

Post-Modern Religion

by Dr. Ted Peters

Critics contend that the scientism and secularism of the last two centuries have broken and fragmented what should be whole: we have separated subjects and objects by abstract thinking; we have compartmentalized our knowledge through warring specialism; and we have sundered the bond between humanity and nature. Many voices are calling for a new post-modern consciousness. Rather than disintegration, the post-modernists want integration. In fact, a renewed sense of the whole is the heart of the post-modern consciousness.

Theologians of this century have defined their task as making the gospel relevant and meaningful to the *modern* world characterized by natural science and a this-worldly secularity. But what happens when this world of modernity changes? What happens when the world in which we live becomes less scientific and secular and more religious?

I intend to examine the specifically religious tendencies in post-modern thinking as a kind of »perennial Gnosticism« which teaches eight things: (1) cosmic unity, (2) the higher self, (3) the divine spark, (4) human potential, (5) reincarnation, (6) evolution and transformation, (7) gnosis, and (8) Jesus, sometimes. After describing each of those, I will offer a theological assessment.

Perennial Gnosticism

A trend already begun in the Renaissance continues to the present day and characterizes post-modern thinking as well, namely, opposition to Christian orthodoxy and to the institutionalized Church. Historically, rebellion against ecclesiastical authority--political and intellectual--marked the advent of the modern world. That the post-modern movement would continue the anti-establishment tradition is probably to be expected. Strangely, the major emerging religious consciousness often denies that it is religious at all, preferring to identify itself as a science or as a personal-growth enterprise. Whatever label practitioners give themselves, however, their religious structures can be clearly discerned.

That emerging religious consciousness is by no means limited to a single cult or to any single formal organization. In part or whole one might find it associated with Transcendental Meditation (TM), Hare Krishna, *est*, Lifespring, holistic health, the occult, astrology,

Teilhardianism, UFO cults, articles in the *National Enquirer*, and Freemasonry.

I call that new age religiosity »perennial Gnosticism.« It is not identical to the Gnosticism of ancient Rome, of course. Nothing could be. I believe the term perennial is helpful because it connotes that many new age teachings in fact are drawn from ancient wisdom, although in many cases that is disguised. I settle on the term Gnosticism because the basic category for understanding the nature of the human predicament and for solving it is a form of knowledge. It is knowledge understood as experiential awareness or consciousness. Carl Raschke uses the term modern Gnosticism to refer to that set of perennial beliefs that stand in revolt against modernity.¹ Not everyone in the movement would embrace all eight of the doctrines I shall describe. But after allowing for differences in terminology and nuance in different quarters, we still find considerable consensus in the movement.

1. The Experiential Awareness of Cosmic Unity

What I am calling the neo-Gnostic sensibility begins with religious wholism. It seeks to foster an immediate or direct knowledge of reality, an experiential connection with the infinite and the eternal--what Carl Jung calls the experience of »at-one-ment.«² That cosmic at-one-ment usually takes the form of an ecstatic experience, which may or may not be labeled religious by the persons involved. Marilyn Ferguson quotes the testimony of a wealthy real estate entrepreneur to such an insight.

It was Esalen, my first trip there several years ago. I had just had a Roling session, and I walked out-doors. Suddenly I was overwhelmed by the beauty of everything I saw. This vivid, transcendent experience tore apart my limited outlook. I had never realized the emotional heights possible. In this half-hour solitary experience I felt unity with all, universal love, connectedness. This smashing time destroyed my old reality permanently.³

Reflection upon that experience in the higher religions often leads to the positing of monism, an underlying cosmic oneness that incorporates and unifies the apparent plurality of things existing on the surface of reality. Monism affirms a latent completeness or perfection of all things lying below the surface of the apparent incompleteness or imperfections we see. The multiplicity we perceive is either an illusion--that is, it is unreal--or, if real, it is reality is subtly dependent on a principle of mutual complementarity or balance with the uniting whole.

That position has probably been worked out most thoroughly by the eighth-century Indian philosopher Shankara, whose influence in contemporary India is overwhelming. According to Shankara, there is an

absolute reality, Brahman, and there is no other reality but Brahman. Only that which neither changes nor ceases to exist is real, he says. So Brahman is understood as absolute existence, without qualities or attributes, without distinctions within or outside, beyond the subject-object split, beyond the sense of mine and yours, and without change or process. Therefore, the distinction between the human self and the single cosmic reality is a false distinction. My self (my Atman) is identical with Brahman. If I fail in my consciousness to realize that at-onement, then I am living in ignorance. Marvin Henry Harper contends that Shankara has the most popular philosophy in India today, and in one form or another it pervades the cults that are making their way West.⁴

2. *The Higher Self*

The sense of cosmic unity seems to carry with it a notion of a higher or supra-individual self, an inclusive reality within which one's apparent or phenomenal self participates. The real estate man quoted by Ferguson above says he discovered

multiple dimensions of self, a newly integrated sense of oneself as an individual...a linkage with others as if they are oneself...and the merger with a Self yet more universal and primary.⁵

Personal integration here takes one beyond the ego, beyond the individual or phenomenal self. It connects us to a much larger self, which Ferguson describes as an invisible continent on which we all make our home. We live in a friendly universe, not one jostled from pillar to post by destructive forces. And this cosmic friendliness expresses itself in our lives through the higher self, through the god within.⁶ Here, as elsewhere in new age thinking, we find a partnership between modern Western and ancient Asian thought.

The doctrine of the higher self usually begins by acknowledging that life here on earth is darkness, a sleepy haze. We bumble through life in a sort of hypnotic sleep, not clear on what forces are governing the course of personal events. We feel that our life is a lonely combination of inconsistent decisions, random events, accidental happenings. At times things may appear to be meaningful, but overall there is no visible purpose or unity to life.

If we could penetrate the haze to apprehend the light of truth, we would realize that there is a hidden higher and eternal self directing us. Our life happenings are not simply a series of accidents or random events. There is purpose, direction, and influence from a source of which we are at best only dimly aware. Holistic health advocates describe the higher self as the healer inside us. Occasionally, the higher self will break

through to the mundane level as a moment of inspiration. Willis Harman quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson's »The Oversoul,« wherein Emerson writes, When it breathes through his intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through his will, it is virtue; when it flows through his affection, it is love.⁷

It is our task as human beings to become aware of the metaphysical unifying reality that lies within us. The ancient imperative of Socrates, »know thyself,« is the starting point of post-modern Gnostic consciousness. Those who have joined the Aquarian conspiracy—who are breathing now the spirit of the new age coming--believe they are in touch with their higher self and are vigorously pursuing deeper awareness of it.

3. *The Divine Spark*

According to the anthropology of ancient Gnosticism, the human being consists of three dimensions: body, soul, and spirit. The body represents the prison of darkness. The soul has seven built-in passions which correspond to the seven planes or spheres of reality that separate our mundane world from the transcendent realm of divine light and pure reality. The spirit represents the divine spark, a tiny piece of the eternal light smothered under layers of darkness and emotion. Restrained by the life of the flesh, the spirit within us is asleep, unconscious, ignorant of its true identity.

True knowledge consists in recognizing the divine within the human being. To know oneself at the deepest level, then, is simultaneously to know God. Momimus, an ancient Gnostic teacher, put it this way.

Abandon the search for God and the creation and other matters of a similar sort. Look for him by taking yourself as the starting point.

Learn who it is within you who makes everything his own and says, »My God, my mind, my thought, my soul, my body.«...If you

carefully investigate these matters you will find him in yourself.⁸

Wholeness is sought in Gnosticism, ancient and modern, through a turn inward. If God is to be found, then it is said that he will be found on the inside. It appears that the divine spark doctrine is making a comeback.

4. *Potentiality*

We are being told by some new age voices that human potential is limitless. All knowledge and power are ultimately accessible to the mind looking within itself, and all limitations are ultimately self chosen. Immense untapped resources lie within the dormant 90 percent of the brain. We need a technique for tapping those resources, and once we tap them, we will find we have powers to engage in activities such as extrasensory perception (esp), precognition, psychokinesis, telepathic communication, and astral travel.

For example, the human potential movement teaches that (1) each of us has a great potential lying within us; (2) that potential can be awakened through education and experimentation; (3) the individual can change his or her situation dramatically, that is, actual self-transformation is possible; and (4) self-realization and self-fulfillment are the proper ends of life.

esf founder Werner Erhard says that the self is the ground of all that is: in fact, the self is all there is, that's it! To speak of the divine is to speak of oneself. A Theta Seminar creedal statement reads:

The thinker in all of us is the creator of our universe and manifests whatever it believes to be true. Within the dominion of our minds we are surely God, for we can control what we think, and what we conceive to be true becomes the truth.⁹

5. Reincarnation

Reincarnation, or metempsychosis, the doctrine that souls migrate from one body into another through death and rebirth, probably originated in ancient India. Repudiated in the West first by the Christian Church, for whom reincarnation is incompatible with its belief in the resurrection of the body, and then by modern naturalism, for whom reincarnation is mere religious superstition, the doctrine is making a comeback. Each issue of that most widely read periodical the *National Enquirer* contains accounts of people discovering their identities in past lives.¹⁰ Reincarnation therapy, whereby a client is helped to go back to a traumatic experience in a previous life, is being practiced within many religious cults, as well as in more public new age circles.

The spiritually sterile culture of modernity has sent religious seekers to non-Western sources of wisdom. Reincarnation is one of the alleged treasures which they have found. A bit ahead of the crowd and in large part responsible for those who have followed, the great Tibetan scholar W. Y. Evans-Wentz has been seeking for a rapprochement between Western science and Eastern metaphysics. He believes the convergence of those two traditions will produce an atonement (an at-one-ment) which will result in Westerners accepting the notion of reincarnation. He writes enthusiastically in his preface to the first edition of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*:

Then, when that long-awaited at-one-ment shall have been consummated, there will no longer be doubt, nor fallacious argumentation, nor unwise and unscientific Church-Council anathematizations directed against that paramount doctrine of pre-existence and rebirth, upon which the Bardo Thodol is based. Then,

too, not only will Pythagoras and Plato and Plotinus and the Gnostic Christians, and Krishna and the Buddha be vindicated in their advocacy of the doctrine, but, equally, the Hierophants of the Ancient Mysteries of Egypt and Greece and Rome, and the Druids of the Celtic World. And Western man will awaken from that slumber of Ignorance which has been hypnotically induced by a mistaken Orthodoxy. He will greet with wide-open eyes his long unheeded brethren, the Wise Men of the East.¹¹

As clearly reflected in that Evans-Wentz quotation, belief in reincarnation represents a modest rebellion against Western science. It is modest because many advocates are in fact seeking scientific verification for that otherwise metaphysical belief. It is rebellion because it represents listening to a spiritual voice that speaks to the human soul on an issue about which science has been silent too long. Evans-Wentz goes on to offer general praise for the mystical insights of Asia and expresses his hope that the coming new age in the West will be propelled by a renaissance of Indian philosophy.¹²

6. Evolution and Transformation

In the new age subculture, evolution refers to change on an abbreviated time scale. It may refer to psychological change within an individual's lifetime, as well as to a revolutionary transformation in human consciousness that could occur within a single generation. To achieve such transformation is the avowed goal of new age theorists. Harman is pressing for a societal metamorphosis based on a fundamental transformation of the human mind which he describes as metanoia, or religious conversion. The new society would live out a new worldview in which (1) the emphasis of science would be to understand rather than to manipulate through technology; (2) an ecological ethic would reign; and (3) a teleological view of life would organize human efforts around a single central purpose. What he appears to be describing is a cultural transformation which in principle could occur within the span of a generation. But in Harman's view such a transformation is part and parcel of the cosmic evolutionary process in which we cooperate but which has a telos of its own.¹³ The key elements for change are knowledge and choice. We have the power to choose to be something different than we presently are.

Ferguson described four stages of personal transformation that lead finally to membership in her Aquarian conspiracy. First, the entry point, which consists of shaking up the old understanding of the world. It may occur as a spontaneous mystical experience or as a drug-induced

experience. The second stage is exploration. It is a deliberate step into a new paradigm for understanding the world and may involve participation in such things as TM, est, Rolfing, etc. No one of those, however, is adequate; their limits are soon recognized. That leads to a third stage, integration, a mopping-up operation in which the individual establishes his or her new identity and no longer seeks validation from some movement or group. That is followed by stage four, conspiracy. Conspiracy literally means sharing the spirit. What happens here is that transformed individuals seek one another out, joining minds and attempting to transform all of society.¹⁴

Ferguson speculates that God might be thought of as the evolutionary drive of consciousness in the universe. She reports that for Aquarian conspirators, God is experienced as flow, wholeness, the infinite kaleidoscope of life and death, ultimate cause, the ground of being, the organizing matrix that enlivens matter. God is the flowing silence out of which all sound comes. She quotes Buckminster Fuller, for whom God is to be understood as a verb, a process.¹⁵

The New Age Movement Defined

Typical new age enthusiasts range from disciples of Carlos Castaneda to run-of-the-mill people who believe that man can be whatever he wants to be. We will not find total unanimity among all new age supporters, but so much general agreement exists that new age has become a distinct category in philosophic and religious literature.

How, then, shall we describe this movement? To put it in simplest terms, the new age movement is a diversified stream of coalitions, organizations, and individuals all striving to induce a new age of enlightenment and harmony in our society. The bond which unites them is their desire to promote a new worldview based on a melange of humanistic ethics, holistic health ideals, the human potential movement, and traditional Eastern religions (Hinduism, Zen, Sufism, Tibetan Buddhism) in order to revitalize humanity.

Many people optimistically anticipate the dawning of a new age, a sweeping revolution in man's ways of thinking, perceiving, and developing. The impending new age is also believed to be a genuinely new stage in the evolution of mankind. This time, however, the human species will not evolve structurally (new organs, body parts, etc.) but psychologically, spiritually, psychically, and socially. Some authors expect to see humankind develop a planetary consciousness, with definitions ranging from a universal concern for global survival to everybody thinking the same way (and occasionally the same thought). A common term is *transformation*: the new age will not just introduce new ideas—it will bring a new mind.

Four fundamental premises undergird nearly all new age literature. The first

In ancient Gnosticism the god who fashioned the world is not the ultimate reality; the impersonal supra-temporal One, or All, is. At that point, however, it appears that Western neo-Gnostics still take reality as governed by time and space quite seriously. The new Gnostics are not the world-denying pessimists that their ancient ancestors were.

Although the ancient Gnostics believed in personal advance and development in consciousness, such advance carried with it renunciation of the material and ephemeral world. The attainment of saving knowledge (gnosis) for the Gnostic meant escape from the physical world of darkness into the intellectual or spiritual world of light. That antipathy toward the physical or natural world does not preoccupy contemporary new age thinkers. »There is no dualism,« writes Ferguson, »no separation of mind and body, self and others.«¹⁶ Emphasis on personal and social transformation marks a decisive acceptance of temporality and progress on the part of the neo-Gnostics. To the extent that integrative consciousness and wholism are pursued, the world of nature is included and even celebrated.

continued

premise involves the acceptance, in one form or another, of monism. The heavy emphasis new age writers place on Eastern teaching, theoretical quantum physics, meditation, and planetary consciousness is only explicable by the component common to them all: the presupposition that all is one. The new age movement can just as easily accommodate traditional pantheistic Hinduism as it can a Werner Erhard proclaiming, »Consciousness is all there is, there isn't anything else.«¹ A classic example of new age monism can be found in Michael Talbot's *Mysticism and the New Physics*, wherein he argues that »the universe is a great thought,« the substance of which is »consciousness« and that we do not actually exist (like points in geometry, we »possess no true reality in space-time).² Marilyn Ferguson contends that »everything is process. The solid world is a process,« and in fact probably »is an illusion« created by our »consciousness.«³ New age believers have a decided bias towards deifying consciousness as the monistic substrate of the universe and generally embrace the corollary premise that they themselves are fragments of this cosmic consciousness and must possess innate divinity.

A second key premise is the new age philosophy of relativism and continuous change of matter and being. Accordingly, there is no ultimate truth, nor a personal God who has spoken with finality. Stagnation comes from the misconception that one has arrived, has the truth, or has the last word. Conversely, transformation and personal growth come from constant change, accommodation, and synthesis of new views. Ferguson says the transformative methods »eventually lead to the realization that there will be no ultimate answers.«⁴ Thus, a fundamental assumption is that nobody has all the answers or even a final answer: we are all evolving. (This is why theistic religions such as

7. Gnosis

Transformation, which is the functional equivalent of salvation, is to be gained through knowledge, through gnosis. For the ancient Gnostics such knowledge consisted of secret, or esoteric, wisdom, an insight into the workings of the world and the opening of the transcendental gate so that the soul might pass from this ephemeral world of darkness into the eternal realm of light. Gnosis is saving knowledge.¹⁷

The kind of knowledge involved, then, is not the kind of objectivist or controlling knowledge characteristic of modern science and technology. Rather, it is an intensely personal form of knowledge often dubbed new awareness or higher consciousness. Elaine Pagels explains that the ancient Greek language could distinguish between scientific or reflective knowledge (He knows mathematics) and gnosis, that is, knowing through observation or experience (He knows me). Gnosis involves an intuitive process of knowing oneself, and to know oneself is to know both human nature in general and human destiny.¹⁸ Stated that way the term gnosis is also descriptive of much of new age thinking. For modern

Christianity, Judaism, or Islam, and even highly authoritarian cults such as the Moonies and the Way International cannot be considered part of the new age movement. They claim to have a final truth.)

A third basic ideal is individual autonomy. Since social transformation will arise through transformation of the person, each individual must have the freedom to choose for himself what he deems best. One of the great banners of the new age is the freedom to live any lifestyle one desires. Ferguson dubs it *anarchy*, »government by the self.« Political theoretician Mark Satin has suggested that new age politics would insure abortion rights, gay rights, animals' rights, the right to polygamy, and repeal of all prostitution, gambling, and drug laws.⁵

New age autarchy is founded on the concept that there are no moral absolutes which judge both people and society, that there are no permanent standards imposed by God incumbent on all people everywhere. All ethics are self-imposed. For example, Satin believes »A spiritual path is valid for us if it is appropriate to our needs as we ourselves define them.«⁶ Such a statement typifies new age writing and echoes the guiding principle of sorcerer, occultist Aleister Crowley: »Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law.«⁷ Plainly, such an ideology makes no allowance for the final and ultimate Lordship of Jesus Christ. The humanist imperative is an essential component of the infrastructure of new age thinking and cannot be detached from new age philosophy without destroying it entirely.

A fourth premise is the new age insistence that our problems stem from a Western, Judeo-Christian worldview. New age philosophy denies that man's basic problem is moral, caused by sin. Instead, it is caused by a lack of knowledge, awareness, or fully seeing. Most people are convinced humanity is chin-deep in a

Gnostics the fundamental human problem is understood as ignorance, and the solution must then be some form of personal knowledge.

Literary critic Ihab Hassan uses the term new Gnosticism to refer to that personal form of knowledge. He perceives in Western culture a growing insistence on apprehending reality immediately, that is, without mediation by the scientific and critical disciplines. There is a »new sense of the immediacy of Mind, of complete gnosis or knowledge.«¹⁹

That concept is illustrated, among other places, in Robert Heinlein's science-fiction novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*. The Martian tries to *grok* his experiences of earth. *Grokking* means complete identification, total understanding, a participatory knowledge which requires a momentary fusion of two beings into a larger shared awareness. The new Gnosticism presupposes that critical or scientific thinking is itself a form of ignorance from which we need to be liberated.

By direct knowledge Ferguson means a mystical or quasi-mystical experience with the whole. It is not that the world of appearances which

megacrisis--environmental, political, economic, personal--but those in the movement assign fault to the antiquated political/religious/social structures we have today. Thus, the transformation of those structures and of our lives depends on finding a new worldview, of seeking a new paradigm with which to understand them. We do not deny that genuine technical advances have occurred in science and business through seeking new approaches to old problems. The personal paradigm change espoused by the vast majority of new age advocates, however, involves the acceptance of a monistic, Eastern worldview and occultic-mystical experimentation. ■

Excerpted from Eric Pement's »Consensus or Conspiracy? The New Age Movement« and reprinted by permission from Cornerstone magazine.

Notes

1. Marcia Seligson, »est: The New Life-Changing Philosophy That Makes You the Boss.« *New Times*, 18 October 1974, n.p.
2. Michael Talbot, *Mysticism and the New Physics* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), pp. 175, 167.
3. Marilyn Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy: Personal and Social Transformation in the 1980s* (Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, Inc., 1980), pp. 102, 180; see also pp. 180-185, 375-376.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
5. Mark Satin, *New Age Politics: Healing Self and Society* (New York: Delta Books, 1979), pp. 129, 130, 137, 240, 246.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
7. Armand Bideaux, *The New Consciousness* (Willits, CA: Oliver Press, 1975), p. 107.

we study objectively and scientifically is wrong. It is, rather, that if you can penetrate through the system of *things*, you can communicate directly with the whole.

Direct knowledge gets us out of the system. It is the awakening. It reveals the context that generates our lesser reality. The new perspective alters our experience by changing our vision.²⁰

With a new mind, a new consciousness, we can transform ourselves. We obtain that new mind by reinterpreting our world through new paradigms. »We live what we know,« writes Ferguson.

If we believe the universe and ourselves to be mechanical, we will live mechanically. On the other hand, if we know that we are part of an open universe, and that our minds are a matrix of reality, we will live more creatively and powerfully.²¹

If we draw upon the resources already lying deep within us, upon our potentialities, we can create a new vision of how the world should work.

8. *Jesus, Sometimes*

If and when Jesus appears, his role is that which he played in ancient Gnosticism, the teacher of gnosis. He represents the protohuman, the one who has developed his innate human potential to its fullest actualization. He has fanned his divine spark into a full flame.

In the *Aquarian Gospel of Jesus* it is reported that in the missing years between Jesus' twelfth birthday and the beginning of his teaching career, he went to India. There he studied mystical esoterica at the feet of Hindu gurus. The reason we normally do not associate such Hindu teachings with Jesus is that the established churches have conspired to keep such knowledge from the general public.

Theological Reflections

To raise the question of the whole of reality--as is done in post-modern speculation--is to ask about the divine. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, all that is real is the product of God's creative work, leading to the theological conviction commonly known as monotheism. Something exists beyond the being and value of all things. That »One beyond all the many« Christians call God.

In principle, it is possible to solve the problem of the relationship between the one and the many without recourse to the Christian God. The path taken by perennial Gnosticism is monism. Monism holds that the plurality of things in the phenomenal world is ultimately part of a single reality. The pre-Socratic philosopher Thales, for example, held that everything was a form of water.

The problem with monism is that it denies the Christian belief in a radical distinction between God and creation. Our God transcends the world. That means, among other things, that the creature can never become fully like God. God creates *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, and the created realm is entirely dependent upon God as the source and power of its continued existence. We have a part in the universe, not by some natural right, but only by the grace of God. The proper creaturely response is to be thankful.²³

Another problem with monism is that it makes God less than ultimate. The One ultimate reality in religions such as Gnosticism and Buddhism, for example, is supra-divine. God is a creature among others and, as such, belongs to a whole that is greater than the divine. The divine belongs to the realm of the many, not to the One.

A variant on the above is pantheism, which makes divinity coextensive with the cosmos. That view offers support for the belief that each human being is essentially divine and that the task in life is to actualize the divine potential that lies within each of us.

In Christianity the relationship between God and the world is that of creator to creature. There is no ultimate dualism because the whole creation comes from the divine word. There is no ultimate monism because the creation is sufficiently distinct from God that a genuine relationship can develop. There is no ultimate pantheism because, although God is everywhere present to the creation, the creation does not exhaust God's being. He is still transcendent. We come to know the Christian God through his revelation in history. The transcendent creator God becomes present because of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Ismael Quiles writes in Rahner's *Sacramentum Mundi*:

The solution attempted by pantheism leads to atheism, at least according to the Christian viewpoint. For the equation of God and the world means ultimately the reduction of God to the world and the denial of transcendence which goes beyond the world. The Christian notion of God is gained from historical revelation, but pantheism derives its idea of the God-world relationship from an a priori concept of being, and by equating God and the world eliminates the notion of God.²⁴

Whole, Part, and the Eschaton

Post-modern speculations on perennial Gnosticism have a tendency to dissolve everything into a timeless unity. But we take history seriously, so that what is engaged in temporal passage is in fact real. We also believe in the possibility of a genuinely new reality coming into

existence. Hence, we deny that the whole of reality presently exists.

In isolated moments of meaningfulness, however, we anticipate the completed whole, the total reality which will finally put all things into their respective places. To see meaning in the present moment is an act of faith, it is an act of trust that the future will confirm the meaning we presently perceive and experience.

Wolfgang Pannenberg contends that the essence of all things will not be determined until the eschatological future. The meaning we find in the present moment is dependent upon an implicit faith that includes a fore-conception of what is to come.

Only from such a fore-conception of a final future, and thus of the still unfinished wholeness of reality, is it possible to assign to an individual event or being--be it present or past--its definitive meaning by saying what it is. Thus, when someone names a thing and says, »This is a rose,« or »This is a dog,« he always does so from the standpoint of an implicit fore-conception of the final future, and of the totality of reality that will first be constituted by the final future.²⁵

To look toward defining the whole of reality is to look toward God. All events are moving ahead to meet a common future, a common future that is the reality of God. We must live by faith and by reason until the process is complete, at which time faith and reason will themselves be united. In the meantime the idea of God is a paradigm for understanding and a hermeneutical principle for determining provisionally the meaning of the course of events.

Sin and Wholism

The anticipated eschatological unity of all things recognizes another factor totally overlooked by new age thinkers: sin. We are seeking wholism in large part because of our impatience with the division, fragmentation, loneliness, competition, and violence caused by the modern way of life. What is assumed in the post-modern critique of modernity is that all of those problems are caused by a form of ignorance, but the post-modern critique ignores a crucial key ingredient in the discussion, namely, sin.

The essence of sin is our refusal to place our trust in a gracious God and an open future. By nature, we want to reorder the relationship of dependence. We want to reorient everything so as to hide the gifted essence of who we are. We try to reestablish our relationship to the world on our own terms, to establish the human self as an independent source, as the creator.

We deny the truth by taking unto ourselves the powers of creativity and by creating history to suit our own designs, thereby shutting ourselves off from the open future. To trust God means that we face history squarely with all its ambiguity and its uncertainty. That terrifies us. When one chooses to center history, not in the divine future but in the human present, the future becomes an extension of present potential. That denies to history the quality of advent, of newness. In modern technology the new we celebrate is the new gadgets produced by engineers who calculate and remake the world according to their own designs.

Science and technology help to provide a hospitable mental framework for a consistent denial of divine grace. Those forms of rational thought may represent the flowering of seeds sown by the ancient astrologers. In the fourth century, Augustine reports with amazement the ability of ancient stargazers to predict eclipses. What a scientific achievement! Yet he proceeds immediately to note how the star calculators undergo an eclipse of the mind by writing God out of the picture.

So early can they foresee a coming eclipse they do not see, for they do not seek with a devout mind...[they do not know] your Word, by which you made the things they number off, and themselves who number, and the sense by which they discern what they number, and the intellect by which they number (*Confessions*, Book V, Chapter 3).

Sin is the production of darkness through willful division and fragmentation. It is choosing one realm of knowledge as absolute and consigning all other realms of knowing to untruth. The overcoming of ignorance--including the criticism of modernity by perennial Gnostics--is laudable, to be sure, but it does not guarantee that people will choose to live synergistically instead of independently. Much of the fragmentation we experience is due not to Descartes' subject-object split but to Adam's God-human split. No amount of post-modern consciousness-raising can bridge the chasm that split has caused. Only forgiveness can. The forgiveness accomplished in the atoning work of Jesus Christ is a »proleptogram,« a message announcing the final unity of all things in the consummate future of God. ■

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Notes

1. Carl A. Raschke, *The Interruption of Eternity: Modern Gnosticism and the Origins of the New Religious Consciousness* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1980), p. xi.
2. Carl Jung, *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*, ed. W. Y. Evans-Wentz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. liii.
3. Marilyn Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (Los Angeles: Tarcher, 1980), p. 98.
4. Marvin Henry Harper, *Curus, Summis, and Avalams* (San Francisco: Harper, 1976), p. 10. One might at this point protest my use of the term perennial Gnosticism, used to describe new age thinking, on the grounds that ancient Gnosticism has a reputation for being dualistic. In one sense that is correct, making new age thinkers a bit closer to someone such as Plotinus, for whom the phenomenal world is finally an emanation from the single source of being. There is a sense, however, in which one could say that all mystical monisms are simultaneously dualistic in that they divide sharply between the truth of the whole and the illusion of multiplicity among the parts. The term gnostic is chosen here because it is a general term communicating that salvation is gained via a form of transcendental yet personal knowledge.
5. Ferguson, pp. 98-99.
6. Richard B. Miles, "What is Holistic Health?" *Holistic Health Review*, Fall 1977, p. 10; cf. Brooks Alexander, "Holistic Health from the Inside," *SCP Journal*, August 1978, p. 9.
7. Willis Harman, *An Incomplete Guide to the Future*, p. 103.
8. Quoted by Hippolytus and cited in Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1981), p. xix.
9. Cf. William Hulme, "Human Potential in the Lutheran Church," *Dialog*, Fall 1977, 16(4):264.
10. Cf. Ian Stevenson, *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, 2nd rev. ed. (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1974) and a theological response by Hans Schwarz, *Beyond the Gates of Death* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981), Chap. 4.
11. W. Y. Evans-Wentz, ed., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Galaxy Book, 1960), p. x.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
13. Harman, p. 104; cf. pp. 32-33.
14. Ferguson, pp. 89-93.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 383; cf. p. 49.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 372.
17. Cf. Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon, 1963), p. 35.
18. Pagels, pp. xviii.
19. Ihab Hassan, *Paratextualisms* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1975), p. 144.
20. Ferguson, p. 372; cf. pp. 97f, 350.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 146; cf. pp. 45f.
22. Levi, *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ* (Marina Del Rey, CA: DeVors & Co., 1978); cf. David Spangler, *Towards a Planetary Vision* (The Park, Forres, Scotland: Findhorn Foundation, 1977), Chap. 6.
23. Cf. John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 8.
24. Karl Rahner, ed., *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi* (New York: Seabury, 1975), p. 1158.
25. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971], II, 62; cf. I, 150f, 229f. Jürgen Moltmann takes the same position in developing the notion of transcendence in terms of the future (cf. *The Future of Creation* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979], Chap. 1).