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**BE WISE AS SERPENTS BUT INNOCENT AS DOVES – THE FINE LINES
BETWEEN NEW AGE AND CHRISTIAN HEALING**

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Matthew 10:16

¹⁶ *'See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.'* Matthew 10:16 NRSV

As a young person I was impacted by the charismatic renewal. We were making the discovery that God was much more real and immediate than we had ever imagined!

Despite the sobering experience of four years in a critical, liberal seminary, that sense of God's immediacy never quite left. I could not discount what I had seen and experienced, and so I tried to fit it together with the worldview which, my seminary training was insisting, was the grown-up, rational worldview of a Christian in our time.

This task took me to the UK for graduate work. One of the reasons I wanted to go there was because so much was happening there among people who were both Anglican and charismatic – including serious theological scholars who did not leave their brains at the door when they walked into church.

When I finished my doctorate in systematic theology, the only teaching job I could get was in world religions. I combined this with a post as research officer for Jim Thompson, then the Bishop of Stepney. Jim was soon chosen to be the new bishop of Bath and Wells (yes, there really is a diocese by that name!). As this diocese contains Glastonbury – a prominent British New Age site – Bishop Jim started getting correspondence from strange groups and individuals, and he asked me to prepare a briefing paper for him on the New Age movement. Doing that research was an eye-opener! Soon after, I began working at an Anglican college for evangelists, where I was asked to teach a course on cults and the occult. As I began – via all these experiences -- to look at the alternatives that are out there to orthodox Trinitarian Christian faith, and to get a sense of the spiritual experiences they promoted, I began to reflect on my own experience as a charismatic Christian.

What I noticed were some similarities between charismatic gifts and New Age/occult paranormal experiences.

- Many Spirit-filled Christians **speak in tongues**: but some Mormons do too, and some shamans also when in trance

- Christians sometimes speak **words of prophecy**: but so do many esoteric and New Age groups (a recent Google search on 'the prophecies of Nostradamus' yielded 2,170,000 results.)
- Many Christians receive '**words of knowledge**' about others: so do mediums and channellers.
- Christians practice **healing by prayer and laying on of hands**: so do Spiritualists and many kinds of practitioners of New Age energy healing.

So what do we make of these similarities? Is this a problem?

The pluralist worldview is quick to say there is no problem, because it's all the same thing really'. It would assert that there is no fundamental difference between the Christian healer who anoints you with oil, lays hands on you and prays for your depression, and the New Ager who uses their hands and mind to build a wall of spiritual protection around your aura.

The rationalist worldview would also say that the similarities are no problem, because all efforts at spiritual healing are equally a load of nonsense. On this view, spiritual healers, Christian and otherwise – simply work to arouse the placebo effect - - that is, the suffering person is moved by the care shown them and impressed with the ritual, and the conviction that 'something has been done' stimulates the sick person's inherent self-healing.

For a Christian worldview the similarity between Christian charismatic phenomena and occult paranormal experience is a problem. Christians hold that Jesus Christ brings about a new possibility for human beings which is not available elsewhere. So they are automatically uncomfortable with the idea that 'it's all the same really', and equally uncomfortable with the idea that it's all 'just smoke and mirrors'.

Christians might explain the similarity between the charismatic and the paranormal in two ways. **The first is about our common humanity and its God-given design.** The human body, mind and spirit is fairly 'standard issue' across time and culture: there are only so many ways it can respond. Our very humanness means that there are only so many 'shapes' that spiritual experience can take. To paraphrase Augustine, we all have a God-shaped hole in us. Here's where the second part comes in. We all have the same God-shaped hole: but what we attempt to fill the hole with is varied -- and makes all the difference.

This brings us to the idea of counterfeits. God the Holy Spirit gives us spiritual gifts – the *charismata*. The enemy, who cannot create but can only mimic, provides spiritual look-alikes – good-looking counterfeits which either do not last, do not satisfy, or come with additional baggage. We can fill that God-shaped hole with the things of God, or we can get fooled into filling the God-shaped hole with counterfeits.

But telling the one from the other can be hard! The enemy takes a good thing and corrupts it, or makes a fake that seems like the real thing. Developing the discernment to tell God's gifts from the enemy's knock-offs is vital for all Christians, but especially vital for those who are engaged in the Christian healing ministry. To be

involved with Christian healing is to be involved with the supernatural. It is an incredible privilege, but with it comes great responsibility. If your discernment is poor, you can limit and damage yourself and others.

The counterfeits that we meet up with in the world of spiritual healing usually come to us through the New Age movement, which is the soft and user-friendly end of the occult. So it's worth having a look at what New Agers believe.

INTRODUCTION

The New Age movement heralds the dawning of a new era for humanity and for the earth. It represents a convergence of attitudes and ideas from many different sources -- post-Newtonian science; future studies; ecology; the cultural and ethical relativism which developed in our secular pluralist societies; the desire for non-invasive health care; psychology; eastern religion; western occult philosophy; aboriginal primal religion; Sixties radical politics and the hippy drug culture. Having developed slowly in the earlier decades of the 20th century and put its head above the parapet in the sixties and seventies, New Age has now emerged as a self-confident, well-financed and widespread social and spiritual movement. It is now part of the cultural fabric of the United States, Canada and Western Europe. (Elliott Miller, in *A Crash Course on the New Age Movement* Eastbourne, Monarch Publications, 1990 pp. 15-16)

The New Age is about spiritual progress and spiritual evolution, but also about ancient wisdom. It is the bubbling up to the surface of a very ancient religious tradition. It originated perhaps in the East but has existed since the time of the ancient Greeks in the west. Modern adherents call it the esoteric (or hidden) religious tradition.

Characteristic of it is the desire for direct experience (gnosis) of the divine, coupled with a desire to retain one's independence from it. Direct experiential knowledge is much preferred to **faith, trust or obedience. Those attitudes are seen as appropriate to human childhood, out of which one grows into the maturity of gnosis.** Anthropologist and shaman Michael Harner, in his 1990 preface to *The Way of the Shaman* (3rd ed., New York, HarperCollins, 1990) expresses the attitude which is characteristic not only of modern shamanism but of New Age as a whole:

"One reason for the increasing interest in shamanism is that many educated, thinking people have left the Age of Faith behind them. They no longer trust ecclesiastical dogma and authority to provide them with adequate evidence of the realms of the spirit or, indeed, with evidence that there is spirit. Secondhand or thirdhand anecdotes in competing and culture-bound religious texts from other times and places are not convincing enough to provide paradigms for their personal existence. They require higher standards of evidence." (pp xi, xii)

New Age seekers are typically the alienated children of both secular materialism and biblical religion. The secular materialist path has left them feeling an inner emptiness which they can identify as spiritual, but the forms of biblical religion with which they are acquainted -- and often but superficially -- do not attract them, appearing lifeless, cerebral, guilt-ridden and authoritarian.

Some New Age groups use Christian terminology, but with subtly transformed meanings e.g. the popular 'channeled' book *A Course in Miracles*, (London, Penguin Arkana 1975). Some groups see themselves, as did the early Gnostics, as being the true or higher Christianity. But there is in New Age a widespread negative reaction to orthodox Christianity which ranges from polite indifference to active hostility. Having forsaken the faith of their fathers (secular materialism) and their grandfathers (biblical religion), New Age seekers reach out for an alternative spirituality which satisfies their need for meaning and personal transformation without depriving them of intellectual and moral autonomy. **Or to put it more bluntly, there is a desire for spiritual experience and spiritual power without attachment to the God of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures.**

The New Age solution to the human condition is expressed in terms of enlightenment rather than salvation: what is needed is for ignorance, i.e., the judging of the world by its appearances, to be dispelled and for human beings to accept existentially -- to "realise" -- what has always been true. Salvation, in the sense of being rescued or restored, is not needed: there is nothing to be saved from, except ignorance. Enlightenment in turn brings about "personal transformation" -- "a lifelong growth process marked by increasing wholeness and personal power" (Miller p 17) and the possibility of the transformation of society.

2. New Age Method: Altered states of consciousness

The main New Age way to seek enlightenment is by entering altered states of consciousness (ASC). Through the use of techniques such as mind-emptying meditation, drumming, chanting, ecstatic dancing, sensory deprivation, fasting, mind-altering drugs, self-hypnosis and visualisation, a state of consciousness is achieved which is different from ordinary reality, and in which the seeker has strange experiences, some of them profound.

Initiative in ASC induction

New Agers believe it is right to actively induce altered states of consciousness. They claim that their ASC experiences are the same as the mystical states of prayer of all world religions, including classical Christianity, and you can find Christian mystical writers like St John of the Cross, Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen and Meister Eckhardt in many New Age bookshops.

Some Christian scholars, like Evelyn Underhill, in her 1911 classic *Mysticism*, stress the similarities among all mystical traditions, but Christian experts in the field also identify important differences between Christian mysticism and that of Eastern religion and New Age.

One of the big differences between Christian and New Age mysticism is the question of who takes the initiative. Roman Catholic historian of Christian spirituality Fr. Michael Aumann repeatedly insists in *Spiritual Theology* (1980) that in the Christian tradition, genuine mystical experiences occur only at God's initiative: they are not sought after or induced by techniques, but occur during the course of ordinary vocal or mental prayer or discursive meditation. Any active attempts to

induce mystical experiences are considered harmful and wrongheaded, opening the personality to delusion and spiritual deception. This stands in the sharpest contrast to the New Age understanding of ASCs as a desirable achievement for which one takes the initiative by using 'spiritual technologies'.

For Christian healers the lesson to be learned is that for healing ministry we trust God, wait on God, place ourselves in a receptive position before God, but we never seek to work ourselves or others up into a frenzy. We are also very wary of any 'healing' techniques which appear to rely on any kind of hypnosis or trance induction.

The superior reality of ASC experience

ASC experiences are deemed to be not only just as real as ordinary reality, but much more real -- as glimpses of ultimate reality. Christians and New Agers would agree on dismissing the secular materialist view that our ordinary state of consciousness is the only reality. But New Agers seem to operate on a simple dichotomy of ordinary/nonordinary reality, ascribing a high value to all species of the latter. Christians are more nuanced in their approach to nonordinary reality. They distinguish between genuine mystical spiritual experience (glimpses of ultimate reality given by God), psychic or paranormal experience (nonordinary experiences of or communications from human or spiritual beings other than God), hallucinations, and fantasy. On the Christian view, ASC experiences could come from several different sources.

The New Ager's uncritical acceptance of ASC experience leads to a breakdown of the distinction between reality and fantasy. Thus along with the **ethical** relativism rooted in its monistic understanding of reality, the New Age promotes a **cognitive** relativism. After all, it argues, who are we to say what is real and what is not, what is truth and what is illusion? (see Harman p xx).

By contrast, Jesus said "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." (John 8:32) If Jesus was not a liar or a madman, then these words point us to the idea that there is truth, and that we can know what it is. Christian healing practice which reflects this view is characterized by simple, clear biblical teaching, and a lack of trappings, show or fuss. We don't need to surround the ministry with a mysterious aura – just show up with faith and let God be God.

What does the New Age and occultism teach about God? Despite its emphasis on freedom of discovery, the central New Age conclusions about ultimate reality appear remarkably similar. As Kevin Logan, a minister with substantial experience of occult and New Age people, puts it "It was amazing how all these New Agers were alike when it came to basics. They all pretended to be free spirits, doing their own thing, attuning to their own inner consciousnesses, yet they all sounded the same, as though they had been programmed in some subtle way." (Kevin Logan, *Close Encounters with the New Age* (Eastbourne, Kingsway, 1991, p 22)

At the core of New Age belief about spiritual reality is monistic pantheism.

Monistic pantheism teaches that God is all there is, and all there is, is God -- ultimately there is but one Self (with a capital S), of which we are all part. The Self, the One, ultimate reality, or God on this understanding is identified with the Advaita Hindu concept of Brahman – Divinity -- as an impersonal, infinite consciousness and force possessing Being (sat) Awareness (cit), and Bliss (Ananda). Other New Agers do not use the word 'God' but speak of cosmic force, life-force, life-essence, etheric, Kundalini serpent force, ch'i (Chinese form of universal energy) or prana (Hindu version of ch'i), od (magnetic force), celestial hierarchies (a chain of life-giving spiritual beings, sakti (Hindu term for divine energy), or elemental essence.

New Age healers often talk in terms of unblocking your chi or letting the life-force flow freely, raising it up through the chakras of the spine. Energy healers are all about improving the flow of divine energy through your body, mind and spirit. It sounds scientific, but it is monistic pantheism nonetheless.

This non-personal conception of God is alien to the biblical conception of a personal God who is distinct from the created universe. Understand it and you understand much about the New Age approach to spirituality. For Christians a deepening spirituality is a **deepening relationship with a known and trusted Person, and God, the goal**, is the focus of attention rather than **the process of growing closer to God**. For New Agers, a deepening spirituality is fundamentally a journey into the dark: there is no personal divine Partner for a relationship, only a deeper exploration into one's deepest self as a gateway to the Self. As we overcome the "illusion" of separateness with which ordinary life presents us, we achieve 'self-realisation' -- the realisation that one's true self is God. This goal is held to be both mysterious and inexpressible, **so the New Age focus is more on the spiritual process or technique.**

3.7 Religious pluralism and 'The Christ'

In harmony with monism ('I am God, you are God, all are One') and as part of its relativism, New Age endorses all spiritual paths as equally valid. All the great religious teachers of the world are seen (without very close attention to the detail of their messages) as avatars of the One. Thus Jesus is honoured, along with Buddha, Krishna and Muhammad and countless others.

New Agers are usually happy to acknowledge Jesus as the Christ, but the Christ they have in mind is the Cosmic Christ, the 'Christ principle' which has incarnated innumerable times in innumerable avatars. Incarnating the 'Christ principle', or being 'Christed', is a legitimate spiritual aspiration for any sincere New Age seeker. (See Douglas Groothuis's orthodox, *Revealing the New Age Jesus*, Intervarsity Press, 1990; and compare with Matthew Fox's heterodox *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*, New York, Harper & Row, 1988.)

Here again we see how similar and yet how different New Age religious concepts are to Christian ones, and how careful Christians dialoguing with

New Agers need to be about terminology. We assume that anyone who talks positively about Jesus must be okay. Even the goal of 'incarnating the Christ principle' does not sound so far from things that St. Paul taught. But look again. Christians have as their goal the formation of '*Christ in you, the hope of glory*' (Col. 1:27), and to grow up '*into the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ*' (Ephesians 4:13) so that '*I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.*' (Gal. 2:20). But the Christian's desire is for full relationship with and conformity to the now-risen but historical person Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God who incarnated once only. Despite Paul's flowery language, Christian Christ-mysticism seeks not the merger or replacement of the individual human personality by that of a supernatural Christ-entity – but rather the maturity and sanctification of the human personality through fellowship with Jesus so that it becomes one of the 'many brethren' of whom Christ is the firstborn.

Spirits, spirit helpers, power animals, New Age angels

The facelessness of ultimate reality for New Agers is compensated for by belief in, and attachment to, a host of nonphysical, intelligent, supernatural beings, ranging from powerful 'gods' to tiny nature spirits. This belief may include a full-bodied conviction of the objective reality of the spirit entities, or it may, especially at the beginning, be more nuanced through the New Age concept of myth.

Names and characteristics of spirit beings vary, and include the *devas* and *devatas* of Hinduism, gods of the ancient Egyptian and other pantheons, angels, members of Gnostic-style celestial hierarchies (as in Theosophy), ghosts of the dead, especially of great spiritual teachers, the supernatural archetypes of animals; earth, water, tree and mountain spirit; extraterrestrials, and daemons (not necessarily seen as evil). All spirits are held to have some power, and New Agers are often keen to tap into the powers of particular spirits.

The role of spirit mediumship, or "trance channelling" in the formation of the New Age movement is now recognized. The influence of 'channelled' teachings and books is widespread, as are the spiritistic aspects of some aboriginal traditional practice. New Age teachers often encourage followers to find a 'spirit helper' or 'inner guide' in healing or personal growth work. There is evidence of a link between Hindu yogic practice and spiritism (see Rabindranath Maharaj, *Death of a Guru*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1977).

Biblical Christianity has always recognised the reality of supernatural beings other than God (though some post-Enlightenment theologies try to discard this element of the tradition): where it differs from the New Age is on whether it is desirable to try to communicate with them. Actively seeking to communicate with spirits, to borrow power from them, or seek union with them, as many New Agers do, is both unnecessary and highly dangerous.

Unnecessary, because intimate communication with the most loving, wise and trustworthy of all spiritual beings, the Holy Trinity, meets every conceivable need for this kind of communication and guidance. A New Ager who converted to Christianity told me that in relationship with the God of Christians he found the fulfillment of what

he had sought, and partially found, in the New Age. His new attitude to spirit communication was 'why fool around with the little guys when you can go straight to the top?' To exchange communication with this God for communication with spirits is to have "*exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator*" (Romans 1:24).

Dealing with spirits other than God is highly dangerous. According to biblical teaching God is the only perfect being: all others involve a degree of imperfection or limitation, and many have actively rebelled against God, embraced evil, and desire the downfall of humanity. In seeking spirit communication one has no way of knowing what kind of spirit has been contacted, and it would be in the nature of evil spirits heavily to disguise their real nature. Scripture tells us that the devil is the 'father of lies'.

Even some New Age writers warn of the dangers involved. American shaman Michael Harner, for instance, insists that guardian spirits are wholly good, and are possessed by the shaman rather than possessing him or her, yet mentions that there can be "involuntary" ways of acquiring a guardian spirit -- which sounds a lot like being possessed -- (p 43, 64), He also warns his students against having anything to do with certain kinds of spirit creatures they may meet on their ASC journeys, saying they are evil (p 118). While claiming to practice only healing shamanism himself, Harner also notes the existence of bad or 'bewitching' shamans, who send 'spirit helpers' into victims' bodies to cause illness or death (p. 16).

Miller's review of channelling concludes that, while channelled entities at first appear benevolent, and communication with them is voluntary, this can change. Cases of involuntary possession resulting from channelling contained features so unusual that German psychiatrist Hans Bender created a new classification to fit them, called mediumistic psychosis. The cases involved malignant entities which drove the host to attempt suicide and murder (quoted in Miller, p 168).

The New Age interest in spirit communication, along with being dangerous, is somewhat ironic. If it is true that each individual is God, and one needs only to look within to realise one's divinity, the desire for external information and interaction seems absurd. Perhaps it points to the reality that in each of us there is not divinity, **but a capacity for relatedness to the Divine**. This option not being taken up, there remains that God-shaped hole in the individual which the faceless, non-personal One cannot fill. Recourse to the spirits offers a substitute. (see Miller p 162, 175).

There is only one spirit by which it is safe to be possessed, and that is the Holy Spirit. When we ask to be filled with the Holy Spirit, we are speaking the language of spirit-possession, of spirit-initiation. The difference is that God the Holy Spirit is utterly trustworthy, works in us only by invitation, and never overpowers the individual personality but rather refines and enhances it.

NEW AGE AND THE OCCULT

Occult practice and 'esoteric philosophy' are intimately connected. And both are intimately connected with New Age. Kevin Logan, who has written both about the occult and New Age, describes the connection thus:

"On a superficial level, these [New Age] techniques seem attractive to those fleeing an ultra-materialistic society in which gold outweighs the soul. For some, it provides hope in the lostness of their worlds. Surely, as the New Age of Aquarius dawns, they reckon, a new humanity might learn to carry each other's burdens in an inner quest for peace and goodwill. We can all pursue ecological harmony and work for a New World Order. There are increasing numbers in Britain who... have trod the alternative paths only to come to grief on explosive mines hidden beneath the surface of this pop culture. It is important to note some of these mines.

"First, the occultic means to achieve New Age ends have left many lost in confusion. Their personalities have been altered, and not for the better. Hannah [a woman fleeing occult involvement who committed suicide] was only one of the countless many who come to Christian ministers for help.

"Second, the New Age is today providing a 'soft-occult' climate in which satanism and witchcraft can seem acceptable. Hannah certainly saw them as the next stage of inner growth.

"Third, if the god-force is everything and everything makes up the god-force, then there is no external absolute against which to measure what is right and wrong. Truth is reduced to personal whim...

"For an increasing number like Hannah, the combination of the occult with the loss of ethics and morals is proving too much... Those who started off in the 'soft' New Age were frequently graduating to the 'hardcore' of witchcraft and satanism..." (Logan, p.27)

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

As servants of the Christian healing ministry we need to be 'as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves'. We need to be aware of the look-alikes and counterfeits to Christian healing that are around us:

- Watch out for 'energy healing' in all its forms.
- Be suspicious of any system that relies on empty-mind meditation, that has systems of secret initiation into its inner circle, or which makes practitioners pay for initiation.
- Keep an eye on new liturgies and symbolism in worship: many New Age ideas are coming into the Church through 'creation-centred' liturgies, and in some cases through interfaith worship. Texts and planned worship activities need careful theological assessment.
- Scrutinize the programs of Christian retreat houses. In North America and the UK they have proved in recent years to be either indiscriminating or unconcerned about the nature of the spirituality of groups who use their

premises. It is sad to say that Christian retreat centres are often the places where Christians are first introduced to New Age ideas and experiences.

The Christian healing ministry by its very nature is capable of infiltration by psychic or occult 'healers'. 'Results' in terms of healings cannot be the sole measure of an authentic Christian healing ministry: spiritualists and other occult groups also get results. What is taught and prayed must also be assessed, as well as the personal and moral lives of the practitioners and the effects of the ministry on involved individuals over time. As Jesus said, "By their fruits you shall know them".

In our healing practice be aware that we will probably encounter people who are oppressed by evil spirits. Healing and deliverance were cousins in Jesus' ministry: we should expect them to be so in ours, and prepare ourselves accordingly.

The task of discernment is made harder because many of our church members, including clergy, are unwittingly flirting with New Age and occultic practice. We tolerate Freemasonry. We allow our church halls to be used for yoga classes, meditation groups and tai chi. Church members consult psychics, read their horoscopes, watch TV shows about mediums, get their homes feng shui'ed. Many still have the naïve assumption that if it is spiritual it must be about God.

Christian healers need to be informed about the dangers that are out there, and even more they need to be people of deep prayer, seeking and using the charismatic gift of discernment. We need to express our dissent from New Age practices with courtesy - the New Age caricature of Christians is of a group of paranoid witch-hunters who neither savour the joys of spirituality themselves nor permit others to do so. But we will need a firm backbone as well as a smiling face, and the courage to say no now to questionable activities, especially within church congregations and dioceses. As the New Age grows in popularity, respectability and power, it will be more difficult to say no later on.

At the end of the day, the acid test for discernment remains the attitude to Jesus. If a system or practice is indifferent to Jesus or hostile to him, or recreates a 'Jesus' who is not the Jesus of the Bible, then watch out! If it preaches or implies that Jesus is not uniquely God made fully physically human, who does not save us by his cross and who did not rise from the dead, watch out! Add to that the test Jesus suggests: 'by their fruits you will know them'.

We understand the New Age passion for the spiritual and the desire for direct experience of it, though we must reject its interest in acquiring supernatural knowledge and power apart from a relationship of trust and obedience with God. We can even endorse in a qualified way the New Age conviction that human beings are divine. New Agers say this is by nature: Christians, and I think on better evidence, looking at human nature, say that our status and reality as adopted children of God is a matter not of nature but of grace, bought for us by the costly sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

One of the best ways to combat New Age error is to offer a vibrant spiritual alternative. New Agers are often drinking from poisoned streams because they have never known the taste of living water. By a much fuller teaching and living-out of our Christian calling -- in terms of intimate relationship with Jesus, authentic meditative and contemplative prayer, vibrant worship, charismatic gifts, healing and deliverance ministries, and a full-bodied and sacrificial love for each other and for the wider world -- we can model the reality, quality and power of the Life for which New Age seekers yearn.

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