

VI THE NEW AGE MOVEMENT (NAM)

INTRODUCTION

The New Age Movement ... is a complex sociological phenomenon not unlike the proverbial elephant discovered independently by three blind men: one came upon his leg and described him as a tree; another got hold of his trunk and likened him to a hose; the third stumbled on his tail and insisted he was like a rope. Things that may be true about parts of the New Age Movement are not necessarily true of the whole. (Miller, 1985, p. 17) NAM cannot be classified as a cult or sect. It has no official spokesperson who speaks authoritatively. It has no headquarters and no official doctrine or creed. But there are many groups, organizations, and individuals who through their published materials exercise great influence. People from all walks of life are attracted to NAM as it offers a religion without sin and guilt for its followers, and plenty of glamour. Increasingly, people are turning to angels, nature spirits, channeled beings, and other unseen entities to guide them through these troubled times. NAM has become a significant North American spiritual and social force. It is not a passing fad. NAM is big business. In most book stores you will find books under the headings of the occult, reincarnation, dreams, yoga, and astrology. In the US, there are radio stations specifically geared to the promotion of NAM (Cole, Higton, Graham, Lewis, 1990, p. 5).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

NAM's beliefs and ideas are borrowed from a great variety of sources, both ancient and modern. Its essential message is that although the world is faced with destruction, humans have the ability to avert it and build a new world of harmony and peace. Individualism is at the very core of its faith and practice.

Carl Jung's (1875-1961) psychology is experiencing a revival. His ideas are disseminated in several new books appearing in stores, especially those that specialize in New Age topics. The connection Jung made between religion and psychology was crucial for NAM. He "psychologized" religion and at the same time turned psychology into a religion (Wilson, 1995, p. 13). He saw God the Father as the projection of the ideal self He led his patients "on a guided tour through the mythic realms of ancient religions to a land of personal redemption and rebirth, all within the guise of psychoanalysis" (Eskens, January, 1994, p. 23).

Professor and author Marvin Olasky says NAM has an important historical precedent in the massive spiritist movement in the US during the 1850s. It espoused many of the same doctrines and practices-pantheism, channeling of spirits-that characterize today's NAM (Olasky, 1992, p. 20).

NAM has a definite Hindu connection. Its most basic beliefs are that everything has a soul and is part of the world soul. NAM is a westernized version of classic monistic Hinduism. Many of NAM's ideas and techniques come straight from India, brought to North America and taught here since the 1960s by Hindu swamis and gurus.

Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) is considered an important forerunner of NAM. He founded the Anthroposophical Society in 1912. He described anthroposophy "as knowledge produced by the higher self in man" (Hardwood, 1973, p. 203). He claimed that an enhanced consciousness can again achieve perception of spiritual worlds. He is the founder of the Waldorf School movement. Yet he always retained his membership in the Roman Catholic Church.

NAM is a variant of ancient gnosticism, a philosophic-religious movement relegated to the ancient mystery religions and directed toward personal salvation. (The word gnosticism is derived from the Greek word "to know.") The path of gnosis is a path of spiritual awakening, through which one discovers the divine within. "

Music

Music has a vital role in NAM. It helps to lead one on a journey inward. New Age-style music is described by *Newsweek* as ". . . a loosely defined school that encompasses ... lyrical jazz folk ... airy harp fantasies ... spacey synthesizer noodlings What ties these musicians together is a vaguely mystical worldview and a striving toward a relaxing musical mood" (Miller, 1985, p. 21).

The Church

The influence of NAM on the church is unsettling. It seems that the church has lost touch with its rich spiritual heritage, and in its search for a deeper spiritual life absorbs indiscriminately whatever new trends offer. "Riddles and Revelations," a feature article in the *United Church Observer*, describes the importance of dreams for spirituality. These dreams come from "the God within." The article also advises the reader to go to "your local Jungian association" for an analysis of your dreams (Sinclair, 1989, December, pp. 20f).

Ecology

New Agers are very concerned about threats to the environment. They believe that people transformed by NAM thinking should take responsibility for society as a whole and bring about "planetary transformation." The Green Movement is an outgrowth of NAM. The Green Parties in Europe and Canada are based on NAM's holistic ideology. Mother Earth replaces Father God. Author K. D. McRoberts claims that "New Age politics has abandoned the patriarchal tradition in favour of a matriarchal tradition that engenders community instead of aggression, intuition instead of rationality, cooperation instead of domination" (1989, p. 45).

NAM'S Beliefs

NAM's beliefs are in direct conflict with the traditional Western worldview based on JudeoChristian thought.

Monism

Ultimate reality (god) is one and impersonal. It contains no distinctions, is undifferentiated, without qualities or attributes. All that is in God. Ultimately there is no difference between God, a potato, or a rock.

Pantheism

There is no personal God. The cosmos is an extension of god, has the nature of god. In essence, everything is divine. This means there is no distinction between right and wrong, good and evil. Christian theologian Peter Kreeft calls pantheism the "blob god." He points out pantheism solves the problem of evil neatly. "Evil is part of the blob god too. Hitler is God as well as Christ. God is both good and evil. That accounts for the presence of good and evil in the world, for the world is a part of God, or a manifestation of God" (Kreeft, 1986, p. 40).

Man is God

Human beings are not distinct from god. They are an extension of the ultimate reality and share its nature and its divine being. The divine essence within man is his real and true self American actor and author Shirley MacLaine declared, "You must never worship anyone or anything other than self For you are God" (Stanhope, 1989, p. 23).

Human's Predicament

Since there is no personal god, humans are not in a state of rebellion. They have not fallen into sin. Rather, humans' dilemma is the lack of awareness of their divinity. They have limited themselves so that they cannot see that all is one. They only sees fragments of reality.

The Remedy

The remedy for humanity's predicament is dispelled by experiential knowledge of the divine reality and man's essential deity. This knowledge is known by man names- gnosis, enlightenment, and god-consciousness. Since there is no personal God who has been offended, there is no need for a mediator.

Jesus Christ

NAM's Jesus Christ has nothing to do with the Jesus Christ of history. NAM regards the Christ "spirit" or "principle" as the spirit of cosmos and speaks of the experience of "the Christ." Jesus is no more God than anyone else. He is regarded as one of the many avatars or gurus.

The New Age Jesus became "the Christ" only after purifying himself of "bad karma" through many incarnations, and even now (as many believe) he is only one of several "masters" who serve humanity from a higher (but not the highest) plane. (Miller, 1985, p. 22)

Death

Man is immortal. Since man is part of god he can never die. Death is not the end but the beginning of a long journey. It is not annihilation but a change in energy state.

Reincarnation

"Reincarnation is the belief that when we die our spirit or soul will move into another body, a process that will be repeated until eventually we reach full union with the Absolute" (Antonides, 1991, p. 2). NAM finds the Hindu belief of reincarnation very attractive. MacLaine recalls past lives. She believes that she once lived as "a young Buddhist monk, an orphan child adopted by a herd of elephants, a Colonial settler during the signing of the US Constitution, a ballet dancer in Russia, and a Mongolian maid raped by a bandit" (McRoberts, 1989, p. 11).

All Religions Lead to God

NAM claims that all religions are one. They all, at their core, teach the same thing. All the great teachers, including Jesus, taught the One for All. This is, of course, pure syncretism.

Evolutionary Optimism

Central to NAM thought is a spiritualized doctrine of evolution, the conviction that personal transformation will lead to planetary transformation. Through conscious training and enlightenment humankind may expect a better world and a new supra-human species.

Scripture-twisting

Like the cults and sects, NAM twists Scripture to make it fit its teachings. When Jesus said, "except that ye be as little children, ye cannot enter the kingdom of Heaven" (Luke 18:17b), NAM interprets this as meaning that the kingdom of heaven is essentially the level of consciousness attained by enlightened people who are empirically aware of their divinity (Grimm, 1990, p. 30).

A Christian Response

The contemporary interest in spirituality affords a great opportunity for a resurgence of a vital spirituality based on the Bible. Biblical spirituality provides a source of meaning for all of life. It does not divide life into sacred and secular spheres. It does not separate spirituality from education, science, or entertainment, for example.

Since NAM does not make a distinction between the creator and creation, the doctrine of creation needs a strong emphasis. God is not part of the earthly reality and earthly reality is not part of the divine. The Bible does not elevate creation and man to a divine status. Creation is important because it is the sphere within which man is in communion with and of service to the Creator.

An all-encompassing view of life is also desperately needed. Christians must learn anew to think holistically; to develop a worldview as a way of seeing, understanding, interpreting, and approaching the totality of human life from a biblical perspective (van der Walt, 1994, p. 182).

SUGGESTED READING

Douglas R. Groothuis. *Unmasking the New Age*. InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1986.

Douglas R. Groothuis. *Confronting the New Age*. InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1988.

Erwin W. Lutzer & John F. DeVries. *Satan's Evangelistic Strategy for This New Age*.

Victor Books, Wheaton, IL, 1989.

Karen Hoyt, Ed. *The New Age Rage: A Probing Analysis of the Newest Religious Craze*. Spiritual Counterfeits Project.

Elliot Miller, *A Crash Course on the New Age Movement*. Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1989.

Walter R. Martin, *The New Age Cult*. Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 1989.

A catalogue of New Age books by New Age authors is available from:

Bantam New Age list

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