

Apocalyptic Hope in the New Age

JOHN W. DRANE

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Though terms like 'apocalyptic' or 'eschatology' would generally be foreign to New Agers, speculation concerning the future of the world is absolutely central to this contemporary spiritual movement, encapsulated most clearly in the theme song of the 1960s rock musical *Hair*. 'This is the age of Aquarius . . . the age of the mind's true liberation'.

The Aquarian terminology derives from astrological speculation related to the signs of the Zodiac, according to which the Age of Aries (the Bull) was followed by the Age of Pisces (the fish), which in turn will be superseded by the Age of Aquarius (the water bearer). On the basis of comparisons between these astrological ages and Joachim of Fiore's dispensations of law, grace, and freedom, Aries can be identified with the Father (=Judaism), Pisces with the Son (=Christianity), and Aquarius with the Spirit (=New Age). The negative characteristics of the present Age of Pisces can therefore be understood as a product of Christianity's dualism between God and humanity, whereas the coming Aquarian Age will usher in a time of peace, harmony and wholeness for the whole universe, reuniting people with their spiritual origins as part of a cosmic process of rediscovering the essential oneness of all things.

Two factors are commonly expected to be instrumental in this change. The astrological projections imply that this New Age will dawn in some tangible way. Some believe it has already arrived, but many more expect it no later than about the middle of the 21st century, perhaps heralded by the arrival of a messiah-figure. This will involve a paradigm shift breaking with the patterns of the past and creating a more holistic lifestyle in a global post-colonial context, building on the insights of scientific knowledge, while allowing room for more intuitive forms of perception, incorporating the spiritual insights of non-western people and an appreciation of a more mystical world of the spirit. In the words of Sir George Trevelyan:

We are approaching a crucial turning point . . . Much may have to fall away in our present social structures, but a new society may then emerge in which the unifying spiritual impulse is genuinely at work.¹

How that will be accomplished is open to debate, though William Irwin Thomson claims that

Whether the movement from one world system to another will involve stumbling or total collapse may very well depend on the success or failure of the new age movement. . . .²

This is where the second transformational factor comes into the picture, namely the New Age itself. If the meaning of life is to be found by understanding people in the wider context of oneness within the cosmos, that means the potential for change is within each person. We all have direct access to the energy of the entire universe, and every individual can potentially determine the future:

The paradigm of the Aquarian conspiracy sees humankind embedded in nature. It promotes the autonomous individual in a decentralized society. It sees us as stewards of our resources, inner and outer. It says that we are not victims, not pawns, not limited by conditions and conditioning.³

Therefore, if enough people can simultaneously realign their consciousness so as to be in tune with the emerging paradigm, the New Age might be ushered in sooner rather than later. This was the purpose of the universal 'Harmonic Convergence' (16-17 August 1987), when New Agers gathered at sacred sites around the world, including Stonehenge, Mount Shasta (California), the Great Pyramid of Cheops in Egypt, and the Andes in Peru, to 'synchronize the Earth with the rest of the galaxy'. In the initial publicity the organizer, Jose Arguelles (who holds a PhD from Chicago University), announced that as a result of the spiritual energies of those who took part, 'great, unprecedented outpourings of extra-terrestrial intelligence . . . will be clearly received'. Basing his calculations on Mayan and Aztec predictions, Arguelles envisaged this great global festival of Shamanic chanting, drumming and meditation as the point when 'Energy will flow through the linked network of sacred sites . . . as we learn to become co-creators and friends with God.' He predicted that the process would end by 1992, when

the phase shift transiting civilization from a military state of terror to a de-industrialized, decentralized, post-military planetary society will be complete at least in its foundations . . .⁴

Only 20,000 people took part, and not the '144,000 Rainbow Humans' that Arguelles called for, but that has not deterred others from continuing to congregate regularly at sacred sites around the world in the same mood of expectancy — for the original gathering *did* coincide with the final collapse of the Soviet empire. The Age of Aquarius may not yet have arrived in its fullness, but it is only a matter of time before it does — and in the meantime spiritually aware individuals will tune into its values so as to be ready when the day comes.

This is the context in which New Age therapies and beliefs thrive, for within this worldview literally anything that offers the possibility of a change in human outlook is attractive. Elements from mystical traditions combine with psychoanalysis and political movements pressing for social change, linked not by some logical connections to one another, but only by their perceived usefulness in inducing that 'change of consciousness' which will be essential for the future of the world.

Though it has historical antecedents, the New Age is clearly a product of postmodernity. The ideology of modernity has destroyed itself from within, as its self-confident predictions of an ever-improving human condition were shown to be false by the increasingly brutal and barbarian tendencies of twentieth century behaviour. Faced with these realities, it can easily seem that in the last few centuries the dominance of rationalist materialism has all but destroyed the possibility of spirituality. Since Christianity is a part of this Enlightenment-inspired western cultural establishment, its empirical manifestations are generally regarded as part of the problem, and therefore not part of any possible solution to it. Belief in a material revelation of truth — whether religious or secular — no longer seems possible, which easily leads to the conclusion that truth is a mystical, secret thing which powerful cultural institutions have deliberately concealed to protect their own vested interests. Throughout the history of the West, there has always been a tendency to revert to what Aldous Huxley called 'the perennial philosophy', a kind of essentialist, idealist (and therefore timeless and universalist) way of understanding life. This is why the New Age typically looks to non-western sources for answers, and if Christianity features at all it tends to be through the medieval mystical traditions or heterodox movements such as Gnosticism.⁵

Though the New Age is presented as the ultimate postmodern globalization of spirituality, equipped to lead humanity forward into a utopian world in the future, serious questions need to be asked about this claim. Marilyn Ferguson has described the New Age as 'the second American revolution', and claims that

American society has at hand most of the factors that could bring about collective transformation: relative freedom, relative tolerance, affluence enough to be disillusioned with affluence, achievements enough to know that something different is needed.⁶

In the light of such statements, one might wonder if the New Age is not just a more subtle form of imperialism for a post-colonial world — not now a political imperialism, but an intellectual imperialism that claims that everyone else thinks the wrong way and must be brought into line in the cause of justice, peace, harmony and wholeness (all as defined by western thinkers). The Islamic writer Ziauddin Sardar has expressed this forcefully

. . . when western thought reaches a dead end, it unreservedly turns towards [other cultures] to appropriate and devour [their] thought and continue on its irrational and grotesquely skewed goal . . . [which turns out to be] simply a new wave of domination riding on the crest of colonialism and modernity.⁷

It is significant that western people have suddenly become interested in non-western traditions at the very moment when they have concluded that all 'truth' is at best relative. That way, everyone's 'truth' can be ransacked without placing any particular value on it, other than the individualistic motives of western spiritual searchers at this point in time. Not only Christians, but many other thinking people, will wish to question this relativizing of truth claims. Though philosophers of postmodernism take it for granted that the concept of some 'true' overarching metanarrative giving meaning to life has been rejected, popular culture provides plenty of evidence that the majority of people still search for something that will provide stability and coherence. Moreover, most people still believe in the value of reason and rationality, and find many New Age speculations to be bizarre and unbelievable. One of the things Christians may have to bear witness to today is the importance of reason, while avoiding the mistake some of our forebears made by supposing that reason can provide the answer to every question.

The New Age worldview also raises a significant moral question. Put simply, if the future of the world is entirely in our hands, and we can change things by making choices to do so, that also means that the way things are now must be as a result of choices we have already made. Some New Age writers have made it clear that there is no place in such a worldview for the notion of objective evil, or the idea that people can be the victims of undeserved suffering. Social psychology professor J.L. Simmons expresses it plainly:

We create the realities we experience . . . Since we construct our own lives it is false and misleading to blame others for what we are experiencing . . . The buck stops with us.⁸

When he also claims that

Different ethnic groups literally create and inhabit different worlds within the larger planetary sphere. We are all performers in the melodramas we have co-created and staged⁹

it is not difficult to understand why Margaret Brearley should characterize the New Age vision of the future as 'a potential new Holocaust'.¹⁰

At the same time, an appropriate Christian response will not be entirely negative. When *New Age Journal* conducted a reader survey, one respondent described the New Age as

ultimately a vision of a world transformed, a heaven on earth, a society in which the problems of today are overcome and a new existence emerges.

Another wrote of

moving into an era that emphasizes self-discovery, spiritual growth, and enlightenment.¹¹

Most people attracted by the New Age have these simple aspirations as their main motivation, and may well not be particularly interested in some of the more speculative aspects covered here. The emergence of this spiritual search has undoubtedly highlighted some of the ways in which Christians have too easily accepted the worldview of modernity, and has articulated some questions which demand answers. It has also drawn attention to the undying search of the human spirit for meaning and value, which in Christian thinking about the future can be found only in lives renewed through an encounter with Jesus Christ.

John Drane is head of Practical Theology in the Department of Divinity with Religious Studies at the University of Aberdeen.

Footnotes

1 Sir George Trevelyan, 'Spiritual Awakening in our Time', in W Bloom (ed), *The New Age: an Anthology of Essential Writings* (London: Rider Publications, 1991), 33.

2 William Irwin Thomson, *From Nation to Emancipation* (Findhorn: Findhorn Press, 1982), 52.

3 Marilyn Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, 1980), 30.

4 Jose Arguelles, 'Harmonic Convergence, Trigger event: implementation and follow-up', *Life Times Magazine* 3, 65.

5 The New Age is, of course, far more complex than that, and eastern thought coming west is just one part of it. For a more extensive discussion of its components, see my *What is the New Age Still Saying to the Church?* (London: HarperCollins, 1999), especially 23-50.

6 Marilyn Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, 125, 142.

7 Ziauddin Sardar, *Postmodernism and the Other* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), quotations from 225 and 13.

8 J. L. Simmons, *The Emerging New Age* (Santa Fe: Bear & Co, 1990), 83

9 *The Emerging New Age*, 78.

10 M. Brearley, 'Matthew Fox: Creation spirituality for the New Age', in *Christian Jewish Relations* 22 (1989), 48.

11 'The members speak: what does "New Age" mean to you?', *New Age Journal* (November-December 1987), 52.