

## The Christian Receptions of the New Age

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The New Age Movement, which took birth in North America, did not arrive alone and by itself in Europe. Like any other historical movement coming from outside, the New Age movement came to Europe bringing with it signs of the reception it received in the USA. As a matter of fact, many people had already heard about New Age from people outside the movement before they themselves had the chance to come into contact with the New Age in one or more of its manifestations. For some people, without even meeting a new-ager, without even reading new age literature, without even coming into contact with anything New Age, their first contact had been through material written by outsiders.

We have to admit, then, that most people receive the New Age through the reception of another. It follows that the personal reception of a socio-cultural and religious movement such as the New Age is a very delicate and tricky procedure. The personal reception must take into account:

1. That one has to be aware of the reception that other people have made of the New Age, based on their own keys of interpretation, or their own interests, sympathies or fears.
2. That one has to be clear about one's own personal convictions as well as one's own prejudices, insecurities and resistances.
3. That one should be prudent, and not make too hasty a judgement; instead, one should take one's time to study New Age with an open mind and with spiritual sympathy.

The focus of interest in this paper is the reception that French-

speaking Christians of Europe and Canada have accorded to the New Age. This reception has taken three forms: the model of refusal, the model of accepting, and the model of a dialectical union of refusal and accepting.

### **1. The Refusal Model**

The reception characterized as refusal has been elaborated by the American Pentecostal and Evangelical congregations and churches in the USA. These groups have expressed their response to the New Age in an abundant literature, in precise pastoral practices, in pamphlets, in articles appearing in Christian newspapers, and in the mass media under the control of evangelicals and pentecostals. Because of the silence of the great historic Churches (the Roman Catholic church and the mainstream protestant Churches), the evangelical-fundamentalist response has come to be considered as 'Christian'. This vibrant and dynamic reception, marked by a zeal to defend Christianity and to denounce the perverse errors crossing its borders, has often been pretentiously put forward as '*the Christian reception*' of the New Age. In any event, it was the only available model of Christian reception. This model accompanied the coming of the New Age to French-speaking countries, and we have proof of this in the French translations of several of these American books.

The evangelical-fundamentalist model of reception rests on three basic principles:

1. There is no salvation outside the explicit belief in Christ and conversion to Jesus acknowledged as the only Saviour and mediator between God and human beings;
2. All teaching not found in the Bible is against the Bible, and hence heretical, the Biblical text being the only and last judge of all doctrine and practice;
3. Prophecy is the ultimate key of interpretation in understanding the historical events underlying the plan of salvation and a pre-millenarist conception of eschatology. With the help of prophecy, especially that of the Apocalypse, it is possible to discern in history signs which show the accomplishment of God's plan for the earth.

These three basic attitudes determine the understanding of the New Age which is widely circulated in evangelical-fundamentalist circles. The New Age is seen as:

1. A road leading to damnation, even if it does contain some elements of a search for the transcendent;
2. A mixture of heresies, errors and false beliefs about God, Christ and Salvation; a return to paganism, with pretensions to achieving divinity;
3. A predestined sign of the general apostasy which is supposed to precede the return of Christ and the end of the world;
4. A conspiracy of Satan under the direction of the Anti-Christ, to impose neo-fascism and destroy the kingdom of Christ. The books by Cumby, by Marrs and by Larson are extreme illustrations of this conspiratorial interpretation.

The model calls for a very characteristic response:

1. By rejecting the phenomenon as a whole, especially its doctrinal aspects, not least because of its esoteric occult practices;
2. By a challenging attitude which seeks to denounce the errors of New Age and to illustrate the truths of evangelical Christianity;
3. By a conversion strategy, using all energies to pull people away from the New Age.

This is the type of die-hard attitude which is shared by the great majority of evangelical and pentecostal fundamentalists in French speaking Europe and Quebec. The Pentecostal groups are the most aggressive. Their pastors cannot tolerate any involvement with error, for they see themselves as being accountable to God for uprightness in doctrine. They positively pride themselves on putting down the New Age. The Pentecostals believe that the gifts of the Spirit flow in their communities. The pastors and the members of their congregations feel that these gifts have been entrusted to them, especially the gift of discernment, and this gives them the right to judge between what is good and bad, black and white, true and false. Their discernment comes from the power of the Spirit, and

thus they feel they have the right to denounce without weighing things and without any involvement.

This attitude is somewhat softer in some evangelical groups which reject a conspiracy theory but which retain the apologetical dimension of this model of reception which invites all Christians to try their best to convert new-agers.

The pentecost-evangelical model of reception has succeeded in penetrating the great Christian Churches, both Catholic and Protestant, in the French-speaking world, where in some instances it seems to be in favour of new-agers: the New Age, it is said, has good intentions, but is off-track from the truth.

The Roman Catholic Church and the great Protestant Churches have developed no apostolic strategy towards New Age, and therefore it is difficult to define a particular reception of the New Age coming from these churches.

A good number of Catholics and Protestants, even among regular church-goers, have been influenced by ideas and practices proposed by the New Age. Belief in reincarnation, positive thinking, the quest for psycho-spiritual experiences, body-therapies, and much more from the market of the new religiosity has invaded the spiritual fields of many Catholics, who more and more are composing for themselves a Christianity *à la carte* by reinterpreting certain components of the Christian heritage and by taking skin grafts from cosmic religions, from esoteric thinking, or from trans-personal psychology. From all these elements, they have created a personal synthesis in which the internal coherence stems necessarily from an emotional logic, rather than from theoretical reasoning. People are less willing to accept ideas because they are true and in conformity with the magisterium, or with an outside authority, but only because they touch emotions, they are doing good, they are comforting or effective. The proven, the felt, the experiential become the measuring-stick of truth, and the basics from which new Christian coherence is made. Although many Catholics assume certain beliefs and practices of New Age, very few are converted to the project, to the paradigm, to the world vision of New Age. They have not yet accomplished the psycho-spiritual and epistemological conversion which goes hand in hand with entering into the New Age. Because many people touch the

periphery of the New Age, we believe that the New Age is widespread, even among practising Christians.

In this situation, pastoral agents — priests, pastors and lay people — have often assumed an attitude influenced by the negative reception coming from the pentecostal-evangelicals. This approach has been used also in charismatic circles in the Catholic church. The charismatic community of the Lion of Judas in France is a good example. The negative attitude is developed without any preliminary theological reflection and under outside influence, without any planned approach. It expresses itself as a refusal, based on the incompatibility between New Age and Christianity, and takes pleasure in reaffirming its Christian faith, sometimes in the most traditional and conservative terms.

As for Jean Vernet, this kind of refusal seems to go with a certain form of acceptance. In fact his attitude, even if it goes under the banner of discernment, is still an apologetical endeavour, where the New Age is very subtly disqualified, to the advantage of Christianity, which has all the answers. Vernet proposes a method which may be summarized in three steps: exorcize, discern and evangelize. The exorcism is done by denouncing the New Age as neo-paganism, neo-gnostic syncretism, pantheism, monism. For Vernet the New Age is seen as a 'concoction' of techniques, practices and beliefs, as a 'bulimia of mystical experiences, as a new form of hedonism in a society over-heated by tranquilisers' etc.<sup>1</sup>

Once the New Age has been exorcized, then one may use discernment. Thus, for Vernet, discern means 'separate the grain from the husks',<sup>2</sup> and this can be done only by choosing a point of comparison from where one can discriminate. Vernet takes several points of comparison, according to each case: the Bible, Catholic dogma, the Apostolic tradition, the mystical masters, the Pope's words, Father Godin. His discernment consists of comparing the New Age doctrines with one of these measures with the aim, says the author, of showing that because of 'fundamental points of difference'<sup>3</sup> with Christianity, the new-ager is 'radically outside of Christianity'.<sup>4</sup>

Once the exorcism is accomplished, and the sorting out is realized, the third step is to evangelize by using the kerygma that proclaims that 'salvation is given by faith to the God of Jesus Christ'.<sup>5</sup>

This evangelization, reduced to the proclamation of the kerygma, aims either to convert the new-ager to Christianity, or to give to the New Age 'a reply coming from inside of Christianity itself'.<sup>6</sup>

With a few variations, we find this Vernetto apologetical approach in Bernard Bastien,<sup>7</sup> and in the pastoral letter of Cardinal Danneels, Archbishop of Malines-Bruxelles. Even if the exorcism of the New Age is done with a very low profile, this letter aims particularly at showing the difference between the New Age and Christianity, and reaffirms that the Christian faith in an incarnate God is the answer to the New Age.

## 2. Acceptance

Just as the refusal model does not entirely exclude open-heartedness and acknowledgement of what is good and true in New Age, so the acceptance attitude does not exclude criticism and reasons for not receiving the New Age. Those in favour of an acceptance attitude do not miss the chance, on occasions, to criticize the New Age, to denounce commercialization and abusive practices, sometimes to such a degree that the great patron of New Age in Quebec, J. Languirand, has said, 'I have been de-frocked by the New Age', while at the same time remaining an ardent new-ager.

A minority of both French-speaking Catholics and Protestants take this attitude to a point of even sometimes declaring themselves to be new-age Christians. This liberal attitude is influenced by the Dominican theologian, Matthew Fox, who attempts to reinterpret Christianity using elements of the New Age paradigm. Based on the doctrine of the original blessing, on the monist principle and on the primacy of the cosmic on history, Fox seeks to elaborate a creation theology of the Cosmic Christ that integrates the intentions, feelings and values of New Age. Inspired by his thought, a minority of Catholics are searching through New Age for a new model of Christianity.

The best example of this liberal attitude in French-speaking society is perhaps the Protestant theologian from Switzerland, Carl Keller. In his book, *New Age*, Keller proposes the hypothesis, 'that the original melody of the New Age is the chant of Christ himself who sings his own glory';<sup>8</sup> he thinks that 'the yeast which makes

the movement rise is the essence of Christianity itself, in other words, Jesus Christ is its Life and its Survival'.<sup>9</sup> According to him, 'the guru who leads the Aquarian children to perfection is none other than Christ who works anonymously. Authentic followers of New Age seek Christ without even knowing it; they are anonymous Christians, because they ignore the true identity of their inner dimensions'.<sup>10</sup> In summary, the Cosmic Consciousness which is spoken of in New Age is the Christ-Logos who created the universe and whose energy operates in all things. Thus the spirit of whom the New Age speaks is, in fact, the Spirit of the God of Christians. In a word, Keller perceives the theo-cosmo-anthropic Christ in the Cosmic Consciousness and the universal energy that the New Age speaks about. 'By calling for a change of paradigm which will re-establish the primacy of the spirit/consciousness/energy on matter, the New Age asserts implicitly the primacy of Christ/consciousness/energy on all phenomena of creation'.<sup>11</sup> This viewpoint, inspired by the inclusivist model of theology, is built on interesting intuitions, and insists on the convergence of, and the similarities between, Christianity and the New Age. But does it not run the risk of dangerous misinterpretations, and of falling into comparisons which ignore the differences? And if the differences are covered up, would it still be possible to have a real dialogue? Isn't there a disguised Christian imperialism pretending that the New Age ignores what it adores, and that only Christianity is able to name and identify the liberator principle at work in its experience? And will the new-ager be happy to wear the label, 'Christian', and have others define his or her identity? I do not guarantee that this proposed attitude will bear as much fruit as may appear possible at first glance.

### **3. The Dialectical Union of Rejection and Acceptance**

It seems to me that one has to find a response in which rejection and acceptance are held together in a dialectical union; a method which allows us to establish, in the same movement, a dynamic of acceptance and refusal. This does not mean accepting what is acceptable and refusing what is not acceptable, from the Christian standpoint. It means, rather, an attitude which maintains in a

dynamic tension of refusal and acceptance at the same time. In a same action, one welcomes the New Age integrally and one refuses it integrally. That is to say that, on the one hand one recognises the New Age as an emerging spiritual reality, and, as such, one can only welcome it as it presents itself with all its specific components, true or false, with its greatness and its limits; on the other hand, one refuses it, meaning that one sees it as being something else, in its differences and distortions.

We assume, that is, that the dynamic typology proposed by Tillich in *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* allows us to realise this dialectic union of acceptance and refusal. I have shown the validity of this method for treating new religions in my book *Le Cortège des fous de Dieu*, and its validity for treating the New Age in *Le Nouvel Âge en question*. This is the standard adopted by the 'Centre d'Information sur les Nouvelles Religions de Montréal', and it has also been recommended to the Bishops of Quebec. I am happy to see that, during a Congress held in Geneva in May 1991, the Swiss theologian, Schwartz, explicitly declared that the method put forward in *Le Cortège des fous de Dieu* is the most appropriate approach for Christians in their encounter with New Age.

The dynamic typological attitude requires a certain elaboration of religious types, that is the Christian type and the New Age type. Each religious type articulates in its own way the great polarities found in every religious model. Here is an incomplete list: God/man, one/many, immanence/transcendence, faith/knowledge, mystic/ethic, reason/mystery, historic/cosmic, time/eternity, experience/belief, origin/end, action/contemplation, liberty/destiny, life/death, nature/grace, personal/impersonal, good/evil. In each pair of polarities, the poles are in contrast and in tension. Tillich writes:

Types stand beside each other and seem to have no interrelation. They seem to be static, leaving the dynamics to the individual things, and the individual things, movements, situations, persons (e.g., each of us) resist the attempt to be subordinated to a definite type. Yet types are not necessarily static; there are tensions in every type which drive it beyond itself. Dialectical thought has discovered this and has shown the immense fertility of the dialectical description of tensions in seemingly static structures. The kind of dialectics which, I believe, is most adequate to typological inquiries is the

description of contrasting poles within one structure. A polar relation is a relation of inter-dependent elements, each of which is necessary for the other one and for the whole, although it is in tension with the opposite element. The tension drives both to conflicts and beyond the conflicts to possible unions of the polar elements. Described in this way, types lose their static rigidity, and the individual things and persons can transcend the type to which they belong, without losing their definite character.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, according to the method of dynamic typologies, the decisive point in the meeting of religions is not situated in historical structures (doctrinal, cultural, social), but in the way each religion understands and organizes the elements that are common to all religious models. The particular understanding of these common elements, and the particular way that they are organized around their constitutive poles, determines the specificity of religious types.

### *Reciprocal Interpellation*

According to the dynamic typological method, the meeting of Christianity with the New Age takes, in the first place, the form of a reciprocal 'interpellation'<sup>13</sup> where the other is recognized in its specific difference. Interpellation does not occur at the level of doctrines and beliefs, but at the level of the constitutive poles of each spiritual and religious model, and is done thus: first the New Age questions the Christian Church on its manner of articulating, *hic et nunc*, the great poles of the Christian model; once this question is accepted, the Church, in its turn, can question the New Age. The New Age invites the Christian Church to consider critically the religious polarities as they are currently articulated in Christianity. Western history, the coming of modernity and scientific rationality, the triumph of technique and efficiency, have unbalanced the tensions between polarities to the advantage of certain poles: the historic to the detriment of the cosmic, action to the detriment of contemplation, sin to the detriment of goodness, the magisterial to the detriment of experiential, redemption to the detriment of creation, transcendence to the detriment of immanence, the prophetic to the detriment of the mystic. The New Age challenges the Christian Church to severe self-appraisal and to a serious re-balancing of the tensions between the poles.

On the other side, Christianity can also challenge the New Age on the balance of tensions which is particular to the New Age model. Does it not privilege the one over the many, the cosmic over the historic, the impersonal over the personal, the mystic over the ethic, the magic over the rational, immanence over transcendence, etc.? Christianity should question the New Age about its tendency to resolve tensions by negating certain polarities, which can lead to painful absolutizations and to a spiritual shrinking which can be very harmful.

### *The Confrontation*

The second element of Christian reception of the New Age is confrontation, not in the sense of a quarrel, but in the sense of a head-to-head dialogue, establishing which elements are identical, and which are different. This is a dialogue in which similarities are recognized through confronting differences, a dialogue which refuses to skip over the differences and to go for unity at all costs. The confrontation is not at the level of spiritual paths and the great polarities of the types, but at the level of emphases and standpoints. I would like here to note three important points: the ambiguous relationship between New Age and modernity and rationality, the confusion between the spiritual and the psychic, and the refusal to acknowledge suffering as a factor in spiritual growth.

### *Ambiguous Relationship to Modernity*

The New Age seeks to transcend modernity by returning to the archaic, archaic being understood as a model of understanding where the individual is anchored in a world-order dominated by forces and energies that eventually one can seize, orientate, and turn away by appropriate techniques, shamanic rituals, magic and occult practices, the use of objects said to possess mysterious powers, crystals, channelling, etc. By these practices one tries to create a Disney-world. The New Age is post-modern in the sense that it comes after modernity; it is pre-modern because it returns to traditional teachings and re-animates archaic principles. This retro-futurism seems to be an indication of the ambiguous way in which

the New Age is situated in relation to modernity, particularly in relation to the rationalist ideal which is its principal regulator.

The New Age should be challenged on its relationship to analytical and technical rationality. If it is true that modern and scientific rationality ends in a *cul-de-sac*, it is an illusion to believe, as the New Age seems to, that one can correct the confusion and contradictions caused by reason by dismissing analytic rationality itself. It is not by doing away with rationality, but by stripping it of its pretensions to an absolute standard of knowledge that one may hope to find a way between the spiritual infertility of modern rationality and the damaging credulity born of the denial of all forms of critical approach. It is only through minimizing the requirements of the critical spirit and of the *Aufklärung* that the world of wonder can be recreated.

### *Confusion Between the Psychic and the Spiritual*

In the New Age, the words 'spiritual', 'spirituality' and 'spirit' carry a vague meaning. One thing is certain: the New Age tends to identify the spiritual with the psychic or para-psychic. Some authors, for example, Placide Gaboury, have drawn attention to this irritating confusion. As a result of this misunderstanding, the New Age encourages the psychic and para-psychic and adds to their strength. Even if exploration of the psychic leads towards a spiritual path, there remains the possibility that, in practice, it diverts people away from such a path because it ascribes to techniques and therapies a role and powers they do not really possess.

Because of this confusion what is best in the New Age, i.e. its spiritual research, runs the risk of degenerating into a psychic side-product in search of happiness, psycho-corporeal well-being, and even a power-trip.

### *Concerning Suffering*

The New Age is incapable of integrating suffering into its approach, as noted by Placide Gaboury and Matthew Fox. Yet we know that suffering forms an integral part of love, just as it is part of growth; whoever refuses to suffer, refuses also to love and to grow. To

become, entails suffering; to reject suffering is to refuse to become. There is no short-cut along the spiritual path, and he who wants to avoid suffering has opted for spiritual atrophy. The New Age is false when it forgets that there is a serpent in paradise, and that happiness and abundance are not the sole aspects of spiritual growth. 'Spiritual growth', writes Placide Gaboury, 'demands a courage, a strength and faith that have nothing to do with crystals, ecstasies, out-of-body experiences, well-being and all that those therapies are supposed to bring. I believe that all of that does not prepare people for the terrible meeting with their own demons, when they find themselves alone, without explanation, without consolation, without any object to lean on. We do not prepare people by cradling them with angelic lullabies, astral-music (which avoids completely all discordancies and shocks), caressing and floating-baths. All these are mothering. There is one essential element missing, I say the »essential«.'<sup>14</sup>

### *The Criticism*

This third approach to the Christian reception of the New Age contains the possibility of denouncing abuses of trust and the exploitation of the naivety of people in distress. Unwarranted commercialization risks stifling the dynamism of the New Age, reducing it to mere trendiness or to something simply commercial. Marketing means that all products may be labelled New Age, be they glasses, furniture, or clothes. Especially when we deal with psycho-spiritual therapies, we are often 'in the presence of »by-products« where one finds them here and there, applied by »therapeutics« who sometimes are charlatans, sometimes »charismatics«, sometimes »humanists« or »Jungians«, or just vaguely »oriental«'.<sup>15</sup>

There is good reason to call for prudence and discernment. One does not entrust one's soul to just any Tom, Dick or Harry.

In conclusion, we can say, in the spirit of Vatican II, that the attitude to the New Age should be one of dialogue. This implies that each of us, secure in his own beliefs, should be willing to listen and to learn, even if it is only to gain in precision and flexibility when reaffirming our own convictions. New-agers who display a 'new-convert' mentality are not always disposed to enter into

dialogue because, having rejected the faith of their childhood, they feel they have nothing to learn from the Church. In reality, the New Age counts more sympathizers than adepts, and many of the sympathizers are Christians, even practising Christians. Some of the sympathies are the result of misunderstandings of Christian faith and also of the New Age. The dialogue approach may be of particular help in enabling sympathizers to realize what the New Age is really saying and what the Christian Church is really teaching. The New Age may be a positive stimulus if we take it for what is: a spiritual quest in the heart of authentic humanity.

### Notes

1. *Le Nouvel Âge*, p. 207.
2. *Op. cit.*, p. 4.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 181.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 179-208.
6. *La Vie chrétienne*, July-August 1992, p. 4.
7. *The New Age: Where is it Coming From?*
8. P. 77.
9. P. 78.
10. P. 67.
11. P. 87.
12. Tillich, *op. cit.*, p. 55.
13. Interpellate: '(In foreign, esp. French, Chamber) interrupt order of day by demanding explanation from (Minister concerned)', *Concise Oxford Dictionary* [Ed.].
14. *Renâître des cendres*, Libre Expression, 1991, pp. 76-77.
15. Pierre Pelletier, *Les Dieux que nous sommes*, Montreal: Fides, 1992, p. 50.