THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

Beyond Familiar Shores: New Age Spirituality

SINCE NEW AGE SPIRITUALITY is so protean, it is impossible to define as precisely 'this' or 'that'. It is not a single phenomenon but rather a totality of individual and communal pilgrimages toward a multitude of 'holy grails' variously described and understood.

The New Age path leads through labyrinthine ways of Eastern wisdom, quantum physics, the occult, human potential psychologies, ecological concerns and the mystical texts and practices of all religions. It incorporates ideas and values which gained wide acceptance in the youthful counterculture of the 1960s and have moved quietly into mainstream thought in America and Europe during the past three decades.

New Age spiritualities are so diverse and complex that a concise discussion of them presents problems. One must select a few common themes and aspects, recognizing that no single teaching or approach to the spiritual life is universally held by New Age seekers and thus representative of all. One also must acknowledge that no spiritual tradition can be fully or adequately explicated in a brief examination.

Some have dismissed New Age spirituality as strange or bizarre, as tabloid religion which will not endure and so need not be taken seriously. Others contend that it may represent the beginnings of a new religious paradigm, the first halting steps toward a transformation of Western spiritual thoughts, perceptions and values. A majority of observers agree that its effects are being felt in churches and synagogues throughout the West. Theologian Ted Peters describes the New Age's impact on traditional Western religion as 'the equivalent of a religious H-bomb in sustained explosion . . .'[1].

Most major tenets of New Age spirituality actually are not new. Many can be found in some form in the Christian tradition, although they usually were not part of the religious formation which the members of the sixties generation received from their churches.

What countercultural spiritual teachers and devotees have accomplished is to place particular religious and philosophical concepts squarely into modern Western consciousness.

They have, for example, emphasized the sacred character of all elements and processes of nature. They have located the arena of highest spiritual development in ordinary human life in the world. They hold that everything that is, from black holes in space to human beings, is interconnected and interrelated, and that the spiritual life necessarily involves striving for harmony, peace and good for the entire cosmos.

In addition, most spiritual seekers of the New Age believe that God or Ulitmate Reality is both transcendent and immanent, beyond the limits of the

universe and yet pervading every part. As immanent in the human soul, the divine is accessible through direct experience, experience which can be nurtured by spiritual practices such as meditation.

They also see the present historical period as a 'new age', an evolutionary period in which higher consciousness, the apprehension of levels of reality beyond the mundane, is possible as never before. They are convinced that through expanded consciousness, compassion and right action human beings will join together to transform society and save life on the planet from devastation or extinction.

Finally, they stress the importance of a non-dualistic spiritual vision in which matter and spirit, mind and body, female and male, rationality and intuition are considered equally valuable and sacred.

Many observers think New Age religious movements have filled a vacuum created by a crisis in Western religion. A 1978 Gallup poll commissioned by Catholic and Protestant organizations in the United States disclosed that sixty per cent of Christians who attended church regularly agreed with the statement, 'Most churches have lost the real spiritual part of religion'.[2]

Benedictine Bede Griffiths said in a 1983 interview that those who come to his ashram in India

> are looking for something . . . that the church and the whole world has got to discover: new structures by which the inner life can be expressed. It is the inner life people are seeking and a style of life to go with it.[3]

Westerners who have turned to the New Age for religious sustenance are searching for the meaning of existence, for ways to make sense of the complex world in which they find themselves. They long for heart-opening relationship with divinity or some Absolute, for values to live by, for a sense of connection with others and with nature. For many the quest has led them to travel beyond known and familiar religious shores.

A decade ago, according to estimates, the new religious movements comprised 2.2 per cent of the world's population (some ninety-six million). John Coleman has said these movements 'represent, world-wide, a challenge to mainline Christian denominations'.[4] Seen in this light, New Age spirituality should be of interest to those concerned with the present and future of Christianity.

The religious expressions of the New Age can be understood – at least in part – as a response to a confluence of circumstances unprecedented in human history.

By the second half of the twentieth century, industrialization and technology had created in the First World a large middle class able to provide its children with educational opportunities, leisure and an extended period of youth unknown in earlier times.

A communications revolution had enlarged the boundaries of ordinary human experience, offering people the chance to see and hear into every corner

of the planet and observe their century's events firsthand. More and more individuals had access to an ever larger and increasingly sophisticated flow of information on every subject. Air travel brought thousands, especially the young, into direct contact with persons and cultures across the globe.

However, the same sciences and technologies that had expanded both life expectancy and life expectations had their darker sides: atomic weapons, environmental destruction, materialism, consumerism and a loss for many of a sense of the sacred.

Theologian Langdon Gilkey says that while the West had learned to manipulate, control and rearrange the external world,

> in the process it had forgotten and so infinitely weakened the inward life of the spirit . . . [the human] self had become an illusive shadow, a hungry and lonely ghost, unrecognized and hidden, in a merely external process.[5]

This was the milieu for the emergence of the New Age spiritual movements in the West. An immediate catalyst for the youthful counterculture in which they first would flourish was the Vietnam War which caused millions of young people to question authority and demand the right to analyse and criticize the rules, organizations and accepted values of their cultures' most sacrosanct institutions – familial, social, political, economic and religious.

The civil rights and embryonic women's liberation movements, widespread use of hallucinogenic drugs and developing human potential psychologists all contributed to the sixties generation's longing for new possibilities for their lives and the conviction that global and personal transformation were within reach. Like the writer of the Book of Revelations, they saw 'a new heaven and a new earth' emerging in their midst 'for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away' (Apoc 21:1).

By 1968 thousands of young women and men gathered in urban enclaves and rural communes saw themselves as pioneers in a revolution of culture and consciousness. They adopted their own peculiar and identifying modes of dress, created new art forms, including a popular music which, through new melodies and metaphors, spoke to generational spiritual and political aspirations in powerful ways.

For the youth of the New Age the counterculture represented a shift from external to internal authority. No longer were external standards – put forth by family, church and society – to govern one's identity and existence. The task was to find values, purpose and meaning derived from personal insight and experience. Only the one living a life could determine what shape that life should take.

Humanistic psychologies, with their optimistic views of human nature and potential, provided an important context and conceptual framework for this self-discovery and self-realization. Taught by theorists such as Abraham Maslow that world transformation begins with self transformation, members of

the counterculture sought physical and psychological healing through numerous methods offered by the human potential movement, from psychotherapy and encounter groups to massage and Tai Chi.

In addition, psychedelic drugs precipitated the spiritual quest for many young persons. These drugs altered brain chemistry in such a way that users often experienced a transfigured reality and altered states of consciousness.

It is impossible to deny that psychedelics played an historic role in drawing people into other transformational processes and religious searches. Those who used hallucinogens, looking for parallels, discovered that the accounts closest to their own experiences derived either from mystical literature or from the world of theoretical physics. Numerous individuals can trace their spiritual journeys back to their use of LSD.

Alfred North Whitehead has said that 'the progress of religion is defined by the denunciation of gods' and that 'the keynote of idolatry is contentment with the prevalent gods'.[6]

Those who have drunk from the spiritual streams of the New Age seem comfortable with iconoclasm. Many have critiqued what they consider to be the rigid dogmas, lifeless rituals, excessive rationality and lack of genuine spirituality of their birth religions. Christians and Jews looking for 'new gods' and different ways of being religious have been attracted to alternative religious forms.

Some have embraced nature religions, including Native American traditions and Goddess worship. They express a longing to recover the 'forgotten wisdom' which enabled peoples of the past to live in harmony with nature and to find in natural processes divinity and revelation.

For others, science has provided a gateway into mystical consciousness. In *The Tao of physics*, physicist Fritjof Capra explored the world-views of modern physicists and ancient mystics and found parallels of insight and experience which have been useful to many in apprehending spiritual reality.

However, the most significant destinations for Western New Age seekers have been the mystical traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam.

Western interest in Eastern religion is not novel. In ninteenth-century America, Emerson and the Transcendentalists found intellectual grounding in Hindu philosophies. Hindu scriptures, especially the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita, had been studied by European scholars as early as 1808. In the first decades of the twentieth century, persons in England and the United States were introduced to Sufism by Hazrat Inayat Khan. In the same period, George I. Gurdjieff brought to the West his amalgam of Asian wisdom designed to assist human beings out of the 'soulless prison' of mundane existence.

For the most part, Western fascination with Eastern religion had been confined to small, élite groups. The turn Eastward which began in the 1960s was a mass movement involving all types of people from diverse religious backgrounds.

What Westerners have found valuable and compelling in Eastern traditions include: new religious language; new understandings of the spiritual life; new

spiritual practices; appreciation for all religions; lay spirituality; and spiritual mentorship.

A new religious language

Scholars like Sallie McFague and Ana-Maria Rizzuto have emphasized the major role our religious metaphors have in shaping our perceptions of ourselves, others and the world. We have empirical evidence throughout history, for example, that in conceiving God as King and Ruler, people created and justified hierarchical and oppressive social and religious systems.

To abandon one religious tradition for another involves a fundamental shift in religious metaphors. To change the words we use to express the divine is to alter our entire spirituality. One can begin to comprehend the all-encompassing nature of such a metaphorical shift by considering briefly the difference between the principal metaphors of Christianity and Sufism.

In Christianity, the hegemonic metaphor for God is 'Father', an image which elicits a constellation of ideas, feelings and responses. If God is parent, then human beings exist in eternal childhood, passively dependent on the One who provides and punishes.

A spirituality derived from the Father God metaphor will be shaped by it. Father God educes and desires a certain kind of love from human beings – childlike, filial, tinged with fear because of the power differential. Virtues in this system will correspond with those demanded by many human fathers: obedience, humility, submission. Sins will resemble offences against human parents: disobedience, disrespect, rebellion. The goal of this spirituality will be to create model children.

In Sufism, the root metaphor for God is Beloved, the object of spiritual desire. The Sufi's religious imagination revolves around the deepest of adult relationships – that of lovers. The love which God as Beloved evokes is passionate and spiritually erotic. It is characterized by longing, restlessness, pain, despair, joy, ecstasy, fear of separation and the sense that one can never possess the Beloved as one yearns to do.

In Sufism, the virtues are those befitting a lover: faithfulness, desire to please the Beloved, continuous remembrance of the Object of love and the consequent forgetting of self. 'Sins' include lack of ardour, unfaithfulness, settling for lesser loves, unwillingness to surrender all that one is in the name of love. The goal of the spiritual life in Sufism is to create the perfect adult lover.

While lover-beloved imagery is not foreign to Christian mysticism, such metaphors have not been central to the religious imaginations of the average Christian.

New understandings of the spiritual life

The old Baltimore Catechism stated that God made us 'to know, love and serve Him in this world and to be happy with Him in the next'. For the ordinary Christian, knowing God generally has involved adhering to church doctrines. Serving God often has meant conforming to certain moral laws and obligations derived from the New Testament as interpreted by the Church.

Those who have turned to Eastern religions have found different perceptions of the spiritual life that seem to them more congruent with their most profound spiritual intuitions. An example of this can be seen in the attraction Zen Buddhism holds for thousands of Americans and Europeans. Satiated with what they consider to be the dogmatic character of Western religion, these persons appreciate Zen's non-use of formal dogmas, creeds or rituals. Many feel empowered by the Zen assertion that one attains nirvana (the highest state of bliss, peace and purity) through one's own efforts rather than by passively relying on a 'salvation' already achieved by someone else.

In its essence, Zen is utterly simple. One sits in zazen (silent meditation), and that is everything, according to the Zen masters. There is no concern with 'progress' or 'success'. One learns only how to *be*. It is in this process of mindfulness, of *being*, that individuals begin to learn who they are, to discover the meaning and purpose of life. The answers to all the great questions of existence, say the masters, lie within; to find them is the purpose of the spiritual life. Zen views external spiritual authority as counterproductive. The Buddha urged his followers to 'be lamps unto yourselves . . . do not look to anyone besides yourselves'.

It is easy to see how the Zen conception of spiritual realization through meditation, reflection and self-discovery, with its inherent values of freedom and spiritual adventure, would appeal to persons in the West.

New spiritual practices

In interviews, books and articles, persons whose spiritual quests have led them East often have complained that while Christians preach love, compassion and peace, they seldom explain exactly how these qualities are to be attained.

There are scores of Eastern spiritual practices, developed over many centuries , which are intended to inculcate such qualities in the person and lead him or her into higher consciousness. A few examples may serve to illustrate them.

Most Buddhist and Hindu meditation techniques quiet the mind and bring it to depths below the chaos and superficiality of ordinary thought processes. All forms of meditation are designed to produce inner transformation and deeper consciousness, with tangible effects flowing out to others and into all aspects of life.

The Zen koan or riddle ('What is the sound of one hand clapping?') is a tool which the Zen student can use to move beyond the borders of the rational into infinite inner space.

The chanting of the holy name of God in Sufism (*dhikr*) is said to be the water that nourishes the tree of the heart, causing it to blossom into union with the Beloved.[7]

The power of meditation and other practices has been recognized by a growing number of Christians who either have incorporated Eastern disciplines into their spiritual lives or have rediscovered and utilized practices (such as the Jesus prayer) from the Christian tradition.

Appreciation for all religions

The demonization of persons of other religions still causes suffering in the 'global village', in places from Bosnia to East Timor. Islam is the West's new 'evil empire'. To the Arab, Jews are 'villains'.

Most New Age thinkers reject negative categorizations by religion and hold that all religions and their adherents are worthy of respect and appreciation. They contend that no single religion contains within it the fullness of truth of divine revelation, that all religions can enrich one another, because each possesses a particular and unique wisdom and spiritual genius.

A lay spirituality

In the Catholic tradition, the lay vocations of marriage and the single life generally have been considered spiritually inferior to vocations to the priesthood and religious life. As a result, lay people usually have received little spiritual formation beyond what they learned in catechism classes or at Catholic school.

There was a common perception that lay people, with all their 'distractions', had neither time nor inclination for the finer things of the spirit; those were reserved for the 'professionals' – priests, sisters, brothers and especially monks and nuns. Lay persons with mystical aspirations were given scant encouragement. They might be directed to the works of Teresa of Avila or John of the Cross, individuals whose lives bore little resemblance to their own.

The mass appeal of New Age spiritualities has shown that many lay people have deep spiritual longings. To the New Age way of thinking, no state of life is intrinsically holier than any other. Ordinary life in the world offers as much opportunity for spiritual growth and realization as life in a special enclave such as the ashram or the monastery.

Zen, for instance, teaches that the spiritual life consists of a series of simple moments in which one strives for 'mindfulness', the ability to enter fully into an experience, whether it be sitting in meditation or peeling a carrot. The Zen disciple enters the Great Emptiness or the Void which is the source of all life through the gate of mundane activity.

Carol Flinders, a student of the Hindu teacher Eknath Easwaran, conveys the feeling of this interpenetration of the secular and the spiritual when she speaks of the effects of using a mantra (a spiritual phrase used in meditation) while preparing meals:

> Even the smallest task can be thought of as an offering to the Lord, and when it is, it follows that it will be performed in the best possible way, with the greatest care and attention. Looked at in this light, every action becomes, potentially, an act of love – a work of art.[8]

Spiritual mentorship

In Eastern mystical traditions, many persons have encountered the spiritual teacher for the first time. Most Christians and Jews, while they may at times

have sought advice from a priest, minister or rabbi, have not received personal spiritual guidance over an extended period.

In spiritualities centred around inner processes and a progression to higher consciousness, the teacher is essential to the well-being of the disciple. The true teacher is one who has sucessfully travelled the path and so can lead the student through its stages, assist in difficulties encountered along the way and help keep the disciple's heart focused on the goal. The teacher knows the often subtle pitfalls of the journey and so can alert the disciple to them. The Sufis said that one who attempted to tread the mystical path without a teacher had Satan for a guide and was not to be accepted by any Sufi community.

Those of the New Age who have found genuine teachers have gained much: a wisdom that lures them onward; a living model of what the journey is meant to produce; a spiritual friend who knows the way and is willing to share the inner maps.

Yet Westerners, because they lack experience with spiritual mentorship, easily can become prey for the self-deluded or cynical 'teacher' who loves power, sells teachings for money or creates unhealthy, 'cult-like' communities in which followers can be sexually or psychologically abused. Such things occur because

> The seeker is not qualified to make the choices that must be made. It is impossible for one who is lodged in mundane consciousness to evaluate definitively the competence of any guide to transformation and transcendence without having already attained to an equal degree of transcendence.[9]

In recent years, however, writers such as Ken Wilber have provided valuable aid by formulating guidelines for discerning the difference between authentic and inauthentic paths and teachers.[10]

New Age spiritual travellers also face other difficulties in undertaking journeys over unfamiliar spiritual terrains. These include excessive syncretism, shallow appropriation of other traditions, and cross-cultural misunderstandings.

Excessive syncretism

Critics of the New Age have pointed out, with justification, that some individuals – particularly those without spiritual teachers firmly grounded in a tradition – have approached the accumulated wisdom of many religions and philosophies as though it were a giant cafeteria. They have chosen something here and something else there, picking what appeals, avoiding what does not. They may fashion custom spiritualities combining, for example, Zen meditation, 'teachings' from 'channelled' spirit personalities, Tarot cards for answers to personal problems and crystals or pyramids to 'centre their energy'. The spiritual lives of extreme syncretists often lack the focus, discipline or moral foundations essential to a genuine spirituality.

Shallow appropriation of other traditions

It takes time and a great deal of commitment to enter a new spiritual tradition. One must spend years with its teachers, learn the meaning of its language and come to appreciate its subtleties. This kind of patience and diligence may be hard for Westerners used to the constant and diverse stimulations of modern life.

Native Americans, for example, complain that some 'seekers', fascinated with their religions, spend a few hours talking with their elders, learn several prayers and stories, then consider they have grasped and can utilize the traditions effectively. Some even write books or give workshops as experts on 'Native American Spirituality'. Such individuals make money by exploiting 'popular' spiritual subjects and, in the process, delude their readers, their students and themselves.

Cross-cultural misunderstanding

Theologian Harvey Cox has argued that Eastern religious traditions cannot survive their transplantation to Western consumer societies which prize individualism. He asserts that people in the West cannot understand mystical concepts such as 'detachment' and 'egolessness' because they lack the cultural context and experience necessary for comprehension.

Cox has warned that the meeting of Eastern wisdom and Western egotism may result in spiritual hybrids which combine 'the worst elements of both cultures . . . What comes out looks much like irresponsibility with a spiritual cover . . .'[11]

While Cox's premonitions deserve serious consideration, I believe they are at least premature in prophesying the failure of New Age spiritualities rooted in the East. Who, for example, could have predicted accurately the future of Christianity a decade or so after the death of Jesus? Or Islam just after Mohammed?

The spiritualities and the seekers of the New Age are maturing and growing. Teachers and disciples have become more self-critical and more discerning. By now, countless Westerners in Eastern paths have struggled and suffered for years with sincerity and commitment, flinging their lives and capacities into the search for the Ultimate.

New Age spirituality may be compared to wildflower seeds scattered by birds in the formal gardens of Western religion. What the seed ultimately produces will be known only in its flowering.

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NOTES

[1] Peters, Ted: *The cosmic self: a penetrating look at today's New Age movements* (San Francisco, 1991), p x.
[2] Ferguson, Marilyn: *The Aquarian conspiracy* (New York, 1980), p 368.
[3] Hoblitzelle, Harrison: 'India's Christian guru: a visit with Father Bede Griffiths', *New Age Journal* (August 1983), p 40.
[4] Coleman, John: 'The religious significance of new religious movements' in *New religious movements*, eds Coleman, John and Baum, Gregory (Edinburgh and New York, 1983), p 9.
[5] Gilkey, Langdon: 'Toward a religious criterion of religion' in *Understanding the new religions*, eds Jacob Needleman and George Baker (New York, 1978), p 134.
[6] Whitehead, Alfred North: *Adventures of ideas* (London and New York, 1967 [1933]), p 11.
[7] Schimmel, Annemarie: *Mystical dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill NC, 1975), p 168.
[8] Robertson, Laurel; Flinders, Carol and Godfrey, Bronwen: *Laurel's kitchen: a handbook for vegetarian cookery and nutrition* (Berkeley Ca, 1976), p 45.
[9] Anthony, Dick; Ecker, Bruce and Wilber, Ken, eds: *Spiritual choices: the problems of recognizing authentic paths to inner transformation* (New York, 1987), p 6.
[10] *Ibid.*
[11] Cox, Harvey: *Turning East: the promise and peril of the new Orientalism* (New York, 1977), pp 139–140.