In a short article it is necessary right at the start to state the obvious: that there are many varieties of ‘Christianity’ and many varieties of ‘New Age Thought’. In talking about the Christian tradition, it is possible to think in terms of denomination: Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant, and the sub-varieties within each. It is possible to think in terms of theological approach: catholic, liberal, conservative, evangelical. It is possible to think in terms of spirituality: humane, social gospel, liberation, evangelical, contemplative, ecological. It is possible to think in terms of strands within western Christianity: post-Vatican II, post-Bultmann, process theology, liberation theology, existential theology, feminine theology, black theology, situational ethics, new biblical approaches, liturgical renewal, and so on. And it is possible to think in terms of the increasingly important elements within Third World Christian theology: Gandhian insights, Kitamori’s theology of the pain of God, Koyama’s water-buffalo theology, Latin American liberation insights, Indian Christian concerns for interior spirituality, African Christian concerns for the validity of dreams, visions and healing, Korean Christian emphases upon emotion, and Chinese Christian insights into fellowship, unity, and the inter-dependence of Heaven, humans and the earth. And so we could go on.

In the case of New Age thought, the problem of pinning down what it represents is even more difficult, as this paper will show. Rather than concentrating on definitions, or a wide range of scattered issues, the purpose of this paper is to give some insight into the general phenomenon that is sometimes called “New Age religion”, to build bridges between New Age thought and Christianity, and to indicate also some areas wherein Christians would be wise to exercise caution in relation to New Age thought.

During the last few years New Age thought has come into greater prominence. This has happened partly through high-profile (and not necessarily representative practitioners) such as David Icke and Shirley MacLaine, but it has happened also through the emergence of new age insights in more hard-nosed endeavours such as science, industry, economics and education. An example is Stanislav Grof’s book Ancient Wisdom and Modern Science (State University of New York Press, 1984) in which “non-religious” scientists express the desire to blend modern science with traditional wisdom. In the last decade there have come to the surface elements connected with what is now known as New Age religion that were mainly hidden before. It is possible to take it too seriously, or not to take it seriously enough. Christians have a lot to learn from New Age thought; they should also be wary of some aspects of it.

It is, of course, true to say that there is no such thing as a New Age worldview. There are many aspects of New Age thought, and indeed congeries of new age insights. Marilyn
Ferguson’s book *The Aquarian Conspiracy* written in 1980 was taken up by some militant evangelical critics such as Constance Cumby as signifying a new age conspiracy to take over the world. This attack was misplaced both in the sense that there was no James Bond-type conspiracy plot built into new age aims, and in the sense that New Age thought and New Age movements are far from being monolithic. They are in fact, insofar as they can be characterised, the opposite of being a set of sinister plotters. They tend to be individualistic, relaxed, flexible, free spirits who sit somewhat lightly to organisation. They are suspicious of dogmas, institutions, and establishments. It is not that these do not matter at all; the point is that they are secondary – they are means to ends, not ends in themselves. New Age thought is a network of varied movements and varied ideas that are vaguely linked; it is an amorphous worldview that is nevertheless real.

What then are the elements of New Age thought and religion? For the sake of imposing some sort of framework and clarity on the paper, a scheme of ideas will follow, but it is important to remember that the ordered nature of the framework will help to conceal as well as reveal what New Age thought basically is. An important element is the idea of moving into a new age, of coming to the end of a millennium, of proceeding into the 21st century. The build-up to the year 1000 was momentous. The decade leading up to the year 2000 may well prove to be even more awesome, partly because the notion of the end of the millennium is no longer a merely European prerogative. The year 2000 is etched on to the global calendar, whether it be seen in terms of 2000 AD or 2000 CE (Common Era). This ‘new age’ in New Age thought is not seen under the heading of Armageddon but as a tremendous invitation to new discoveries, new spiritual adventures, and new paradigms. Astrologically there is the sense that the year 2000 coincides with the new Age of Aquarius which promises new freedom and new possibilities.

A second element in New Age thought is the link-up with new paradigms within the philosophy of science. There is a sense that the empiricist and positivistic view of science associated with the names of Descartes and Newton must be extended, widened and deepened. The classical assumptions – that we can describe the world fully in scientific language; that scientific language stands in a one-to-one relationship to factual data; that these data are ascertained by observation and experiment; that scientific observation and experiment are based upon what our senses can reveal; that scientific theories are built up through our induction of factual data; that this induction and this theorising is ‘objective’ and not reliant upon personal matters; and that scientific knowledge resulting from all this is proven knowledge of the world as it objectively is – these assumptions, from a new age perspective, form a paradigm that is now being outmoded. They depend upon the primacy of the material, of the senses, and of the classical scientific worldview that has now, it is argued, become limited and is no longer able to deliver the goods. Prominent new theories espoused by much new age thought include the following: Fritjof Capra’s view, in *The Tao of Physics*, that sub-atomic physics is akin to Eastern mysticism insofar as the old view of substance as an objective entity is gone and the contrast between sub-atomic particles and space around them is overcome; David Bohm’s theory of “implicate order” according to which the universe is enfolded multi-dimensionally upon itself so that (rather like a hologram where any single part of the picture contains the whole) the universe is contained holographically in any particle; Rupert Sheldrake’s theory of “formative causation”; James Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis which suggests that the earth is a living organism, not lifeless matter, and that there is a co-operative mutual dependency between nature and human beings under God; Teilhard de Chardin’s older theory of creative evolution, incorporating a sense of optimism and hope, which suggests that the cosmic process is evolving in the direction of God; and systems theory in science which concentrates upon the inter-relationship of parts within the whole, rather than upon the parts themselves.
point is important in new age thought and religion which imbibes the notion that the point lies not in separate specialisations but in holistic thought and synthesis, and in seeing the parts of life and the world in relation to the whole. Thus economics and ecology are intertwined and, if a factory in the Firth of Forth makes a huge profit but spews pollution into the Firth, both are relevant to a consideration of its contribution to the general weal. Medicine and alternative medicine are both valuable aids to physical recovery. Moreover physical and psychological cures are intertwined.\textsuperscript{11} Thus New Age thought sees itself as going beyond materialistic and scientific science in a more metaphysical and spiritual direction. Scientific reductionism is out, and the spiritual world is real. Although some of the scientific theories mentioned above are still speculative to a number of working scientists there is, if not yet a switch of paradigm, a questioning of aspects of the old paradigm among scientists themselves. This can be helpful to Christians who are too often wedded to an old view of science that is now under deep debate.

A third element in New Age thought focuses upon ecology and on feminine values. In Christian circles this is brought out most clearly in Matthew Fox’s creation theology.\textsuperscript{12} Both are important in themselves, and both are also global concerns. They are linked too with the recent insight into the complementary nature of the two sides of the brain, the rational and the intuitive. According to this strand of thought there is a need to balance male and female values, a stress upon the outward and a stress upon the inward, an emphasis upon reason and an emphasis upon intuition. Carl Jung’s ideas are often leaned upon in this regard, especially his notions of the need to integrate the different sides of the personality, and his notion of the universal unconscious from which all human beings can draw.\textsuperscript{13} It is sometimes claimed that New Age thought downplays the whole experience of suffering within humanity, yet Jung does stress the shadow side of the personality which we hide and project on to others. In any event the focus upon ecology and female values is basically sound and the search for a theology that takes ecological and female concerns seriously is one that commends itself to the Christian tradition.

A fourth element in New Age thought relates to healing. In New Age circles there is an abiding sense that the body reflects the total inner state of a human being. Therefore if there is something wrong with the body it is important to heal the body, but it is also important to heal the total personality. Orthodox medicine usually concentrates upon healing the bodily symptom that has manifested the illness. New Age healing would welcome this but would also include the possibility of alternative healing in many different forms, of spiritual healing, and of creative visualisation of a well state for the whole person.\textsuperscript{14} In this there is an analogy to Christian faith healing and the possibility of convergence.

A fifth element in New Age thought emphasises the human potential that is claimed to be the birthright of every person. It is said that human beings undervalue themselves, their own possibilities, and their own potential. As Abraham Maslow puts it, “peak experiences” are available to those who are willing creatively to seek them;\textsuperscript{15} human beings can and should grow in love; human beings can and should understand themselves as they really are. This is not an option open only to a few. For those who have eyes to see and the vision to seek, the potential lying within human beings is greater than they suppose and it is there for the claiming. This sense that there are no limits to what human beings can do under God is not foreign to the Christian tradition. It was, for example, implied in John Wesley’s notion of Christian Perfection which centred upon the idea of growing into perfect love.\textsuperscript{16} However the contrary pull in the direction of human limitation and human unworthiness has also been a factor in Christian self-estimation alongside the injunction to love one’s neighbour “as one loves oneself”. Christian psychiatry has opened up this area of wholesome love of the self, and New Age religion has freely and creatively claimed it as part of true religion.\textsuperscript{17}
A sixth element in the New Age complex of ideas emphasises the power of the inner voice. Meditation of one kind or another is a pervading aspect of New Age religion. Spiritual experience is central to the New Age endeavour. God’s Spirit is within, and God is immanent. God may be transcendent as well, but above all God is immanent and we can know the kingdom of God within our dreams, meditations, and leadings. One suspects that a lack of stress upon the Holy Spirit in the church has led to a deep stress upon the Spirit at two ends of the spectrum – in New Age religion, and in charismatic Christianity. Both are interested in healing, both are interested in human potentialities under God, and both are eager to stress the spiritual potential that is available to those who are willing to seek and use it. In both cases there is a challenge to the church to re-awaken to the doctrine and reality of the Holy Spirit. In both cases, too, there is a challenge to the theory of rampant secularisation and the forecast that religion would wither away before the onslaught of science and technology. New Age thought and religion and charismatic Christianity (among other factors) cast doubt upon the force of secularisation theory. According to it, they should be unlikely and improbable, whereas in fact they are growing and there is the suspicion arising that a new scientific paradigm is burgeoning that is moving in a more spiritual rather than a more secular direction.

Christians can largely affirm the elements that have been mentioned so far: the new science, holistic thought, a concern for ecology, a concern for women’s focus on global issues, and a recognition of the power of healing, human potential, and inward spirituality. Vibrant Christians can ally with New Age thought and sometimes are new age in these matters.

Before we consider some problems raised for Christianity by New Age thought, it is well to state that New Age thought is different from two constituencies that are sometimes confused with it. New Age religion and thought are different from the other living religious traditions. They may borrow from the other world religions (and often do) — especially in matters to do with spirituality wherein Hindu yoga, Buddhist Zen, the Jewish Kabbalah, Sufi Islam, and American Indian spirituality may be tapped. However, New Age thought is not to be equated with the other living religions. Indeed other religions are often critical of what they see to be the radical tendencies within New Age thought, often more so than Christians. Equally, New Age religion is different from the spectrum of new religious movements. There may occasionally be some overlap. However, the new religious movements, such as the Unification Church, Hare Krishna, Divine Light Mission, Brahma Kumaris, and so on, are usually tight-knit groups with strong leaders and a strongly worked-out set of ideas, whereas New Age religion tends to be individual, flexible, moving and unstructured. New religious movements may have elements of New Age thought in them, but they are not thereby New Age.

In what respects, then, should Christians be cautious about New Age thought and religion? Three are worthy of mention. Firstly there is the whole area of channelling whereby a person becomes a medium or a channel for a spirit which delivers teaching or help through the mediating channel of the person concerned. The Theosophy and Anthroposophy movements have arisen during the last century or so, based partly upon channelling. However, it would be a mistake to label the insights of their leaders as occult obscurantism, in spite of the channelling that was part of them. Madame Blavatsky (who, together with Colonel Olcott, founded the Western Theosophical Movement), her disciple Annie Besant, and the founder of Anthroposophy Rudolph Steiner, were fascinating people who opened up the inner and spiritual nature of human beings, and the inner and spiritual world beyond the physical that humans can relate to through the non-physical dimensions of their being. They and others would claim that they were not declaring anything essentially new but were reclaiming the
soul and the spiritual world from the obscuration and captivity that had been their lot since 13th century Christendom. However, one of the ways in which Madam Blavatsky claimed to do this was by spiritual contact with Masters in the Himalayas. Rudolf Steiner claimed to be able to read the “Akashic Records” which are alleged to be a kind of panorama of spiritual records in the invisible world. Alice Bailey, another mature spiritual thinker who founded the Arcane school in 1923, claimed to receive messages from a Tibetan Master D.K. 4,000 miles away. In her case the result was 25 books containing impressive insights. However we interpret Madame Blavatsky, Rudolf Steiner and Alice Bailey (were they, for example, tapping into Jung’s universal unconscious?), the fact is that in recent years there has arisen a spate of channelling. In 1963 Jane Roberts was writing poetry when a spirit Seth came and began to teach through her via trance, and her husband Rob wrote down the teaching. Another well-known spirit Ramtha is channelled by another female channeller, J. Z. Knight. Another internationally-known channeller is Jack Pursel, who channels the spirit Lazaris. And there are many others.21

How do we interpret all this emergence of channelling? At one level there is evidence of spiritual need and openness that is borne out in opinion polls and the work of places such as the Religious Experience Research Centre at the University of Wales, Lampeter24, to the effect that a large percentage of the population believe in God and have some sort of contact with religious experience, however that is defined. But this is largely outside the orbit of the Christian institutional church, and is a challenge to the church to speak to the religious need that is implicitly there. At another level it speaks to an element of gullibility among some new agers which is probably taken advantage of by some practitioners of channelling for financial gain. However the example of Jim Bakker and American evangelists, who recommend conversion as a way to vast wealth, will enable Christians to be humble in these matters. At yet another level there is the need for caution. Channelling spirits has some similarities to the helping role of the Virgin Mary and saints in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox communities, but it is also different. It is not so much that (as some evangelicals claim) channelling can have a dark side as that it becomes so banal, and is a diversion, in New Age as in Christianity, from direct contact with God.25

A second question that may be applied to New Age thought relates to its interpretation of psychic and spiritual power. These may overlap, but they may also be different. New Age spirituality tends to hold them together, but an ability to ‘discern the spirits’ has usually been valued by authentic religion of any kind. Psychic power is not good or bad in itself. It is neutral. It contains no necessary ethical content. Something such as the odic force that can be used in healing is a psychic human gift that can be used in and out of a religious milieu.26 It is helpful when used in the light of ethical and spiritual perception. “By their fruits ye shall know them” remains a valid criterion not only for the exercise of spiritual power but also for the exercise of psychic power.

A third cautionary note relates to challenges made by some New Age thought to Christian doctrines, for example the doctrine of Christ. Especially interesting and controversial are the references that are sometimes made to the lost years of Jesus. Did he stay as a carpenter in Nazareth, or what did he do? Speculations such as those of the Rosicrucians are one thing. Historical certainty about events in the life of Jesus that are necessarily speculative are another. When Shirley Maclaine states in Going Within that “of course Jesus was an Essene teacher and healer” there is no ‘of course’ about it, as any knowledgeable scholar will readily testify.27 She appears to have received this insight from Szekaly’s The Essene Gospel of Peace and treated it as fact.28 Other books that are more certain about the hidden years of the life of Jesus than they have any right to be are Notovitch’s La Vie Inconnue de Jesus Christ, written in 1894, and Levi Downing’s The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ, written in
Included in Notovitch’s book is a document entitled “The Life of Saint Issa: Best of the Sons of Men” which he claims to have discovered in Ladakh and which he claims is superior to the evidence in the canonical Gospels. Some of the accounts of the hidden years of Jesus claim that the three magi visited the two-year-old Jesus and began to initiate him as a Master; that at the age of 13 he went to Persia and to India, was trained in Hinduism and Buddhism, and was initiated as a Master; that after the events in Palestine that led to his crucifixion he did not die on the cross but (and sometimes evidence from the Turin shroud is introduced) he survived and went off again to India, and was finally buried in Kashmir. Clearly this is speculative history and speculative theology. Helen Schucman’s claim to have transcribed her influential 1200-page Course in Miracles through the voice of Jesus, and the estimable counsellor Edgar Cayce’s claim to tap into the Akashic Records about Jesus with his unconscious mind, do not diminish the sense that speculation is at work. So often New Age speculation about Jesus becomes fact, and at that point it is fair for Christians to ask searching questions. It is wise to repeat what was stated at the beginning: that New Age thought is diverse and operates at different levels, and it is a minority of new agers who would adopt stridently anti-Christian views. Naïveté rather than malevolence is more often at work.

It is helpful to differentiate between two kinds of New Age thought: the soft-core version outlined in the first half of this paper, which should be taken up and affirmed by Christians; and the hard-core version outlined later, which should be treated with the caution it deserves. There is evidence of a two-way bridge that is being built between New Age thought and Christianity, whereby some Christians are widening and deepening their Christian faith through contact with New Age thought, and whereby some people are finding that New Age thought is a way into Christianity – albeit at a deeper level than was the case before (if in fact they were Christians before).

New Age thought is a phenomenon that is most present in the West. It is in the West that a sense of ‘soul’ and a sense of the ‘spiritual world’ have most obviously disappeared. New Age thought is a challenge and a spur to the Christian tradition in the West. It is a challenge and a spur to rediscover the importance of living inward spirituality that takes Spirit seriously and does not bow down to secular models as the norm. When new agers ask where they can find a local church that takes spirituality really seriously, where are they to be directed? It is a challenge, and a spur also, to think creatively and adventurously about some wider secular issues of the day: the way forward for modern science, ecology, women’s rights, global issues, healing, the human potential; hope for the world; the need for a new world order; the desirability of taking into account all parts of the personality (body, mind and spirit); and the desirability of taking into account all dimensions of life – the material, the mortal and the spiritual.

It is true to say that inward spirituality has never been lost in the Christian tradition. It has been maintained especially within the monastic communities of the Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches. However, its influence and importance have declined in face of the material and outward success of science and technology and secular models. The spur to the revival of Christian spirituality has come from outside and has led to a re-discovery and renewal of what was already implicitly present within the Christian tradition. It was triggered by Hindu swamis and Zen masters in the 1960s, especially in America but also in Britain, and it has been re-invigorated more recently by new age figures, such as Sir George Trevelyan, who have linked a revival of spirituality with the holistic and adventurous worldview mentioned earlier. As Trevelyan puts it, “the spiritual world view ... sees the world of Creative Spirit as primary – a realm of Absolute Being and Creative Intelligence, from which matter and the phenomenal or material world are derived. Understanding, in the spiritual world
view, involves the capacity to look inward and so through into spheres of ever-widening consciousness ... The spiritual world view is a vision of wholeness, an apprehension of the essential unity of all life.” He states that “the emerging world view is essentially simple. Grasping it requires no great intellectual effort, only a flexibility of thought, a readiness to delight in change, a resilience and youthfulness of attitude, regardless of how many years we have lived.”

It is perhaps no accident that New Age thought and religion are strong where contemporary western Christianity is somewhat weak, and it may also be the case that the opposite is true and that New Age thought and religion are somewhat weak where contemporary western Christianity is strong. Having said that, it may well be the case that the seeming ‘weakness’ of New Age thought and religion (a lack of firm structures, a lack of clear doctrines and a flexible tolerance) also constitute New Age strength. Like Star Trek, it is willing to go out where humans – and angels – often fear to venture in its daring quest for a deep spirituality and a planetary and humane vision that will, naively or otherwise, match up to the stimulus of the new century, the new millennium, that zooms upon us. Rather than sit on the sidelines, or negatively criticise, it behoves Christians to do likewise on the model of the early Fathers, who felt the call, in humility rather than arrogance, spiritually to outlive and mentally to out-think the world of their time.

ENDNOTES


16. See, for example, the section on ‘human potential’ pp.109-152 in Bloom (ed.) op.cit.


18. See, for example, the section on ‘the inner voice’ in Bloom (ed.), pp.41-74.


24. Sir Alister Hardy was an internationally known biologist who in later life became interested in the phenomenon of religious experience which he discovered was common throughout society and not confined to institutional religion. The RERC (in Westminster College, Oxford at the time this paper was written) was formerly known as The Alister Hardy Research Centre and had been originally founded as the Religious Experience Research Unit (RERU).

25. This is brought out in Spink, op.cit.


32. There are various places aimed at facilitating this, including the Omega Order at Winford Manor near Bristol and The Abbey at Sutton Courtenay near Abingdon, Oxfordshire.

33. An interesting insight into some of these issues is given by Robert Muller (himself a Roman Catholic and recently Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations) in *New Genesis: Shaping a Global Spirituality*, New York, Doubleday, 1984.


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