

Apologetics: Jesus Christ, Bearer of the Water of Life. Revisiting an Important Church Document on New Age



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Anyone involved in ministry in Ireland knows that there is some confusion as to what beliefs can and cannot be combined with Catholicism. I've been told by regular Mass-goers that 'the universe is God, and God is the universe,' 'I went to a medium after my mother died,' 'I believe in reincarnation,' 'abortion is ok.' I have been asked, 'But Father, do you *really* think there is life after death?'

Some of what Catholics try to graft on to the Faith can be sourced to New Age thinking, a vast range of interconnected theories about reality (along with accompanying ritual or prayer practices) that to greater or lesser degrees reject Christian revelation in favour of a mixture of beliefs popularised by European free-thinkers from the late 19th century onwards, gathering elements from many sources, and echoing early Christian heresies like gnosticism and pantheism.

The 2003 Vatican document on the New Age movement, *Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life* (JCBWL) is

aimed at 'those engaged in pastoral work so that they might be able to explain how the *New Age* movement differs from the Christian faith.' This is necessary but difficult, since New Age is not a unified set of teachings. Indeed, one of the secrets of its success has been to convince Christians that New Age beliefs are complimentary and in harmony with Christianity, not in conflict with it. A sign of New Age's tendency to absorb and neutralise rather than directly contradict is the fact that few bookshops now have sections called 'religion' or 'theology', but will permit a few Christian books to be included in a section called 'Mind – Body – Spirit'.

JCBWL sees New Age as a wide river fed by many streams: 'Some of the traditions which flow into *New Age* are: ancient Egyptian occult practices, Cabbalism, early Christian gnosticism, Sufism, the lore of the Druids, Celtic Christianity, mediaeval alchemy, Renaissance hermeticism, Zen Buddhism, Yoga and so on.' Vatican II, instead,

presents Jesus Christ as the true water of life: 'the Church has always held and holds now, Christ underwent His passion and death freely, because of the sins of men and out of infinite love, in order that all may reach salvation. It is, therefore, the burden of the Church's preaching to proclaim *the cross of Christ as the sign of God's all-embracing love and as the fountain from which every grace flows.*' (*Nostra Aetate* 4. Italics added).

While Christians seek healing from the God known from revelation, New Agers seek healing from an *unknown force or energy*, or from themselves: 'The source of healing is said to be within ourselves, something we reach when we are in touch with our inner energy or cosmic energy.' It is perhaps a weakness of JCBWL that it puts scant emphasis on the fact that the malignant power of the one Jesus calls 'the father of lies' can also operate through some of the unidentified and seemingly benign powers that are invoked in New Age practices. Yet JCBWL states bluntly: 'it must unfortunately be

admitted that there are too many cases where Catholic centres of spirituality are actively involved in diffusing *New Age* religiosity in the Church.'

How has New Age become such a powerful force? *JCBWL* sees New Age as *both growing from and reacting against* our postmodern culture. In the time since World War II, the great ideologies of people, state and science have proven false. The certainties of the past gave way to a sea of rumours and conspiracy theories, with an emphasis on feeling, absolute personal freedom and living only for the moment. Postmodern humanity is slow to believe anyone or anything, and prefers to see facts and theories as possibly but not probably true.

A dislike of clarity, or an actual preference for uncertainty, finds expression in the swirling and often self-contradictory world of New Age literature, with its evocative but ambiguous use of words like spirit, love, mystical, enlightenment, inner, outer, angel, God, cosmic, consciousness, mind, etc. Rational distinctions between good and evil, female or male, divine and human are disallowed. In contrast, 'the Christian tradition has always valued the role of reason in justifying faith and in understanding God.'

Although New Age ideas are hard to pin down, *JCBWL* makes it clear that 'it must never be forgotten that many of the movements that have fed the *New Age* are explicitly anti-Christian.' The new age in question is 'The Age of Aquarius... conceived as one which will replace the predominantly Christian Age of Pisces. *New Age* thinkers are acutely aware of this; some of them are convinced that the coming change is inevitable, while others are actively committed to assisting its arrival. People who wonder if it is possible to believe in both Christ and Aquarius can only benefit from knowing that this is very much an 'either-or' situation.'

Catholics are urged 'to have an understanding of authentic Catholic doctrine,' so as to be always ready to respond to challenges to the reasonableness of their faith. We should also be aware that Christians who drift into New Age beliefs or practices may not have had their spiritual hunger met by their own community. Saint Pope John Paul II said to a group of bishops from the United States: 'Pastors must honestly ask whether they have paid sufficient attention to the thirst of the human heart



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for the true "living water" which only Christ our Redeemer can give.'

Vatican II spoke of the search for truth and meaning characteristic of human beings: '[They] expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition, which today, even as in former times, deeply stir the hearts of men: What is man? What is the meaning, the aim of our life? What is moral good, what is sin? Whence suffering and what purpose does it serve? Which is the road to true happiness? What are death, judgment and retribution after death? What, finally, is that ultimate inexpressible mystery which encompasses our existence: whence do we come, and where are we going?' (*Nostra Aetate*, 1). While Christianity offers clear answers to these questions, one of the attractions of New Age is that *each individual chooses what they are prepared to believe*, without having to 'lose their freedom' by 'conforming' to the authority of Christian Scripture or tradition.

Acts 24 gives us a portrait of the Roman procurator Felix, that echoes the reluctance of today's generation, who may know a lot about Christianity but are reluctant to commit to Christ, partly because their paradigm of reality has been deeply influenced by the 'background noise' of New Age assumptions. Felix actually 'sent for Paul and gave him a hearing on the subject of faith in Christ Jesus. But when he began to treat of righteousness, self-control and the coming Judgement, Felix took fright and said, 'you may go for the

present; I will send for you when I find it convenient'.' (Acts 24:24-26).

Like Felix, some contemporary seekers are open to faith and actually initiate a process of enquiry about Christ, but when talk turns to an objective standard of truth, the need to change the way one lives, and the reality of *Dominus Iesus* as sole Redeemer who will judge all humanity with one measure, Felix steps back, without a definitive yes or no. His words, 'you may go for the present; I will send for you when I find it convenient,' clearly express our discomfort with Christ's inconveniently *absolute* claims and demands.

To any Christian looking for a convenient way to avoid staking everything on their faith, instead being carried along by dangerous waters of New Age ambiguity, *Jesus Christ Bearer of the Water of Life* tells an inconvenient truth: Jesus Christ is the *only* true Bearer of the Water of Life. Our challenge is to find new ways to listen deeply to the 'Felixes' of our time, to take their search for truth and authentic spirituality seriously and respond to them with sensitivity, sincerity, courage and – most important of all – a life in harmony with what we believe.

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