

Is the 'New Age' New?



Talk shows, magazine covers, bookstores—everywhere one looks—display evidence of the "New Age" movement that is attracting millions of North Americans. Throughout the world are thousands of New Age or occult movements.

James Arkema, a member of Church of the Servant, Grand Rapids, Michigan, and a Calvin College graduate, introduces a few of the better known cults that are part of the New Age movement in North America.

Anyone can join the New Age movement, but all comers better have their charge cards handy. A videocassette of a medium "channeling" messages costs \$65, materials about a gathering promoting brotherhood by using Amerindian rituals costs \$35, a month's supply of "spiritual wellness powder" costs \$50, and a weekend retreat at a yoga camp costs \$155.

The name *New Age* describes a large group of *new* religions that have erupted in North America since the sixties. These religions are not new! They often claim to be older than Christianity. But they are new to thousands of people who have rediscovered spirituality after having flirted with notions that there is no God and that

humanity can perfect the world with science.

In the sixties people threw out square-minded capitalism and Christianity. A "new consciousness" was spreading as the earth entered the Age of Aquarius, they believed. People flocked to spiritual masters who preached world unity and antimaterialism—beliefs common in the Orient.

Many cults and their leaders are covered by the New Age umbrella:

The Hare Krishna. Its founder came from India to New York in 1965. By the 1980s he had started Krishna temples in thirty-nine United States cities and fifty-three other countries.

The cult's followers worship God as

revealed by Krishna, a god/prophet who appeared in India thousands of years ago. Hare Krishnas believe that nothing in this world is of ultimate value, that physical existence is full of suffering, and that only by renouncing the world and worshipping God can a person be saved.

Yoga is a discipline of body control that raises people's awareness of their *godhood*. The positions in yoga exercise are meant to physically align the student with the eternal stream-of-consciousness and remove blockages to truth. Yoga was brought to the United States during the late sixties. It has since been welcomed into school physical-education programs, and Sri Swami Rama, the founder, has opened the Himalaya Institute, a school that holds year-round classes in yoga and meditation.

Neo-paganism—including witchcraft, Amerindian ritualism, astrology, séances, palmistry, and holistic health techniques—joined the roster of the new-consciousness religions in the late seventies. At this time, the New Age movement was

born.

The closest the new movement came to having a "birthdate" was Sunday, August 16, 1987. People around the world gathered to greet the sunrise and celebrate the *harmonic convergence*—a unique alignment of the planets.

Groups met on Colorado mountaintops, near Ohioan Indian burial grounds, and on the Atlantic seashore. All shared the hope that humanity would be improved.

In a gathering held a bit south of Grand Rapids, Michigan, several celebrants met in the predawn darkness. They purified themselves by patting their bodies with smoke from a bundle of sacred herbs. They chanted, circling counterclockwise in a weedy field. Beating hand drums and cymbals, they wandered around the woods praying for peace and love.

Culture and Capitalism. Ironically, the new-consciousness religions of the counterculture sixties and neo-paganism have joined the mainstream of culture by teaming with capitalism.

Christopher Hill, a long-bearded father of the New Age, discovered a high-protein algae in 1965 that he thought would solve world hunger. Today he heads Light Force, Inc., which sells the algae to Americans through direct-sales distributors.

Hill explains that the algae—a food grown from sunlight—when potentized through his power, can bring enlightening calm to the user. It brightens the stomach (the spiritually and physically darkest part of the body) and balances all the user's body activities.

The stressful modern age puts people out of balance, leaving a person fatigued, sallow, and glum. Holistic health doctors like Hill promise good health for the whole person, body and soul.

For those who sell "Dr. Hill's Potentized Spirulina," it also has monetary benefits. "The potential income to you is twice as high as other" direct-sales plans, brags the dealers' promotional booklet.

Tolerance. Besides triggering opportunism, the New Age movement preaches tolerance, an idea equally ingrained in the

Western psyche. The wide variety of beliefs within the New Age movement is baffling unless it is seen as part of Western individualism.

In the pluralistic societies of Canada and the United States, people are not given a religion; they must choose one or none for themselves. However, a person must tolerate others' beliefs. Jimmy Swaggart, for example, has been labeled intolerant—and therefore unacceptable to persons involved with a New Age religion—because he says that Jews and Roman Catholics are not saved. Most Westerners ask what gives Jimmy Swaggart the right to declare who is saved and who is not.

The New Age movement is open to all beliefs. The Hare Krishnas, although they believe nothing on earth has ultimate

value, also believe that persons can praise God in their everyday activities, so they tolerate persons who choose another path to God. Those who do not choose the Hare Krishna path will be reincarnated and become enlightened in another life.

We Are God. Some in the New Age movement believe that God formed the universe out of his own substance. The creation is God. Furthermore, all human beings are *God*. People who realize their own godhood must tolerate others, because no one is wrong or evil.

Hindus and Buddhists believe that humans have a god-nature. Swami Amar Jyoti taught this when he came to the United States from India in 1973 and founded the Truth Consciousness organi-

The "New Age" in Today's Culture

Various terms are used to describe the rise of pantheistic thought in North America. The New Age Movement embraces many cults and groups. Broadly speaking, the New Age Movement is a loose coalition of many organizations that believe in a new world religion, that work towards a new world order, and that expect a "New Age" Christ.

New Age religion is manifest in today's culture in many ways:

1. Along with the "older" cults—Christian Science, Unity, Bahai, and Scientology—are the newer groups and gurus. Transcendental meditation, yoga, Hare Krishna, the Church Universal and Triumphant, and the Unification Church are a few.

2. New Age thought permeates the mass media. The idea of pantheism, which says God is all and all is God, runs through movies such as "Star Wars," "Return of the Jedi," "The Exorcist," "ET," "Close Encounters," and more.

3. New Age ideas were generated in music by the popular Beatles when they embraced Hare Krishna principles. These ideas continue today, unabated, and dominate rock music, even including "outright satanic lyrics in some hard rock songs."

4. Pantheistic influence appeared in public schools through TM (transcendental meditation) until the courts recognized it was *religious* in nature. Today other forms of yoga, meditation, exploration of inner space, and more continue to be present in public education.

5. Business too embraces some of the pantheistic thought. Seminars regarding holistic health fads, relaxation techniques, and biorhythms are numerous.

6. That belief in reincarnation has grown demonstrates the popularity of ideas from Eastern pantheistic religion. (In 1982, according to a Gallup poll, 30 percent of college students believed in reincarnation.)

—taken, with permission, from Dr. Norman L. Geisler's, "The New Age Movement," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Jan/Mar, 1987.

Other material by Dr. Geisler is available from Quest Ministries, P.O. Box 2500, Dallas, TX 75221.

Comparisons and Contrasts

One reason professing Christians are being deceived by New Age beliefs is that they look mainly at the similarities between New Age and Christian beliefs. These are numerous: both believe in God, Christ, prayer, life after death, and many moral values. They also use terms such as revelation, cross, redemption, resurrection, and second coming.

The following chart contrasts major teachings of biblical Christianity and New Age pantheism.

	Biblical Christianity	New Age Pantheism
God	Father Personal Only Good Created all things	Force Impersonal Good and evil Is all things
Man	Made like God Is evil Spirit/body Resurrection	Is God Is good Spirit only Reincarnation
Jesus Christ	Same Person	Different persons ("Jesus" and "Christ")
	God-Man Death/resurrection	God Spirit in man Death/reincarnations
Salvation	From moral guilt By grace Victory over sin	From disharmony By human effort Victory over fear
Faith	In divine power Objective focus To see God's will done	In human potential Subjective focus To see man's will done
Miracle	Done at God's command Supernatural power (of the Creator) Associated with good	Done at man's command Supranormal power (of creatures) Associated with evil

—taken, with permission, from Dr. Norman L. Geisler's "The New Age Movement," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Jan/Mar. 1987.

Other material by Dr. Geisler is available from Quest Ministries, P.O. Box 2500, Dallas, TX 75221.

zation. He tells his followers to search "for the fulfillment that lies within. We may call it love or consciousness, Rama, Krishna, Jesus, Buddha, or simply Light."

"Swamiji," as his followers call him, founded three spiritual communities in the United States—in Arizona, Colorado, and Michigan. The communities hold services twice weekly. The first part is a yoga class. The group then listens to a *satson* (communion with the truth) spoken by Swamiji. Until his followers learn to communicate directly with their god-nature, revelation comes through Swamiji. Other New Age followers receive guidance from the spirit world.

Channeling. On February 18, 1978, a housewife, J. Z. Knight, was visited in her kitchen by a seven-foot, gleaming white spirit named Ramtha. He continued to visit her and teach her. Eventually Ramtha began to communicate through

Knight. She wrote books inspired by Ramtha and began to *channel* his messages to listeners. The most important message was *we are god*.

Ramtha now has a large following, including movie star Shirley MacLaine, who appeared on the cover of *Time* (Dec. 7, 1987) as a proponent of New Age religion. Seekers of Ramtha's wisdom pay steep fees to attend group channeling sessions.

Ramtha has warned people that by the year 2034 the world economy will fail. In the ensuing anarchy those who did not plan ahead will die and be reincarnated. Those who are "sovereign" will need to barter and run small farms. The world will rebuild itself around unity and peace.

Ramtha will soon stop speaking through Knight, and Knight will retire to become sovereign in anticipation of the apocalypse. After ten years of mediocrity with books and TV programs and thousands of channeling sessions, Knight is wealthy enough to provide for herself

and her husband.

The Search for Truth. Beneath quick-money recruitment offers from holistic medicine companies, and beneath the profiteering of J. Z. Knight and other mediums, and underlying the union of self-help consciousness and greed is a genuine search for truth. Men and women are inclined to pursue the god who shapes them and the world. New Age spirituality fills the gap left by decades of the "God is dead" idea.

The search of the thousands who seek to fill this gap challenges traditional Christianity to either demonstrate a true spirituality or stay on the sidelines of the revival.

Christians can meet the challenge of other religions without fear. Christ's invitation for men and women to rejoin God the Father has leapt from Jerusalem to the world. Christ's message need not be protected from debate and examination as if it were fragile. The power of God, not the defensiveness of individuals, holds the church true.

Also, the church can grow and learn from the challenge of the New Age movement. Christians ought to test their traditions to determine if what has become familiar to the church is unnecessarily offensive to others. The Apostle Paul declared that he would readily change himself if this would draw others to Christ. Ironically, meditation and holistic health techniques are part of the church's traditions; here the church is challenged to reclaim what it has lost.

But Christians need not change only to fill a craving for the new. The church has outlived the *newness* of transcendentalism and the modern rejection of biblical miracles as well as the "new consciousness" of the sixties. Biblical teachings are benchmarks that expose the New Age falsehoods that humans are gods and that there is no sin or Satan.

Most important, Christianity's spirituality ought to reflect the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. By these, non-believers will know they can end their search for truth and rest in Christ. ■