

Christianity and New Age beliefs

Introductory address given by **Father John Ives** of the *Celtic Orthodox Church*

Good evening. It has fallen to me (it would appear), to simply introduce the subject of the relationship of New-Ageism and Christianity. I am (as you just heard) an orthodox arch-priest of the Celtic Orthodox Church; and while the Church - or rather the jurisdiction to which I belong - is very small, especially here in Glastonbury, I would remind you that the Orthodox Church is the second largest church in the world; and while the views I shall put forward are my own, they are, I believe, the views of the silent majority of those here present; and no doubt they will annoy some. But since I have been drastically restricted in the original time allotted to me, I apologise if I do not succeed in annoying you personally. I will try better if we have a next time. (That was just the introduction to the Introduction - so that time does not count.)

I hope that you have - or will – read; mark; learn and inwardly digest the three passages on the handout which I originally meant to quote in this address, but time now forbids. They are all from intelligent, thoughtful Christian writers. (One of them in political correct-ism is even a woman.) They are particularly pertinent to the discussion this evening.

The first from Tom Davies, a respected journalist, was written ten years ago. But I think that little has changed since he interviewed me in my then shop: *The Orthodox Way*. Indeed, when I walk down the streets and passage-ways of Glastonbury and am confronted with countless statues of Hindu gods and goddesses, broomsticks and cauldrons, Green Men and spellbooks, I sometimes think I have walked on to the set of *The Wicker Man*, or entered Harry Potter's Diagon Alley without knowing it. One is assailed on all sides by bookshops peddling anti-Christian polemic, and countless pseudo-history, of which *The Da Vinci Code* is just the tip of the iceberg. What would they do without Atlantis; the Holy Grail; and especially the Knights Templars? One is tempted to paraphrase Voltaire's famous statement about God: if they had not existed, it would be, it appears, necessary to invent them. How have we indeed come to this?

Tom Davies quotes me as saying we couldn't just hand it over; but that I fear is precisely what we have done, or are doing. The high tide of the swirling sea of nuttiness that he mentions is in full flood. Why is this? What has caused this phenomenon - this mixture of neo-paganism, neo-spiritualism, neo-theosophy that has been fused with a back-to-nature, utopian, pseudo-scientific, pseudo-historic, pseudo-psychology that has all been lumped together under the title of: The New Age Movement. (Incidentally, very little of it is new. Neo-gnostic would, I feel, be a more accurate description.)

Many answers have, and indeed, may be given this evening. But I think a major reason for its tremendous popularity lies with the Christian churches themselves. The mainstream western churches have become increasingly secular, preaching a vaguely Christian philosophy from which traditional religious beliefs and practices were to a large extent removed. Especially in liturgy and worship which has discarded the mysterious - the awe, the numinous (to use the technical term), the inspirational - in favour of social action, pop psychology and culture, and vague platitudes about Love and 'being nice to each other', under inaccurate terms like 'Family' or 'All-age worship', which make most young people cringe. (The Sunday schools and school assemblies have a lot to answer for.) So ironically, just as they were reaching out for the candles, incense and chants of New-Ageism, the Churches were, and still are, busily discarding all such things. In the New Age movement the youth of the 60s and 70s found what they were seeking - elaborate ritual, emphasis on the mysterious, the supernatural, the esoteric - the very things an increasingly secularised Church seemed to be lacking. Human beings have an innate religious need, and the need to visibly express it. The Diana phenomenon and accident shrines show that if it is not met by the Church, it will be found elsewhere. Belief, like Nature, abhors a vacuum; and this is one great lesson we Christians can learn from New Agers.

Equally, the other major underlying cause for New Age success is ignorance. So many regular church-goers, as much as others, have no real knowledge of what Christianity is all about (present company excepted, I'm sure); and much of what is currently said or written is simply inaccurate or downright wrong. The theories and suppositions of one writer are in an amazingly short time passed on as indisputable fact by the next; and thus the anti-Christian myths grow and go on. They reject what they have chosen or been led to believe is the Christian faith, when in reality it is only a pale shadow or crude distortion; and thus, understandably, the genuine seeker thinks and assumes that the mystical and spiritual they hanker after is only to be found elsewhere. Primarily in the iconography, philosophy and mantras of the oriental religions to which they can add liberal doses of ancient (especially Celtic) paganism; to provide an individualistic, synchronistic conglomeration. But for more on that please read the telling passage from Yvonne Lubbock on the handout. One who has indeed been there; done that; and thrown away the tee-shirt.

Christianity has of course an equally strong tradition of prayer, meditation and contemplation; its rosaries and prayer ropes; its mantras and iconography. But they do not exist in isolation from the whole Christian life. They are not simply personal techniques for alleviating stress and cannot just be lumped together indiscriminately with the Bhagavad Gita or Upanishads one day; Sufism, Qabalah the next; and Astrology and the Tarot on the days after.

So to return to the fundamental question: What should be the Christian attitude to New-Ageism?

Well, we have tended to divide into two extreme groups.

There are those who regard it all as a vast cosmic satanic conspiracy; an occult supernatural demonic trap. This view is, I think, a trifle naïve. There are no doubt real satanic and occult groups endeavouring to practise what they believe to be the Black Arts, but they are a minority; and while I am sure the devil lies behind all that is misguided confusion and error, nevertheless I believe he's more subtle than your average *Hammer House of Horror* film image of him. (And as C.S. Lewis once wrote, he welcomes the materialistic atheist as much as the magician; and no doubt the New Age advocate along with the liberal Christian as well.)

The other view is that now Christianity has come of age and been stripped of the errors of past belief and practice, we can welcome and embrace the New Age with enthusiasm and gusto. And so make it what we said back in the 60s and 70s, meaningful and relevant for the ongoing situation; and thus freely link Christ's name with Krishna; and God the Father be replaced happily with God the Mother. This view is in my opinion not only equally naïve, but possibly harmful. But on that subject, please read the passage from C.S. Lewis - a passage which, unlike many of his other writings, is not very popular today.

What therefore should be the relationship between Christianity and the New Age alternative ideologies? Are the two compatible? Can one take elements from the one, and inject them into the other? As you will by now have gathered, I think not. Above all, honesty, as well as respect, is necessary in any coming together. But there are, I maintain, absolute truths that cannot be compromised. Christianity makes, like it or not, exclusive claims; and cannot be regarded as just one spiritual way among many. The old cliché that all religions are really saying the same thing is sadly not the case. Our Lord Jesus Christ said: 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father, except by me'. Now one can accept or reject that statement, but it is unambiguous, and those who profess to be, and call themselves Christians - but adopt a view so wide that it negates the absolute uniqueness of Christianity - must of course begin by re-writing or throwing out Scripture, and the traditional doctrines of the faith. Which is precisely what so many have done ever since the so-called Enlightenment of the 18th-century - with disastrous results.

Christianity believes itself to be the fullest expression of God's revelation to the world, which fulfills and completes all other beliefs. This startling, and to some, embarrassing, claim is basic. It does not mean that we Christians deny the partial, or incomplete validity of other quests for truth, and indeed welcome them - there is of course truth in all religions, and any step in the right direction is to be welcomed - but not all paths lead to the top of the mountain of spiritual truth. There are many cul-de-sacs along the way, and the ultimate path is narrow and leads only through Christ - the way the Epistle to the Hebrews speaks indeed of God, who at sundry times and in divers manners has spoken in times past. But goes on to say: He has spoke for all time in His son - the Word made flesh. Consequently there is a major difference

here with those who seek a return to paganism. (Not that there ever was a singular paganism, a mythical 'old' religion. But simply paganisms in the plural, all very different and diverse.)

Many of the early Christian writers and fathers of the Church, like Origen and St Clement of Alexandria, encourage true gnosis, or knowledge, with regard to the pagan myths; and saw in them much truth, and that they equally prefigured the coming of Christ just as much as Judaism did. ("God sent the pagan world good dreams", says C.S. Lewis.) But there is no need to put the clock back and return to pagan worship. The types and shadows of the past, as St Thomas Aquinas' great hymn *Tantum Ergo* puts it, have their ending for the newer rite that is: 'Christianity is here'. And the Church quite blatantly took over and baptised into Christ that which was good in pagan worship, and we need not apologise for it.

The Apostle John warns us to test every spirit as to whether they be of God. And that certainly should be true of much of the New Age spirituality. The test, he says, is if they say that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh or not - in other words, is it compatible with the incarnation of God in Man, as Jesus Christ? We must reject all that is contrary to His divine incarnation, so that anything that reduced Him simply to being another avatar, or master among masters or teacher among teachers is at heart sub- or non-Christian. Neither can the Holy Trinity be devalued in consequence, or tampered with by feminine language, which changes either the Eternal Father or Holy Spirit into a Mother Goddess. (Please see Lewis on this point.)

Christians equally need to be aware and deny emphatically that most popular of New Age doctrines: reincarnation and the Law of Karma. Our Lord positively denied it when speaking of the man born blind; and it is incompatible with the Christian doctrine of Christ's atonement of our sins by his death and resurrection. (But more on that another time.)

But I would like to stress that while taking what may be considered an uncompromising position, this does not of course require the coercion of others, or justify the oppression or intolerance of non-Christian faiths or philosophies. We can, and indeed must, live together in harmonious difference as best we can; striving by discussion to understand each other. But beyond that we should not go, I would say - especially in the area of common worship.

In conclusion, let me say that while Christianity and the New Age movement may be fundamentally incompatible on many points, nevertheless we all need to know and discover more about each other. Where we are, as well as where we are not - and that may surprise us all. Above all, the Church needs to put her energy into once again offering her life-giving truth to those who have so long been with her; and be prepared to listen in return.
