christianity outmoded in comparison with orientalism, which they find very attractive. When they do adopt Christian symbols or vocabulary, they ascribe a different meaning to them. No longer bound by Christian morality or subject to a magisterium regarded as overbearing, adherents have become more autonomous. They decide what is good for them and reject what curtails their freedom. The concept of Christ is also an integral part of New Age philosophy. While the history of Jesus as a man is considered unimportant considerable emphasis is placed on the fact that his knowledge of the divine was extremely profound. He incarnated the cosmic Christ Spirit by inaugurating the Age of Pisces. Another entity will be invested with Christ-like qualities to inaugurate the New Age, that is, the Age of Aquarius. The Holy Spirit is the Cosmic Spirit, the energy which breathes life into all the divine particles imprisoned in matter.

#### **The Role of Magic and Animism**

To round out their religious universe, New Age followers have revived certain occult practices associated with magic and animism in primitive religions. Ritual dancing, trances, the worship of gods incarnated in certain animals, and the deification of the Earth and its elements are all a part of an already varied religious landscape. Astrology, clairvoyance and communication with the spirit world are no longer considered marginal activities but veritable "spiritual sciences."

### Are New Age Attitudes, Practices and Vocabulary Truly New?



It is hard to distinguish between concepts which are exclusive to the New Age movement and those which merely reflect contemporary culture. It is necessary, nevertheless, to be able to differentiate strictly New Age concepts from the principles of Christianity.

### Rebuilding One's Energy or Tapping Divine Energy'

At one time or another we all say, "I don't have any more energy" or "I have to recharge my batteries." The question of energy concerns the very essence of human beings. Human motivation, enthusiasm and vitality are certainly not exclusively New Age concerns. However, from a strictly New Age perspective, the question of energy is inevitably related to the divine. God is the primary source of cosmic energy to which people may have access by channelling their positive energy. Massages, the use of crystals and certain forms of alternative medicine are aimed at bringing people back into contact with the source of divine energy.

### Being Optimistic or Mastering Matter?

Is positive thinking a concept confined to New Age philosophy? Looking on the bright side of things has always been considered a wise attitude. We are all familiar with the old saying "God helps those who help themselves." Most Christian saints stressed the fact that human beings have the power to integrate their will into a spiritual horizon which transcends that of the individual, i.e., the will of God. The New Age presents "positive thinking" as the unique capacity of the human mind to transform negative situations into positive ones. People have the capacity to find happiness, prosperity and knowledge. They do not need an external god or divine assistance.

### Meditating or Seeking Illumination?

Is meditating - or striving to make contact with God and nature - exclusively a New Age practice? One merely needs to think of the long contemplative tradition associated with all the major religions to realize that this is not the case. Visualization and listening to one's emotions were advocated by Ignatius of Loyola and the tradition of Spiritual Exercises. However, when meditation serves to discover energy points or *chakras*, gradually find illumination or achieve divine consciousness, or to leave the body and enter the spirit world then it is used in a way which can be more readily associated with the New Age movement.

### The Universe: A Part or a Product of God?

Is the holistic view which regards the various components of the universe as being interrelated confined to the New Age? Paul described Jesus Christ as the one who would recapitulate the universe (cf. Colossians 1: 13-20; Ephesians 1: 3- 10). He also associated creation with salvation (cf. Romans 8). Palaeontologist Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit tried to reconcile this Christian view with a scientific approach to the universe. However, Christian thought has never denied the existence of a God who is both immanent and transcendent. Yes, there is a holistic Christian view of the universe. However, as suggested by New Age thinking, God is identified as a unique entity made up of many variations of the primordial energy.

### *The New Age Questions Christian Beliefs and Practices*



It would be dishonest to suggest that all New Age experiences should be rejected. On account of its global perspective, the New Age often makes judicious choices based on the present state of the world. It rejects excessive materialism and criticizes the overexploitation of nature and the domination of technology over values. Owing to its concern for the individual, it proposes a new balance between rationality and emotion, ascribing to feelings and affection the importance they deserve. This philosophy challenges the Christian faith.

### **Does Faith Foster Self-Fulfilment?**

One of the determining factors in the remarkable development of the New Age movement has been the popularity of techniques or philosophies emphasizing self-realization and concern for oneself. A certain form of Christianity has tended to denigrate individualism. It has urged believers to ignore their own needs, sometimes to excess, and devote themselves exclusively to the service of others. Certain authorities have condensed the desire for a well-balanced life and imposed an external code of ethics. By neglecting the individual, Catholicism has run the risk of becoming a religion which is disconnected from human reality. The New Age questions the extent to which Christianity is concerned with people as individuals, with their self-realization and quality of life. Is the Christian faith intended for disembodied entities or for human beings who have to cope with everyday problems?

### **Does Faith Leave Room for Emotional Experience?**

The New Age regards personal experience as an excellent means of finding God. It also acknowledges the primary role of emotions and intuition. It therefore questions the overly rational religious instruction of the Church, which itself is a product of an era which considers science supreme. By devoting too much attention to often moralistic, cognitive objectives based on dogmatic theology, the Church has lost touch with the everyday concerns of its members. As a result, some members have turned to groups which help them to understand their life in relation to their emotional experience and physical state. Tapping into the rich heritage of the lives of the saints, the Church will be able to more easily understand the melding of faith and emotion. Catholics will take an interest in their Church provided it becomes a place where they can rediscover the love of God.

### **Can Faith Exist in Harmony with the Body?**

The faithful have rarely understood why the body and sexuality have been rejected by certain Christian movements. An emphasis on rules and law rather than dynamic growth has led a large number of Catholics to leave the Church feeling that they would never be able to satisfy the requirements of a religion which accepts nothing less than perfection. The absence of the body from the spiritual approach has confined believers to a cerebral faith, totally dissociated from human behaviour which is a source of guilt. The New Age reemphasizes the importance of the whole person, made up of both a body and a spirit. As in the biblical perception of the individual, the body is the person and the person is the body. Faith cannot be experienced without the involvement of the whole person. otherwise, it would be disembodied, a purely moral doctrine. Its only achievement would be a kind of obedience which leads to dependency rather than autonomy.

### **Christianity Questions New Age Beliefs and Practices**



The New Age often claim to go one step further than Christianity and the Bible. It considers its spiritual path superior to that of Christianity in that it enables followers to attain a level of maturity which obviates the need to refer to external institutions or authorities. However, this is an unfair assessment of the Christian faith, whose pertinence and originality have not been erased by the claims of the New Age movement. Some reasonable questions might be asked.

### **Can We Really Be the Source of Our Own Salvation?**

The concept of ultimate liberation associated with New Age philosophy was borrowed from Eastern religions, in particular Hinduism. According to this view, there is no room for grace or any external contribution to the salvation of the individual. Liberation is achieved through the efforts of the individual alone, through a series of reincarnations. Despite its contempt for performance, the New Age offers a theory which emphasizes personal effort as a means of salvation and which professes that adherents must constantly pay for errors made in past lives. Christians believe that they have only one life on Earth and at the end of it, God's will, which is love and mercy, will be done in death as in life. The source of this gift of personal salvation is offered by Jesus Christ. By entrusting our fate to another, we free ourselves of human pride and agree to be judged by love. This voluntary relinquishment of our life leads to a serenity and openness with regard to the actions of a living God who plays a vital role in our existence,

### **Can God Be Other?**

For those who adhere to the New Age movement, God and the individual are one and the same thing. Jesus is but one form of divine energy, who had access to pure knowledge and lived as a master In his time. Christ is but a more perfect product of primordial cosmic energy. He is an idea rather than a person. The Spirit is another manifestation of the divine and helps followers understand their relationship with global consciousness. Christianity considers that God is present in human existence. According to Saint Augustine, Christians believe that God knows them more intimately than they know themselves. But God is also regarded as the Other whom we encounter in our life. He is the loving Father. He is the Son who offers mankind an opportunity to share his divine filiation. He is the Spirit who shows the Church and humanity which actions can inspire hope. By accepting God as Other, we accept that we ourselves are not God. It is through the will of God that we may aspire to blissful eternal life.

### **Can We Hope to Be Eternal?**

The New Age stresses the cosmic dimension of human beings, whose ultimate realization is the impersonal union with cosmic energy. Christianity, on the other hand, emphasizes the uniqueness of each individual. It asserts that individual consciousness exists, which inevitably implies that human beings are responsible for their own destiny. Christianity proposes a communion where individual consciousness is in no way eclipsed by a single global consciousness. Each person receives the love of God with whom he or she has a personal relationship.

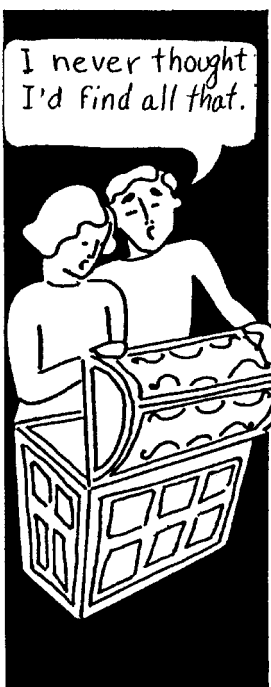
**Can the Poor Challenge Our Social Consciousness?**

Expanding individual consciousness is a permanent goal of the New Age movement. External reality is of little importance if it does not contribute to the evolution of the individual. And since all beings are indissociable from global consciousness, they are interconnected to a certain extent in their progress toward the divine. The New Age shows compassion for the poor and the sick. They are victim of the mistakes they made in previous lives. They can promote the spiritual evolution of more advanced beings by showing which attitudes should be avoided. Good deeds can also serve to make the next life more enjoyable since they are recorded in our conscience and determine the parameters of our next reincarnation. In Christianity, personal and collective history since the resurrection of Christ have paved the way for liberation, which has already begun. Christians believe in a God who loves the poor and the sick especially when their suffering is caused directly or indirectly by others. God's love for those in need prompts Christians to join forces to combat all forms of evil. In Christianity, we are urged to respond to Jesus' appeal to help "the least of these my brethren" (cf. Matthew 25) for acts of charity are intended for them.

**Does the Community Have a Role?**

In the New Age movement, it is not essential to identify with a community to pursue one's spiritual growth. Solidarity is fostered by the search for harmony in oneself and one's human and cosmic environment. Adherents are left to their own devices to find spiritual points of reference. In Christianity, human solidarity was proposed by God who, from the moment he revealed himself, addressed people. The community promotes fraternity, an indication that believers share the same faith. The communal celebration of faith makes the Body of Christ visible and motivates the faithful to fulfil the Church's mission. The Church is meant to serve as a rallying point for all those who have chosen Jesus Christ as their saviour and master. The basic community, whether a parish or a diocese, offers believers a cooperative framework and services that will help them in their spiritual growth. The Church must also ensure that the faith, which takes on many different forms, is a coherent, unified whole. As members of the Church, Catholics are invited to declare their faith in a set of beliefs which determine their Christian Identity. There are certain norms which establish the framework of Christian faith. The mission of the Church is to reassert and teach the basic tenets of Christianity and ensure that the beliefs which are embraced today are the same as those born of the experience of the Apostles. In other words, one never becomes a "Christian on his or her own."

### **Reacting to the New Age**



Most Catholics seem oblivious to the various repercussions of the New Age. In reaction no doubt to this form of indifference, some people denounce all forms of religion which do not correspond exactly to the teachings of the Church; in certain cases, they even associate the New Age movement with Satanism. Others prefer to ride with the tide and reap the benefits of New Age thinking without really worrying about the consequences of blindly adhering to certain principles. How should we react to the New Age? The following suggestions might answer some of the questions Catholics have in this regard.

### **Understanding the Need for a Personal Approach to Spiritual Growth**

The New Age is a personal matter rather than a mass movement. Adherents are people who are trying to discover the meaning of life in this hectic world. Obviously the Church has not been able to fully convey all the wonders of Christianity; however, the rejection or condemnation of New Age approaches would only deepen the rift already existing between Christianity and the New Age. The fact that people are turning to New Age techniques and experiences in an effort to discover fundamentally good values is a positive thing, reflecting a desire to believe and hope regardless. Adherents want to avoid the pitfalls of the material world, an attitude resembling the hope held out by the Christian faith, which asserts that life triumphs over death despite appearances to the contrary. We must, therefore, be receptive to people who express a sincere need to grasp the meaning of life. At the same time, we have to exercise judgment. To make sense of all the concepts associated with New Age thinking, we must first become aware of our own convictions. In order to understand what and in whom we believe.

### **Being Tolerant toward New Beliefs and Practices**

Most of the beliefs and practices associated with the New Age are positive features reflecting today's dynamic culture. New forms of awareness have emerged at different periods of time. The New Age gives precedence to certain themes which have become the object of growing concern in recent years: for example, the return to nature, the development of the entire person, holistic medicine, a clean and healthy environment, equality, global harmony, a balance between rationality and emotions, and a desire for unity. These themes correspond to some of the basic aspirations of every human being. Should we not emulate the openness displayed by Paul when he wrote, "Do not quench the Spirit... but test everything; hold fast what is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:20)?

**Coming to Terms With New Age Beliefs**

Coming to terms with New Age beliefs is no doubt the most difficult task. Beliefs are the basic values which make a religion unique. When confronted with a new way of thinking, we must be careful not to merely skim the surface, but to read between the lines so as to understand the philosophy or spirituality as a whole: "...whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (Philippians 4:8). In comparing New Age beliefs with those of Christianity, the important thing is not to have the last word but to fully comprehend what they have in common, while understanding their differences and even their conflicting features. Christians can no doubt reach those who adhere to the New Age movement; first, however, they must identify what Christian beliefs meet the latter's basic aspirations. To do so, they must:

- Explore the wonders of Christianity to discover what may have been neglected in recent years.
- Adapt their vocabulary so as to express Christian values in terms which relate to modern-day realities.
- Explain why it is important to discover a personal, living God with whom a loving relationship can be developed.
- Try to practise Christianity so as to promote their personal growth and share the fruits of the experience with others.
- Regard and talk about the body in more positive terms.
- Adopt a pastoral approach which fosters a balance between reason and emotion.
- Develop a deep commitment to the environment, peace and the future.
- Rise to the challenge of proposing an approach which requires people to relinquish their fate to another and accept external realities over which they have no control and which bear witness to sin and human responsibility.

Most of these concerns are reflected in the basic precepts of Christianity. The Bible and the experience of Christians from all ages are inestimable treasures just waiting to be rediscovered.

**Passing Judgment on New Age Practices:  
The Need for Caution**

New Age practices take on their true meaning for adherents in relation to a particular theory or belief. For example, using crystals to channel energy is meaningful only if intended to bring users into contact with God-Energy. We should be careful, however, not to denigrate or condemn all New Age practices; some are ambivalent. The intention of those who engage in these practices is therefore a determining factor. New Age exercises and techniques can lead believers to embrace the philosophy underlying these approaches. For example, spiritualism may encourage adherents to embrace ideas enabling them to understand the hierarchy of entities outside our material world. Moreover, certain practices may help Christians find the path to the Christian God. Techniques such as meditation and yoga should not be considered harmful in themselves,

**Finding a Balance between Personal Freedom  
and Respect for Others**

Paul's attitude toward the consumption of meat from animals sacrificed to idols might prove useful to people in search of spiritual guidance by helping them to decide how they would react to this type of problem (see 1 Corinthians 8: 1-13). As Paul said, the sacred animals of pagans had no sacred value for Christians. While eating this meat did not in itself diminish the quality of one's relationship with God, it could lead, in his opinion, to splits within the community. He suggested therefore that the principle of fraternal love should guide people's actions. We should always try to find a balance between personal freedom and respect for others in the community. Freedom must thus be considered in the framework of the community; although it is an inherent right, it is subordinate to the common Interest In this light, certain practices become inappropriate and therefore inadvisable. While we are entitled to choose what is good for us, we must not unduly offend others.

**Viewpoints****The Best and, the Worst**

"The New Age Is a hodge-podge of values, attitudes and so forth, some of which are excellent and wise, while others are mediocre, naive, deplorable or even fraudulent. Many new therapies and religious groups are said to be associated with the New Age movement simply because they are new and do not apply Western scientific theories or perpetuate Greco-Roman or Judeo-Christian traditions. Some of these groups, however, do not share any of the values or characteristics of the New Age. To claim to belong to this movement, they must cherish its ideals.

"Very often, having recourse to non-discursive reasoning and intuition and giving credence to transpersonal, spiritual and even miraculous powers is an easy way of concealing the incompetence of leaders, justifying bizarre, fraudulent and even dangerous practices, and spreading imprecise, vague, confusing, and ill-defined doctrines and theories totally devoid of seriousness or rigour."<sup>1</sup>

**A World View That Differs from That of Christianity**

"Another important point to remember in comparing New Age thinking with Christianity is that the former's metaphysical perspective is incapable of integrating the latter - an historical, ritualistic and dogmatic religion - without radically changing the nature of Christian faith. This is illustrated by New Age followers who are unable to adopt Christian themes and symbols without reinterpreting them in a way which robs them of their very essence. Furthermore, ordinary Christians who flirt with the New Age by adopting one of its beliefs or techniques run the risk of opening the door to a paradigm which will gradually undermine and invalidate the Christian world view."<sup>2</sup>

**A Formidable Challenge for Christians**

"The New Age represents a huge challenge for Christianity. Not only because it is being propagated so energetically, but also above all because it formally blames Christianity, including in their critique whole areas of the Christian heritage, beginning with the bible. In addition, the New Age sets itself up as a new religion --a planetary, universal one-- a religion which replaces all previous religions, bringing them to their perfection. The New Age is wonderfully adept at encouraging modern people in their dreams..

"This having been said the New Age also offers good things : a sense of universal brotherhood, peace and harmony, raising people's awareness, a commitment to bettering the world, a general mobilization of energies for the sake of good, etc. Nor are all the techniques they advocate bad: yoga and relaxation can have many good effects."<sup>3</sup>

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1 Pierre Pelletier, "Une interpellation spirituelle," in R. Bergeron, A. Bouchard and P. Pelletier, *Le Nouvel Âge en question* (Montréal: Éditions Paulines, 1992), p.110-111 [translation].

2 Richard Bergeron, "Qu'en pense la théologie," in R. Bergeron, A. Bouchard and P. Pelletier, *Le Nouvel Âge en question* (Montréal: Éditions Paulines, 1992), p.97 [translation].

3 Godfried Danneels, "Christ or Aquarius ?" *Catholic International*, vol. 2, no. 10 (May 15-31, 1991), p.485.

### Ignoring the Facts

"The popularity of New Age approaches can readily be explained. As a result of rapid technological change, most citizens now find themselves in an impasse. The radical transformation of the family and of sociosexual roles is completely restructuring our social fabric. As our main ideologies collapse, we must take up the task of discovering the meaning of life. However, these unavoidable realities seem to encourage people to seek refuge in magic and the most mollifying obscurantism. Instead of taking the bull by the horns, they prefer to believe in fairy tales. Similar reactions have been observed in the past during other periods of rapid change. The social history of astrology and theosophy bear witness to this phenomenon."<sup>4</sup>

### When the Self Becomes an Object of Worship

"What we perceive as less noble and pure in this form of lost-soul spirituality is that God is no longer considered the Totally Other, but is often reduced to a Thought or a form of Energy.... The self is no longer detestable but worthy of adoration, as though it had the power to create life and time, avoid death, and merit its own survival. It alone is regarded as the source of salvation."<sup>5</sup>

"By seeking their inner self through the almost unlimited expression of their psychic potential, those who espouse New Age thinking strive to be eternal and thus think that they are God."<sup>6</sup>

### Finding a Basis for Mutual Understanding

"Is it possible for Christians to come to terms with New Age thinking? Based on what I have said so far, we are obliged to say "yes" immediately. The God of Jesus Christ wants to know every human being in his or her own cultural context, which leads to another question addressed directly to Christians and the Church: on what conditions can they promote mutual understanding between Christianity and the New Age movement? I would suggest two conditions: by allowing their beliefs to be called into question by those who espouse New Age thinking and by calling into question the beliefs of such people in turn."<sup>7</sup>

### Making a Conscious Effort

"All of the questions raised in these areas are potentially religious questions for which certain answers may be found in the Good News. Christians must first agree, however, to make an effort to reach an understanding with other people on questions which interest them. They can no longer merely wait at the church door. 'Let us go across to the other side,'" as the evangelist Mark wrote (Mark 4:35).

4 Mario Poirier, President of the Corporation professionnelle des psychologues du Québec, "Nouvel Âge: faut-il tout jeter au panier?" *La Presse* (October 15, 1991), p. B3 [translation] -

5 Benoît Lacroix, "Nouvel Âge, vieilles paroles," *Communauté chrétienne* vol. 2, no. 14 (October 1991), p. 3 [translation].

6 Rolande Parrot "Vivre sa foi dans la rencontre de l'autre," *L'église canadienne*, vol. 23, no. 3 (February 8, 1990), p. 69 [translation].

7 Marcel Dumais, "Une rencontre possible avec la foi?" *L'église canadienne*, vol. 23, no. 2 (January 25, 1990), p. 48 [translation].

8 Jean Vernet, "Le paganisme est de retour," *Actualités religieuses dans le monde*, no. 80 (July-August 1990), p. 36 [translation].

## **Reading in Groups**

The following activities may be carded out either before or after reading about a particular topic.

Their purpose is to:

- Identify what users already know.
- Prepare them for reading the text.
- Suggest ways of applying the concepts discussed.
- Encourage users to consider certain questions in greater depth.

Since we presume that the guide will be used mainly by groups, users will henceforth be referred to as participants. It should be noted, however, that individuals may also apply the techniques suggested here.

## **Approach for Studying Part 1**

### **Part 1 - Understanding the New Age**

#### *Objectives*

To enable participants:

- To realize that New Age phenomena can be observed in their immediate environment.
- To say how they would define the New Age.
- To determine whether their definition is correct.

#### *Instructions*

Before reading this section, say what you know about the New Age. The simplest way is to draw up a list of the main phenomena, i.e. words, behaviour and so forth, which you think are associated with the New Age.

You can then formulate a definition based on the features included in your list. For this purpose, answer the following question with regard to each of the phenomena you have listed:

Why do I think that this is a feature of the New Age?

*Example: A New Age phenomenon*

A person does exercises to enhance the power of the right side of his or her brain, i.e. the side associated with intuition and imagination.

Why do I think this phenomenon is typical of the New Age?

Increasing the brain's potential is an important goal in the New Age.

By reading Part 1, you will be able to determine the scope and accuracy of your knowledge about the New Age.

If you would like to take a more in-depth approach, you may refer to the methods proposed below for studying some of the questions dealt with in Part 1.

### **Prevalent New Age Beliefs**

#### *Objective*

To enable participants:

- To say how they would define the New Age.

#### *Instructions*

Answer the following questions before reading this page:

- Who is God In the New Age?
- What **is** meant **by** the term “human being”?
- What place do human beings occupy in the universe?
- How do we achieve happiness?

After reading this page, check to see whether these beliefs are reflected in the features you listed.

### **Some New Age Attitudes and Values Some New Age Practices**

#### *Objectives*

To enable participants:

- To realize that New Age attitudes and practices are widespread.
- To realize that these attitudes and practices are not exclusive to the New Age.

#### *Instructions*

After reading these two pages, say whether you share any of these attitudes or practices and to what extent. Do you consider yourself an adherent of the New Age movement?

### **New Age Vocabulary**

#### *objectives*

To enable participants:

- To become acquainted with New Age vocabulary.
- To realize that familiar words can take on new meaning.

#### *Instructions*

After reading this page, try using New Age vocabulary. Then ask yourself whether some of the words you used had a different meaning from that which you normally attributed to them.

**Approach for  
Studying Part 2****The New Age: A Reinterpretation of Religious Heritages***Objective*

To enable participants

- To determine what they have learned about the New Age.

*Instructions*

After reading this page, you will have finished the first section of the guide defining the New Age. Compare what you knew in the beginning (see the list of features you associated with the New Age) with what you know now.

**Part 2 - Adopting or Rejecting New Age Thinking***General objectives for studying Part 2*

To enable participants

- To explain why a particular attitude or practice (e.g. meditation or positive thinking) is associated with the New Age.
- To consider three areas where New Age thinking calls Christianity into question.
- To explain the pertinence of the answers offered by Christianity to such questions as salvation, the identity of God and human beings, commitment to helping the poor, and the role of the community.

Separate instructions are given for each of the three main themes discussed in the second section of the guide.

**Are New Age Practices, Attitudes and Vocabulary Truly New?***Instructions*

After reading this page, answer the following question:

Under what circumstances are the following clearly associated with the New Age?

- Activities which replenish one's energy
- Thinking positively
- Meditation
- The presence of God in the universe

**The New Age Questions Christian Beliefs and Practices***Instructions*

After reading this page, answer the three questions serving as subtitles, based on your convictions.

Are there other areas in which New Age thinking could call Christianity into question?

**Christianity Questions New Age Beliefs and Practices***Instructions*

After reading these two pages, say what benefits human beings derive from the following.

- Salvation is a gift of God.
- God is separate from human beings.
- The God of Jesus Christ proposes that people seek communion with him rather than union.
- People get together to fight poverty.
- The community is important in Christianity.

Are there other areas in which Christianity could call New Age thinking into question?

***Approach for  
Studying Part 3*****Part 3 - Living with the New Age***Objectives*

To enable participants to decide how they should react to the New Age when confronted with:

- People who are interested in this phenomenon
- Newly emerging social trends
- Beliefs about God, human beings, the universe, and salvation

## Reacting to the New Age

### *Instructions*

After reading these two pages:

1. Say how you would react if a person you know said:
  - That working with the sick made him wonder about the meaning of life, why some cancers appeared, without warning and why some people died so young. To find answers to these questions, he read the revelations of a master which were transmitted by a medium. The wise man talked about karma, the search for enlightenment and the profound desire for harmony in the heart of every human being. Your friend was deeply affected by what the master said.
  - That he changed doctors because he could no longer tolerate taking pills all the time. He found a doctor who takes his emotional life into account and suggests relaxation techniques which make him more calm.
  - That he spent \$50 a week to revitalize his *chakras*. It helped him to overcome the despondency which afflicted him since his divorce.
  - That he believed that God is Energy and that he was a part of that Energy.
2. Say whether the Christian tradition includes any forgotten "treasures" which should be revived now that the New Age is flourishing,

## For Further Study

While watching films, reading magazines, or talking with others, try to identify ideas embraced by the New Age movement.

Write down your beliefs about God, human beings, their respective place in the universe, happiness, sin, and salvation. In short, write your own credo.

Read other books and articles on the New Age. Consult the bibliography.

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