



Altars to unknown gods

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What exactly are the philosophies and practices of those who collectively are known as followers of the New Age? A theologian from the University of Aberdeen at present on sabbatical in California maps out the spiritual quest of New Agers.

MY first encounter with the New Age phenomenon was at a Christmas party in the late 1980s. The venue was a former Scottish manse in a village, right next door to the church that had once been the focus for a thriving community life. The manse had been sold off and was now home to a cohabiting couple, both of whom were recovering from painful divorces. Though they had plenty of problems of their own, they still found time to help others. I was there because my wife had a professional connection with them.

The others who gathered were a diverse bunch, including an electrician, a surgeon, a forester, a bureaucrat, an engineer and a motor mechanic. As introductions were made, I began to wonder how they would react to the news that I taught theology. I had had plenty of previous experience with people who, for a variety of reasons, would have found themselves embarrassed at this. But the hostess's immediate reaction was to ask me, "Do you believe in God, then?", and once it had been established that I did, the rest of them suddenly came alive. In no time at all I was being bombarded with questions about the Bible, before being quizzed about my experience of the spirit world and extra-terrestrials. They proceeded to speculate about who I might have been in previous lives, in the process touching on miraculous healing, spirit guides, messages from angels, various therapies I had never heard of,

and much more.

Of course, more conventionally religious matters were mentioned, and my hosts made it clear that though they had found their home, as a former manse, to be a "spiritual" place, they had no time for what went on in the church next door. They were not anti-Christian, but they found the people there to be "religious" rather than "spiritual", more interested in safe and predictable rituals than in discovering God for themselves. By contrast, they were committed to beliefs in the mystical and the supernatural that, as a theological student in the late 1960s, I had been told had to be "demythologised", because they were no longer credible to intelligent people. We talked long into the night. When I told them that I had written a PhD thesis on Gnosticism, I might as well have plugged them into the mains. As they plied me with yet more questions about Gnostic gospels, it was obvious that for them this was not just an ancient Christian heresy, but something they believed could be of direct relevance to their own lives, if only they could somehow crack the mystery which seemed to shroud it.

As I drove home that night, I knew I had to investigate all this. The map these people were using to explore familiar territory was significantly different from anything I knew, even when it seemed to touch on traditional Christian concerns such as prayer, the Bible, or indeed Christ himself. I sensed that there was something here that the Churches would need to engage with if we were ever to make any progress towards the re-evangelisation of Britain.

These were serious spiritual searchers, looking for something that could provide them with a worldview that would help them to be better people. They were not interested in anything that divided the sacred from the secular; they wanted to embrace life in a holistic way.

They were not really against the Church, though none of them found that it spoke to them. Their occasional encounters with it led them to conclude that it was a lifeless corpse, with the reality of God's presence ("spirituality") somehow squeezed out of it by institutional concerns about power, control and empty rituals ("religion").

Because they were suspicious of the motives of religious leaders, they felt they would need to reinvent spirituality for themselves. They were prepared to explore whatever spiritual wisdom they could find. If that meant combining aspects of different traditions from different cultures and historical periods to form a kind of do-it-yourself designer faith, then they would do it.

Thirty years ago, these would have been the very people who would have been regarded as the natural constituency of the Churches: pillars of the community, thinking and sensitive people with a social conscience. But now they were of the opinion that Western civilisation was in a state of terminal decay. Historically, in their eyes, the Churches had been part of the Western Establishment that was responsible for such misguided enterprises as the Crusades or colonialism.

In their search for new paths, they draw on four sources.

First, they are attracted to world views which are not Western. If the cause of our present predicament is rooted in things that are modern and Western, then the way to resolve it, they think, will be to seek solutions in those that are ancient and Eastern. On this basis, they might commit themselves to Eastern spiritual paths, particularly – but not exclusively – Buddhism, albeit in a Westernised form.

Secondly, there is an interest in the belief systems of ancient nations colonised by the West, as in the Americas or Australasia. These aboriginal inhabitants had environmentally friendly lifestyles which were brutally suppressed, and a spirituality that was labelled "primitive" and "unscientific" by Western imperialists. But it now seems that Westerners could have learned much from the peoples they displaced, and can perhaps find new ways forward by revisiting such cultures.

Thirdly, the New Age movement favours creation-centred spirituality. Its adherents want to rediscover a simpler connection to the world of nature. This concern accounts for the burgeoning interest in neo-paganism in its many forms, which is one of the fastest-growing aspects of New Age spirituality in northern Europe today.

Lastly, they look inside themselves. Hence the development of psychotherapies of various kinds, the popularity of transformational video and audio tapes, "bodywork" and other therapies. They hope in this way to gain access to experiences which will transform them, without having to take on the baggage of religious dogma.

How should Christians respond? They have generally preferred not to engage with the New Age at all, and when they have done so they have often been dismissive and hostile. I can find no evidence for the idea that the New Age represents some kind of conspiracy to undermine Western civilisation, nor do I believe that it is an essentially occult movement. Given its eclectic nature, some traditionally occult practices are undoubtedly followed by some New Agers. But the vast majority of New Agers are ordinary people who are trying to plot a course for the future in the face of the apparent collapse of inherited Western values.

MERELY condemning the New Age search will get us nowhere. What we need is an encounter with it in which we can bear witness to our faith in Christ, recognising that the questions highlighted by the New Age are also significant for us. While many aspects of the New Age prescription for the ailments of today's world may be nonsensical and meaningless, its diagnosis of the disease is too accurate for comfort. The way we have applied our Christian beliefs, spirituality and lifestyles has squeezed out the intuitional and the numinous.

Within the Roman Catholic tradition, time-honoured forms of spirituality, such as the Rosary, have been played down in the last decade or so, just at the time when people have been going to New Age festivals and filling their pockets with crystals. And while members of religious orders now dress like businesspeople, real businesspeople are going to New Age training courses and dressing up like wizards and magicians in order to turn themselves into "psychic managers". The rediscovery of the visual, the tactile and the sensual in spirituality will be a key element in any effective mission to a post-modern culture.

We would do well to consider St Paul's approach to the "spiritual supermarket" of Athens. In

reporting it, Luke makes it clear that Paul did not like what he saw. He thought it was wrong, and certainly not Christian. But he did not take the line that many later Christians have followed, and which some advocate today in relation to the New Age, of simply confronting and condemning it. On the contrary, Luke carefully describes how Paul went, first, to observe, to look around, to listen, in order to understand the nature of the spiritual search in that place. Only then did he have anything to say. Moreover, when he did speak he still resisted the temptation to sweep away all that he saw, preferring instead to stand alongside the Athenians in their spiritual journey and explore with them the very thing they were searching for but were ignorant of, namely "the unknown god" to whom they had erected an altar.

The question for Christians should be, where are the altars to the unknown god in today's culture? And once having identified them, we need to be bold enough to take the kind of risks that the apostles took, by addressing those who worship at these altars and sharing with them the story of Jesus.