

## **THE NEW AGE MOVEMENT (1994)**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

1 The Conference of 1990 referred to the Faith and Order Committee the following Memorial (M.8) for consideration and report not later than the Conference of 1992:

The Pickering (29/22) Circuit Meeting (Present 32. Vote: unanimous) request that Conference examine the New Age Movement with respect to its theological content and socio-political ambitions, in order that the Methodist people may receive guidelines as to its compatibility with the Christian faith and Methodist doctrines.

2 In 1992 the Faith and Order Committee expressed its regret that, for a number of reasons, it was not in a position to present a recommended reply to the Memorial, and requested that it be allowed a further two years in which to prepare its report. The Conference directed the Faith and Order Committee to bring a reply to Memorial M.8 to the Conference of 1994.

## PART 1: CHARACTERISTICS AND ORIGINS OF THE NEW AGE MOVEMENT

### I Characteristics

- 3 New Age ideas are all around us on television and radio, in newspapers and magazines. We meet them in the shopping place, possibly – depending on the work we do – during training. **They are becoming all-pervasive.** This all-pervasiveness is both characteristic in itself and a fact which has arisen from other characteristics. While there are certain noted centres of the movement, particularly Findhorn and Glastonbury, there is no focal point from which it sprung, no single co-ordinating centre – instead there are hundreds of ‘centres’, increasingly interconnected by computers. Similarly, while there are some significant people involved (Marilyn Ferguson, Sir George Trevelyan, David Spangler among them) there is no leader, no inspirational central figure – it is “a leaderless but powerful network” (Ferguson, quoted in Chandler 1988, p229). It does not consist of an established set of doctrines which can be set down and examined by those who might consider ‘joining’ it – in fact, any thought of dogma is anathema to it.
- 4 ‘Movement’ is a good word to describe it since **it is in a state of continuous change.** As John Drane puts it, “Understanding the New Age is like trying to wrestle with a jelly” (Drane 1991, p40), precisely because it is amorphous and eclectic in nature, drawing into itself so many of the new movements and developments, like particle physics and alternative medicine, as well as a range of ancient patterns of thought and belief: “Anything and everything that has potential for promoting a change of thinking among the world’s people will be sucked up and utilized as we move relentlessly towards the Age of Aquarius” (Drane 1991, p45). In publishing terms, it is one of the major growth areas, some 25% of all new ‘religious’ publishing coming under its umbrella in this country alone.
- 5 To try to study the New Age is to experience the intellectual equivalent of the sense of drowning – yet certain distinguishing and cohesive features can be made out, like figures emerging from the haze. We mention four:
- 6 (i) The most prominent and most important of these is **the emphasis on the spiritual as opposed to the material.** In the New Age, people are rediscovering a sense of the spirit and the concept of the soul, a belief that there is more to them than just their material bodies. Together with this has come an increasing sense of a spiritual world which is ‘out there’, which can be communicated with directly, through channelling of spirit guides, through trances and mediums. Reincarnation has become a fashionable belief, out-of-body and near-death experiences are openly spoken of, past lives are recalled. There has been a steadily growing interest in the subtleties of Eastern faiths, practices and mysticism, and there has been increasing involvement in the occult. At the popular level, films such as *Star Wars* and *E.T.* show interest in the possibility of life forms beyond this planet and of forces beyond our comprehension, while *Ghost* echoes resurgence in the hope of a life beyond this one. But there is more than just a sense of the individual having spiritual depth and existence: the universe is the scene of great forces which can influence people’s lives if only they are harnessed and directed through such things as crystals and pyramids, or discerned through astrology. Linked into

this is the New Physics, where matter is declared to be no more and all that is, is a pattern of electrical and magnetic forces.

- 7 A major part of that sense of life forces beyond themselves has been the growth among many of a belief in the 'Gaia' hypothesis, the concept of Mother Earth as a living entity carefully nurturing the total world environment and maintaining a stability if humankind will only attune to its needs. As well as being part of the upsurge in interest in matters spiritual, this focus on Mother Earth has also been part of the shift towards an emphasis on female rather than male values and thought. Many feminist thinkers are involved, viewing men "as brutalizing women through sexual violence and pornographic exploitation, and dominating them through a stern, overbearing, male 'sky-god'" (Chandler 1988, p121): for them, the religiously-sanctioned domination of nature is of a piece with the exploitation of women.
- 8 There is a belief that "We have been conditioned to operate through only one half of our brain – the left half, which does the thinking – while the right half, which majors on feeling and perception, has been left undeveloped and immobilized" (Drane 1991, p68). The view that the way forward lies not with conflict and competition (though interestingly, certain aspects of New Age thinking have been incorporated into management training and techniques) but rather with co-operation and harmony, whether that be global or individual, has taken increasing hold.
- 9 (ii) So, **harmony and the related concepts of unity and wholeness, are also crucial to the New Age:** "This wholeness encompasses self, others, ideas . . . You are joined to a great Self . . . And because that Self is inclusive, you are joined to all others'" (Ferguson, quoted in Drane 1991, p70). Health is wholeness, a harmony between mind and body, a oneness with the universal spiritual energy, which can be achieved through meditation, though the use of such practices as aroma, colour or cymatic therapy, through iridology, reflexology and essential oils, through acupuncture and acupressure which restore balance to the forces within the body.
- 10 That need for harmony between people and omnipresent spiritual energy is a particular thrust of the New Age, a need for people to 'attune' themselves and come together, in 'harmonic convergence', to stave off the disasters our world is otherwise coming to. Underlying much of this thought is Pantheism, the belief that 'All is One. We are all One. All is God. And we are God'.
- 11 (iii) This leads to another emphasis of the New Age – one which brings it close to the dominant political thought of the 1980s – **the emphasis on the individual and the individual's right or ability to select from all that is on offer the mix that is appropriate for them.** Not only is this a right, but it is also a responsibility: "There are no victims in this life or any other. No mistakes. No wrong paths. No winners. No losers. Accept that and then take responsibility for making your life what you want it to be." (Chandler 1988, pp28-29). This springs from the view that there is no reality outside yourself – 'You create your own reality' is a New Age slogan. Also, it is in tune with the New Age emphasis on positive thinking: ". . . if we all create our own reality, then by focussing on wholeness and health, instead of worrying about disasters and failures, we can together create something entirely new, that will be better than what has gone before" (Drane 1991, p42). Educational thought follows this line with its emphasis on 'confluent' education, which 'posits the

equality of individual values because everyone has the wisdom of the universe within'. It also raises questions of good and evil, of right and wrong behaviour. Evil is an illusion, so there are only alternative ways of reaction: what counts is that one is properly attuned to the cosmic forces.

- 12 One manifestation of the New Age Movement's emphasis on individualism is that, by and large, it encourages political quietism. Those writers who put forward a 'conspiracy theory', arguing that it wishes to take over the world politically, seriously over-estimate its structural resources. New Agers tend to be individualists, arguably self-absorbed to a high degree. One result of this is that the commitment of many (though not all) New Agers to social and economic change is slight: many of its members have prospered during the 'yuppy' years of the 1980s.
- 13 (iv) The final major feature of the New Age to be noted is **its hopefulness**. Coming to an end, it claims, is the current astrological age, the Age of Pisces, the age of the fish which was inaugurated by the coming of Jesus Christ and which has been characterised by division, conflict, war, injustice, hatred, bigotry and mistrust, all of which are seen to be related to the division between God and humankind demanded by organised religion. Approaching is the age of Aquarius, the age of the water-bearer, a figure who symbolises healing and restoration, the promise of new life and the growth of peace, harmony and wholeness. This will be "a time when people and God will be reunified, when there will be a healing of all the separation and an assertion of the fact that we are all part of our natural environment." (Drane 1991, p42). Sir George Trevelyan issues a warning in that there is, he claims, "a sense of urgency. We are approaching a crucial turning point, and this generation is involved in a great task. Either Man learns the true healing impulse of blending consciously with the powers of light, or he will plunge himself into disaster and catastrophe" (Bloom 1991, p33), but he speaks mainly of a 'note of joy' and with great confidence: "the immediate present is a time of profound growth and mind-opening – a resurgence of the spirit linking individuals and injecting fresh impulses into man's understanding . . . We are truly involved with a Second Coming" (Bloom 1991, p33). Such in outline only, are some of the characteristics of the New Age.

## II Origins

- 14 It is helpful to review some of the sources of the Movement, to look at its growth and consider its history: New Age is a flourishing tree and, like all plants that flourish, **it has roots which are both widespread and deep**. At first sight, however, it would seem to be a phenomenon of the recent decades only, coming into existence with the approaching end of this millennium and the consequent awareness that now is a significant time in which to be living. The first distinctive 'counter-cultural' movements of the post-war era came in the 50s. Given that this was a period of conflict still, between rival gangs of Teddy-boys and Greasers, between Hoods and Socs, it would seem to be part of the age of Pisces, but it was also a time when interest in Eastern faiths and philosophies began to emerge into the public arena through the fascination with Zen. New Age attitudes came to the fore in the following decade with 'flower-power', the emergence of the Hippies, the emphasis on love – essentially 'free' – as the way forward, the production of the film "Hair" and its central theme that "this is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius", the

prominence of the Beatles and their (brief) espousal of the East in the shape of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.

- 15 Other Eastern gurus, such as Swami Muktananda and the teenage Maharaj Ji, “Lord of the Universe” and overseer of the Divine Light Mission, emerged on either side of the Atlantic. That in the 90s there is a particularly fervent development of New Age thought can be explained, not only by the prospect of the approaching end of the millennium, but also by the passing of the youth of the 60s into their time of middle-age: material needs satisfied, children produced, careers well established, they are turning in large numbers to the search for greater depths in their lives and a rediscovery of a sense of the spiritual which they have ignored or set aside for the last thirty years. Their thinking is fed by such seminal works as Marilyn Ferguson’s *The Aquarian Conspiracy* and Fritjof Capra’s *The Tao of Physics*, produced in the 1970s, and New Age ideas are made common property through the media that features, for instance, Shirley Maclaine’s experiences and the New Age music of John Denver.
- 16 If such has been the emergence of the New Age into the public arena since the war, **there was a steady growth of ideas – ‘root systems’ – taking place before it and stretching back well into the last century.** A significant name is that of Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (writer of *The Secret Doctrine* and *Isis Unveiled*) who, together with her close companion, Colonel Olcott, founded the Theosophical Society in 1875: this was an occult organisation into which she and Olcott imported their own brand of Hinduism after their visit to India in the latter half of the 1870s. Blavatsky has been described as “a godmother of the New Age movement” because “she paved the way for contemporary transcendental meditation, Zen, Hare Krishnas; yoga and vegetarianism; karma and reincarnation; swamis, yogis and gurus.” (Chandler 1988, p47). 1893 saw the establishment of the World Parliament of Religions as part of the World Fair held in Chicago: this brought a flood of Eastern figures to America and so made eastern mysticism widely available to Americans for the first time. The centenary of that date – 1993 – was designated a ‘Year of Interreligious Understanding’ and, as Seddon points out (1990, p7), it “is perhaps not entirely coincidental that astrologers regard 1993 as a propitious year when, for the first time since 1821, Uranus meets Neptune just over halfway through Capricorn.” The earlier part of this century saw the contribution of several significant writers – the Afrikaaner, Johanna Brandt, is credited with giving the first coherent presentation of the ‘new age’ between “The Millennium” of 1916 and “The Paraclete” or “Coming World Mother” of 1936.
- 17 Charles Williams was fascinated with the occult and a successful, popular writer – but perhaps the most prominent of these was Alice Bailey, who wrote in the 30s and 40s. It is she who is credited with first using the title ‘New Age’ and who spoke – in *The Way of the Disciple* – in terms of a shift in the approach to God, away from “those who look back to the past, who hang on to old ways, the ancient theologies, and the reactionary methods of finding truth . . . people who recognise authority, whether that of a prophet, a bible or theologies . . . who prefer obedience to imposed authority” to those, small in number, who are an “inner group of lovers of God, the intellectual mystics, the knowers of reality who belong to no one religion or organisation, but who regard themselves as members of the Church universal and as ‘members one

of another’.” It is these latter who, “in the fullness of time . . . will so stimulate and energise the thoughts and souls of men that the New Age will be ushered in by an outpouring of love, knowledge and harmony of God himself.” (All quoted in Bloom 1991, pp22-23).

- 18 But **the deepest roots of all** – as is clear from some of the influences mentioned above – go back far further than the last century, in fact **go back for thousands of years**: “The new culture is the consummation of all previous cultures, for only the combined energy of our entire cultural history is equal to the new quantum leap of evolution”. (“The Independent Weekend”, 30 Sept 1989, quoted in Seddon 1990, p8). Perhaps it is the greatest irony of the ‘New Age’ that so many of its significant features and ideas are so ancient, because here is a movement that draws variously on Buddhism and Hinduism, on Zen, Taoism and Paganism, on Egyptian, Greek, Aztec and Mayan mythologies and sees the re-birth of one of the oldest Christian heresies, Gnosticism (though it was more than that, being a widespread phenomenon in many cults and faith-systems during the early years of Christianity), which maintains that “humans are destined for reunion with the divine essence from which they sprang”. (Chandler 1988, pp47-48). The language is new, particularly that which draws on modern psychology and science; the essence of the age is the renewal of the ancient. If that is true, then a species of its reverse is also true, that the ‘New Age’ involves the overthrow of ideas and patterns of life that have developed in more recent centuries, or at least offers a challenge to them. Some of these warrant closer examination.
- 19 Certainly **New Agers have turned to developments that have taken place in scientific thought this century to support their beliefs**. These developments present significant challenges to the assumptions of scientific and rationalist thought as it has proceeded from ‘the Enlightenment’, which, according to Sir George Trevelyan, “in many respects, was anything but that” (Bloom 1991, p31). That the Enlightenment was given that title indicates very clearly how the ferment of new ideas that arose was viewed: the ‘primitive’ ideas of the Middle Ages and before, were pushed aside by it; belief in a flat earth was replaced by acceptance that the world was a globe; despite the initial objections of the Church, a heliocentric replaced a geocentric universe, this discovery single-handedly dismantling medieval ideas about concentric spheres and undermining the ‘layer’ concepts of creation with God in the remotest heavens. The French philosopher and mathematician, Descartes (1596-1650), introduced an analytical approach to thinking, whereby thoughts and problems were broken down into smaller pieces and then reassembled in a logical manner.
- 20 Newton (1642-1727) as well as discovering gravity, produced a model of the universe which depended on precise mathematical laws and exact relationships of time and space. Eventually laws of nature were formulated that gave a rational explanation of phenomena which previously had seemed to be miraculous. Following hard on such ideas came rapid progress which produced the Industrial Revolution and, with it, a rapid spread of western culture throughout the world.
- 21 Implicit in all these ideas are certain presuppositions about matter, the earth and the universe. In a rather simplistic way, the universe came to be viewed by many as mechanistic and subject to eternal laws established by God, which

meant that experiments conducted under identical conditions would produce identical results. Everything within that universe was knowable to the rational mind, in particular the disembodied mind of the scientist who would 'make observations'.

- 22 Developments this century – particularly what has come to be known as the New Physics – have challenged many of these assumptions and been eagerly gathered into the fold of New Age belief. The combination of Einstein's theory of relativity, quantum theory, chaos theory and the 'Big Bang' theory has produced a scientific upheaval. In popular and often uncritical and mistaken forms, many New Agers have used – arguably abused – 'the New Science'. In particular, most New Agers argue that the earth is not a dead globe but a living entity – hence the name 'Gaia', the Greek Earth goddess also known as Ge. She has given her name to the sciences of geography and geology, and "the hypothesis that the entire range of living matter on Earth, from whales to viruses, and from oaks to algae, could be regarded as constituting a single living entity, capable of manipulating the Earth's atmosphere to suit its overall needs and endowed with faculties and powers far beyond those of constituent parts" (Lovelock, in Bloom 1991, p166).
- 23 For New Agers, the machine metaphor is no longer acceptable in a universe begun by a 'big bang' – preferable is the image of an embryo, growing and unfolding. The scientist is no longer seen as a disembodied mind, the detached observer. Rather, scientists are members of cultural and social groups, their observations are not independent of the minds that produce them, they participate in what they observe.
- 24 It is that connection between the new science and the spiritual which leads us to the second major area which calls for closer examination – **that whole area of the spiritual, of faith and belief.** Capra, one of the earlier New Age scientists, makes specific connections between scientific developments and characteristics of Eastern mysticism: "The conception of physical things and phenomena as transient manifestations of an under-lying fundamental entity is not only a basic element of quantum field theory, but also a basic element of the Eastern world view. Like Einstein, the Eastern mystics consider this underlying entity as the only reality: all its phenomenal manifestations are seen as transitory and illusory" (quoted in Bloom 1991, p156). Similarly, "In spite of using terms like empty and void, the Eastern sages make it clear that they do not mean ordinary emptiness when they talk about Brahman, Sunyata and Tao, but, on the contrary, a Void which has an infinite creative potential. Thus, the void of the Eastern mystics can easily be compared with the quantum field of sub-atomic physics . . . Like the sub-atomic world of the physicist, the phenomenal world of the Eastern mystic is a world of samsara – of continuous birth and death" (Bloom 1991, p157).
- 25 But the Eastern world view had begun to penetrate the West some time before modern science became alive to these and other such connections. As has been shown above, with the Chicago World Fair of 1893, and before that through the Theosophical Society of Madam Blavatsky, Eastern religions began to find a foothold in predominantly Christian cultures. With the increasing pluralism of the twentieth century, that foothold has become larger and firmer and the New Age has eagerly absorbed a range of thoughts from such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism.

- 26 **New Age spirituality has about it the quality of the supermarket shelf;** it draws on a diversity of spiritual tradition and includes among its sources Transcendentalism and Spiritualism, native American religions, Neo-Paganism, Druidism and Goddess-Worshippers. This has allowed it to give added credence to the channelling of spirit guides. New life has been breathed into astrology and Pantheism has come to be seen as a uniting, monistic, spiritual principle – hence ‘The Force’ or “The High C, High Consciousness or God-self” which is “the innate wisdom within all of us, where we are all one” (Kystal, quoted in Bloom 1991, p195). It is this supermarket quality which has led to a revival of Gnosticism, until recently the preserve of only a few specialist scholars.
- 27 Gnosticism, the belief that there are two worlds – this one, dominated by materialism and corruption, and another which is dominated by ‘God’ and where true spiritual fulfilment and enlightenment may be found – has proved especially attractive.
- 28 That such a belief should resurface is both a sign of the shift that has taken, and is taking, place in Western thought and a warning to the Church that the path it has trodden since the time of Schleiermacher – the path which has produced much rationalist and scholarly theology, which in the sixties allowed the theologians to claim, like Nietzsche, that ‘God is dead’, the path which has allowed the church to be part of “the new, self-confident, all-pervading worldview dominated by the progress of science, reason, technology and materialism” (Drane 1991, p53) – is rapidly becoming a cul-de-sac. New ways of understanding the faith, ways which emphasise spirituality, are coming forward. The fastest growing ‘section’ of the church in the Western world is the charismatic movement, a movement which comes very close to many New Agers in its fervency.
- 29 The Catholic Church, especially, though not solely, is re-discovering the meditative spirituality of pre-Enlightenment times in such figures as Mechtild of Magdeburg, Julian of Norwich and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The former Dominican, Matthew Fox, has become a champion of creation spirituality, which moves from an “‘I think therefore I am’ philosophy to a ‘Creation begets therefore we are’ philosophy” (Fox 1991, p102), a spirituality which “celebrates the whole person – right brain and left brain, body and mind, soul and spirit . . . feeling and judgement” (Fox 1991, p103-104). Fox has not, however, remained in good standing in his Church.
- 30 Christ is being presented increasingly as a Cosmic Christ, “a cosmic principle, a spiritual presence whose quality infuses and appears in various ways in all the religions and philosophies that uplift humanity and seek unity with spirit” (Spangler, quoted in Groothuis 1990, p222). The western world has been desiccated by rationality and materialism. There is need and demand for a re-emphasis on the spiritual, and for a theology that eschews arid intellectualism but does not shirk serious reflection upon matters of contemporary relevance and urgency.
- 31 New Age beliefs are, by and large, shaped by an attractiveness to prosperous or relatively prosperous people in the Western world. It is not in their interest to radically change, still less overthrow existing political and social structures. For this reason, this report contends that the ‘socio-political ambitions’ of most New Agers are negligible.

- 32 Its theological content is to be taken much more seriously, as both a challenge and a stimulus to orthodox Christian teaching. The nebulous, disparate and ego-centred characteristics of the quests of many New Agers underscore the need for Christians to have an adequate ecclesiology, or doctrine of the Church, as a framework for (among other things) worship and Christian nurture. The wide variety of often incoherent beliefs prevalent among New Agers indicates the need for Christians to be grounded in their faith and knowledge of God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- 33 But two matters stand out as particularly important because versions of them are so often found in New Age writing. The first is the doctrine of creation, and the second is the person and work of Christ. Parts 2 and 3 will examine these areas in relation to the New Age Movement.

## **PART 2: NEW AGE PERCEPTIONS OF CREATION – A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE**

- 34 Because perceptions of creation are central to New Age thinking, this is the first major area to which we must respond. For this limited purpose we can identify three major cultural/perceptual issues in relation to which these attitudes have been formulated, in however loose conceptual shape.
- 35 (i) **There is invariably little affinity with, and often antipathy towards, certain strands of traditional monotheistic, including Christian, accounts of creation.** Understanding creation as the purposive act of an omnipotent personal Creator (usually depicted in the sources as male) who remains ‘outside’ or ontologically discontinuous with the natural world and who decrees that humans are to exercise ‘domination’ over the earth is a problematic concept for New Agers. That the creative Spirit ‘broods over the face of the deep’, that at each stage of creation earth’s life was pronounced ‘good’, that humans are to bear the divine ‘image and likeness’ and therefore are to exercise, as the divine representatives, lordship within the time/space realm, and that they are to be as vegetarian as the animals in the original divine intention – these themes may well find resonance among New Agers.
- 36 However, those New Agers with more ecological commitment find the anthropocentrism of the Genesis I account of creation, in which humans are to ‘dominate the earth’ and all other living beings, a far from earth-friendly doctrine. ‘Christians’, said Lynn White as early as 1967, in a widely influential essay reprinted in innumerable journals and anthologies, ‘bear a huge burden of guilt for the destruction of the earth’. This is primarily because of their espousal of this divine decree to the human race to master the earth. New Age ecologists look for an account of human relationship with other life-forms in creation more in terms of mutually dependent co-equals sharing together in earth’s life. Even the more clear emphasis, in the Genesis II account, on human ‘caring’ for earth (by an Adam who is shaped by God from earth’s substance, then into whom is breathed living spirit), if interpreted in terms of ‘stewardship’ of creation, is still problematic for the very committed ecologist.
- 37 To some extent, it may be the lack in many traditional Christian accounts of creation of the presence of the continuously creative Spirit of God as the life immanent within the whole creative process and of the cosmic Christ as the

centre-point through whom all things cohere that has made those accounts so unacceptable to many ecologically sensitive New Agers, as well as, indeed, to many Christians.

38 There does, however, seem to be a perceptual divide on at least two points here:-

(a) Any Christian doctrine of creation will need to be emphatically theocentric (as the Genesis account and other biblical pointers are) – at least affirming that creation derives solely from the good purpose and creative power of God, effected through and finding its integrating point in Christ. For New Agers, however, cosmic life appears as a self-enclosed system within which impersonal forces affect the direction of events, rather than the creation of a personal, purposive Creator, the transcendent source of as well as the immanent power within cosmic life. This provides the framework for the New Age tendency to see the spiritual powers flowing through cosmic life as controllable and manipulable by those sufficiently initiated into New Age esoteric wisdom. A number of New Age practices, therefore, look like magical acts or occult arts performed within this self-enclosed system and providing the secret keys to its successful functioning.

(b) However much an ecologically sensitive Christian account of creation may wish to emphasize the participant character of the human presence among creaturely life and the need to contain the arrogant aggression that has proved so destructive of nature, the responsibility to care for the rest of creation implied in the bearing of the divine image that is distinctive of human nature is inescapable. The New Age reluctance to accept any such distinctive role for humans again indicates a further perceptual divide. On the other hand, where New Age thought is linked with ecologically-sensitive developments in our time, there is a radical rejection of the view (from which mainstream Christianity has found difficulty in distancing itself) that Earth's rich resources are there to be exploited by humans to provide unlimited consumer-products to satisfy human wants. New Age generally is not consumer-orientated, it often proposes a radical counter-culture.

39 (ii) **A second self-distinguishing issue for New Age thought is modern techno-scientific secular culture.** Descartes made a radical distinction between rational, analytical mind and insentient, objectifiable nature – perceived as an inanimate mechanism rather than a living organism. This led him to use pointedly violent imagery about the way in which mind, and therefore the human enterprise, relates to nature.

40 Rational knowledge is essentially power, enabling the 'hounding', 'binding', 'enslaving' of nature by the scientist, who is to 'torture' secrets from her. Mastery, possession and exploitation of nature to rational human ends were key concepts in this Cartesian world view, (called Cartesian, because it was based on the philosophy of Descartes), even though the concept of God was also deemed necessary for the functioning both of the rationality of mind and the mechanism of nature.

41 In many respects the refinement of this early philosophy in the 18th century, served only to perpetuate the mind-nature dualism. Even the emergence of biologically determined evolutionary theory in the 19th century did not bring about a fundamental 'paradigm shift' in western cultural attitudes towards

nature – in spite of a mild resurgence of nature-romanticism in some cultural circles. Rational mind, though in some sense emerging from nature, was still seen as immeasurably superior to, able to transcend and objectively review, the preceding evolutionary process. New Age thought has vigorously rejected this Cartesian dualist world view and presents itself as a radical alternative to techno-scientific secularity. Its forms of expression often appear anti-intellectual and also anti-science as science is understood today. However, it is also true that modern biological science has largely determined the emergence of the ecological sciences often linked with New Age. And a few biologists have shown decided affinity with aspects of New Age thought, (e.g Rupert Sheldrake). In general, New Agers vigorously reject the view of reality defined by modern technology and science, traditionally understood:

- 42 a) As against any mind/nature dualism, along with other ramifications of such a basic dualism, New Age emphasises the interlocking inter-dependence of mind and nature. Generally, a wholistic (which we spell in this alternative form, to emphasise the New Agers' emphasis on the whole-ness of all) account of all the constituent elements of being is given. True, there may also be an emphasis on the pre-eminence of a spiritual dimension, or some higher level of consciousness. But material nature and bodily sensation will be seen in some integral way as instrumental to such a spiritual dimension or emergent consciousness. Frequently New Agers refer to the Yin-Yang character of the universe which does not imply a dualistic system. Rather it means the eternal balance of opposites. Equilibrium is the key.
- 43 b) New Agers often seek alternative forms of healing, either on the grounds that Western allopathic medical practice fails to treat the sick person in a wholistic way, or because some more esoteric view of the body's constitution is held. A quite common New Age view, for example, is that the body and its inner selfhood is an integrated micro-cosmic form of the macro-cosmic universe, a concept that can have widespread ramifications for our understanding of the relation of self to body, of individual person to the rest of creation and, of course, for our understanding of personal wellbeing and healing.
- 44 c) New Age claims that modern scientific knowledge, including medical practice and its effective technological skills, have largely been based on the scientist's ability to isolate more and more irreducible entities in the natural world, and thus control that world. True knowledge of our world and our place in the world, however, needs to recognise the interwoven character of all things and should seek their equilibrium and integration. The practice of yoga is often one of the ways in which it is believed such integration can be achieved.
- 45 d) While techno-science assumes the power of the rational intellect to effect control of things, New Agers claim we need to find harmony with a wide range of supra-mundane energies flowing through cosmic life, and potentially able to flow through bodily life. The numerous ways in which such cosmic energies are thought to be channelled and utilised include astrology, meditative techniques and yogic practices, spirit-media and 'channelling' etc.
- 46 e) New Agers urge people to create their own reality. This implies an individualistic but also, in some ways, an idealistic attitude to reality. Here, though, there is a certain ambivalence: the New Age certainly emphasises the

need for each individual to work things out creatively within his/her own being, but community reflection and community living also finds emphasis, for it is believed that alienation of body from mind also leads to other forms of alienation, of individual from community and male from female.

- 47 **iii) A third cultural tradition in relation to which New Age thought about creation has been formulated is that of Eastern religion**, some aspects of which have already been referred to. Others include:
- 48 a) The concept of all in one and the oneness of all. In a sophisticated form this is the core theme of the Advaitic (or non-dualist) system or 'vision' within the most prominent Hindu religious philosophy, Vedanta. There this 'all in oneness' means that in an ultimate sense, there is only pure oneness of being. In other important schools of Vedanta, rather than pure identity of being or of consciousness it is relationship that is seen as ultimate reality, clearly an ontology closer to a traditional Christian perspective. New Agers generally are ambiguous on this vedantic distinction, merely affirming that divine life, or elevated consciousness, is somehow interwoven with all cosmic life.
- 49 b) Some form of deluded consciousness, often affirmed by New Agers. This corresponds directly to the doctrine of maya or 'illusion', expounded in many and various ways within the different Hindu schools of Vedanta. Some affirm that all our perceptions of separate objects in the world are caused by maya; they are not real in the way that either our selfhood or the Great Self of all is real. Others affirm the exact opposite; because all that the Great Self by his power of maya has wonderfully created, must be real, all created objects are as real as that Self. This intra-Hindu debate has been very fierce, a point entirely ignored by many New Agers.
- 50 c) The Hindu idea of divine emanation. The primal image of the great creative Being transforming itself into the manifold form of our created universe was deeply embedded in ancient Hindu mythology. The non-dualist found this problematic, impossibly threatening to divine transcendence, for such self-emanation can only appear to take place. There cannot be the real emanation of the Great Self into the multiform life of the world. There is a similar problem with the related idea of creation as divine play (Lila). Again there are several ways of interpreting this within the Hindu traditions. In all, however, it implies that God creates without compulsion, is spontaneous and free in every way. In that sense, creation is also said to be without prior motive, though this does not entail lack of meaning and value in creation. Although New Agers make reference to the ideas both of a divine self-emanation and divine playfulness, there is little evidence of recognition of how these beliefs have been developed and debated within Hinduism.
- 51 d) The very primal concept of the cosmos as Earth Mother. This vision of all living things as enfolded in the encompassing being of the sacred Mother who gives birth to and nurtures all life, so that all life-forms share her sacred being, is found within much Eastern religious life as well as in many other primal traditions. Thus it has often been declared in primal cultures that any human intrusion into or destruction of these life-forms that share the Mother's sacredness, makes it necessary to ask the Mother's pardon, or to seek to propitiate the concerned Spirit of the place. New Agers clearly see such an attitude as far more desirable than the unbridled exploitation resulting from the de-sacralised licence of modern industry.

- 52 e) Karma, another freely used New Age word taken from Indian religious thought, being a term basic to almost every Indian religious system. Literally meaning 'action', it refers to the inescapable result of every action, good or bad, the fruits of which the eternal individual soul is literally bound to experience at some stage in its endless journey through birth, life, death and birth again. The cycle is endless until some transcendent factor can break the chain and set the soul free (moksha).
- 53 Karma thus has a creative role, for it is karma that determines in what form the soul is to take each new embodiment. While this is a concept that has provided a way of coping with tragedy and suffering, even a way of seeing cosmic life as coherently interlinked, it can and often has been used to justify all manner of unjust and oppressive situations. In fringe New Age writing, it has even been used to justify the Jewish holocaust. New Agers have also taken on board the doctrine necessarily accompanying karma, that is the doctrine of a cycle of rebirths in order that the soul may eventually realise its true destiny. However, whilst Hindus tie this in to a belief in cause and effect in a moral universe, New Agers believe that they can choose their own, upwardly mobile, form of future reincarnation.
- 54 f) Avatara, literally meaning 'descent', which refers to the stories in Hindu scriptures of special divine embodiments on earth, in animal as well as in human form, who in each age are believed to have saved the world from calamity and chaos. The meaning of these Avataras differs greatly in different Hindu theological systems. In some of them, Gurus, those specially enlightened teachers able to initiate the seeker into the esoteric truth of things, are also seen as Avataras. This resonates with the New Age idea of various outstanding figures specially empowered to direct the world away from impending chaos and guide such souls as are responsive to their influence into a new level of cosmic consciousness. Some New Agers speak of the descent of Christ-consciousness, others of Buddha-consciousness in such Avataras. And there are numerous other kinds of extra terrestrial beings and powers thought from time to time to enter into and affect the course of world events.
- 55 g) The complex chronology in Eastern religious traditions, in which many ages are structured as part of the creative process in the cosmic cycle. Within any series of ages there is also the idea of gradations of moral and spiritual progress (or decline), perhaps leading up to an ultimate age of enlightenment. We have noted that in New Age thought the present age is often described as that of Aquarius, the cosmic water-carrier deemed to signify the healing and restoration which will be characteristic of the coming New Age to be realised in the new millennium. A millennialist strand is strong in New Age thought. The fact that Aquarius is both one of the heavenly bodies and one of the signs of the Zodiac, reminds us of the reality for New Agers of astrology and the efficacy of celestial bodies – sun, moon, planets, stars – in determining human destinies, though this is but one of the numerous ways unseen forces are believed to be at work in cosmic life. While Persia may have been the original home of astrological science, at least some of its influences in western life – quite apart from the New Age Movement – is through its very important role in Eastern religion.
- 56 h) Meditation and the various techniques developed for focusing the mind and harnessing spiritual energy, which in Eastern religions, as in New Age

practice, are an important way of controlling the influences at work within cosmic life. Different forms of yogic meditational technique provide one genre of such practices.

- 57 Frequently such meditation today is focussed on world peace and the quietening of aggressive passions – and the latter has always been a key motive in meditational practice in most Eastern religions. It should be noted that yogic practice is not locked into and dependent upon any particular spiritual theory. It is capable of adoption within a wide range of accompanying theories, non-theistic and theistic. Literally, it simply means the ‘yoking’ of the mind (in its tendency to be distracted by sensory objects). Many Christians, in India and elsewhere, have found spiritual benefit through a distinctively Christian practice of yoga.
- 58 i) The fact that a number of Eastern religious systems – Buddhism, Jainism, Ritual Brahmanism, Early Sankhya, Taoism – have no significant place for a Creator. In the Buddhist tradition, for example, cosmic life is thought of as in a state of permanent flux, with nothing having substantial continuing being. While New Age thought may not be directly or explicitly indebted to any one of the Eastern religious systems in this case, as we noted earlier, New Agers do not easily accommodate the concept of a personal Creator God. When the male imagery so strongly prominent in the traditional Judeo-Christian depiction of the Creator is transposed to female imagery, the creation concept does generally become more acceptable to a New Age world view.

## Conclusion

- 59 Therefore, in relation to the Christian doctrine of creation, the major positive and negative points raised by New Age thinkers are as follows:-
- 60 i) New Age presents a challenge to numerous directions taken in modernity with which Christians have gone along. For New Age is fundamentally pro-earth and ecologically sensitive, where the dominant culture has been ecologically destructive and economically consumer-orientated. Creation is seen as having worth in itself, not merely as humanly useful.
- 61 ii) But New Age thought goes beyond affirming that creation is ‘good’. It tends to see Nature as sacred and replete with sacral powers. Mother-Earth has recovered some of her lost status as primal Earth-Goddess incorporating innumerable cosmic powers. Cosmic life thus tends to become a self-enclosed system, within which initiation into esoteric, semi-magical arts becomes necessary.
- 62 iii) This inevitably weakens faith in a personal creator who has a purpose for creation. This is a key Christian belief, even though it may be desirable to include female imagery within that concept, and however disastrous the male-dominated aggression towards nature may have been in western civilization. When the reaction to human aggression rejects any key role or responsible status for humans in relation to the natural world of which we are a part, then we deny our God-given role as those who bear in a special way the divine image.
- 63 iv) However, New Age’s wholistic understanding of the human as an integrated being of body, mind and spirit, with the health of humans being

dependent on just such integration within, as well as on harmony with the eco-world of which we are part, is another necessary emphasis which all contemporary people must take seriously. Indeed, attunement to a radically new way of thinking and feeling – about ourselves and our world – and attunement to a new life-style appropriate to this new world view is central to being a New Ager. While this may often be expressed in terms of self-fulfilment and personal integration – rather than in terms of the fulfilling of the good purpose of a loving Creator, the challenge to change is clear.

- 64 v) In some circles this is even expressed in terms of social, economic, political and ecological change. There is even a kind of eschatological expectation similar in some respects to Christian hope for a changed world, a new age which must surely come.
- 65 vi) Within other New Age circles, however, there is a tendency to think of the evils in our present world as rather illusory. All we need is a new consciousness and all evils will disappear. This is very different from the biblical call to struggle against evil, injustice and oppression. There is a danger, too, in the related idea of complex levels of cosmic life through which levels the soul is to work out its destiny as it moves on to an even higher grade of consciousness. Clearly this weakens the critical, cutting edge of the ethical challenge in this one world of which all life is part, and within which all are interdependent.
- 66 vii) Finally, a related aspect in New Age thought, equally problematic from a Christian perspective, is the often naive, seemingly indiscriminate and eclectic acceptance of esoteric and archaic wisdom from a wide range of sources. Creative and critical dialogical interaction, from a well-grounded position, with various religious traditions is desirable. Indiscriminate use of concepts and practices drawn from such diverse sources makes for an esoteric hotchpotch, which New Age writing often, but not always, is. Insofar as coherent response to such an amorphous movement is possible, critical dialogue by Christians is what is needed.

### **PART 3: HUMANKIND, SALVATION AND THE PERSON OF CHRIST: A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE**

#### **I Humankind and its Salvation**

- 67 New Agers tend to regard human beings as essentially themselves constituting God. This can be very affirming of human individuals, giving them sense of their own infinite worth and of their potential to be the most creative, well integrated and successful people imaginable. Much traditional Christian preaching which begins with people's natural sinful state, can create in them a debilitating sense of guilt; in a society where immoral behaviour and shady practices attract a good deal of admiration, being reminded of their alienation from their true being (their immaturity) might shame people out of moral inertia much more effectively than being reminded of their sin. In the Gospel story it was because Jesus first demonstrated how much he loved and valued him, that Zaccheus repented.
- 68 However, Zaccheus did repent. The New Age perspective does not recognise the reality and tenacity of sin and evil. Moreover, the New Ager's concern to

develop her or his potential to the full can become a self-centred or even elitist quest. It does not answer the needs of the poor and marginalised of society.

- 69 The Christian message is rather that all of us, secure or insecure, need the personal purposive, creative Being who is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Christians believe that human beings are created in the image of God, not in the sense that they are essentially identifiable with God, 'sparks of the Divine fire', as it were, but in the sense that, though distinct from him as his creatures, they are made to enjoy personal relationships with him and to draw upon his resources of love and goodness to live lives themselves of that same quality.
- 70 New Agers are quite right to remind Christians of the analogical nature of the language of personhood or parenthood when applied to God. They need to be listened to, and learnt from, when they baulk at the way calling God 'Father' has encouraged an understanding of him as patriarchal, oppressive and severely authoritarian and how this has often set the tone. Their predilection for using feminine imagery of God, especially 'mother', is an important corrective. The richness of both feminine and masculine (though both alike are analogical) needs to be drawn on sensitively in our talk about God as well as appropriate impersonal imagery.
- 71 At the same time, Christians will not want habitually to refer to God as the life Force, as cosmic Power or Energy, or even as universal Consciousness, as do many New Agers. Thoroughly personal language enforces both the transcendence and immanence of God and God's incarnation in Jesus Christ; it reminds us that while God is much more, he is at least a personal Being, suprapersonal rather than impersonal.
- 72 The Christian message also affirms that the image of God in his human creatures has been vitiated by sin and evil, a state from which we are not able to save ourselves. Christian theology down the centuries has speculated much on the origin of evil, a debate that will doubtless continue. It is, however, noteworthy that the Gospels do not record Jesus as having debated the question; he simply accepted the reality of evil. But one thing is clear from Christian tradition, which is that evil cannot be explained away, in the manner of much New Age thought, as the result of our ignorance, or our inability to see things in the way they really are, essentially good and pure. Also clear is that, whatever we believe about 'Satan', the origin of evil is not to be explained by laying it all at his door, else we lay ourselves open to a dualistic view of the universe with good and evil divinities eternally at war. So there is something suggestive about the way some New Agers see good and evil alike as having their source in God. If this is taken to condone or passively to accept evil situations, then this is something the Christian cannot countenance, but as a way of hinting at the truth that ultimately God takes responsibility for creating a universe within which it was possible for evil to emerge, it is very salutary.
- 73 Christians have sometimes emphasised God's holiness to such an extent that he is said not to be able to look upon evil or abide it in his presence. His attitude to sinful people has then been taken to be one of implacable antagonism instead of compassion and mercy. Seen as thrust out from his very presence like this, instead of being borne by him to redeem it, evil has often been projected on to people who are believed to be so far immersed in it that

they cannot be suffered to live, hence the witch-hunts, crusades, inquisitions, pogroms and holocausts of history. Those New Agers who practise Wicca (popularly known as ‘witchcraft’) may be seriously misled but they are not necessarily satanic. The same inordinate emphasis on the holiness of God to the exclusion of his love has also left many people with a pitiful sense of their own unworthiness and overwhelming guilt.

- 74 The Christian message affirms that all people need salvation, not just enlightenment. We need saving from the tight hold that unbelief and selfishness have on our lives, in short, from sin, not only when it expresses itself in unethical behaviour but even when it masquerades as enlightened self-interest or fulfilment.
- 75 At the same time, God, who reaches out to save us from this, is full of compassion, love and understanding, and does so with full regard for our infinite worth and our place in his purpose for the universe. This is not the place for a full treatment of all the ‘revelatory’ and natural means God uses to reach us even before we respond to him, but it is worth noting that John Wesley regarded such means as the grace of God at work and understood them as able to elicit some response from people for their salvation, even if they had no knowledge of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. (Sermon LXXXV; Letters to Thomas Whitehead and John Mason; Explanatory Notes on the New Testament: On Acts 10:35)
- 76 If New Agers have any doctrine of salvation, it is usually expressed in terms of reincarnation and its attendant concept, karma, a concept we have already mentioned. If the New Age objection to one earthly life per person is that it is unfair for a person’s eternal destiny to be decided on the conduct of one brief life, then it can be countered that God’s generosity towards us is surely not limited to our present existence and that the future life he has in store for us beyond this earth will not be a static one, bereft of growth and all activity. The so-called ‘near-death experiences’ that appeal to the imagination of some New Agers, are shared by an increasing number of people in these days of improved resuscitation methods, and they are nearly all characterised by a vision of glorious light, accompanied by a sense of peace and well-being and a feeling of love. While this should not be allowed to lull anyone into a false sense of security or inhibit their moral seriousness in the present, whatever explanation be given to them, physiological, psychological or spiritual, they are congruous with what Christians believe to be the nature of God as revealed in Jesus Christ: that we are, for all our sin, objects of the undeserved grace of God.
- 77 It is very important for Christians to stress ‘structural’ sin, as well as individual. The Churches themselves, as well as many other institutions and organisations have often oppressed groups, within and without, and been used to exercise power over people, rather than for them and their liberation. The gospel presents a challenge to institutions and structures; it does not reveal salvation as a mere quest for personal spiritual betterment, as do so many New Age ideals.

## **II The Person and Work of Jesus Christ**

- 78 The Christian message is that Jesus Christ has brought to a sharp focal point in a unique and decisive way this truth about God’s gracious attitude to us, and that in responding to this movement of God towards us in Jesus Christ, we find

the dynamic for repentance and creative living. Christians believe that Jesus Christ is peculiarly equipped for this task in that he has two natures, a human and a divine.

- 79 With the passing centuries, and within different cultures, a variety of models will be used for exploring the meaning of the human and the divine in him and of the relationships between them (even if the language of ‘natures’ is used at all), but there is a consensus that Jesus Christ meets our creaturely need so appropriately because he is one with us, as human as we are, while at the same time, being God with us, able, as he is, to do for us what only the Creator-Redeemer can do.
- 80 Many New Agers also find a place for Jesus Christ in their understanding of reality, but rarely, if at all, does he play the decisive role for them that he holds in traditional Christian belief. There are, indeed, some New Agers, especially some who practise Wicca, who would deny the right of any teacher to have authority over our lives or a directing function there, whether “Jesus or Buddha or Mohammed or Moses . . .” (Starhawk, cited by William Bloom (ed), *The New Age: an Anthology of Essential Writing*, Rider 1991, p34) on the grounds that the self needs to consider itself free from such enslavement and to teach itself, discovering for itself what spiritual truth it is to live by.
- 81 Many Christians would respond that enslavement is the very antithesis of their experience of the Lordship of Jesus Christ: rather, he frees one to be oneself or to discover one’s true self within a liberating relationship of love to God, to others and to oneself. On the other hand, New Agers are right to accuse Christians of the way in which we have often been slow to interpret and apply the basic truths of our faith in fresh and more timely ways, given the widening of the frontiers of human knowledge and new ethical challenges. A particularly difficult problem raised by practitioners of Wicca is whether a male saviour can save women; even some Christian women wrestle with this issue. Such women do find themselves enslaved by the ‘Lordship’ of Jesus since, for them, it is coloured by ‘masculine’ notions of power and possession. Christians need to reflect how Jesus can be interpreted in ways consonant with women’s experience, and men must reflect how this might liberate them, too.
- 82 Amongst other New Agers there are a bewildering variety of understandings of Jesus Christ which we shall try to summarise under four headings, though recognising that there is much overlap between them:
- 83 i) Several New Agers make a very sharp distinction between Christ and Jesus, and identify with the life force, cosmic energy or universal consciousness that is at the heart of all things and their ultimate truth. It is significant that in this guise Christ is normally described as being most characteristically the power or principle of love, to which Methodist Christians might well warm with Charles Wesley’s words ringing in their ears, “Pure universal love Thou art”.
- 84 However, while Christians ought to be generous and humble enough to recognise that that character of Jesus Christ does exercise a positive influence over the hearts and minds of people of many different beliefs, we want to take issue with the very idea inherent in this particular New Age belief, that human beings in their essential nature are one with such a divine Christ.

- 85 Moreover, this New Age Christ is usually thought of as the same divine being that inspires or indwells all the great religious teachers of humankind, and so is variously called by different individuals including Moses, Buddha, Krishna, Jesus (or Christ) and Mohammed, according to what is appropriate to his or her religion or cultural environment. Where Jesus himself is concerned, the Christ is usually said to have entered him at some significant point in his adult life, e.g. at his baptism, and then left him on his death (or thereabouts) to pursue his, the Christ's, universal career again. Although this has been an influential 'adoption' understanding of 'messiah-ship', it has never convinced a majority of Christians that it is an adequate interpretation. The Adoption heresy does not sufficiently root the Christ-event in the eternal purposes of God.
- 86 Without denying that the great religions of the world do have much common teaching and that the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ is creatively at work outside the Christian faith, it is most misleading to reduce all the religions of the world in this way to one common denominator. It denies the manifest differences between the tenets of the different religions and their great teachers, and for the Christian blurs what is distinctive about Jesus Christ and his Gospel. Also the Christian will hesitate to make a distinction between Christ and Jesus in the way many New Agers do, even if one is taken to stand for the divine principle in him and the other the human. For then the danger is that the union of God with the human being, Jesus, becomes purely fortuitous and not one ensured from Jesus' very conception onwards and permanent and planned and prepared for by God through the long centuries of preceding human history.
- 87 None of this is intended to detract from the thoroughly Christian conviction that Jesus Christ represents humanity of the quality God wants for all his human creatures. We are called to grow into his likeness, whether this is expressed in Pauline terms as coming "to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Ephesians, 4:13), or even in Johannine terms as likeness to God (I John 3:2). In this sense the notable New Age teacher, Sir George Trevelyan, is right to hope for "the enChristing of all of us", (cited by Michael Perry, *Gods Within: A Critical Guide to the New Age*, SPCK 1992, p32), and when he says in the same context, "When we overcome the greed and fear of the ego and become a heart-centre, the rising tide of love will flow . . . [and] will never be checked", we catch an echo of the optimism of John Wesley's teaching on Christian perfection of perfect love, which would put no limit to what the grace of God can accomplish in human lives if we would but let it. In the last analysis, though, Trevelyan's words fall foul of what both the New Testament and Wesley were intending, because of the metaphysical background against which they were uttered, that of the identity (not just likeness) of the human person with God. For Trevelyan had begun "The 'I am' in you is a droplet of divinity in a bodily temple, a little piece of God".
- 88 Loosely related to this New Age perspective on Christ under discussion still is the significance, already mentioned, which some New Agers find in the successive astrological ages: of Aries the Ram (beginning c2000BC); of Pisces the Fish (beginning with the Christian era); and Aquarius, the Water Carrier (beginning c2000AD). In this scheme, in the Age of Aries, God was said to have been characterised by the name, Father, and religion to be patriarchal; in the Age of Pisces God has been characterised by the name, Son, and religion,

especially Christianity, has been largely institutional; in the Age of Aquarius, God will be characterised as Spirit and religion of a hierarchical and organisational kind will give way to an era of uninhibited and creative spirituality. Again, this only relativises Jesus Christ in a way that Christians cannot countenance; it is also a caricature of the history of religions as well as being a distortion of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. The Christian perspective is that a new age began with the coming of Jesus and then the descent of the Holy Spirit on his disciples at Pentecost, that same new age is here now, with its urgent challenge to respond to Jesus Christ and his gospel, and will continue until the end of time.

- 89 ii) Some New Agers conceive of Christ as one of a hierarchy of spiritual beings mediating between God (however he is conceived) and human souls and emanating from him – all arranged in a variety of groups, orders or ranks. Christ can be reckoned as the highest of these spiritual beings or emanations, but not invariably so. In some versions of the scheme he is located lower down, sometimes sharing a place with Maitreya, the Buddha who is to come, or even exchanging places with him; and either one or the other of these beings can be said to be about to return to the earth to inaugurate a new world order of peace and unity.
- 90 Some New Agers seem to have come up with these views as a result of self-conscious borrowing from both Gnosticism and eastern religions, others as a result of drawing eclectically and indiscriminately on the mass of religious data that is around today in literature and through the media. It is all a far cry from the Christian message that in Jesus Christ, God himself has come into direct contact with his human creatures, body, mind and spirit.
- 91 In this same context, we may consider a theme which is present in both the ancient mystery religions and in popular Hinduism today and which has surfaced in Wicca: the dying and rising deity who typifies the cyclic movement of nature, the changing seasons and the life-cycle of the crops. Some Wiccans conceive of Jesus as one of the many “magically born, annually dying and sacrificed hero-gods” (Marian Green, *A Witch Alone*, Aquarian Press 1991, p18). If nothing else, the once-for-all nature of Jesus’ death and resurrection and their historical grounding rules this out of court for Christian faith.
- 92 iii) Among New Agers, Jesus is also conceived of as one (albeit a very important one) of the enlightened teachers of world history. In this role he can be said to speak either as a purely historical figure, Jesus of Nazareth, or as the mouthpiece of the divine Christ, considered under (i) above; and his teaching itself can be available today in a variety of ways.
- (a) from extant apocryphal gospels such as the Gospel of Thomas;
  - (b) from channellers who claim to be in touch with spirits from the past such as the spirit of Jesus himself or of one of his disciples, e.g Bartholomew;
  - (c) from a wealth of published Gnostic material, some explicitly attributed to Jesus in the text, some uncritically attributed to him by New Agers;
  - (d) from sheer assumptions that such an enlightened teacher as Jesus would teach vegetarianism, reincarnation etc and would authenticate any

wisdom that New Agers find congenial from ancient Egypt, Essene, Jewish, Cabalistic, Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi or Ahmadiyya Muslim sources.

- 93 There is a common assumption among New Agers that all such teaching was deliberately excised from the Christian faith by the orthodox Church of the first Christian centuries and that the Gospels as we have them in the New Testament represent only a very small portion (and a biased one at that) of Jesus' original teaching. Whilst it is true that the debate about Christian origins has been and remains important and often heated among some Christian scholars, New Agers have not engaged in this scholarly and intellectually serious quest. They have merely asserted or assumed whatever supports their eclectic and eccentric views. Certainly the teaching this New Age Jesus promulgates is not characteristic of the authentic Jesus the New Testament Gospels present to us. It is verbose and turgid; it presents a very vague concept of the deity; it speaks almost exclusively to the listener's or reader's own private spiritual quest and it is full of a bland moralism. Admittedly, it highlights the importance of love, but is hardly recognisable as Jesus' love, lacking, as it does, guts, and rarely directed to the deprived and rejected of society as it did with Jesus, costing him suffering, rejection and death.
- 94 iv) Finally, it will not then be surprising to find that very little is said about the Cross in New Age thinking about Christ.
- 95 Some New Agers argue that during the course of the human Jesus' life, at least from his baptism onwards, the divine Christ took greater and greater control of his body until, on the cross, "the incarnation was fully achieved and death conquered (cited by Lawrence Osborn, *Angels of Light: The Challenge of the New Age*, Daybreak 1992, p148). But the truth that is extracted from this is primarily the ability of the mind to master matter. Certainly Christians would want to affirm that in Jesus Christ crucified, divinity and humanity are seen in the closest relationship imaginable. It is about the cross that Paul is speaking, and not about the incarnation, except indirectly, when he says that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (II Corinthians, Ch5.10); for there God is seen to face with such utter realism the evil human beings perpetuated, and yet still to hang in there, absorbing it, not compounding it, out of love for us and for our forgiveness, though it cost him so very much. One looks in vain for this redemptive message in New Age understandings of Jesus Christ; the scandal of the Cross remains. This is probably why several New Agers find a peculiar fascination in the belief of the Ahmaddiyyas, a heterodox Muslim sect, that Jesus did not die on the cross but escaped and made for Kashmir, where he continued his teaching until his eventual death there.

#### **PART 4: MISSIOLOGICAL AND PASTORAL QUESTIONS RAISED BY THE NEW AGE MOVEMENT**

- 96 Here, we summarise the pastoral and missiological implications of the rise of the New Age Movement:
- 97 i) The New Age has at its heart a serious search for a divine reality which meets the spiritual needs of people today. In their search for God, New Agers do not have ties to the Church as did previous generations, though many have tasted what the Church has to offer and found it unpalatable. The sobering fact

is that New Age exponents are more likely to perceive the Church as the embodiment of powerful and corrupt structures, rather than the repository of spiritual truth and reality. Indeed the bureaucratic structures of the churches are increasingly viewed, even by Christians, as a managerial necessity, rather than as a source of theological wisdom or spiritual leadership. Theologians begin to speak of authority “from below” rather than “from above”, suggesting that the person in local communities is at the centre of the Church’s life. Language of the Holy Spirit is useful in this regard, since its freedom of movement cannot be contained by structures and it is no respecter of human status or traditions. The churches are beginning to democratise the life of the spirit, something which is known well to Methodists.

- 98 ii) The New Age Movement poses a serious challenge to an arid and over-rationalist theology. This report contends that there is need and demand for a re-emphasis on the spiritual and the ethical: the challenge for the Church is to meet that need and show that the new life is to be found in Christ. In this regard, it is as well for Methodists to own their own tradition as one which was in its earliest days thought to be an uncontrolled expression of emotionalism (as nowadays is much of the New Age Movement) rather than as one which displays the marks of the Holy Spirit. Bishop Butler described these enthusiastic experiences as “a very horrid thing” and wrote to challenge John Wesley on this point. What needs to accompany these Spirit-filled experiences and occasions is the recognition that we are still human and God is still divine. Realising the gifts which the Spirit gives does not mean that we shed our humanness, either temporarily or permanently. We are not so easily transported from one realm, or mode of existence, to another. Rather, what we as Methodists seek to affirm is that what the Spirit effects in human life is the beginning of a life-long process of committed action and prayer, so that we may grow into the life of God. This does not happen overnight, and although we are certainly upheld at every step of the way by a power we call the Holy Spirit, we are not lifted out instantly into something new.
- 99 In the process of growing into holiness, we are also growing in relationship with the divine who continues to stand out before us, to challenge us and question us, to meet and uphold us in our journey. The Holy Spirit accompanies us and draws us on into further, deeper, and more profound knowledge and involvement in the divine love.
- 100 We need to find ways to describe this to our neighbours, and to preach and teach this in our churches. It may be important in this process to affirm the search for enlightenment which the New Age represents, and to acknowledge how real is the hunger for the divine out of which it emerges. What we may be more cautious about is the context of consumerism and instant gratification in which this quest is set today. We need to be careful about the tendency to speak of the power of the Spirit as another consumable item, which can be bought and enjoyed as an extension of our normal range of activities. We need to be aware of the tendency to believe that once someone has bought something, they have “been there” or “done that”. We need to understand, in ourselves as well as in others, our desire to be taken up painlessly into new life, and our avoidance of the struggle, through the ambiguities of relationship and community, towards God. The history and the text of the people called Methodists are full of material which is relevant to this project emphasising, as

they do, scriptural holiness and experiential religion. These may provide new insight into the relation of God's Spirit to human life in our day.

- 101 iii) Spurning an arid rationalism does not mean that we should cease to love God with our mind. The New Age Movement should cause Methodists, as other Christians, to look to the rock from which we were hewn. But New Agers have taught us precisely that mere reiteration of stale doctrine does not convince and may even repel searchers after truth. We must recognise that they have often raised issues, such as the kind of universe we inhabit, and the mutuality of masculine and feminine, which compel us to examine how our tradition of faith has to be understood and lived at the end of the twentieth century. Clearly we need to be faithful to our inheritance yet interpret it in ways relevant and life-giving to the contemporary world.
- 102 iv) Much has been said about the darker side of the New Age Movement. Some say that all of it is demonic, others protest that it is without exception an authentic search for spirituality. Our analysis suggests a third course. The New Age Movement has its darker side and part of it slides off to witchcraft, the occult and at its worst to satanism. "Channelling", for instance, clearly is not the same as the transformation of being "in Christ" for in it the persona of the individual is taken over by another and is open to the presence of evil. This calls to mind the state of people described in the synoptic gospels before they were 'exorcised' by Jesus. On the other hand, Christians ought not to 'demonize' all aspects of the New Age Movement and all New Agers, because of the involvement of some with evil. Nevertheless, such evil must be challenged by Christians.
- 103 v) An emphasis on the imminence of the spirit is for Christians a helpful counter-balance to what many perceive to be too much stress on the distance of God. Unlike New Age teaching, much Christian theology has insisted upon a radical discontinuity between the divine and the human or natural world. As descriptions of the physical world became increasingly mechanistic and deterministic in the early centuries of modern science, so Christian theology turned increasingly to other-worldly emphasis on the utter transcendence of the divine. The remoteness of God and the portrayal of God as the final Master of the Universe and the Controller of Destiny have been more difficult to sustain in a contemporary context, and in addition, have had some fairly damaging consequences in people's emotional and spiritual lives. As a result, some Christians have lost their nerve altogether in discussing or believing in the reality of a transcendent being.
- 104 However, throughout the Bible, the blessing of God brings Peace, Shalom. Such peace, being more than the absence of conflict, is the offer and challenge of the best in personal development, community living, sharing of resources, national and international responsibility, and above all a depth of devotion to God. It is about coherence and unity within the love of God. In particular, physical and spiritual healing and wholeness has become much more widely practised in the Christian Church in recent years. This response to the teaching and ministry of Jesus has been profoundly helpful to many people.
- 105 vi) Environmentalism is one of the powerful influences leading people to the New Age Movement. The social, political and economic issues concerning our global environment have been the access point to New Age for many people. For all this the New Age response is not only diverse but divided.

Into this maelstrom of the Green agenda and Green spirituality, Christians have much to say about our responsibility before God for all creation. In particular we need to express how and in what sense the Spirit of God is given to the creation, is *bestowed upon* the world and human life by a loving Creator. Images of tenderness may therefore be more appropriate than those of mastery. For tenderness presumes closeness and care, and at the same time acknowledges a transaction in which there are two parties. The Holy Spirit has been understood to be the means by which this loving transaction between the divine and the natural/human has been effected (affected). So the Holy Spirit does not stand alone, but as an intrinsic part of the whole relationship between God, the world and humanity. Before us, therefore, lies the challenge of learning to speak to others of our belief in the Holy Spirit, and of preaching and teaching about the Holy Spirit, in words which express that the spirit found in the world is at the same time, an essential expression of the life of God.

106 vii) Many people describe their experience of life as being 'out of control', whether reflecting on security of employment, nourishing relationships, and indeed the balance of their own life. They are conscious of social, political and economic instability in national and international affairs. To this secular worldview the New Age is attractive, with its confidence, based on the Gaia hypothesis, in the ability of Mother Earth to explain all things.

107 At the same time as many people are asking ultimate questions about life on earth (and hereafter) the churches have often failed to emphasise the Christian hope of the redemption of all creation (Romans 8:18-25 and Colossians 1:15-23).

## **PART 5: CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS**

108 This report has refrained from giving explicit guidelines for Methodists, in their relations with New Agers. In part, this is because the New Age Movement is so amorphous and eclectic, that the framing of guidelines is a difficult, if not impossible, task. It may prove helpful, however, to draw out from the main body of this report certain conclusions which could act as principles for Methodists in their relation to New Agers and the New Age Movement.

109 (i) Any over-reaction by Christians to New Agers, their beliefs and practices, is very unhelpful and unwise. Actually, New Agers often address themes which our modern society, including Western Christianity, has until recently, largely ignored: for example, the nurturing of our planet. Moreover, many Christians have tended to shun perfectly respectable practices, such as homeopathy, because New Agers have annexed them to serve their points of view. Even more controversial practices, such as yoga, are not inherently associated with non-Christian belief systems, so the determination of some Christians to shun them can seem an over-reaction.

110 (ii) Indeed, Christians would, to some extent, share three of the four cohesive features of the New Age Movement, mentioned in Part 1: the spiritual as opposed to the physical; harmony and wholeness; and hopefulness. To be

sure, there are major disagreements about the form of these features and in whom (or, for many New Agers, in what) they are located. In the one major area of disagreement, the New Age insistence on the individual's right to choose, there is still much to discuss, not least because, in practice, Christians do choose, from their faith, themes for their life stories. There would, therefore, seem to be more wisdom in talking to New Agers.

- 111 (iii) Themes concerning the Holy Spirit may provide something of a framework for consideration as we talk to one another, and to those influenced by and committed to the New Age, about the spiritual dimension of life. There is much to be learnt through dialogue.
- 112 Our own starting points may be these :
- 113 Firstly, the Spirit which is known in and through the natural world may be affirmed as an expression of the divine life. Through engagement with this Spirit, we may begin the process of acknowledging the creative work of God, and of discovering the fullness of the divine through what has been given.
- 114 Secondly, the Spirit which is available to all persons as energy, resource and possibility for self-transcendence may be affirmed as the important first steps in a process of continuous spiritual development. A method of life and prayer will then be needed as more challenging dimensions of the development open up, and as we struggle through relationship with others, to grow into the life of God.
- 115 Thirdly, we may affirm the presence of the Spirit in a whole range of people throughout history who are living testimony to the greatness and the benevolence of God. We will then need to articulate the uniqueness of Christ as the one through whom we know the divine to be love itself, and in whom we are constantly stirred to be amongst the suffering of our world. Methodists have much to contribute in the articulation of all these themes in our world.
- 116 (iv) If Methodists are to be encouraged to engage in dialogue with New Agers, then it is vital that they be nurtured in the essentials of their faith. Otherwise, there is the likelihood of the blind leading the blind. There is also the possibility of Methodists being attracted and captivated by notions and practices which, although alluring and apparently harmless, are not consonant with Methodist teaching.
- 117 (v) However, Methodist teaching is not static. It needs to be applied, critically and creatively, to the needs of the societies in which Methodists find themselves. To some extent, New Age-ism has flourished because many Western Christians have uncritically assumed that the values of our techno-scientific culture have resulted from and are congruent with Christian beliefs. Methodists must hear the legitimate questionings of New Agers and not fall into the extremes of dismissing them or of readily accepting all their critiques, still less the answers or solutions they offer.
- 118 (vi) Everyone involved in the New Age Movement is someone whom God loves and for whom Christ died. This is another ground for serious and searching dialogue with New Agers, rather than avoiding them. It is also a reason for sharing the faith that is in us as providing all people with the key to an answer to life's deepest questions.

## **RESOLUTION**

The Conference adopts the Report, *The New Age Movement*, as its reply to Memorial M.8 (1990).

*(Agenda 1994, pp.274-299)*

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The Conference adopted, in place of the above resolution:

The Conference:

1. Thanks the Faith and Order Committee for the detailed work that it has undertaken in producing the report on the New Age Movement, receives the report, and encourages the Methodist people to use it as the basis for further study of the issues raised.
2. Emphasises the particular importance of paragraph 116(iv) to the extent that some of the practices mentioned in the report could well need further investigation if people are to protect themselves from the spiritual dangers which may be involved.
3. Declares that the report, the debate, and these resolutions shall be the reply to memorial M.8 (1990).