

SIN, EVIL AND DEATH IN THE NEW AGE

By MONI McINTYRE

THE FATHER OF A MAN I KNOW has just died after a long and painful illness. The son describes his deceased parents as 'nice people' who were 'very supportive' of him. A friend called to update me on the progress of her recuperation from back surgery. She states that her difficulties are compounded by the double talk of a particular physician and the administrative nightmare of an ineffectual health care system. A disconcerted transsexual phones me daily to report her increasing lassitude after years of physical and psychological distress from hormone therapy designed to prepare her for surgery she can neither afford to have nor bear to live without for much longer. I take a walk to ponder these situations and contemplate the enormity of human sorrow and the wonder of human courage.

Each of these individuals worships at the same church which I attend regularly. Day after day both the priests and people of the parish try their best to alleviate the mental anguish of these and other persons whom we meet. Through personal prayer, parish activities, and the celebration of the sacraments, the ministrations exchanged between and among individuals make significant differences in the lives of these believers. Still, it seems that as one pain is alleviated, at least one other moves in to fill the vacuum. Many of the problems raised by sin, evil and death go unresolved. Within the Christian mystery there is, finally, a requirement for faith in the midst of *real* suffering.

The magnitude of pain on this planet is incomprehensible. The universal experience of suffering produced by the demise of a loved one is immeasurable. At times one can scarcely manage one's own difficulties and care for those of even one other without grave inconvenience and manifest inadequacy. The phenomenon of massive evil, whether unprovoked or as a response to another evil, is almost beyond our imagining. One can neither describe adequately one's own penchant for perpetrating evil nor provide a credible explanation for large-scale human abuse. The experience of sin, evil and death strains the human imagination and mocks our longing for cosmic, social and personal wholeness.

No religious or philosophical tradition has ever been able to provide satisfactorily a cogent and unambiguous explanation for the enormity of the world's afflictions. All members of creation, it would appear, endure various degrees of suffering for dubious benefit. Peoples of all ages have looked to the cosmos for answers to their primal questions which include the meaning of human suffering. In increasing numbers, contemporary individuals are choosing avenues and explanations proffered by New Age philosophies in favour of traditional religious explanations.

In her article heralding the annual 'Psychics, Mystics, and Seers Fair' in Toronto, Ontario, journalist Patty Winsa describes the growing New Age preoccupation with palmistry, astrology and the occult. Winsa notes that:

experts in psychology believe the phenomenon [of the rise in superstition and otherworldly beliefs] is linked to the decline in interest in traditional religion and a need to find spirituality in an ever more technologically oriented world.¹

Gallup poll figures indicate that belief in the devil and witches is increasing among Canadians, according to Winsa.

New Age is an amorphous concept that, according to Russell Chandler, 'is not a sect or cult, per se'. He states that

there is no organization one must join, no creed one must confess. Identifying individuals as 'full-blown' New Agers is baffling. Some subscribe to certain portions of New Age, some to others; some dissociate themselves from the movement altogether, though they embrace core aspects of its thinking.²

Three representative strains of New Age thinking will be apparent in this article: a channelled entity, a New Age Christian, and a native American. Their notions about sin, evil and death will be considered.

Sin

Sin is a highly complex issue for Christians. It is a fundamental category of Christian ethics and moral theology. Simply stated, sin is traditionally understood as (a) the condition into which one is born (original sin), (b) deliberately and freely chosen individual acts of commission or omission against the Creator (sins), and (c) the basic choice one may take for the direction of one's life (fundamental option). A fourth category, social sin, is generally used to describe the systemic evils of society, e.g. homelessness, poverty, for which no single individual

may be blamed but in which all members of society share some responsibility. James Childress points out that

in general, Roman Catholic moral theology has concentrated on sins, while Protestant ethics has concentrated on sin, emphasizing the broken relationship with God in mistrust and a lack of faith.³

Joseph Fuchs distinguishes between the moral and theological relevancy of sin:

A sin is precisely a defect; by sin we refuse to put order into this world. Therefore a sin, objectively considered, is against the Creator of this world and the order of this world, against the Creator of the human person and the order of the human person. Sin is a violation and this violation is brought about by a free choice, a psychologically free act. In this psychologically free act we make a choice of this or that reality out of all the realities of the world (*liberum arbitrium*). Here we find the *moral* relevancy of sin.

The *theological* relevance of sin affects the personal relation of a human person to God . . .⁴

Sin, for Fuchs, is more than a single person's initiating moral discord into the world. The larger concern is that in sin one changes one's self-understanding.

Proponents of New Age perspectives tend to dismiss the traditional Christian understanding of God. There is, it is thought, no transcendent Other to whom one is accountable, although there are spirits that may influence the course of human events. As a result, sin, as a theological category, i.e. related to a single divine entity, must necessarily be rejected. New Agers tend to believe that the human is the measure of all things; indeed, the self is the beginning and the end.

Channelling is the means one uses to contact a spirit, deceased mentor, extraterrestrial being or, possibly, an animal evolved into another plane of consciousness. 'Emmanuel', described as a 'spiritual friend', was channelled through Pat Rodegast and Judith Stanton. He maintains that 'you are responsible not only for your actions day to day but for the very fact of your existence, which extends your involvement even beyond conception and the grave'.⁵ Persons do not owe their existence to a single Creator of the universe. We create ourselves even before we are born, presumably through some form of reincarnation. One may wonder, then, just how Emmanuel, as a former living human being, is able to remain outside of human experience and make this

observation about the human situation. Might Emmanuel be standing in for some form of an otherworldly God figure? What happens when channelled entities disagree with one another? These questions are not usually discussed in New Age literature, although they leave their readers curious.

According to Emmanuel, humans are incapable of making a free choice for evil. For example, in his discussion of guilt, Emmanuel states that persons do not choose wrongly. Instead,

Guilt is second judgment. It is looking at oneself in hindsight and saying, 'I really ought not to have done that'. But, my very dears, if you *really* 'ought not to have', you would not have.

Know that at the moment of happening, it was all appropriate. If you have learned since that the act was not what you would choose now and you feel guilty, know that the act itself has brought you to this understanding. That was all it was meant to do.⁶

It seems logically inconsistent that one can be both responsible for one's existence while at the same time be incapable of making a moral choice. If it is true that everything one does is 'appropriate', then how can one account for the hurtful choices that are made by human beings?

Interestingly, Emmanuel does admit that

of course there seems to be darkness in all of you, however it is not as you believe it to be. It is only a shadow, cast by the interface of your false illusions, that cuts you off from the Light.⁷

Whatever this 'darkness' is, it is clearly not intrinsic to the personhood of individuals who, according to Emmanuel, are 'Beings of Light working through the maze of [their] own misconceptions'.⁸ The exact nature of the human person is never discussed, but the spiritual or non-material element is obviously an intrinsic component.

Emmanuel does recognize moral evil within human persons:

Within each one of you there is a small portion, some smaller than others, where there is hate, where there is racism, where there is a voice that says, 'I am different than you and I am better'. Wherever you can hear that voice, you are speaking to what you have perceived in the outer world as Hitler.⁹

It appears that while human 'darkness' is illusory, hatred is real but, in any case, no one is morally responsible for it. There is, in other words, no sin. If however, one knows that there are 'false illusions', it would seem

that there is a consequent responsibility to become aware of them and shed them for 'truth', however one understands it.¹⁰

Another New Age thinker on the subject of moral evil is clinical psychologist Kenneth Wapnick who has become a chief spokesperson of *A course in miracles*, a widely disseminated educational programme that combines psychology and spirituality. Wapnick has argued that

Jesus did not suffer and die for our sins . . . because once you see his death in that way, then you make sin real. You make sin real and then you have to atone for it. The whole idea of the Course is that sin is an illusion . . . For the Course, sin never really happened . . . The Bible speaks of a sinful humanity that is separated from God and in need of reconciliation through the atoning work of Jesus Christ. The Course would dismiss such teaching by saying that its source is not God, but the guilt-ridden, separatist ego.¹¹

Wapnick links the notion of sin with guilt and fear. He rejects the notion of original sin because, he believes, it implies separation and alienation from God that neither heaven nor earth can heal. As we realize the impact of this situation, we experience guilt which springs especially from this false awareness of who we are but also from what we have done.

Due to this sense of basic wrongness and wrongdoing, we will fear the punishment we are sure is forthcoming as our just deserts. We are seemingly helpless in the face of the basic anxiety and terror that inevitably accompany the belief in our own guilt.¹²

From a traditional Christian perspective, Wapnick and all New Agers reject what ought to be rejected. Belief in a God or system that does not allow for a return to grace and ordains punishment for an ontological condition over which one has no control surely deserves to be abandoned. In fact, this interpretation is a misreading of what believers mean by the 'good news of salvation'.

Wapnick and others seem to miss the wonder and joy of the reality of forgiveness for Christians. What the psalmist perceived so long ago has somehow escaped their experience: 'A heart contrite and humbled, O God, you will not spurn' (Ps 51:17). God will not and cannot, we believe, abandon us. When Christians argue in favour of the reality of original sin, they are admitting to a certain proclivity toward evil which they neither chose nor are able adequately to explain. When they claim responsibility for perpetrating certain wrong actions and beg forgive-

ness, they proclaim an awareness of their inability to live blameless lives without the grace of the divine. They endorse belief in their own free will as well. The admission of responsibility for one's wrong actions before God must be coupled with a firm desire to avoid similar behaviour in the future. This is at once to say something about both the nature of God and the nature of the human person, i.e. one *can* do this without fear of reprisals, and, one *must* do this in order to realize one's human potential. The reward, far from being a punishment, is a peace beyond all telling.

Evil

Christians make no attempt to deny the reality of evil in the world. Ethicists distinguish between moral and non-moral evil. Moral evil, also known as sin, has been discussed above. It occurs when one violates the moral law, i.e. the universal natural law available through the light of human reason, or, for believers, when one disobeys the will of God. Non-moral evil, by contrast, includes those disorders which do not have their origin in human sin. It is the latter with which we are primarily concerned in this section.

Several approaches to evil are prominent in New Age thinking. Evil may be considered an illusion or ascribed to one's karma, a rough equivalent of sin. Russell Chandler surveys leading spokespersons for New Age philosophies who prefer to think of evil as an invention of the human imagination. Among his notables is Shirley MacLaine who, he points out, does not believe in evil as such:

Evil, she believes, is only what you *think* it is . . . In MacLaine's view, evil is denied, change is always good, problems disappear, guilt evaporates, and potential is unlimited.¹³

Chandler also reports on other New Age experts:

In New Age thinking, observes Art Lindsley in *New Age Rage*, 'the only way to transform this evil situation is to eliminate the illusion of the finite, the personal, and the social. Disease and suffering are illusory – a matter of consciousness. If we alter consciousness, we eliminate disease.

And, apparently, even war.

New Age spokesman and physician Dr Irving Oyle was once asked how America should deal with the Vietnam War. 'If we all stop thinking about it', he replied, 'if we all stop agreeing on its objective reality, it will cease to exist'.

Entities Seth and Michael, as channelled respectively by Jane Roberts and Jessica Lansing, stated that evil has only as much reality and power as people give it by their basic beliefs. The same applies to devils and demons.

This view, according to researcher Lanny Buettner, gives demons alleged power through negative telepathic suggestion: 'If a man believed his neighbourhood was filled with muggers, he would telepathically attract a mugger, thus confirming his belief'.¹⁴

Regardless of their approach to the presence of evil, New Agers believe that human beings are essentially good and are bound to progress.

Native American spirituality has been included among New Age literature. Evil in this genre is generally considered to be related to human intentionality. Dhyani Ywahoo is a member of the Etowah Band of the Eastern Tsalagi (Cherokee) Nation. She is the founder and head of Sunray Meditation Society in Bristol, Vermont and directs a training programme called the Peacemaker Mission. She believes that 'evil is thoughtless action, evil is what causes harm to others. Evil begins in the heart of ignorance and the desire to dominate'.¹⁵ Ywahoo speculates on the origins of evil:

How is it that evil comes into the world? Evil comes, as my grandparents told me, from people having pride and thinking they have dominion over creation and others. In the Tsalagi creation story about Star Maiden, it is told that when she came to Earth she inhaled a wind and became pregnant and bore two sons. One of them wanted to do things in another way. And these twins fought within their mother, and she died giving birth to the stormmaking one because he came out from underneath her arm rather than in the natural way. And from her body came all the good things that we know. This is one explanation that was given to us as children as to how evil originated. The real lesson in this story is that when we want to argue with the natural plan, when we become so arrogant that we seek to go against the order of things, we bring forth a negative energy. When we act without considering how our actions will affect others, when we act in a way that may cause harm to others, in this moment or three generations from now, then we are planting the seeds of evil.¹⁶

In short, Ywahoo believes that evil occurs when persons abuse the sacred gifts of life, intimacy and knowledge.

Many New Agers would dismiss raw human carnage and malice as persons following their 'karma'. For ordinary Christians, it is somewhat appalling to contemplate the deliberate manifestations of hatred and blatant acts of violence as 'appropriate' and 'the way it is supposed to be'. Something in the human psyche ought to recoil in horror as one contemplates the preponderance of both animal and human suffering at the hands of individuals bent upon causing senseless mutilation and

death among innocents. To excuse the evil in these human actions implies a naïveté and denial that traditional Christians find untenable.

Death

As far as we can tell, death is the ultimate qualitative change in the life of persons as we have known them. This can be seen most clearly in the case of a person who has suffered from a long and debilitating illness. The body deteriorates around an indomitable spirit which finally takes its leave. To all appearances, the struggle between what is and what will be is over. If anything follows this life, only those who have gone before know for sure.

From a theological perspective, death is not the final human event. Rather, it is the very act in which a person becomes her or his decisive self. It is at this moment that one 'enters eternity', if indeed it may be said that eternity has a beginning. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, in any case, is viewed as the single most important event in the salvation of the world. By virtue of his life, death, resurrection and ascension, we may also live beyond the grave.

The death of human beings has been seen variously as a consequence of original sin, as a manifestation of actual sin, and as the natural termination to life. Feminists in particular have resisted linking sin and death too closely. For example, Rosemary Radford Ruether rejects the first two of these notions:

The notion that humanity is culpable for its own finitude has laid upon Christians an untenable burden of guilt. Although we may evaluate our mortality as tragic, or seek to embrace it as natural, what mortality is not is sin, or the fruit of sin. The (preapocalyptic) Hebrew view that mortality is our natural condition, which we share with all other earth beings, and that redemption is the fullness of life within these finite limits, is a more authentic ethics for ecological living.¹⁷

Ruether notes further that both women and the earth have suffered inexorably when the ties between sin and death have been too tight.

Humans have long desired to eliminate death and live forever. Russell Chandler notes that

basically, there are three beliefs about what happens after death: annihilation, which holds that nothing happens because there is no reality outside the world of matter; resurrection, the Christian belief that a person's mortal body is transformed into an immortal one; and reincarnation, which theorizes that death is a passage to cyclical but unending rebirth.¹⁸

New Agers tend not to prefer annihilation or the traditional concept of resurrection, but they do espouse variations on the theme of reincarnation within the New Age literature.

For example, Dhyani Ywahoo notes that

in Tsalagi view, one has seven lifetimes in which to come again to complete realization. It can be done in one lifetime, and in seven it is certain to be complete. Then one may become a planet, a star, the quintessential fire permeating all things, or rest in the formless. It is good to help those in need, as a caretaker.¹⁹

Ywahoo describes the ingredients of 'conscious rebirth' with these caretakers:

Friends or family who choose to be born again together may select a particular constellation in the sky upon which to gaze. When one is reborn and becomes old enough, seeing this constellation [*sic*] will spark remembrance of commitment to be again with those dear ones. In the process of dying one projects one's consciousness to that constellation, and those who will remain on Earth, they, too, meditate on that particular constellation while their friend is dying, so that the thoughtstreams are the same. The dying person's friends also keep clear the stream of their emotions during this time, so that the dying person's journey in the clear light is not obscured by clouds. At a higher level of consciousness and with the help of certain rituals and ceremonies, one can choose the actual kind of relationship one will have with one's friend in the next lifetime.²⁰

The Tsalagi nation teach their people to be unafraid of death and live each day to the fullest. In this way, death will be a peaceful transition to another season of one's life.

Both Kenneth Wapnick and channelled entities stress death as illusion. In a section entitled 'The unreality of death', Wapnick states that 'death is merely a belief, and in his resurrection Jesus proved that belief to be an illusion'.²¹ He describes death as 'the quiet laying down of the body after it has served this holy purpose' of teaching Jesus' lessons of forgiveness.²² Resurrection is 'the awakening from the dream of death . . .'.²³ Just as death is unreal, so is sin which is the cause of death.

Channelled entities reject the belief in annihilation following death. For example, Emmanuel explains that

death is like taking off a tight shoe. *Even when you are dead, you are still alive.* You do not cease to exist at death. That is only illusion. You go through

the doorway of death alive and there is no altering of the consciousness. It is not a strange land you go to but a land of living reality where the growth process is a continuation.²⁴

In fact, death is described as the 'greatest gift'²⁵ that the school of life can offer to an individual. Emmanuel states emphatically that 'death cannot kill You'.²⁶ In response to the question, 'Where did my friend go when he died on Sunday?' Emmanuel replies, '*Where you go when you erase the lines of self-restriction. Your friend went out of illusion.*'²⁷

Fear is the biggest obstacle to a joyous experience of death although once one has walked through the door of death, one no longer lives in fear and pain is not part of this new experience. A welcoming committee is there to greet the new arrival and make the transition a joyous one.

Once the soul is oriented, the Guides will appear. What is seen depends on the belief system. It may be a lighted Buddha, a lighted Christ, or another holy figure, but it will be Light. The soul will then be led to where it needs to go and where, at the deepest level of being, it wants to go.²⁸

Channelled entities live 'on the other side' and so, one is urged to believe, their testimony can be trusted.

In short, death for New Agers is almost universally considered to be a natural transition to another and better phase of life. The best preparation for this movement is to live life to the fullest. The journey is to be anticipated rather than feared because it will bring one closer toward one's true identity.

Conclusion

Significant anthropological and metaphysical differences distinguish New Age and traditional Christian spirituality. Unlike traditional Christian thought, life and death for New Agers are illusory. Sin and evil are likewise not real for New Agers who tend not to hold individuals morally responsible for their behaviour which would be deemed morally reprehensible by classic Christian criteria. Native Americans, however, reject these aspects of New Age thought and argue that persons are capable of moral evil and live several real lives.

One may not arrive at a precise definition of anything in New Age thought since it is a movement with neither creed nor formal organization. It is inclusive of various trends and has touched virtually every stratum of contemporary life. There are, however, certain identifiable characteristics which are commonly understood to be encompassed in

New Age thought. For example, the New Age is a grassroots movement of people who believe that the world is about to enter a new and better age, commonly called the 'Age of Aquarius'. These individuals question traditional assumptions about the divine, the nature of the human planet and the world around us, and the future of the universe. They espouse a humanistic philosophy and are generally committed to personal and social transformation.

Although 'new' in many ways, it is plain that New Age spirituality has its roots in the ancient religions of the East including Hinduism and Buddhism as well as western occultism and others. Unlike the mainline traditions of Christianity, New Age philosophies deny the existence of absolutes and place the human at the centre of reality. This relativism and anthropocentrism sound alarms for both traditional Christians and ecologists who insist upon human accountability for human error and destruction. The suffering of the entire earth is too profound to take seriously a movement that insists upon a self-centred moral scheme. In a time when most persons are seeking global transformation of our economic, political, social and cultural systems, it is essential that traditional Christians and New Age proponents be attentive to one another. We all believe, after all, that we are related at the deepest levels of human hope and aspiration.

NOTES

¹ Winsa, Patty: 'World of occult is just around the corner', *The Toronto Star*, 31 January 1993, p 1. This event was held at the Exhibition Place, 5-7 February. It regularly attracts thousands of persons, including those willing to pay \$95.00 (CAD) for a ninety-minute session with a psychic.

² Chandler, Russell: *Understanding the New Age* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1991), p 5.

³ Childress, James F. in *The Westminster dictionary of Christian ethics*, James F. Childress and John Macquarrie (eds) (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), p 585.

⁴ Fuchs, Joseph: 'Sin and conversion' in *Introduction to Christian ethics: a reader*, Ronald P. Hamel and Kenneth R. Himes (eds) (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), p 206.

⁵ Rodegast, Path and Judith Stanton: *Emmanuel's book: a manual for living comfortably in the cosmos* (New York: Bantam, 1985), p 7.

⁶ Rodegast, Pat and Judith Stanton: *Emmanuel's book II: the choice for love* (New York: Bantam, 1989), p 65.

⁷ *Emmanuel's book*, p 84.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p 84.

⁹ *Emmanuel's book II*, p 151.

¹⁰ I am grateful to Pamela Smith, PhD (cand.) of Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for this last insight.

¹¹ Wapnick, Kenneth quoted in *Understanding the New Age*, pp 192, 193.

¹² Wapnick, Kenneth: *Forgiveness and Jesus: the meeting place of 'A course in miracles' and Christianity* (Roscoe, NY: Foundation for 'A Course in Miracles', 1983), p 50.

¹³ *Understanding the New Age*, p 246.

- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp 246–247.
- ¹⁵ Ywahoo, Dhyani: *Voices of our ancestors: Cherokee teachings from the wisdom fire* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), p 16.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 225–256.
- ¹⁷ Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Gaia and God: an ecofeminist theology of earth healing* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), p 139.
- ¹⁸ *Understanding the New Age*, p 193.
- ¹⁹ *Voices of our ancestors*, p 186.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp 186–187.
- ²¹ *Forgiveness and Jesus*, p 232.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p 233.
- ²³ Quoted in *Understanding the New Age*, p 193.
- ²⁴ *Emmanuel's book*, p 169.
- ²⁵ *Emmanuel's book II*, p 16.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p 29.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p 133.
- ²⁸ *Emmanuel's book*, p 173.