

Framing a Christian Response to New Age Practices: **Core Issues and Pastoral Solutions**

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1. Introduction

In the Western world, at the dawn of the 21st Century, Christianity is confronted by a culture which has accepted a bewildering array of alternative therapies, eastern religious ideas, and a resurgence of pre-Christian nature religion. The post-modern generation holds a deep scepticism about authority, whether vested in any form of religious hierarchy, political regime, or the post-enlightenment exaltation of natural science.¹ Yet this same generation is searching for meaning and some form of connectedness or transcendent experience in their lives. The title, “New Age Movement” is often used as an umbrella heading for the widest range of practices which are now on offer – though it is not a movement in the sense of a centrally planned organisation.²

The Church cannot ignore this phenomenon: on the one hand, it offers a positive opportunity for advancing the “New Evangelisation” proclaimed by Paul VI,³ if only we can learn to present the spiritual riches of the Christian tradition in a form which answers the needs of contemporary society. On the other hand, many New Age practices do not sit comfortably alongside Christianity, and some are fundamentally incompatible with faith in Jesus Christ. It is tempting, but unacceptable, to respond in a simplistic way which invites Catholics to a ghetto mentality of dabbling in nothing which is not “Catholic”. But our post-Vatican II church, with its openness to the gifts God has given the world through its many cultures and belief systems, “rejects nothing of what is true and holy”⁴ while insisting that Jesus Christ remains, uniquely, the Way, the Truth and the Life.⁵ An informed investigation is therefore required, and indeed, in 2003, the Pontifical Councils for Culture and Interreligious Dialogue issued a document, *Jesus Christ, Bearer of the Water of Life*, as an initial reflection on the “New Age” and an invitation to further dialogue.

¹ [*Jesus Christ, Bearer of the Water of Life: A Christian Reflection on the “New Age”*, §1.1](#). (Hereafter JCBWL.) Pontifical Council for Culture & Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, 3/02/2003.

² JCBWL [§§ 1 & 2](#)

³ [*Evangelii Nuntiandi*](#), Paul VI; see also especially [*Veritatis Splendor*, 106-109](#)

⁴ [*Nostra Aetate*, §2](#) (Vatican II Document)

⁵ John 14:6

That Vatican document offers some strong pointers⁶ on the areas of Christian doctrine which are most relevant in weighing the compatibility of New Age practices with fidelity to Christ Jesus. My concern in *this* document is to develop a more practical set of criteria which pastors and potential clients may use to judge any New Age practice, and these criteria flow from three roots.

- Firstly, certain practices may be demonstrably sinful, in that they contradict the moral law which God has given us.
- Secondly, some practices may be spiritually harmful, in ways I shall sketch below. Sinful and damaging practices are to be warned against. But first they must be identified as such.
- Thirdly, recalling the way in which St Paul dealt with the question of whether Christians might eat meat sacrificed to Roman gods,⁷ we must be mindful of whether Christian participation in “acceptable” New Age activities might lead other Christians into unacceptable practices or beliefs, and discourage non-Christians from exploring spirituality of a distinctly Christian flavour.

To some extent, the first and third roots are grounded in the doctrinal incompatibilities picked out by the Holy See’s document. The fruit of *this* process will be my Chapter 5, which offers a succinct “tree of discernment”; the intervening three chapters justify the construction of the tree in the way I set out.

⁶ JCBWL [§4](#)

⁷ I Cor 8. See also I Cor 10:14-33 and Romans 14.

2. Methodological and Hermeneutical Problems

(a) Catholic Authority

Our quest in this essay is to discern the truth concerning certain “spiritual practices”, and also some techniques which claim to be, but may not be, “unspiritual”. As a Catholic, I believe in the teaching authority of the Magisterium of the Church, and in the inerrancy of Scripture as defined and interpreted by this same Magisterium.⁸ The Church claims the ability of giving infallible teaching in matters of faith and morals,⁹ but respects the rightful autonomy of scientific truth,¹⁰ which must be established through empirical experimentation. Also to be recommended, but not infallible, is the wisdom of those Doctors of the Church who have written on “mystical theology” (the old term for what we would now call “spirituality”).

Protestants and non-Christians would doubtless begin from different epistemological starting points. But as a believing Catholic writing guidance for Catholic pastors and people, I have no qualms about taking this approach. Furthermore, as one who has personally experienced and witnessed the charismatic gifts of the Holy Spirit associated with the “Pentecostal movement” or “Catholic Charismatic Renewal”, I accept the reality and importance of these charisms, and the influence of this viewpoint will be clear in the text which follows, especially in highlighting the real danger of spiritual damage from New Age practices. My interpretation of Scripture therefore allows for charismatic gifts, and also for the Catholic practice of asking the saints and “holy souls” (people who have died in friendship with God) to pray for those who remain on earth. I hope that Christians from traditions who would reject either of these concepts will still find useful criteria in the analysis which follows.

(b) Problems of Definition in New Age Practices

There is a major hermeneutical problem in talking about all New Age practices. They are not centrally regulated by any “magisterium”, and practitioners may develop techniques in their own way. So any source text must be treated with caution, on the grounds that other practitioners who offer a therapy of the same name may not share the totality of ideas and operating procedures set out in any one practitioner’s text.

Material critical of the New Age written, or influenced, by evangelical Christians often equates non-Christian religions with occult or demonic practices. Presumably this association is made because a certain evangelical mindset attributes any belief system which does not accord perfectly with the Bible, to Satan, “the father of lies”.¹¹ Clearly a simplistic and total condemnation of other religions is untenable: Christians would not want to deny the unity of God simply because Islam affirms the same! Nor is occult origin a proof of falsehood: would

⁸ See e.g. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (hereafter CCC) 101-119, 888-892, 2032-2040

⁹ CCC 890

¹⁰ *Gaudium et Spes* §36 (Vatican II Document)

¹¹ John 8:44

Catholics deny the Real Presence automatically because Satanists recognise the true nature of the Eucharist? Rather, in line with Vatican II, the truth claim of each individual practice or belief must be tested; origin in any given belief system, which may indeed serve as a warning to give special scrutiny to a certain practice, is evidence neither for nor against veracity.

Critical material may also make major claims about the “hidden” aspects of a particular therapy, for instance, that all Reiki therapists must be “initiated by a Reiki master”, or the Enneagram was “devised by an occultist”. If the critical source is unable to provide evidence to back its claim, how far can we trust such “undercover research” as objective?

As far as possible, I shall aim to judge New Age practices on the basis of the claims of practitioners, rather than critics. Where unidentified sources provide the critical data which indicates a particular practice is of concern, the pastor and the people must make decisions based on how credible the source is.

(c) The Catholic Vision of the Whole Person: Body, Mind and Spirit

In undertaking this analysis, we will need to speak of concepts such as body, mind, soul, and spirit. Soul and spirit in particular are used interchangeably in secular use, but throughout this essay we will need to use a consistent and theologically founded definition. This section sets out the Catholic understanding of the human person, and defines how these words will be used in the discussion which follows.

In Catholic tradition, the human person can be described as “body and spirit”.¹² The normal state of a human person is to be a unity of body and spirit from conception¹³ until natural death. Following death, the spirit (or “ghost”) alone inhabits heaven, hell or purgatory until the Last Judgement takes place, at which time all persons will be given new bodies by God (the “resurrection of the dead” professed in Christian creeds). The human spirit is meant to inhabit a body, so the time from personal death until the general resurrection of the dead is something of an aberration.

So far, I have deliberately avoided using the word “soul”. It is a word used inconsistently in popular English usage: sometimes it has the sense of being equivalent to “spirit”, other times it is the person as a whole. The latter sense seems better suited to theological use, so that before death and after resurrection, the soul consists of body and spirit, while in-between, the soul consists of spirit alone. This makes sense of speaking of the “holy souls” in purgatory while insisting on the unity of body and spirit in our earthly existence. Therefore, in this usage, it is

¹² The CCC, 362-368, expresses this teaching but uses the word “soul” to express what I have here called “spirit”.

¹³ I acknowledge, but will not explore here, the theological debate about whether ensoulment occurs later than conception. In any case, the Catholic Church treats the embryo with the dignity due to a human being from conception: see [*Gaudium et Spes* §51](#).

wrong to say, “I have a soul”, rather, “I am a soul”. A soul is nothing more, nor less, than a human person.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 362-368, prefers to use the word “soul” in the sense that we have employed “spirit”, so the *Catechism* speaks of the human person as a “unity of body and soul”, while acknowledging (363) the possibility of using “soul” to denote the whole person. Arguably the *Catechism* should be the arbiter of the correct use of language for future Catholic theological texts, but since “soul” can be used inclusively or exclusively of the body, any source text must be read with this ambiguity in mind. For clarity, I will speak of “spirit” rather than “soul” in the remainder of this document.

In conscious experience, each human person is composed of a physical body and an inner life. That which pertains to the physical body may be called “corporeal”, and that which concerns the inner life is often dubbed “spiritual”. Catholic teaching strongly insists on the unity of body and spirit as a whole person, so the pronoun “I” is best applied to that unity. It is wrong to say “I have a spirit”, for it is not merely the body speaking; nor is it adequate to say “I inhabit a body”, as if the true “I” were the spirit alone.

Next we must take account of the concept of “mind”. This word is used in conjunction with the human experience of consciousness, closely related to what we have here called the “inner life”. Many contemporary scientists would argue that consciousness is purely a function of the brain and needs no “spiritual” dimension. But if there is such a thing as the spirit of a human person, then clearly this spirit is mediated through the brain since brain damage can severely limit the self-expression or free action of a person. Neurophysiology has revealed much about how thought processes correspond to physical activity within the brain. Doctrine cannot deny such empirical results from the sphere of science; honest empirical research necessarily reveals God’s truth.¹⁴

For the purpose of this essay, I will define the “mind” as being the inner experience due to brain-function alone, in contradistinction to “spirit”. In this way, we can speak of the human person as “body, mind and spirit”, as indeed many bookshops now classify their books on a “holistic” approach to the human person. Spirituality is therefore distinct from psychology, the study of the mind, though closely associated with it. It would follow from such a definition that “mental illness” would actually be due to physical causes, but may be present alongside some “spiritual sickness” whose causes were non-corporeal.¹⁵

A common use of language in the New Testament is to contrast spirit (*pneuma*) with flesh (*sarx*), in which case flesh is seen as base and drawing us to sin. We might posit that *sarx* should be taken to denote the unity of body and mind, since the mind as defined above is the

¹⁴ CCC 159

¹⁵ This definition of mental illness is adopted by some Catholics who work in the field of exorcism and “deliverance”, as expressed in a closed conference on deliverance ministry in England in March 2004.

unspiritual conscious manifestation of our flesh. In this case, however, we must be careful not to fall into the Gnostic heresy in which flesh (= body + mind) is seen as evil and irredeemable against our spiritual destiny, nor the Calvinist doctrine of the utter depravity of the human person. A true Catholic approach teaches that the flesh is good but fallen.

The Greek New Testament often uses the word *psyche*, and this must be translated carefully. Should it be rendered “mind” (whence the English word, “psychology”), or “soul”? In I Thess 5:23, St Paul prays that God will preserve “spirit, soul and body” - *pneuma*, *psyche* and *soma*. The *Catechism* (367) notes this apparent distinction of soul and spirit, explaining that it must not be interpreted as introducing any kind of duality. Generally English translations of Scripture render *psyche* as “soul”, as in Mk 12:29-30 where the word “mind” is also found, used to translate *dianoia*. It might be anachronistic to see in I Thess a Pauline anticipation of our contemporary holistic view of the human person as “body, mind and spirit”.

We therefore end up with a network of terminology as follows:

Outer life	Body	:	
	> =	Flesh	:
	Mind	:	the human person (soul)
Inner life	= <	:	
	Spirit	Spirit (ghost)	:

This diagram shows us the *concepts* we need to keep in mind while studying this area. The actual language used by a translation of Scripture or a contemporary text may not use words in exactly the same sense as I have defined them here.

(d) The Reality of the Demonic

Crucial to some of the lines of argument I shall develop below - and an area not touched upon by the Holy See’s initial document on the New Age - is a recognition of the reality of evil spirits, also known as fallen angels, or demons. While 20th century scripture scholarship¹⁶ has sometimes tried to “demythologise” the accounts of Jesus performing exorcisms by claiming that every apparent possession was in fact a psychological condition, the Catholic position remains that demons are real¹⁷ and possession is possible; indeed, the Rite of Exorcism renewed in accordance with Vatican II’s liturgical principles was released as recently as 1999.¹⁸ Literature is available containing numerous testimonies of encounters with evil spirits by Catholic and Pentecostal ministers,¹⁹ including contemporary authorised Catholic exorcists.²⁰

¹⁶ *Oxford Concise Dictionary of the Christian Church*, E. A. Livingston (ed), 164

¹⁷ CCC, 1673

¹⁸ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/263604.stm>; <http://www.ewtn.com/library/Liturgy/ZEXOR.HTM>

¹⁹ Francis MacNutt, *Deliverance From Evil Spirits*; John Wimber, *Power Healing*, 111-138.

It is not my intention to simplistically condemn the whole New Age movement as demonic. But I believe that an intellectual analysis needs to include the possibility that certain New Age techniques are facilitated by, or open a person to, the influence of evil spirits. To justify this claim, and in order to speak an unambiguous language in this field, it is important at the outset of this investigation to note the empirical evidence gathered by Catholic and Pentecostal pastors who have had considerable experience of dealing with demons. In the absence of Magisterial teaching, this constitutes the source of information available.

The literature indicates that there are several ways in which demons can menace people, and many routes by which an individual may come to be afflicted by an evil spirit. We note in particular the language used in this field:²¹

Oppression - demonic influence which seems to come from outside a person, causing heaviness, weariness or discouragement. Oppressive spirits may be acquired through exposure to a heavy presence of evil: e.g. by participating in deliverance ministry (see below for definition of this), by being in a place where occult activities are taking place, by being placed under a curse, by coming into contact with items of witchcraft. Oppressive spirits may be dispelled by a simple command to leave in the name of Jesus.

Obsession, or **infestation** - demonic influence which seems to reside inside a person, usually afflicting a certain area of a person's life in the form of strong habitual temptations. A person may open oneself to infestation by deliberately seeking the presence or power of evil spirits through witchcraft, Satanism, or fortune-telling (ouija, tarot etc.); infestation may also occur through other grave sins which are not explicitly associated with the occult, e.g. sexual activity by consecrated or ordained persons pledged to celibacy. The infesting spirit usually needs to be identified by name and cast out (i.e. commanded to leave) or bound (i.e. forbidden from exerting any further influence). It is also possible for animals, houses, places and situations to become infested, especially by exposure to occult activity.

Possession is very rare, and only occurs when human beings wilfully hand over complete control of their life to Satan. Formal exorcism, sanctioned by the diocesan bishop, is always required in such cases.

Demonization may be used as a general term covering all the above situations, and **deliverance** is a generic term for freeing someone from the influence of a demon. But you may also see these two terms applied specifically to cases of obsession and oppression, as a contrast to possession which requires formal exorcism. Catholic exorcists generally teach that

²⁰ Gabriele Amorth (chief exorcist of the Diocese of Rome), *An Exorcist Tells His Story*, *passim*; Benedict Heron, *I Saw Satan Fall*, 88-103.

²¹ Scanlan & Cirner, *Deliverance from Evil Spirits*, Servant Books, 1980; S. Conaty, *The "How"s and "Why"s of Deliverance*, unpublished lecture notes. Also F. MacNutt, *Deliverance from Evil Spirits: A Practical Manual*, Chosen Books, 1995, pp. 67-74.

a bishop's permission is not required in order to pray for deliverance from oppressive or obsessive spirits,²² although a strict reading of a 1984 Vatican directive may indicate that prayer for relief from obsession/infestation is also reserved to authorised priests.²³

It is also worth noting that in charismatic circles, "discernment of spirits" refers to a gift (charism) given by the Holy Spirit enabling one to discern the name/identity of any spirit present;²⁴ this is a very different definition from that employed in Ignatian spirituality, where it refers to the analysis of feelings of consolation or desolation.²⁵

In the context of the present essay, we note there are two dangers which may be present in New Age activities. Firstly, wilful participation²⁶ in activities facilitated by evil spirits may open a person up for infestation, even if that person is not aware, or does not believe, that evil spirits exist and are at work. In this case both sacramental confession and prayer for deliverance are necessary for total healing.

Secondly, due to the syncretistic nature of New Age thinking, one therapist may practice several New Age techniques: a client receiving an unproblematic therapy may become subject to influence from oppressive demons if the place or therapist is infested via other activities. Dom Benedict Heron OSB, who has assisted several authorised exorcists with their ministry,²⁷ offers a balanced treatment of alternative/complementary therapies in general,²⁸ and notes that since practitioners of these therapies are often involved in witchcraft or other occult practices, they may covertly attempt to "channel spiritual healing energy" while they practice on patients. In this case, there is no question of culpable sin on the part of an unknowing client, but prayer for deliverance may still be required, and the prudence of receiving the New Age therapy in this particular context is in doubt. It seems plausible that the act of will to receive the therapy "trusting in the practitioner" may even be sufficient to admit demonic influence at the level of obsession.

²² cf. http://www.saint-mike.org/Apologetics/QA/Answers/Spiritual_Warfare/s990902Smith.html

²³ <http://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/CDFEXORC.HTM>

²⁴ MacNutt, *op. cit.*, 81ff.

²⁵ See, for example, Catholic Encyclopaedia entry on "discernment of spirits", <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05028b.htm>

²⁶ It is tempting to try to make a distinction that only sinful acts open a person to infestation, while demons can only *oppress* those who have not made wilful choices of occult activity or other grave sin. MacNutt 90-92 presents plausible evidence, however, that traumatic emotional experience can open a psychological wound which is capable of admitting infestation by evil spirits. He also argues (pp. 108-115, 221-222) that an innocent person can be opened up to infestation by a curse or by being dedicated to Satan: his examples are strongest in the case of children cursed by parents or ancestors. I would be cautious about asserting that a non-consenting adult could be infested by the power of a curse.

²⁷ B. Heron, *I Saw Satan Fall*, xvii.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 45-47

(e) Psychic Phenomena

We cannot rule out, *a priori*, the possibility that in rare cases, the human mind can directly influence or sense matter without being mediated by the muscles and sense organs of the body. We will define as **psychic** any process by which the human mind directly influences matter or acquires sense data. The study of such psychic phenomena is the realm of parapsychology, a field which has not yet produced unambiguous evidence for the existence of any such phenomenon.

Psychic phenomena, by this definition, do not involve any spirit other than that of the human claiming psychic powers, and possibly the spirits of other living persons involved in the experiment. If genuine psychic phenomena exist, it should be possible to investigate them by controlled experimentation, and they would seem to pose a different kind of theological or moral problem from the invocation of spirits.

An authorised British exorcist, speaking at a conference in March 2004, expressed the view that some people did indeed have innate (not natural but preternatural) psychic abilities, but warned that any deliberate attempt to use such abilities could be an entry point for demonization. He stated that the Church had forbidden the exercise of psychic powers and cited Deuteronomy 18:9-12 as evidence that God forbids the exercise of any “soothsaying or augury”.

Does this leave any middle ground for phenomena which are not yet understood by science, but which may be legitimately investigated without breaking any prohibitions put in place by scripture or the Church? Given the exorcist’s warning, it seems that any ground not explicitly forbidden could still be an entry point for demonic influence.

(f) Complementary and Alternative Therapies

The following text comes from a report, *Handle With Care*, by the Evangelical Alliance:²⁹

Alternative is used to mean when a therapy is used as a strict alternative to orthodox medicine, and *complementary* may be used to describe a therapy used in conjunction with orthodox medicine. Both terms, plus *holistic* (which describes an approach taking the whole person - body, mind and spirit - into account) are frequently used interchangeably.

Most therapies fall into one of three categories:

External: includes massage and manipulation
(eg acupuncture, aromatherapy, reflexology, osteopathy)

Internal: involves ingesting medicines (e.g. herbalism, homoeopathy).

²⁹ <http://www.eauk.org/ContentManager/Content/handlewithcare/overview.htm> (checked 26/12/2002)

Psychic: either psychological in origin, or using the paranormal
(e.g. hypnotherapy, astral projection, transcendental meditation).

The Institute for Complementary Medicine distinguishes between *practitioners* and *therapists* for the purpose of inclusion on its register of practitioners: The Institute defines *practitioners* as those able to make holistic diagnoses (not the same as a GP's symptom-based diagnosis) leading to a course of treatment. (NB: In the case of a serious or life-threatening illness, the practitioner should present the patient with the choices available, including orthodox medical treatment.) A *therapist* works under the direction of a practitioner. However, these terms are often used interchangeably throughout complementary medicine and in the media.

Most alternative therapies see health and emotional problems as a result primarily of an imbalance or depletion of the body's energy (be that physical, emotional or spiritual). The aim of the therapy is to restore that energy balance. Because alternative medicine adherents take a holistic approach, the expectation is often that as well as relief of symptoms, clients can hope for a healthier and happier lifestyle.

Dr Robina Coker (*Alternative Medicine*, Monarch) suggests the following questions as a starting point for investigating a therapy:

- Do the claims for this therapy fit the facts?
- Is there a rational scientific basis for the therapy?
- Is the methodology or the principle the effective element?
- Does the therapy involve the occult?
- What is the therapist's world view?

The last two questions must be asked of individual practitioners, as the way many therapies are used is often determined by the individual. As well as asking therapists about their qualifications, no reputable practitioners should mind you taking a holistic approach by asking them if they have any spiritual objectives or practices in their work, and what their spiritual outlook is.

Perhaps it would also be useful to consider why we rarely apply the same scrutiny to orthodox medicine and its practitioners, despite its origins in ancient Greek pantheism.

(g) Selection Criteria for issues considered

What practices ought actually be considered and analysed in this essay? Some anti-New Age writers claim conspiracy theories which link a whole host of superficially unconnected therapies, practices and techniques.³⁰ My choice here is an eclectic one, based on anecdotal concerns I have heard voiced during my involvement with the Catholic church in general, and the Pentecostal movement (charismatic renewal) within and without Catholicism. It is

³⁰ e.g. Randy England, *The Unicorn in the Sanctuary*

sufficient for concern to be raised about any technique, for the pastor to feel responsible for attempting to make an objective discernment of it. I will make no attempt to cite the origin of the “worries” I have heard expressed anecdotally; the mere fact they have been raised and are plausible is sufficient reason to investigate. Out of sensitivity to the many Christians who do not regard the Pentecostal charismatic gifts as part of “normal Christianity” I feel it is fair to also subject these charisms to the same analysis. What, then, are our general areas of concern?

(i) “Spiritual energy systems”: there is a general Eastern belief in a kind of spiritual energy variously called *prana* (India), *ki* (Japan), *qi* (China), *ka* (ancient Egypt), or *chi*; this moves through the human body, which has certain energy centres known as *chakras*. *Reiki* is a technique which claims to rebalance this energy. Practitioners of various alternative therapies may covertly or explicitly seek to manipulate this energy. Use of crystals or styling of rooms (*feng shui*) also buys into a belief in spiritual energy systems. Whether these practices are compatible with Christianity must be considered.

(ii) Martial Arts and Yoga: it is alleged that by adopting certain yoga postures or martial arts stances (*kata*) one is worshipping false gods. Yoga postures are also alleged to be chosen because of their significance in the *prana/chakra* system.

(iii) The *Enneagram* personality typing system is often criticised for being “discovered” by an occultist. Its method of mapping personality types onto a nine-pointed diagram is accused of being a form of numerological divination. Other typing schemes (e.g. Meyers-Briggs) also fall under general suspicion.

(iv) Eastern Meditation techniques (e.g. zen, transcendental meditation, use of a mantra) have been adopted by Christians. Christian and Eastern beliefs about the nature and purpose of prayer may differ, and these techniques cannot be adopted uncritically.

(v) Alternative / Complementary Therapies suffer from scientific criticism. They lack proof-positive clinical trial evidence of efficacy and may seem to contradict scientific orthodoxy in the way they work (e.g. homeopathy diluting a substance so no molecule of it is left in the medicine). In some cases their apparent efficacy may be attributed to occult (demonic) spiritual techniques, or tied in with the Eastern *prana* system (e.g. acupuncture). Some therapies (e.g. aromatherapy, reflexology) are widely practised in Christian retreat houses. Note that in 1856, the Vatican ruled that hypnotism (then called “magnetism”) was not prohibited, as long as the Devil was not invoked, and the hypnotism was not used for wrongful ends.³¹

These represent some of the better known and not immediately resolvable issues which Christians confront in the New Age movement. My list is not exhaustive.

³¹ Francesco Bamonte, *Occult Christianity and Magic*, Many Rooms Publishing, 2001.

3. General Moral Criteria for the Evaluation of New Age Practices

In Catholic moral theology, the morality of an act is determined by the nature of the act itself, and the intention of the person acting.³² A particular action is objectively wrong either because of its intrinsic nature (e.g. murder, theft, worshipping Satan) or because of the intention for which it is carried out (e.g. asking a person for a keepsake in order for it to be used in preparing a charm). An objectively wrong act is only *sinful* (culpable in the eyes of God) if committed by someone who realises that it is morally wrong. Clearly it is possible to do wrong by carrying out a totally ineffectual practice, if the person doing so has a wrongful intention; e.g. even if tea-leaves in the bottom of the cup have no significance for divination, a person does wrong by attempting to read the future from them.

Broadly speaking, most New Age techniques aim to do some or all of

- (i) improve one's own well-being (e.g. alternative therapies, meditation);
- (ii) increase self-knowledge (e.g. some uses of divination, personality tools); or
- (iii) further humanity's general well-being (e.g. directed meditation, certain energy techniques).

Less commonly, techniques may seek particular knowledge (e.g. dowsing for oil or water) or seek to influence particular people or situations (e.g. through a curse or witchcraft). In general, we note two thrusts: to *INFLUENCE*³³ (oneself, humanity, or an individual or group), or to gain *KNOWLEDGE*³⁴ (self-knowledge, specific knowledge). The following principles seem of particular relevance for our current investigation:

Principle A: Recourse to any practice to gain knowledge or influence, which does not consciously direct psychic powers nor seek the services of spirits, believed to be efficacious without reasonable justification, constitutes **superstition**, and is unworthy of Christians.³⁵

Principle B: Recourse to any practice to gain knowledge or influence, whose putative efficacy the practitioner attributes to a spiritual source other than God, constitutes **idolatry**, the worship of false gods, *regardless of whether or not spirits are in fact invoked by the practice*.³⁶

Principle C: Recourse to any practice to gain knowledge or influence, whose putative efficacy the practitioner attributes to the Triune God, but which does not respect the sovereignty of God, constitutes the sin of attempting to **tempt** God, thereby putting one's own will before His.³⁷

³² CCC 1750-1761

³³ JCBWL [§2.3.4.1](#) calls this “magic” or “occult” activity.

³⁴ JCBWL [§2.3.4.1](#) calls this “esotericism”.

³⁵ CCC 2110-2111. Note that superstition also includes attributing power directly to Catholic sacramentals; rather, use of a sacramental should be carried out as a physical sign of faith in God Himself.

³⁶ CCC 2112-2114

³⁷ CCC 2119

Principle D: In previous editions of this document, I proposed that there may be very limited situations where recourse to what appear to be “psychic powers” is not forbidden. I have now modified my position and hold that the use of psychic powers to obtain knowledge is forbidden by Dt 18:9-12. In any case, the non-involvement of evil spirits in a given psychic phenomenon will be very difficult to establish beyond reasonable doubt. The commandment against worshipping false gods is strong,³⁸ and recourse to “unknown powers” would seem to run the risk of invoking false gods unless there is good evidence to the contrary. Advice from a British exorcist indicates that any recourse to psychic powers can be an entry point for demonization; the use of such powers is therefore, in all cases, **imprudent**.

Principle E: For the sake of one’s ultimate salvation, one should be wary of opening oneself to the influence of evil spirits. One should therefore satisfy oneself that there is little likelihood of oppressive spirits being picked up through any activity; or if it is necessary to run the risk for a higher good (as in the case of those involved in deliverance ministry), to take appropriate precautions.

N.B. It seems *likely* that oppressive spirits can be acquired from contact with a practitioner who has been infested or oppressed, and *plausible* that they may be acquired via objects which have been through an occult ritual (the diabolical counterfeit of blessed objects). There is no positive evidence that oppressive spirits can be transmitted by practising apparently unproblematic therapies whose inventors happen to have been occultists, though such provenance should invite the potential client to a thorough scrutiny of the proposed treatment. Similarly, if any therapy which was originally explained in terms of the *prana/chakra* system is subsequently found to be effective in clinical trials, there seems to be no reason to believe that a practitioner who offers the therapy but explicitly rejects the spiritual interpretation runs any risk of inadvertently invoking evil spirits.

Principle F: When receiving a New Age treatment, a client might reasonably place “good faith” in the explanation given by the practitioner/therapist of what is taking place, unless there is good reason to suspect hidden motives or practices. But one who promotes or offers such treatments should satisfy oneself of the accuracy and provenance of the information which is to be offered to clients. This reflects the commandment against bearing false witness, and the Christian duty to live according to the truth.³⁹

N.B. No treatment which has gained popular credence is likely to be wholly ineffective, or it would have no supporters. But the placebo effect will promote well-being to a certain extent, as will the amount of time and care which any “holistic” practitioner spends on

³⁸ Exodus 20:2-5; Deuteronomy 5:6-9; Matthew 4:10

³⁹ CCC 2462-2470

their client;⁴⁰ and divination techniques may include the kind of generalities employed by anyone familiar with the art of “cold reading”. It seems reasonable that the Christian consumer should be able to accept statements made about New Age techniques by their practitioners without being expected to undertake an academic research project first. But if a Christian becomes a therapist offering and advertising any particular therapy or technique, s/he has a duty to ensure that any information imparted is truthful. Patter and advertising based on hearsay and anecdotes is inadequate to honour this duty.

Principle G: Christians are duty-bound to give a good witness to the unique power of Jesus Christ, even to the point of martyrdom.⁴¹ If there is a danger that in receiving a New Age treatment, a Christian might be perceived as having recourse to other spiritual powers, *even though the Christian is satisfied that no such powers in fact facilitate the treatment*, then the Christian is in danger of giving bad witness, and should consider whether this is an offence against charity (love of neighbour). This applies perforce when a New Age technique is to be used in a Christian context, e.g. on parish property or in a retreat centre. Note the arguments of St Paul who knows that meat sacrificed to idols cannot harm him, but refuses to eat it in case the word gets round, causing his audience to believe he worships those idols rather than Christ alone.⁴²

Principle H: It must be possible to reconcile the practice with Christian doctrine. New Age beliefs are often expressed in a context of monism and/or pantheism: all creation is a manifestation of God, and human beings reach wholeness through realising that they too are God (or manifestations of Him/Her/It), and can perhaps reach consciousness of this by various exercises. By contrast, Christian theology teaches that each human is an individual made in the image of God, distinct from Him, but called to grow into an increasingly perfect image of Him (a process Christians call *divinization* or *theosis*⁴³). No person can be perfected by one’s own actions (Pelagianism),⁴⁴ but only by accepting the salvation offered by Jesus Christ. Christian practitioners of New Age techniques must ensure that their teaching and practice are consistent with this Christian anthropology rather than monism/pantheism, and without risking giving the impression that Christianity is compatible with such New Age concepts.⁴⁵

N.B. Chapter 4 of *Jesus Christ, Bearer of the Water of Life* gives a thorough overview of the doctrinal divergence between key Christian and New Age principles. It offers a list of considerations which help to identify whether a practice has strayed away from Christian truth. I reproduce this list below, but for the background and explanation of each test, I refer you to the [source document](#).

⁴⁰ <http://www.eauk.org/ContentManager/Content/handlewithcare/overview.htm>, subsections “Placebo Effect” and “Bedside Manner”

⁴¹ CCC 2471-2474

⁴² I Cor 8

⁴³ JCBWL [§3.5](#)

⁴⁴ R. McBrien, *Catholicism*, 191

⁴⁵ cf. R. McBrien, *op. cit.*, 244, 257 & 166-184

- Is God a being with whom we have a relationship or something to be used or a force to be harnessed?
- Is there just one Jesus Christ, or are there thousands of Christs?
- The human being: is there one universal being or are there many individuals?
- Do we save ourselves or is salvation a free gift from God?
- Do we invent truth or do we embrace it?
- Prayer and meditation: are we talking to ourselves or to God?
- Are we tempted to deny sin or do we accept that there is such a thing?
- Are we encouraged to reject or accept suffering and death?
- Is social commitment something shirked or positively sought after?
- Is our future in the stars or do we help to construct it?

Principle I: Christians are called to place their trust in God, especially concerning the unknown future, and events beyond their natural control. Maturity in faith requires a recognition of, and docile submission to, the Lordship of Jesus Christ.⁴⁶

Having presented some general principles, we can now consider how they might apply in particular cases.

⁴⁶ CCC 2115, which urges an attitude of giving up all unhealthy curiosity about the future. It is worth noting that those who exercise the charismatic gifts of knowledge, wisdom and prophecy responsibly do not explicitly ask God for knowledge about the future; rather, they ask the Almighty for whatever revelation might help them to edify or pray appropriately for their clients.

4. Specific Criteria for the Evaluation of New Age Practices

(a) Concerning Divination of Occult Knowledge

Catechism 2116: All forms of divination are to be rejected: recourse to Satan or demons, conjuring up the dead or other practices falsely supposed to "unveil" the future. Consulting horoscopes, astrology, palm reading, interpretation of omens and lots, the phenomena of clairvoyance, and recourse to mediums all conceal a desire for power over time, history, and, in the last analysis, other human beings, as well as a wish to conciliate hidden powers. They contradict the honour, respect, and loving fear that we owe to God alone.

Human beings are free to explore the natural universe by natural means; use of scientific methods to predict the future according to causal laws would not seem to be an offence of "lacking trust in God" but part of responsible stewardship of creation and management of one's own life. Divination, by contrast, could be defined as "obtaining knowledge by supernatural or preternatural means", and it is turning to a spiritual source other than the Triune God which is forbidden (Principle B). The crucial word here is "spiritual". How do we answer a "divination" practitioner who claims: "This is not a spiritual technique. It is a natural system which empirical science has not yet come to terms with." ?

First, consider any physical activity (e.g. casting lots) or conceptual system (e.g. astrology) which purports to give information about the future without involving the human mind - i.e. where there is no scope for psychic phenomena to be involved. (Presumably, if psychic powers are not needed, a robot could be built to cast lots; or a computer could cast a horoscope based on knowing someone's time and date of birth, or interpret a scan of someone's palm.) It should be possible to conduct an empirical scientific test to determine whether these techniques have any true predictive power: this is using human reason to enquire into nature. Conducting such experiments should have no moral problems so long as the predictions are used only for the experimental data and not as a basis of real life-choices.

If there is no empirical evidence to support a particular predictive technique, then recourse to it is superstitious and not founded on truth; it is a sin of religious excess for Christians to act superstitiously (Principle A). On the other hand, if the technique's consistent predictive power can be verified by empirical studies,⁴⁷ then we can presume we are dealing with a natural phenomenon, whose moral status is no more problematic than weather forecasting. It is not necessary, for moral use, to discover the mechanism by which the predictive power is guaranteed, though it is to be expected that the mechanism will be found in due course.

Does the Catechism text prohibit use of genuine psychic abilities? (See notes on Principle D.) If such abilities are classed as "preternatural" and if "divination" covers this category, then they are prohibited.

⁴⁷ A pedantic Christian might object that a spirit might be consistently influencing the outcome of the experiment, in which case the experimental regime would require a "control" trial which was covered by prayer for protection from spirits.

Rule 1. Recourse to any physical activity or conceptual system which purports to yield hitherto unknown information without empirical justification constitutes superstition, and is unworthy of Christians (A). It may indicate lack of trust in God, especially where the information concerns one's future (I). If the believer attributes the technique's efficacy to a spiritual source other than God (B), or has not made sufficient inquiry into what may be a genuine psychic power (D), s/he sins by worshipping false gods and may also risk attracting oppressive spirits (E). If s/he attributes the technique's efficacy to the Triune God, s/he sins by attempting to tempt God and force an answer (C). Use of genuine psychic ability may be an entry point for demonization (D). In any case, all forms of "soothsaying and augury", which would appear to be a catch-all description of obtaining knowledge by unnatural means, are forbidden by Dt 18. Therefore, we may never seek to divine such information (without prejudice to the ministry of Christians with prophetic gifts). Horoscopes, astrology, palm reading, and interpretation of omens and lots, are all explicitly forbidden by Catholic teaching. So is recourse to clairvoyance, which may refer to the use of a purely psychic ability to see into the future.⁴⁸

(b) Concerning Mediumship and Contacting Spirits

Consider the dowser who claims to find oil or water by walking over the land with two sticks. Is this a spiritual technique? Or could there plausibly be an unknown mechanism which science will one day pin down? What about the dowser who uses a pendulum over a map? It seems implausible that there could be a "natural" link between the map and the geochemical properties of the real world: at this level, some intelligence is needed, either human psychic powers or those of another spiritual entity. As for the dowser who dowses directly in the real world, he or she must give an account of what mental processing is involved. Is it purely a sensory task of feeling rods moving in one's hands? Or must the rods be mentally directed somehow? It is here that we require a clearly defined boundary between spiritual, psychic, and scientific phenomena. If it could be proven that no other spirit is involved, then a dowser with consistent powers would seem to be exercising a natural or preternatural human faculty as yet unexplored by science. Even in this case, however, if no objective scientific mechanism could be discerned, then the dowser would seem to be using a preternatural ability, which still seems to be forbidden by Principle D.

Scripture forbids us from divining the future,⁴⁹ but bids us trust in God. In other words, we may not seek to obtain, by a spiritual technique, knowledge about what is the case, or what is to come. God, however, remains free to reveal aspects of the future to us, as evidenced in the Book of Acts.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Respect for the privacy of another person might likewise make it wrong to use a psychic ability to read thoughts – though would this be morally different from interpreting body language?

⁴⁹ Deuteronomy 18:10

⁵⁰ Acts 11:28; *cf.* CCC 2115

The New Testament recognises that some people are given the gift of prophecy,⁵¹ and if God chooses to reveal future knowledge to such prophets, this is done in a context of professing, rather than denying, trust in God. Christians who have the charisms of “prophecy” or the “word of knowledge” go to the Triune God, ask Him to impart whatever knowledge He wishes to give them in order to minister effectively, and accept what reply, if any, He chooses to give. That He sometimes chooses not to give a word is a sign that an independent will (God’s) is at work, and the charism is not a psychic power of the charismatic individual. God’s freedom to choose not to reply means that charismatic gifts do not breach Principle C. It is sometimes objected that St John of the Cross taught that one should not seek mystical experiences, and therefore charismatics should not seek to exercise such gifts. In scripture,⁵² however, St Paul teaches that we should “eagerly desire” the gift of prophecy. A distinction must be made between seeking spiritual experiences for oneself (from curiosity, or desire for “proof” of faith), and exercising spiritual gifts for the benefit of others.

Scripture explicitly forbids mediumship,⁵³ specifically seeking knowledge from the spirit of a person who has died. It is not forbidden to attempt one-way communication TO the departed (witness the Catholic/Orthodox tradition of asking the intercession of saints and holy souls),⁵⁴ nor is God forbidden from allowing a departed person to communicate an unsolicited message (e.g. Moses at the Transfiguration, the Virgin Mary at Lourdes, the voices of Ss Margaret and Catherine to St Joan of Arc). By extension, what may not be sought from a departed soul, ought not be sought from an angel, so neither should we attempt to receive communication from angels, while respecting God’s freedom to have them communicate on His own initiative.

A few years ago I was aware of a vogue among certain Catholics, for “asking to know the name of your guardian angel”. A cautionary tale⁵⁵ is given by Kristina Cooper, editor of England’s Catholic charismatic magazine: she and a friend did so, and received the names “Harold” and “Gregory”. But when they asked these angels, by name, to intercede for them, their prayer lives became more difficult. Then Kristina read an account by an Anglican exorcist of casting out evil spirits called “Harold” and “Gregory” whose mission was to cause distraction and tiredness in prayer;⁵⁶ she and her friend renounced their involvement with these “angels” and all became well. It seems that by curiously seeking non-essential knowledge (that which God did not freely will to reveal to them) they opened themselves up to communication by fallen angels: a breach of Principle B (knowledge should be sought from God Himself, who may choose to reply by means of an angel), and Principle E (since seeking contact with angels seems to risk inviting the fallen ones to reply).

⁵¹ I Cor 14:1-5

⁵² I Cor 12-14

⁵³ Deuteronomy 18:11; Leviticus 19:31; cf. I Chron 10:13

⁵⁴ CCC 955-959

⁵⁵ <http://www.ccr.org.uk/gn0209/g0209kc.htm>, checked 26/12/02, from September 2002 edition of *Goodnews*.

⁵⁶ Peter H. Lawrence, *The Hot Line*, 146

Rule 2. You, or a person acting on your behalf, may ask the Triune God directly for knowledge, always respecting His freedom to refuse to impart an answer (C). You (or your agent) may not have recourse to any other spirit in the pursuit of knowledge (B). You may not consult a “psychic” who seems to have a genuine preternatural gift (D). We may never seek knowledge or communication from departed souls, angels, or other spiritual creatures. Mediumship – which would include “channelling” of any spiritual being, whether soul or angel – is explicitly forbidden by Catholic teaching.

(c) Concerning Spiritual Power and Energy

Catechism 2117: All practices of magic or sorcery, by which one attempts to tame occult powers, so as to place them at one's service and have a supernatural power over others - even if this were for the sake of restoring their health - are gravely contrary to the virtue of religion. These practices are even more to be condemned when accompanied by the intention of harming someone, or when they have recourse to the intervention of demons. Wearing charms is also reprehensible. Spiritism often implies divination or magical practices; the Church for her part warns the faithful against it. Recourse to so-called traditional cures does not justify either the invocation of evil powers or the exploitation of another's credulity.

As with divination (seeking knowledge), so with the problem of influencing the material world or a human person's well being, we must consider whether particular techniques are superstitious, natural, psychic, or invoke spirits. Scripture forbids sorcery,⁵⁷ magic⁵⁸ and witchcraft,⁵⁹ but acknowledges that certain people are granted charisms of healing.⁶⁰

Rule 3. Recourse to any merely material practice (i.e. without conscious direction of psychic powers or contact with spirits) which purports to influence another person or thing without empirical justification constitutes superstition, and is unworthy of Christians (A). If the believer attributes the technique's efficacy to a spiritual source other than God, s/he sins by worshipping false gods (B). If s/he attributes the technique's efficacy to the Triune God, s/he sins by attempting to tempt God (C). Recourse to genuine preternatural “psychic powers” may not be explicitly forbidden by scripture in this case, but seems ruled out as an imprudent course of action which may invite demonic influence upon the practitioner (D). You, or a person acting on your behalf, may ask the Triune God directly, or via a saintly or angelic intercessor, for a good gift, always respecting His freedom to refuse (C). You (or your agent) may not have recourse to any other spirit as the source of the favour, on pain of idolatry (B). We may only honour and make use of spirits and spiritual powers which confess Jesus as having come in the flesh as Lord. No other spirits or spiritual powers may be exploited or venerated in any way. We may never seek to manipulate occult powers so as to control them and exercise supernatural power over another person, even for the purpose of healing.

⁵⁷ Deuteronomy 18:10; *cf.* Acts 19:19

⁵⁸ Ezekiel 13:18-20; Revelation 9:21 & 22:15

⁵⁹ Deuteronomy 18:10, Galatians 5:20; *cf.* Micah 5:12

⁶⁰ I Corinthians 12

Practitioners of various alternative/complementary therapies will use the language of “balancing the body’s energy”. Reflexology⁶¹ and Chinese acupuncture⁶² in particular draw on certain beliefs about the flow of energy around the human body, and Reiki⁶³ seeks to rebalance this directly. We are forced to ask about the nature of this energy (*prana*, *chi*, etc.). Is it merely a theoretical model which accounts for the efficacy of traditional treatments, and gains credence because of the placebo effect? Is there empirical evidence for the correctness of the predictions the model makes, and if so, for the existence of the energy itself? Are the techniques which seek to manipulate the energy, psychic (as I have defined the term)? Do they work through the intervention of other spirits? Do they constitute the “taming of occult powers”? These questions would have to be looked at in the context of each particular therapy.

The phrase “taming of occult powers” invites further investigation. What does occult mean in this context? The etymology of the word indicates “hidden”. It cannot be synonymous with “demonic”, for the *Catechism* text goes on to highlight recourse to demons as particularly grave. On the other hand, we would not want to extend it to the entire realm of that not yet known – or else harnessing nuclear energy would have constituted “taming hidden powers” when the power of the atom was first discovered. Do all alleged “psychic powers” fall in the realm of preternatural gifts which might serve as entry points for demonization, or are there still human abilities which fall into the same category as atomic energy in the 19th Century, i.e. as something which science has yet to account for?

On the other hand, if there are such things as non-intelligent “spiritual energies” which can be manipulated, these presumably fall into the category of occult powers which could be tamed but are not demonic. Therefore manipulating spiritual energies believed to exist independently of psychic exertions – using crystals, *feng shui*, *reiki*, etc. – would seem to be part of the forbidden activities of this definition; and even if the energies do not actually exist, the practitioner is guilty of attempting to tame powers in this forbidden category.

What if a particular therapy bases its methodology on the existence of *chi* energy, but does not seek to manipulate this energy directly? Is it possible to receive acupuncture or reflexology while believing that their efficacy is not due to the manipulation of occult powers? Perhaps the answer to this is yes. Could a Christian administer these therapies without seeking to “tame occult powers”? Perhaps yes again, but they would have to devise a new rationale for what they are doing and why they are doing it. As for *reiki*, which is direct facilitating of a rebalancing of this energy, this would seem to be ruled out by the *Catechism*.

⁶¹ <http://www.reflexology.org/aor/refinfo/healart.htm>

⁶² <http://www.acupuncture.org.uk/content/AboutAcupuncture/acupunctureabout.htm>

⁶³ <http://www.reikifed.co.uk/define.htm>

(d) Concerning the worship of false gods

We may worship no god except God.⁶⁴ By extension, we must honour no spiritual power unless we can reasonably believe it to be sent by God and in accordance with His will. This immediately rules out Satanism and any earth religion or Eastern practice which worships deities or spirits other than the triune God.⁶⁵ The New Testament criterion is only to accept spirits which confess Jesus as having come in the flesh as Lord.⁶⁶ This allows leeway for veneration (honour which is less than worship) for angels and saints in the Catholic/Orthodox tradition.

Catechism 2113: ... Idolatry consists in divinizing what is not God. Man commits idolatry whenever he honours and reveres a creature [created thing] in place of God, whether this be gods or demons (for example, Satanism), power, pleasure, race, ancestors, the state, money, etc.... Idolatry rejects the unique Lordship of God; it is therefore incompatible with communion with God.

I have heard it claimed that certain positions adopted in yoga or martial arts of themselves amount to worship of other gods. Is it possible to worship an entity unknowingly? Certainly there can be no culpability involved in actions carried out in ignorance. Sacramental theology requires both form and matter for a sacrament to be effected: the right words as well as the right action. By extension, is a conscious intention required for an action to constitute worship of a false god? To practice yoga or a martial art while not believing that there is a spirit responsible for its efficacy is clearly NOT a breach of Principle B. Whether it bears bad witness (G) depends on the culture which observes Christians participating. Only in a culture where observers identify the postures as worship *per se* is this problematic.

In previous editions of this document, I stated: "I am not aware of any evidence from those involved in deliverance ministry that adopting postures without conscious intention can open a person to infestation (E)." I am currently (March 2004) pursuing some possible evidence in this direction and hereby urge readers to err on the side of caution in this matter until I can give clearer guidance.

Subtly different is the question of whether a certain yoga position is associated with belief in *prana* and the existence of certain energy flow points (*chakras*) on the human body. A particular posture may have significance in a *chakra* system, and be empirically known to be conducive to prayer or meditation. To adopt the position when taught it in good faith as a meditation posture is not problematic. But to adopt it as a consequence of believing in the *chakra* system, may constitute an attempt to manipulate occult powers. Even in Catholic liturgy, symbolic meanings have become attached to originally practical actions: washing the hands after gifts of vegetables have been received becomes spiritual purification, the sweat protecting neck-cloth (amice) becomes the helmet of salvation. Conscious adoption of the

⁶⁴ Exodus 20:3; CCC 2083-2085

⁶⁵ CCC 2113

⁶⁶ 1 John 4:1-3; cf. 1 Cor 12:3

symbolic meaning is required for the symbol to have potency; otherwise the action is purely pragmatic. Thus origin in a *charka/prana* system only seems significant when a technique is used with the *intention* of exploiting *prana*.

Fr Rufus Pereira, from India, is an acknowledged expert in the field of healing and deliverance and is the President of the International Association of Exorcists, a Vatican approved body.⁶⁷ He notes that the national committee responsible for charismatic renewal in the Catholic Church in India concluded that: “on the one hand, the emotional and spiritual elements of yoga need to be avoided: at times they can even be diabolic and make us vulnerable to the forces of evil. Nevertheless, the purely practical aspects of yoga [explained later in his article as breathing exercises and bodily postures] can be accepted as long as they are deliberately placed under the Lordship of Jesus.”⁶⁸

In 1984, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a *Letter to the bishops of the Catholic Church on some aspects of Christian meditation*.⁶⁹ This is essential reading for anyone thinking of drawing on Eastern traditions for their Christian prayer life, for it sketches out the areas in which Eastern practices, if not interpreted correctly in the light of Christian doctrine, can lead people astray.

Rule 4. A Christian may not perform any practice with the intention of honouring any other spiritual entity (other than appropriate veneration of saints and angels in the context of Christian worship) (B), nor give the impression of doing so (G) where this would impede the spread of the Gospel. A Christian may not practice or teach a technique which depends on a monistic anthropology, or the non-uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the only redeemer of humanity (H). It would be best for a Christian to place practices adopted from other religious traditions explicitly under the Lordship of Jesus. As stated in Rule 3, we may only honour and make use of spirits and spiritual powers which confess Jesus as having come in the flesh as Lord. No other spirits or spiritual powers may be exploited or venerated in any way. Obviously Satanism and any practice which worships the “goddess” or “Mother Earth” are unacceptable.

⁶⁷ <http://www.eauk.org/ContentManager/Content/handlewithcare/aromatherapy.htm>, checked 26/12/02, from *Goodnews* September 2002.

⁶⁸ Interview with Fr Rufus Pereira in: F. MacNutt, *Deliverance from Evil Spirits*, 286.

⁶⁹ <http://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/CDFMED.HTM>

(e) Concerning the well-being of the human body

Catholic anthropology takes a holistic view of the human person which regards the body as a good and integral part of the human person. True, the body (or flesh) is spiritually fallen, and can be a source of temptation (certainly through hormonal influence tempting us to consider sexual pleasure, and possibly also through genetic predispositions). But the body is good, is destined to be renewed at the General Resurrection, and bodily pleasure, in moderation, is a legitimate enjoyment for human beings when experienced as a consequence of pursuing things which are good, beautiful or true. It is morally questionable whether sensual pleasure may be pursued for its own sake, however.⁷⁰ Gluttony, a sin, harms the body as well as the spirit; and wilful damage to one's own body (mutilation) is also a sin. There is a point of convergence, therefore, between Catholic and New Age approaches to a holistic view of the human person. We must always remember, however, the point made above about human destiny being union with God through the free gift of Jesus - not the "realisation" that one is actually God oneself through one's own exertions.

There would seem to be no special moral problem, beyond the perennial sensitivity to public perception (G), in therapies designed to relax and soothe the human body. Aromatherapy, massage, etc., seem legitimate, although vigilance is needed about other practices which the therapist might bring in. The UK Evangelical Alliance notes that: "Some [aroma]therapists may include elements from other alternative therapies. These could involve spiritual elements which are not Christian in origin, eg dowsing (use of a pendulum over the oils) [N.B. note on Principle E], the chakras (which originates from tantric yoga), and the laying on of hands for spiritual healing. Find out exactly what techniques the therapist uses if you are considering aromatherapy (and any other therapy)."⁷¹ Massage deliberately intended to stimulate sexual pleasure is not appropriate except between spouses.

Osteopathy and chiropractic have a certain scientific plausibility (bodily manipulation might arguably stimulate tissue regeneration around nerves) even if the mechanism claimed by practitioners is incorrect; osteopathy is the only complementary therapy to have its own state-recognised regulatory body in the UK.⁷² Western medical practitioners recognise the empirical pain-relieving ability of acupuncture, and often use it without buying into the Chinese Taoist "yin/yang" concept or belief in "meridian lines" associating acupressure points on the skin with internal organs.⁷³ Reflexology, however, explicitly relies on associating pressure points on the foot with certain parts of the body.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ cf. *Love and Responsibility*, Karol Wojtyla, 36-44.

⁷¹ <http://www.eauk.org/ContentManager/Content/handlewithcare/aromatherapy.htm>, checked 26/12/02.

⁷² <http://www.osteopathy.org.uk>

⁷³ <http://www.eauk.org/ContentManager/Content/handlewithcare/acupuncture.htm>

⁷⁴ <http://www.reflexology.org/aor/refinfo/healart.htm>. One Christian practitioner of reflexology whom I have met has claimed that she administers the therapy believing it to work through stimulation of the central nervous system.

5. A Tree of Discernment

Now, at long last, we are able to distil the foregoing discussion into some more digestible principles:

i. Does this practice explicitly invoke the Triune God?

YES: (i.a) If so, does it respect the sovereignty of His will by allowing Him to give a “no response”? (C)

YES: Legitimate, and may glorify God by its efficacy.

NO: The sin of attempting to tempt God rather than submitting to His will.

ii. Does this practice explicitly, and putatively or actually, have recourse to intelligent spirits? (B,E)

YES: (ii.a) Does it fall within the church tradition of legitimate recourse to God’s angels and saints?

NO: The sin of idolatry, of honouring false gods, which may also open one up to infestation.

Both the Sacrament of Reconciliation and ministry of deliverance may be required for healing.

iii. Does this practice seek to manipulate any unintelligent “spiritual powers” (or energies) which are believed to have an independent existence? (D,E)

YES: The sin of sorcery, which may also open one up to infestation.

Both the Sacrament of Reconciliation and ministry of deliverance may be required for healing.

iv. Is it likely, or at least possible, that the practice, or the method of the individual practitioner, covertly has recourse to spirits? (B,E)

** Remember that covert elements may include e.g. the use of a dowsing pendulum over the ingredients used in homeopathy or aromatherapy.*

YES: Recourse to the practice is unwise; the client may not have done moral wrong if accepting the practice in good faith, but may nevertheless become vulnerable to oppression by demons.

v. Are there empirical or theoretical grounds which justify belief in the efficacy of the practice? (A,D)

NO: The practice is superstitious.

vi. Am I being honest and well-grounded if I am promoting or offering a particular technique? (F)

NO: Promoting a practice on the grounds of anecdotal evidence only may be a sin against truth.

vii. Is the practice compatible with Christian teaching about Jesus and the nature of human beings? (H)

** Possible counter-indications: suggestions that you “are God”, are already one with God, can become or get closer to God purely by virtue of your own exercises; teaching that Jesus is one of many “christs”. For this analysis consider only the practice itself, not its “spiritual significance” in its culture of origin.*

NO: Recourse to the practice is a rejection of God’s revelation, and a sin against His Lordship.

viii. Will my participation give others a false impression of Christianity, or lead Christians into sin? (G)

** For this analysis, DO consider the practice’s “spiritual significance” in its local and original cultures.*

YES: Being an obstacle to the faith of others may be a sin against charity.

ix. Am I using this practice in a way which is under the Lordship of Christ, and totally trusts Him with my future? (I)

NO: You may not be sinning, but may be hindering your true spiritual growth.

YES: Congratulations! You have successfully discerned and “baptised” a New Age practice.

Can this tree help us to discern all the anecdotal cases we mentioned earlier?

(i) “Spiritual energy systems” we considered in some detail at 4c. Branch iii bids us consider whether we are attempting to tame occult powers, iv whether we have any positive evidence of efficacy, and v whether there are covert spirits at work.

(ii) The postures in Martial Arts and Yoga may or may not be problematic – I am following up further evidence on this issue. Even if there are “safe” ways of participating, however, we must still consider the question of evangelisation and public perception (viii).

(iii) The *Enneagram* and other personality typing systems are likely to find most difficulty at stage iv, the test for empirical proof. Some Christian writers against the New Age⁷⁵ express fears about all forms of psychotherapy, especially Jungian methods. I do not think the tests I offer here are very relevant to such cases, except inasmuch as vii points to the importance of adopting a system compatible with the Catholic vision of the human person.

The position of the Enneagram is a particularly delicate one. I know Christians involved in deliverance who swear by it, and those involved in evangelisation who swear at it. Mitch Pacwa’s *Catholics and the New Age* devotes much ink (pp. 95-124) to establishing how the rediscoverers/developers of the Enneagram were serious practitioners of the occult. Assuming this is true, it does not automatically taint it as a tool, but I would fully respect any Christian who chose not to be involved with it precisely because of this. It is not clear whether the technique’s use of a nine-pointed diagram constitutes any form of divination or numerological superstition. The Vatican’s concern over the Enneagram seems confined to its application: “when used as a means of spiritual growth [the enneagram] introduces an ambiguity in the doctrine and the life of the Christian faith”.⁷⁶ So far I have found no evidence that the Enneagram is harmful, if used within the proper limits of how a personality development tool should be used. Given its tainted roots, however, its widespread advertisement in Christian centres may be a countersign against evangelisation.

(iv) Some Eastern Meditation techniques can be used with care, in the light of the Vatican’s letter: the key test is vi, the doctrinal compatibility.

(v) Alternative / Complementary Therapies span such a wide variety of techniques that the whole tree is needed here.

⁷⁵ e.g. *Catholics and the New Age*, Mitch Pacwa, Servant Books, p. 41ff.

⁷⁶ JCBWL [§1.4](#)

6. Framing a Pastoral Response

We are now equipped with a tree to help us discern a wide range of New Age and related practices, therapies and techniques. Our post-Vatican II church, with its openness to the gifts God has given the world through its many cultures and belief systems, does not seek to “nanny” Catholics, but we should still be prudent in our use of these gifts. Three different concerns arise from the tree above:

- some practices are morally wrong, and if done in the knowledge of this, are sinful;
- some practices open a person to harm by oppression or infestation by evil spirits;
- some practices hinder the mission of the Church to give witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ alone.

(a) Practices under the aegis of the Church

New Age practices may take place in a way which indicates total or partial endorsement by the Church. Where Catholic premises are rented by third parties, the endorsement is implicit. Where practices are advertised on parish noticeboards or bulletins, endorsement is strongly implicit, dependent on the normal level of editorial control exercised there. Where practices are offered by clergy or religious, within a Christian retreat house, or in the context of a parish group, endorsement is explicit.

In such cases, the pastor of the parish or rector/religious superior of the retreat house, having satisfied him/herself that the practice is safe from both sinful elements and demonic influence, must still consider seriously the public witness (which depends on perception rather than reality) and also whether the participants are being offered the practice as a stand-alone or in the context of a Christocentric spirituality rooted in Catholic tradition? S/He must balance the right⁷⁷ of Christians practising acceptable New Age techniques to offer their gift to the body of Christ, against the importance of offering those immature in the spiritual life “spiritual milk” rather than “meat”.⁷⁸

A convent offering aromatherapy (available also on the high street) can rightly argue that in so doing it is living out an understanding of the unity of the human person, and offering loving care in the name of Christ; but is it missing out on an opportunity to invite needy clients to turn to Jesus in explicit prayer, which the high street emporium will not be doing?

⁷⁷ This right stems from the duty of the laity to exercise the gifts God has entrusted to them: Vatican II document [*Apostolicam Actuositatem*](#), §3

⁷⁸ I Corinthians 3:2; Hebrews 5:12-13; I Peter 2:2

(b) Admonitions to potential clients

From time to time - and there will be plenty of appropriate lectionary texts about honouring God alone, driving out demons, or witnessing to Christ - the pastor should consider his responsibility to preach about the issues raised here. His congregation should certainly be introduced to the basic principles of the Tree of Discernment, warned how to avoid sin and “evil influence”, and challenged to consider the witness they give. Catechists and those who have pastoral care responsibility in Catholic institutions should also visit these themes on appropriate occasions.

(c) Ministry to actual clients

Such admonitions from the pulpit may provoke those who have already sought New Age treatment to the confessional or counselling room. The pastor needs to be aware of the details of various New Age practices so he can advise whether sacramental confession, deliverance ministry, both, or neither, are appropriate.

How should the pastor respond to learning that an individual parishioner has sought New Age treatment? If the pastor has good reason for concern over the practice or over the individual practitioner/therapist consulted, there may be a need to approach the parishioner. Private prayer for the protection and conversion of the parishioner is always appropriate.

(d) Ministry to parishioner-practitioners

If a parishioner becomes a New Age practitioner/therapist, especially with a public profile, then the pastor has a more serious duty to consider whether he should ask the parishioner to consider whether his/her practice is compatible with Christianity. There is also the issue of reminding the practitioner of his/her moral responsibility to ensure the truth of claims made in advertising or in the treatment “patter”. If the parishioner realises that s/he has been operating a sinful practice, what practical and financial support will the parish offer while s/he loses her/his livelihood?

7. Conclusion

It is not my objective to provide a comprehensive list of legitimate and sinful New Age practices, even if such a thing were possible. And it is not possible, since so much depends on the individual practitioner. But after a multi-layered consideration of the issues concerned, we have been able to develop the “Tree of Discernment” which identifies the relevant issues in language which is not too theologically abstruse.

I hope that this Tree will be able to indicate swiftly where the most problematic concern is with any New Age practice or therapy. There may be other forms of New Age activity which do not fit into this scheme, because I have not taken them into account in preparing it; but I think it will cover most possibilities. I would welcome comment and criticism.

Most of the web references cited were checked during the last week of December 2002.

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Sunday 8th March 2004 – 2nd Sunday of Lent



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