

# A Christian Approach to Discerning Spiritualities

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Theological principles for the discernment of spiritualities are presented. Matthew Fox's Creation-Centered Spirituality, *A Course in Miracles* and New Age Spirituality are examined in the light of these principles

We live in an age that is fascinated by spirituality and healing. The work of Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell alerted us to common themes of spirituality in all peoples. Andrew Weil's book, *Spontaneous Healing*<sup>1</sup> (1995) was a NY Times bestseller for over 70 weeks. The writing of Dr. Larry Dossey and the recent Harvard Conferences on spirituality and healing have shown that even mainstream medicine has become aware of the impact of spirituality on healing. The Enneagram, *A Course in Miracles*, Matthew Fox's Creation Spirituality, various New Age spiritualities, have attracted many. There seems to be disenchantment with institutional religion and a growing fascination with these various spiritualities. They promise growth and healing but differ among themselves and differ in subtle ways from orthodox Christian faith. Are these spiritualities simply temptations to be discarded, or have they elements that can and need to be incorporated in Christian faith? How are we to discern what God may be calling us to incorporate in our practice, with the proper reinterpretation, and what should we stay clear of, and why?

One of the things we notice is that these unorthodox spiritualities grow out of neglected aspects of Christian life. Marxism had as its basic goal "To everyone according to need, from everyone according to capacity," which was the ideal of the early church, as we learn from Acts 2:43-45; 4:34-35. It seemed sadly neglected by industrial Europe and even the Christian church in the time of Marx. The spirituality of common sharing that the church neglected to develop became the rallying cry of atheistic communism. Or consider Jung. He was convinced that Christianity had neglected nature and

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animal life, the feminine and the dark side of reality as well as creative fantasy. Now these suppressed aspects of reality are emerging in our day along with a critique of the church that did not seem to encourage them. Yet Jesus had a beautiful relation to nature, respected the feminine and was aware of God's presence in all kinds of suffering and called each to develop their individual creativity. Is this also true of the enthusiasm for the "New Age" in our own day? Are they pointing to aspects of the "new creation" that Jesus foresaw? Are present spiritualities really calling us back to the fullness of our Christian tradition, and if so, how are we to respond without falsifying our Christian faith?

There is danger both of becoming too fascinated with these discoveries and so losing the focus on Christ, as well as becoming so critical of them that we fail to profit from what is valuable. What we leave vacant will be filled by others - without the Christian focus. If all people hear is words of caution from Christians, how will we appeal to those who are searching, or those who are trying to move humanity in the direction of healing but have been hurt by the narrowness and judgmentalism of their rigid religious upbringing? We do not find such a narrow legalism in Jesus' ministry, but we also do not find him backing down on clear guidelines - as when he affirmed to the Samaritan woman "salvation is from the Jews," even as he affirmed universally that "God wants to be worshiped in Spirit and in Truth." How do we develop such guidelines?

### **The Foundation for Spiritualities: Spirit: Divine and Human**

We need first to have a working definition of spirituality. The editor of the Paulist Press series on Spirituality, Dr. Ewert Cousins, gives the following descriptive characterization:

This spiritual core is the deepest center of the person. It is here that the person is open to a transcendent dimension; it is here that the person experiences ultimate reality. The series will explore the discovery of this core, the dynamics of its development and its journey to the ultimate goal. It will deal with prayer, spiritual direction, the various maps of the spiritual journey and the methods of advancement in the spiritual ascent.<sup>2</sup>

Spirituality deals with the deepest center of our person, where "the person is open to a transcendent dimension." Spirituality deals with how this center is discerned, how it develops and what is its ultimate goal, and what practices encourage its unfolding to this goal. As Christians we hold that this personal core is related to our eternal God, through Jesus and in the

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power of the Holy Spirit, and that it relates us to one another in the Spirit.

But this core builds on other dimensions of the human person, which, because of Jesus' Incarnation, Death and Resurrection, have also to be transformed. These dimensions or levels also have their impact on spiritual development. In Teresa of Avila's metaphor, they are like "rooms" in our "interior castle," leading to the mystical marriage with God. The movement is from outer to inner, from the material to the spiritual, to the Divine. Ewert Cousins cites the findings of Robert Masters and Jean Houston<sup>3</sup> as well as Stanislav Grof<sup>4</sup> from experiences with psychedelic drugs that showed four distinct levels of the human person:

- 1) The *Sensorium*, the realm of heightened sense experience,
- 2) The *Ontogenetic* realm or personal unconscious, dealing with one's personal past (as Freud),
- 3) The *Phylogenetic* realm, where one explores archetypal symbols, myths, and rituals (as Jung), and
- 4) The *Mysterium*. where subjects experience ultimate reality.<sup>5</sup>

Experience shows that prior levels are included in and healed by experiences from the deeper levels. It is the fourth level, the *Mysterium*. that most concerns spirituality, but it touches all the levels.

### **Theological Principles for Discernment:**

#### **"World Sacral" and "Grace Sacral"**

The paradox of human existence is that we are spiritual and bodily at the same time, and that we are affected by the resurrection of Jesus in the depths of our persons. Can we ever fully know what is our full potential as humans, and what depends on the gift of the Holy Spirit? Almost every spiritual gift has what has been called a "Challenging Counterfeit" - spiritual healing has psychic healing, prophecy has psychic knowing, divine ecstasy has astral projection, etc. Are our "natural" gifts like understanding and creativity "inspired by God" or developed by human skill? Even when these gifts are "good" (that is, true and helpful in themselves) they can be used either for

good or specious good or evil. There are mad and evil scientists as well as saints who are scientists. Is there a way to sift what is truly of God from what is natural or even evil?

### *Encounter with the Numinous*

A German Catholic theologian, Heribert Muehlen, has developed principles to allow us to distinguish in experience what is natural ("world sacral") from what is a sharing in God's own life ("grace sacral").<sup>6</sup> Everyone suffers from the limitations of his or her own individuality, which can become so intense as to lead to despair and even suicide if one is closed in on oneself. Every release to a greater whole or a greater reality helps "heal" one's isolation. When one is struck, even subconsciously, by the possibility of being made whole, there arises a thrust toward that experience which can be described as fascination. Rudolf Otto has called it the "numinous," or the "holy" in his book, *The Idea of the Holy*.<sup>7</sup> The "numinous" or "sacred," fascinates but also causes fright, disturbs and unsettles us as we see from the many taboos of primitive religions. There is an ongoing give and take between these two aspects of attraction and fear. Such numinous experiences today might be encountered in the advances of science, the experience of liberalized sex and marriage, the prospect of spiritual healing, the various spiritualities today, world wide communication, etc.

### *The Holiness of God*

Theologically, whereas pagan religions worshiped various things as gods, in the Hebrew Scriptures we confront the simple statement that "only God is holy" (see Is 6:3, Lev 11:44, etc.), before whom nothing including the angels is holy or pure (Job 25:5; 4:18). In the Old Testament (OT), "holiness" is not used in analogy to humans - as is God's mercy, or anger - but is God's alone, his very essence as absolute other. This view is not changed in the New Testament (NT). "Only God is good," Jesus says in Mark 10:18. This implies that creation "as creation" is simply profane, "outside the holy." This is not to deny the necessary relationship of creation to God as Creator. Otherwise we would not be able to see God's glory in creation (Rom 1:20f). But this relationship is itself profane, or we would not be chastised for giving the glory that belongs to God to perishable creatures (Rom 1:22f).

Whereas holiness is God's alone (Rev 15:4; 16:5), the "sacred," which means "belonging to the holy," pertains to all creation, for all creation belongs to God. Thus, all creation is "sacred" as belonging to God, yet also "profane," as distinct from God. Further, there is a sinful profane when one usurps for a creature what belongs only to God - God's glory.

### *Divinization and Desacralization*

This picture is made more complex when in the NT we add the notion of divinization or what is later called "sanctifying (holy-making) grace." By

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grace we are made holy, partakers of God's own life, not just profane. How are we to understand this? The prime example of divinity uniting with a creature is the Incarnation of Christ. Christ's human nature was created in the very act of its assumption by the Second Person of the Trinity. That means that the difference of his human nature from God "results from" union with God. "The profanity of the creature (its infinite difference from God) does not come from itself, but is pre-established [by God] and given for the sake of union. It is the truly divine way of setting the non-divine -- the profane -- free and releasing it to be itself." <sup>8</sup> This exemplifies *the general principle: In God union grounds difference!* Applied to us, the Holy Spirit and grace actually brings us a greater awareness of our difference from God, our relatively independent personhood and historicity, but only in order to increase our "conscious" union. Christianity actually "desacralized" the world (stopped it from being divinized and worshiped) in order to set it free to be raised to share in God's own life. The same is true for today's spiritualities, they need to be "desacralized," seen as created, in order to free us to reground them in Christ and the Spirit.

The word "sacral," then, refers both to creation as related to God its creator and to grace as a share in God's own life. The elements of grace we know only through revelation. They cannot be derived or revealed from world history alone. Now both world-sacral, as grounded in being, and grace-sacral, as grounded in God's self-gift, are activated through interpersonal relations in history. So it is necessary to develop criteria for distinguishing them, not static criteria (like what has traditionally been called "nature" and "the supernatural") but dynamic criteria, perceived in action.

*Fascination and Attraction*

Rom 8:18-25 provides a point of departure. In verses 19-20 Paul says, "the anxious (or eager) expectation (*apokaradokia*) of creation awaits the revelation of the children of God, for creation was subjected to futility (emptiness)... in hope (*elpis*); because creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God." *Apokaradokia* is a picture word, found only in Paul, that indicates holding

one's head away from oneself - a kind of peering around a corner to anticipate what is coming. *Elpis*, on the other hand, signifies confidence despite set-backs. While *apokaradokia* anxiously anticipates an unknown future, *elpis* confidently awaits freedom from slavery and freedom for the glory of the children of God. God's gracious attractiveness "draws" us (see Jn 6:44: "no one can come to me unless the Father ... draw them."). Yet God cannot be possessed; so in "drawing" us, God also withdraws. "If I be lifted up, I will draw all things to myself (Jn 12:32) Jesus says referring to his cross. Grace-sacral attracts us even as it beckons us beyond to total surrender to God. World-sacral, on the other hand, fascinates us; yet if seen only in itself it ultimately disappoints and leaves us empty and "futile." It is primarily withdrawal, where grace-sacral is primarily drawing.

Concretely, then, the distinguishing characteristic of "world sacral" is the predominance of "absence" over presence. We search for a knowledge we do not yet have, and when we attain it, it seems all too ordinary and we must search beyond. Or we think "falling in love" will bring the happiness we have always sought, and when we attain it we run into the inevitable disappointments of every human relationship. God, as it were, shows us the emptiness of merely natural desires ("all creation is subjected to futility" Rom 8:20) in order to draw us beyond to the everlasting attraction they symbolize. "Grace sacral," on the other hand, is an experience of the predominance of "presence" over absence. A "graced" love rests in the permanence of divine love and continues to surrender itself to its ever deepening mystery. Both look to the future and are experienced in history, but the one reaches out from a present lack, the other unfolds from a present possession.

### *The Glory of God*

What "grace sacral" unfolds into is the glory of God - the Spirit of God has been termed "the beginning of Glory" in scholastic theology (see 2 Cor 1:22; 5:5; Eph 1:14). Since the Spirit is "gift" from God, he/she cannot be derived simply from our created existence. We can neither claim the Spirit's sending (it rests in God's freedom), nor anticipate his/her absolute newness "which no eye has seen nor ear heard" (I Cor 2-9). The newness of God takes surprising, even scandalous, forms such as giving his own Son (Rom 8:32) who emptied himself for us on the cross (Phil 2:7). Who could have anticipated that God would give his own Son when we were still sinners? And the cross remains absolutely incomprehensible to us since it cuts short every worldly hope. It remains a stumbling block at every step of our growth, even though afterwards it is seen as given for our good (Rom 8:28). Even the joy of the cross is no mere extension of worldly joy, but a resurrection from the dead, a new creation (2 Cor 5:17).

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*Union of Two Spheres*

"World-sacral" and "grace-sacral" are not two separate spheres. God predestined human profaneness and its history in anticipation of glory (hope). Grace is the ultimate ground of all attraction found in the world. Otherwise there would be two finalities and two meanings of the world. All glory is from grace even though it is not necessarily known as from grace. But grace does not only attract, it also eludes our grasp. From a world point of view, "it is fearful to fall into the hands of God" (Heb 10:31). In the Spirit, however, this withdrawal loses its tearfulness and becomes a melting into God's love, a dying perceived as a new and more wonderful living. Attraction predominates in grace-sacral; tearfulness in world-sacral. Both express "glory," but differently. World "glory" implies riches and power with consequent honor and renown. Interestingly, Scripture does not denigrate this glory (it is shown in the wealth of Abraham or the renown of Solomon, etc.). What it does is relativize it, comparing it to the grass of the field that fades (Is 40:6; 1 Pt 1:24). World-glory is ambiguous, and only in the heavenly Jerusalem will all created glory lose its ambiguity when all is illumined by the "glory of God" (Rev 21:23). Nothing profane will enter the heavenly city (Rev 21:27); it is a sacrilege and a lie (Rev 21:27). Thus, Jesus would accept no glory from men (Jn 5:41). Similarly, the function of Christians in the world is to desacralize the absolutized sacral (see I Cor 7:29-32). The church is not to identify with any one political stance or party, but to witness unceasingly that the form of this world is passing (I Cor 7:31), that is, both changing to ever new forms (the "ever new") as well as already surpassed by the present "entirely new." In contrast, Christian brotherly love is absolute and entirely new (the "new commandment" Jn 13:34; 15:12) and permanently constituted in the world by the Spirit (Jn 14:16). It is conformed to the cross of Christ, the final purification of all world-sacral, which we remember "till he comes" (I Cor 11:25ff). Thus grace-sacral builds on, yet reverses and universalizes, the world-sacral, much as the traditional vows of poverty, celibacy and obedience build on yet universalize and reverse the OT values of possessions, marriage and human freedom. The values of the OT are not simply negated by the NT, but are presupposed and fulfilled at the same time as being surpassed and surrendered in the "new creation."

## **Spirituality and Spiritualities: Applications**

Many things in our world are fascinating and draw us to them. They promise joy and fulfillment, and so we move toward them. Since our hearts are made for God ultimately, each of these areas also says something about how God is leading us today. We are fascinated by *healing* and its promise, but sometimes it seems unending, and ever new methods promise release. We are fascinated by *world religions* and the prospect of a unified spirituality. With the coming of TV and the Internet, we have access to the whole globe and people's religious beliefs are attracting many. There is an openness to *man/woman relationships* and sexual attractions in various forms. And there is the fascination with *sports*, with *space travel*, with *advances in science* and *community transformation*. Every fascination is rooted in our deepest desire which is for a total surrender to God. It is a call of grace that guides our growth. But the way each fascination is understood may either lead to greater union with God or become a block, a hidden idolatry that draws us to the creature rather than to God. So each of these areas requires discernment.

I would like to single out a few representative interests to illustrate how the principles of grace-sacral and world-sacral can help us discern how to respond. I will first look at Matthew Fox's Creation Centered Spirituality which critiques traditional Christian spirituality. Then, I will look at the *Course in Miracles* which purports to be a revelation from Christ, and finally at "New Age" approaches to growth with its distinctively Eastern philosophy. All these "affirm life," but in a way that calls for sifting what is true from what is partial or false. We need such careful discernment and an open heart, for otherwise we might throw out what is really from God in them for us because we find it is tainted with "New Age" or the like.

### **Creation-Centered Spirituality**

Matthew Fox has developed one of the most joyful approaches to spirituality. He touches most of the areas of fascination that I mentioned - the body, nature, the feminine, pleasure - and shows the values of the joy that is attracting many today and a particular way of affirming it. As he put it in his inaugural work, "We have numerous instances in Western spiritualities of a life-denying rather than a life-affirming spirituality .... Repression, not expression; guilt, not pleasure; heaven, not this life; sentimentality, not justice; mortification, not developing of talents." <sup>9</sup> In contrast, his thrust is "toward a creation-centered, that is, a life-affirming spirituality." He initially described "Yesterday's" spirituality as more Greek, with emphasis on spirit and not matter, on the need to limit pleasure and mortify pride and lust rather than affirm the goodness of creation and our



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need to develop our gifts and talents. "Today's" spirituality, on the other hand, is described as more Hebraic, seeing spirit as life-affirming and matter as God's gift and its goodness to be celebrated and affirmed.

Fox later termed these two spiritualities: Fall-Redemption Spirituality (Yesterday's) and Creation-Centered (Today's). He pointed out that fear of sin can keep us enslaved to the institutional definition of law. In contrast, we need to trust our experience and the goodness of creation in order to find the inner freedom to dream and be creative and to go with the energies of creation. The doctrine of "Original Sin," he argued, is itself late (around the time of Augustine), propounded during a time of great upheaval and distrust of sexuality and the body. It needs to be corrected by a more basic trust in creation as God's "Original Blessing," and a recovery of the monk Pelagius' trust in our human efforts for good. Fox does not focus so much on will as on the creative dynamics of the earth and nature to accomplish this. He sees four "Paths" toward this creative release: 1) Befriending Creation, 2) Befriending Darkness and Letting Go, 3) Befriending Creativity, and 4) Befriending New Creation: Compassion, Celebration, Erotic (Male-Female) Justice.

His "Four Paths" correlate rather closely to five Stages of spiritual growth that I developed from salvation history:<sup>10</sup> Initial, Familial, Individuating, Communitarian and Mission; although his are differing spiritual attitudes and not grounded as a historical process. According to Fox befriending creation means to trust life and our natural desires as created by God and therefore good. It opposes the distrust of sexual feelings or anger or the body and pleasure that was behind so much of our traditional spirituality. Befriending darkness means to find goodness even in the painful experiences of life, and letting go of our expectations, relationships, etc. Befriending creativity means to find the divine child within, our inner divinity and inner mothering, and the artist within. Befriending New Creation means to trust one's prophetic call to bring justice and compassion to the world.

Seen developmentally each of these steps reveals a positive aspect of the

stages I developed historically. The original sin of distrust of God is healed by an "Original Blessing." The suffering involved in letting go of ego in individuating faith is affirmed, as is the co-creative working with God in the next "communitarian faith" stage. And finally, our "mission" is truly to become compassionate consolers with Jesus.

Further, there is evidence that the practice of these steps would heal. Therapeutically, we have learned from Carl Rogers that it is trust that frees us to change. Focus on sin can make us try to save ourselves (to become good by ourselves in order to please God) and whereas that is an important first step, in the final analysis we cannot save ourselves. We need to trust God's compassion even *in* our sinfulness, and that is ultimately what enables transformation. As Gerald May discovered: addictions are healed by grace.<sup>11</sup> Further, God did make creation good and this goodness remains even in spite of our sin. The Catholic tradition, in contrast to Calvin's view, never held the position that our human nature was totally destroyed because of original sin. Our thinking and feeling can be a great help in coming to know ourselves and our need for healing as preparation for salvation. We need not distrust science or psychology or our basic experience. Further, the Christian tradition after Augustine has focused on controlling the body and nature, which was not true of the basic message of the NT. Jesus was reverential and open to women and nature, and the NT view of celibacy was not opposed to sexuality. Finally, Jesus' death/resurrection/sending of the Spirit has transformed all humanity, so the potential for goodness is now mediated through creation (as transformed by the Holy Spirit), if not by creation alone.

All this is helpful and true, and it explains the great attractiveness of Fox's work. What is missing, as appears from our principles, is a proper understanding of the fundamental source of this healing. It is not a return to the goodness of creation that is the source, but it is trust in the forgiving and renewing power of Jesus' resurrection Spirit. Fox's position tends to identify world sacral and grace sacral in a way that neglects their differences. In so doing, he neglects our need for redemption. This is implied in his constantly contrasting "Fall-Redemption" spirituality with "Creation Spirituality," as though they were opposed to each other. By failing to look at those two spiritualities developmentally, he pits one against the other rather than seeing them as necessary stages. Thus, he downplays the fact that our evil choices have an impact on others and on history and that we need to repent and be healed, or that sinful patterns will continue down through the generations. Human freedom is the cause of the disorder, but it cannot of itself undo it. It is not enough simply to turn to the goodness of creation. That would be world sacral. Grace reveals our responsibility. We must

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repent and be released by the free gift of God's forgiveness and redemptive love in Jesus.

This shift in interpretation from creation to resurrection has several important consequences. First, to focus on creation leaves us centered in ourselves and takes our eyes off our relation to our personal God that we have turned from by sin. It is this turning from God that is the ultimate source of our alienation from ourselves, from one another and from nature. Any spirituality that overlooks this root injustice cannot bring final healing. It will only cover over our shame and guilt and leave us empty. On the other hand, if we accept what is our responsibility, repent and ask for God's help, we are assured of God's forgiveness. Secondly, a return to creation will not get us back to paradise, for paradise itself is the result of right relation to God. It is now only possible through being "re-created" through Jesus' death/resurrection, that is, through dying to the old (creation and the values of creation) and rising to a divinely empowered life. That holds whether "paradise" is right relations between men and women, humans and nature or humans with themselves. What is needed is a "new creation" (which Fox himself seems to admit), a dying to the old way and rising to the new. This is effected not by creation but by the death and resurrection of Jesus. He became the "new Adam," who releases those who believe in him from their disordered choices and the effects of those choices in history. The resurrection brings us the new possibility of starting over - a new paradise, a new cooperation between earth and humans and between men and women. To open to it we need to admit our inability and sin and seek God's restoration and forgiveness. This I call "Resurrection-Centered Spirituality." It is not attained by our moral efforts alone. It is "grace-sacral," and so

precedes our response as we have already been forgiven by God in Jesus. But it also requires our response of letting go of self-salvation to receive forgiveness freely. The solution is not to deny the Fall, nor is it to focus on sin, as Fox rightly observed but to look beyond to God's superabundant love revealed in Jesus' death/resurrection. "Where sin abounded, grace did more abound" (Rom. 5:20). This is the ultimate ground of our joy.

### **A Course in Miracles**

A spirituality coming more from a transcendent spiritual side is *A Course in Miracles*.<sup>12</sup> Some people I have counseled have been definitely helped by it to discover their inner freedom and learn to release resentments. On the other hand, others have become so enamored of its ideas as to lose their faith in traditional Christianity. It reduces sin to illusion and sees Christ not so much as personal redeemer as a universal presence in each of us. As in all cases of supposed "revelations," we need careful discernment to distinguish what is an inspiration of truth from what is deceptive. St. Ignatius tells us that for discernment of the good spirit, the beginning, middle and end of the inspiration must be good. As we will see, much in the *Course in Miracles* is good, but the ultimate perspective is false and deceptive. I will simply present some of its principles together with the grounding given and indicate how orthodox Christianity might interpret each of those issues. As we will see, its attractiveness comes from opening a person to individuating faith. Its danger comes from not seeing this in light of Jesus' death/resurrection as a stepping stone to redemptive suffering and a fuller transformation of our interpersonal and embodied humanity.

1. *Forgiveness is letting go of the mis-perception that someone has harmed me.*

Because in *CM* we are only truly ourselves in our Christ self, all else is the creation of our own "perceiving." Hence, suffering and sin are ultimately illusions that we need to break out of in order to find healing. In our Christ-self we are not harmed, and forgiveness is letting go of the illusion that we are. This shift of perspective can be a powerful freedom for one caught in resentments, and experience shows that such "letting go" does release new creativity. From a Christian perspective as well, the statement can well be true. Doesn't Paul say, for example, that for those who love God "*all* things work together unto good" (Rom 8:28). Even the betrayal of Jesus by Judas which could have led Jesus into bitterness, was seen by him as the Father "handing him over" in an act of compassionate love despite our sin. So Jesus was not "harmed" by it but actually "glorified" (Jn 17). So forgiveness *is* letting go of focusing on the hurt (with the resentment and defensiveness that comes from that) in order to focus on God's Love in all things. Hence

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the truth of the principle and the powerful way it can heal people of deep resentments. On the other hand, the explanation is false and can lead to isolation (working things out in oneself apart from a believing community) and to loss of faith in Jesus as the one who ultimately frees us from hurt and sin.

*2. What I give I give to Myself*

This statement, which deals with generosity and the importance of counteracting the vision of scarcity we find ourselves working from, is also very powerful for releasing creativity. If we feel that by "giving" we won't *have*, we will constrict ourselves and become more and more defensive, and we actually will create a world of scarcity. This also, according to *CM* is a delusion. God is infinite being, abounding in all that we need, and if we are rooted in our Christ self, we will see that we are all one and actually enrich ourselves in giving. By "giving," whether or not it is received, we actually experience God's abundant life of love - we are actually giving to ourselves. Jesus also teaches this truth when he says: "Do not worry about what you are to wear or eat... Seek first God's Kingdom and all will be given to you" (Mt 6-33). Yet his reasoning is subtly different. The gift will come because of God's abundant love, not our ontological oneness with God. Again, a powerful good can come from living that principle, but a subtle distortion of faith comes from accepting *CM's* explanation.

*3. "Love is Letting Go of Fear"*

It is fear that we create when we create a world according to our limited perceptions rather than seeing reality from God's perspective. If we live by our perceptions, we ultimately fear others as threats to our world and we fear God as the revealer of the timeless truth beyond our control. Fear, then, shows us that we are not grounded in God or our Christ self. When we "let go" of fear (and our defenses and our vision of the world's threat), we find ourselves grounded in God's abundant good will or love. Again, Jesus also says, as to the messengers from Jairus, "Do not fear, only believe" (Mk 5:36). However, we again note that for Jesus, the reason for removing fear is faith in God, not a new knowledge.

*Underlying Untruths*

We notice that in all these statements (and more could be cited), there is a powerful healing truth that people experience, but together with it there is an explanation that renders faith in God's redemptive love meaningless,

Salvation is by knowledge, not faith. This comes out clearly when we look at statements about sin and suffering and about Christ.

### *1. Sickness and suffering?*

"The idea that a body can be sick is a central concept in the ego's thought system" (*CM*, v.3, p. 53). "A sick person perceives himself as separate from God" (p. 54). Thus, sickness is an illusion that we choose to believe and hence cause (notice the influence of Christian Science that the author heard as a youth.). It is healed by bypassing perception (which is always limited) to know our ground in God. There is really only spirit. The material world itself is an illusion.

### *2. Sin?*

Similarly, sin is an illusion because it presupposes separation from God, and a vengeful attitude toward sinners. It is really our anger that we project onto God, an anger we create because of our separation. Atonement is reconnecting to our ground in God (which is always open to us) and so forgiveness and healing are really the same things. No "other person's" forgiveness is needed, because sin itself is an illusion. In the end, all will be "saved." Again, we might hope that in the end all will be saved, that is, will accept God's forgiveness, but to assert it as a necessity is "ontological salvation" not the free interpersonal gift we hold as Christians.

### *3. Jesus role?*

"Christ is God's Son as He created him. He is the Self we share, uniting us with one another, and with God as well" (*CM*, v. 1, p. 421). Jesus is not a person who mediates salvation to us. Rather, he represents what we are all called to. "We have repeatedly said that one who has perfectly accepted the Atonement for himself can heal the world. Indeed, he has already done so. . . . He has become a risen Son of God" (*CM*, v.3, p. 55). The cross shows the pain involved in letting go of our ego self. To focus on it makes God cruel! The point is the resurrection, as revealing our risen selves. Thus, in remembering Jesus you are remembering God. This is not interpersonal, but simply a revelation of the oneness with God we already possess. There is a subtle de-centering of Jesus' person to focus on his function of revealing God.

What we find in the *CM* is a breakthrough to our individuated Self as grounded in God but at the same time, a closure to the interpersonal aspect of that breakthrough. God is *one*, not Triune, and Jesus is not mediator but revealer of the full Christ life. The cross is emptied of its redemptive value for we do not need a redeemer, only the courage to choose our own truth in God. Community is also not needed, for each one can find God alone. Spirituality becomes a solitary quest even if it is seen as united to all reality.

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This subtle spiritualization of reality leads a person to suppress their suffering, and also to a kind of distancing from the suffering of others. In the author Helen Schucman's case, this led to a deep depression that she suffered the last two years of her life.<sup>13</sup> The focus is on salvific knowledge, not Jesus' redemptive love. It can be an important step to free one from enmeshment with others (as can centering prayer, focusing, etc.), but when not seen in light of Jesus' full revelation, it will ultimately lock a person in their own "spiritual" world.

### **The New Age**

New Age thinking has in many ways the same concerns as Matthew Fox and a similar transcendent focus as in the *Course in Miracles*, only it is not Christian in any orthodox way, and not even religious except in a philosophical way. It purports to be scientific and not wedded to any particular faith tradition. It is not so much a single movement as it is a cluster of ideas that have gotten into almost every aspect of modern life - from politics (as Nancy Reagan's involvement with psychics) to medicine and spirituality. The ideas seem to have emerged from the hippie movement in the 60s with its psychedelic experimentation. The deep awareness, influenced by Eastern philosophies, was that all is one, that we are "gods," that good and evil are part of the total reality, that we need to return to nature religions and pagan gods and goddesses to offset one-sided patriarchal views, that we are responsible for our own reality and that there are many "gods" which are many faces of the one transpersonal ground of all that is.<sup>14</sup>

What is it that is so attractive about "New Age" thinking? Without getting into a detailed analysis, we can sample some of its main teachings to see how they relate to Christianity. To begin with, New Age is monistic, "everything that exists is ultimately a single reality." Critical, rational thinking is abandoned. No real distinction is made between good and evil. All religions are the same. The mystical goal is to be absorbed back into the *one*. This appeals to modern thought because we live in a fragmented world. Nations, churches (even Christian churches) and individuals are isolated. There is an explosion of information and who can process it all. Further, all is one not just materially, as with secular humanism, but spiritually. "God

created everything out of his/her essence, so I'm of the divine essence." "I am part of God." We create the world by our attitudes. We create our own morality - it flows out from within - so in potential we have unlimited knowledge and power. This appeals to people who have a low self-image because of negative church teaching, or who come from abusive families (many are from dysfunctional families). They find a deep sense of value. "I am wonderful, divine."

We see that New Age concerns are similar to Fox's, only with less effort to correlate with Christian faith, and their solution is similar to *The Course in Miracles*, a favored book by New Agers. It is a kind of adaptation of Eastern philosophical monism. Evil is seen as rooted in ignorance, so repentance is not needed and we need no savior. What we are ignorant of is our inner divinity. As we open to that, we access superhuman powers as directed by ascended masters and experience our unity with all creation. Jesus models openness to this new consciousness, and every religion is a way to it if it is authentic. Each person has his/her own inner light (god), so institutional religions are not needed. Besides this we need to be reunited to the earth, our bodies, crystals, trans-personal experiences (like astral-travel), etc. Religious experiences take the place of conversion of life.

How are we to respond? We would do God a disservice by lumping everything that smacks of New Age into one basket and throwing it all out. Satan would like nothing better! That way we would get rid of the use of imagination, the truth that God indwells us, inner healing and depth psychology, the fact that our attitudes do change the environment, etc., etc. If we look in the history of similar heresies, like the dualistic Albigensian heresy in the 12th century that emphasized poverty against the wealthy clerics, what was effective was not a moralistic attack on their practices, but a conversion to poverty and true Christian charity on the part of the mendicant orders of Franciscans and Dominicans. Similarly, the real answer to the deceptive views of the so-called "New Age" is to live out the fullness of the true *Christian* "New Age." After all, we are to become a "New Creation," living God's love and healing, bringing true divinization into our world. Thus, I suggest we consider their teaching as a call to enrich our Christian understanding:

### *1. Is God in all things?*

Yes, first as creator (all is created "good"), but more basically as Redeemer (Jesus' death/resurrection/sending of the Spirit has given everything a new beginning through Jesus). We are embraced by "Holy Mystery," as Karl Rahner says. Only, we are not in charge, not "gods" in that sense. We receive this new life through acknowledging our sins and God's love and forgiveness. Then we are restored to our responsibility for



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the whole world. As Jesus said in John's Gospel: "Is it not written in your Law, 'I said you are gods.' If he called them gods to whom the word of God came (and scripture cannot be broken), do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God?'" (Jn 10:34-36). We are divinized, but as *receiving* God's Word, not *being* it

2. *Are we "one"-with all creatures?*

Again, yes, if we repent and receive forgiveness from God and if the others repent and become one with God. Our oneness is in Christ's Spirit, which requires a free choice. It is not simply a given or based in creation. "We are created apart from our choice," Augustine said, "but we will not be redeemed apart from our choice."

3. *Are all religions equal but different ways of coming to God?*

All religions, in so far as they are human attempts to reach God, have both good and bad aspects. We are saved by God reaching us in Jesus, not by our attempts. We needn't know that explicitly (see Mt 25: "I was hungry and you fed me") so acts of selfless love show we are grounded in Jesus. We need deliverance from personal and religious efforts to save ourselves. Even the Law could block people from relying on God's forgiving love. The various religions are our attempts to reach God, so we need to let go of even what is good, to be formed in a "new creation."

4. *Is Jesus just another ascended master who suffered needlessly (for if he were wiser, according to NewAgers, he could have avoided suffering)?*

This is the key point. Satan would like nothing better than to relativize Jesus. Christians believe Jesus: "No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn 14:6). We need not be explicitly aware of Jesus' mediation as we see from Matthew 25, but we hold he is "the only name given to us through whom we are saved" (Acts 4:12). Christians also believe that bearing our cross with Jesus is the only way to wholeness. "Unless you take up your cross and follow me, you cannot be my disciple." Any "new age" that is not

through the cross is deception, and the shadow side will take its toll, as we saw with Helen Schucman.<sup>15</sup> When the cross is denied, the darkness gets pushed into the unconscious to take its revenge later.

5. *Is "evil" only deception, such that "forgiveness" is letting go of the ignorance of our divinity within (as the Course in Miracles affirms)?*

If salvation is "knowledge" and not interpersonal love, then ignorance is what needs to be removed. If salvation is interpersonal love, then it is not enough to repent, we need to have our repentance accepted by the one we have hurt, and be forgiven. God has forgiven us in Jesus. One cannot do that for oneself. And when we sin, we hand on to others that sinful attitude and we cannot stop that evil influence ourselves. God must root out the cause from the beginning. That is what God has done in Jesus, the "New Adam." Now we must repent and choose which "Adam" is our ground. The "New Age" Adam is really the devil's pawn. "You will be like gods ..." it says. Jesus says: "God alone shall you serve." The basic sin is human autonomy, choosing to be one's own God.

6. *Is the pursuit of self-fulfillment what we should be about in today's world?*

Paradoxically, Jesus says "unless we lose our lives for his sake and for the Kingdom, we shall not possess them." Traditionally, we have no doubt gone overboard on the self-denial part. If we do not love ourselves, we cannot love anyone else. On the other hand, true love is interpersonal, not mono-personal. True "self-fulfillment" can only come if we seek to fulfill others. "It is in giving that we receive," as St. Francis' prayer says. Thus, our deepest joy is in reaching out to bring joy to others to the best of our ability.

## **Conclusion**

Several other examples could be cited, the Enneagram, Carolyn Myss' *Anatomy of the Spirit*, (1996)<sup>16</sup> Jung's work, focusing and centering prayer, etc. The same principles would basically apply. All that fascinates is ultimately grounded in Grace-sacral - God's way of beckoning us to total self surrender to God — and so is good. However, insofar as it is created and a help to increase our human life whether materially or spiritually in a created sense, it is "world-sacral." Grace posits "world-sacral" as different (as free) in order to respond freely to God in Jesus, that is to "grace-sacral." "World-sacral" ultimately must die to focus on its own self, even a universal "self," in order to be taken up into God's life. The way to that transformation was and remains the cross, so that the cross of Christ is the ultimate distinguishing mark of Christian spirituality.

Ultimately, Christian spirituality is modeled after the Beatitudes. Not identity with God but poverty; not avoidance of sin but mourning it; not

dominance over the earth but surrender to God; not developing one's divinity but seeking God's justice; not denial of a need to forgive but mercy; not a given oneness but becoming a peace maker; not self-fulfillment but a pure heart to "see God;" not peace as the world gives, peace with our consumer world, but willingness to face persecution. The cross not creation is our guide.

## Reference Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Weil, A. (1995). *Spontaneous Healing: How to Discover and Enhance Your Body's Natural Ability to Maintain and Heal Itself*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

<sup>2</sup> See Ewert Cousins, "States of Consciousness: Charting the Mystical Path," in *The Fires of Desire: Erotic Energies and the Spiritual Quest*, edited by Fredrica Halligan and John J. Shea (NY: Crossroad, 1992), pp. 126-145. Here, p. 128.

<sup>3</sup> Masters, R. and Houston, J. (1966). *Varieties of Psychedelic Experience*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

<sup>4</sup> Grof, S. (1975). *Realms of the Human Unconscious*. New York: Viking Press.

<sup>5</sup> Cousins, "States of Consciousness," p. 133.

<sup>6</sup> Muehlen develops this principle in his book *Entsakralisierung* (Paderborn: Schoeningh, 1971), which unfortunately has not been translated into English. I have explained his view in my dissertation: *Spirit: Divine and Human* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1974), pp. 301f.

<sup>7</sup> Otto, R.. *The Idea of the Holy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1968.

<sup>8</sup> Muehlen, *Entsakralisierung*, p. 307.

<sup>9</sup> See his *On Becoming a Musical, Mystical Bear: Spirituality American Style* (NY, Paulist, 1972, 1976), pp. xv - xx. He changed this terminology to "Fall-Redemption" in *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality* (Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Co, 1983).

<sup>10</sup> See Robert T. Sears, "Healing and Family Spiritual/Emotional Systems," *Journal of Christian Healing* vol. 5, # 1 (1983), pp. 10-23.

<sup>11</sup> See Gerald G. May, *Addiction and Grace* (San Francisco: Harper and Row. 1988).

<sup>12</sup> See, *A Course in Miracles*, 3 vols. (The Text, a Workbook for students and a Teacher's Manual) (Tiburon, CA: Foundation for Inner Peace, 1975) Helen Schucman received inspired teachings over several years, which were written down and published by William Thetford.

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<sup>13</sup> See Benedict Groeschel, *A Still, Small Voice: A Practical Guide on Reported Revelations* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), pp. 75-82 for a fuller critique by one who knew Helen personally.

<sup>14</sup> See Douglas Groothuis, *Unmasking the New Age* (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1986) for a clear presentation and critique this phenomenon. He sees the "New Age" as a reaction against the dominant atheistic secular humanism that had grown strong in the universities, and a response to the present day alienation from institutions and institutional religion. We cannot tolerate the "absence of God" for long, and the "New Age" replaced the absent God by divinizing humanity - the universal presence of God. Many involved with New Age thinking are alienated from their families or institutions, or from the dominant patriarchal culture. So these attitudes seem to be the result of many factors, the fascination of Eastern philosophy, the promise of science, the sense of alienation from institutions and culture.

<sup>15</sup> The recipient of the automatic writing behind the *Course in Miracles*, which was enthusiastically received by New Age proponents, experienced a terrible black depression the last two years of her life.

<sup>16</sup> Myss, Carolyn. (1996). *Anatomy of the Spirit: The Seven Stages of Power and Healing*. New York: Harmony Books. See also her *Why People Don't Heal and How They Can* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1997).

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***The Mighty One, God, the Lord,  
Speaks and summons the earth  
From the rising of the sun  
to the place where it sets.  
From Zion, perfect in beauty,  
God shines forth.  
(Ps50.-1-2.NIV)***