



STATEMENT DN061

THE NEW MYTH
A Critique of New Age Ideology
New Age series – Part Four

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“All truth is God’s truth.” So the saying goes. And although recent applications of the dictum have generated some controversy,¹ it remains in principle a logical necessity. If a non-Christian scientist or philosopher discovers something that is *objectively* true, and the teachings of Scripture are also *objectively* true, then those truths must somehow exist harmoniously. And we can rightfully attempt to harmonize them *conceptually* as well.

The Christian is called to an uncompromising commitment to truth (2 Cor. 4:2; Eph. 6:14; Prov. 23:22; etc.). Such a commitment cannot condone a cursory and simplistic dismissal of entire systems of thought, even if those systems arise from unchristian sources. New ideologies are not born in a vacuum—they grow out of social and individual needs that are at times legitimate, and they likely contain *elements* of truth; truth which partly accounts for their powers of attraction.

The Christian response to New Age ideology, then, should be affirmative as well as critical. Positively, it must identify truth wherever it may be found, and demonstrate how such truth, far from proving a non-christian world view, can be readily integrated into the Christian perspective. Negatively, it must point out those views which can only be classed as false, and expose the dangers which inevitably accompany falsehood.

REDUCTIONISM VS. HOLISM

There is much in Fritjof Capra’s critique of Cartesian reductionism and mechanism with which a Christian can agree. Although Rene Descartes was a professing Christian, his thought gave rise to a very unchristian rationalism and determinism which came to dominate the Western mind. As Capra pointed out, the progress of science is indebted to Cartesian analysis, but the emphasis on reductionism (in general culture as well as science) was carried to an extreme.

In Germany, an effort to find Christian alternatives to this unbalanced situation was underway long before Capra and other aficionados of Eastern religions were voicing similar concerns. The Interdisciplinary Study Group of the Evangelical Church includes physical and social scientists, historians, and theologians.

In a paper entitled “The Spiritual Dimensions of the Scientific World,” a former member of this group, Lutheran pastor Ulrich Duchrow, identifies several distinguishing features of the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm (which he labels “the spirit of classical physics and modern technics”). He further points out some unhappy consequences which follow when they are taken as “the whole of reality,” which I will partially reproduce here.²

Objectivization has led to “the suppression of the subject and of those experiences and aspects of reality which cannot be objectivized.” What *can* be made, *will* be made, with no regard for such subjective concerns as “sorrow

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and suffering, joy and happiness, love and hope and faith.” *Manipulation* has involved the exploitation of nature and human beings which can result in “the ecological and social self-destruction of humankind.” *Particularization* “splits the various aspect of human life into different realms,” and “robs us of wholeness.” *Determinism* and “the belief in unlimited growth which goes with it” leads us to conclude that “nothing can be done about all this because everything follows autonomous laws.” Finally, a *linear view of time without direction* makes us believe that only that which can be scientifically reproduced is true. Therefore, we are oriented toward the structures of the past, no longer viewing the future as an open possibility for “hope, imagination, vision, and responsible action.”

Hopefully, this brief consideration of the effects of excessive reductionism is sufficient to show that the cause of the church is not served by defending the “old paradigm” in all of its assumptions. Our modern technocracy has in many ways suffocated the spiritual and personal dimensions of man, and so there is a good measure of legitimacy to the current reaction against it. New Agers are correct in pointing out the efficiencies in our traditional reductionistic approaches to science, society, health and life.

General Systems Theory

Is general Systems Theory (GST) the answer? Certainly, the holistic approach that it advocates would be useful. However it does not appear likely that it will become established as a proven scientific theory,³ and, that being the case, neither will it provide a basis for the unification of the sciences. Furthermore, several practical weaknesses have been pointed out within GST as a social theory.⁴

So, while the hope of discovering basic, *significant* systems laws for all phenomena is dim, the value of a systemic or holistic approach in many areas of life and science is undeniable. But is a change from reductionistic to holistic thinking *the* critical issue facing mankind today?

Misdiagnosing the Disease

In responding to Ulrich Duchrow’s paper, Stephen C. Knapp of Partnership in Mission made the following poignant observation:

Duchrow’s transition from an all-pervasive “disease” to a single “cause” outside of ourselves, is necessary, perhaps, if one hopes to come up with some accessible and manageable “cure.” Marx’s concern to do something about these same effects led him to isolate their cause in capitalism (and the bourgeoisie) and to locate the cure in the proletariat’s revolutionary action. But the risk in such a ‘narrowing’ in order to make change “manageable” is that the cure will be “out of phase” with the disease...⁵

What is the primary “cause” underlying the many symptoms of our global “disease”? Science writer Mark Davidson states that “the fault, as viewed from the perspective of Bertalanffian GST, is not in our stars and not entirely in ourselves—but substantially in our systems.”⁶

Fritjof Capra offers a Taoist explanation for human self-centeredness—too much dependence on rationality: “Rational knowledge is likely to generate self-centered, or yang, activity, whereas intuitive wisdom is the basis of ecological, or yin, activity.”⁷

To place the blame primarily on our systems rather than ourselves is to diagnose a symptom of the disease as its cause. To attribute human selfishness to an excessive rationality and lack of intuitive awareness is a confusion of categories: cognitive issues are being mislabeled as moral ones. Unselfishness can be found in thinkers as well as mystics, and selfishness is at least as plentiful among mystics as thinkers. Human selfishness is a matter of the will, demanding change of heart much more than the development of intuitive capacities.

We can conclude, then, that an overemphasis on the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm has definitely contributed to the problems of modern times. However, a more *fundamental* cause of the mega-crisis in our “post-Christian culture” is the widespread rejection of biblical truth and moral principles. To a great extent, Western nations have turned their backs on the revealed Word and will of the sovereign God and become a law unto themselves. In this sense at least they are humanistic, and such godless humanism can be traced back to that very seventeenth- and eighteenth-century embrace of rationalism which enthroned the old paradigm in the first place.

The answer, therefore, is not a new, *holistic* humanism. In any form, an ethic that makes man the measure of all things cannot possibly remedy the deeper dimensions of our crisis, for it is exactly this approach that is responsible for them. The breakdown of the family, its resulting injury to our young, and the spiraling statistics for such social

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ills as violent crime, drug and alcohol abuse, and sexually transmitted diseases are ultimately the results of sin, not faulty systems.

New Agers are right—we do need to reevaluate our cultural assumptions and structures. But if such evaluation is not informed by an uncompromising commitment to a biblical world view, the intended cure may only succeed at making the disease terminal.

CHRISTIANITY VS. HOLISM?

We now turn to some deeper apologetic issues. New challenges are being brought to the Christian faith by New Agers, and also, at times, by the systems movement and process philosophers. Efforts are underway to wed the systems view to mysticism, and such unchristian beliefs as “process” metaphysics and creative evolution. Since the need for holistic perspective is becoming increasingly evident, such a synthesis would suggest that orthodox Christianity is becoming increasingly outdated.

Systems and Mysticism

If a shift to a more holistic way of thinking is desirable, does this suggest, or even demand, a switch to mystical modes of thought? When New Agers equate mysticism with intuition they are confusing the distinct technical usages of the words “mystical,” “mysticism,” and “intuition.” Although mystical feelings of oneness with the universe do (infrequently) happen spontaneously, *mysticism* generally involves a determined effort to still the mind and empty it of conceptual thought. Such a practice is neither necessary nor common to human experience.

Intuition, on the other hand, is one of the two basic means to human knowledge (along with reason), and is something that we *all* possess and exercise to varying degrees. Just like a detective, sculptor, or psychotherapist, a systems thinker could develop an intuitive ability to recognize patterns of relationship without becoming involved in any form of mysticism. In other words, while mysticism necessarily involves intuition, intuition does not at all necessarily involve mysticism.

Systems and Process Metaphysics

Is the Christian understanding of a substantial, objective world created by a substantial, objective God compatible with the view, emerging from modern physics, that fundamental reality is more an indivisible pattern of events (random “probability waves”) than an assortment of isolated, ordered objects? Doesn’t this sound more like the views of some mystical traditions, where there is a “dance” but no “dancer”—where God and the world are more energy than substance, more “verb” than “noun”?

First of all, belief in a substantial, objective world does not need to equal the naïve realism: of classical physics which imagined electrons revolving around their nucleus like planets around their sun.

Second, it is crucial to realize that the findings of physics are by definition *physical*. They offer no final answer to such *metaphysical* questions as the existence and nature of God, or the existence and nature of human soul.

Ian Barbour, an authority on the interface between science and philosophy/theology who is also a process thinker, wisely asks:

For what reason do we reject the mechanistic world-view that once claimed support from classical physics: (a) was the mistake a scientific one, which we now reject because of new scientific discoveries, or (b) was it a philosophical and epistemological mistake involving an uncritical transition from physics to metaphysics? In the second case we would conclude that a mechanistic world-view never did have legitimate justification, even when it claimed to be based on the best science of its day; and the lesson from the past would lead us to be wary today about extending modern physics into a new metaphysics.⁸

Our current knowledge of fundamental physical reality is still quite tentative, and scientists remain divided about the implication of their experimental findings. To say that process is more fundamental than substance in the universe may be as misleading as saying that time is more fundamental than space. They may be inextricably united in the larger scheme of creation.

It should be noted that in trying to use modern physics in support of Eastern/occult mysticism New Agers commit the very reductionist fallacy they condemn. Let us grant that microscopic entities *are* pure energy; does that mean

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the material appearance of macroscopic entities is an illusion? If fundamental physical reality *is* “event,” does that mean the highest order of physical reality (man) cannot truly be substance? If in fact wholes cannot be understood by reducing them to their smallest parts, then why deny the reality of what so convincingly appears to be true on the level of human experience? Objects *are* substantial. People *are* “in being.” Events *are* ordered.

Biblically we know that even if process is the fundamental created reality out of which God formed substance, substance (i.e., changeless essence) remains the primary metaphysical reality, for God, the “I Am,” is *not* process, nor in process (Mal. 3:6; cf. Ex. 3:14).⁹

Systems and Creative Evolution

Is the universe a self-organizing system inherently driven toward higher organization? And can the emergence of widely diverse properties (including life and mind) be sufficiently explained by this tendency when coupled with the principle that a whole is more than the sum of its parts?

There is no biblical nor scientific reason to reject the proposition that a whole can be more than the sum of its parts. It can be clearly observed in nature that

*As more complex systems are built up, new properties appear that were not foreshadowed in the parts alone. Each of two separate hydrogen atoms will attract a third hydrogen atom; but when the two combine to form a molecule, the third atom will be repelled. New wholes do not of course contain many mysterious entities in addition to their parts, but they do have distinctive principles of organization as systems, and therefore exhibit properties and activities not found in their components.*¹⁰

Such systems laws can easily be understood as part of God’s original design.

It requires a giant leap of faith from such observable phenomena, however, to hold that such extraordinary, unique qualities as life and mind are simply more complex examples of the same cosmic pattern. There are no known experiments where such emergent processes can be replicated. Systems theorists offer us no explanation as to how inorganic parts brought into complex relationship could possibly produce *life*, or how organic parts brought into complex relationship could possibly produce *mind* (let alone the human psyche). They just assure us that they do.

An even greater downfall of emergent evolution is its claim that there is a *natural* organizing force behind the universe bringing assorted parts into *increasingly complex* relationships. This belief is flatly contradicted by the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which states that all systems inherently tend toward entropy, or *disorganization*.

It is not as though New Agers and systems thinkers are oblivious to the Second Law. But, they argue for another law (Von Bertalanffy named it “syntropy”) which counteracts entropy and accounts for the high level of organization and design that we see.

The reasoning employed here can be fairly represented as follows: 1) Entropy is a fact; 2) The existence of highly organized systems is a fact; 3) Evolution is a fact; so 4) There must be an additional law to counteract entropy and account for evolution.

Here New Agers and systems thinkers are guilty of question-begging. Why consider evolution a fact? Why postulate an unproven law (syntropy) to counteract a demonstrable law (entropy) in order to keep one model, when another model fits the facts of science as we find them? Creation is ultimately no more nor less than “scientific” *or* “metaphysical” than evolution (see Part Two’s argument against equating naturalism with the scientific method). And it perfectly accounts for nature’s order while in no way prohibiting its tendency toward disorder. (In fact, the biblical account would seem to *require* this as the consequence of sin—pronounced thousands of years before the Second Law was discovered. See, e.g., Gen. 3:17–19; Rom. 8:19–22.)

It can be concluded then that while historic Christianity may be incompatible with mysticism, process metaphysics, and creative evolution, none of these elements are essential to a holistic perspective of life or a systemic approach to science. Therefore, there is no justification for the New Age opinion that orthodox Christianity is ill-suited for the needs of our time.

EVOLUTION IN NEW AGE IDEOLOGY/MYTHOLOGY

It is frequently assumed today that human evolution has been advancing with something like an exponential curve over the past few centuries. Those who reason thus unwittingly indulge in the fallacy of *equivocation*. In other words, they cite evidenced for one meaning of the word “evolution” as support for a belief that pertains to a different sense of the word.

What we have witnessed over the past few hundred years is rapid *social* evolution: the development and, in *some* respects, progress of society due to advancing knowledge and technology. There is no essential connection between social evolution and *biological* evolution: the morphological and physiological change of a species over time. The fact that *society* has been rapidly changing does not prove that *man* has undergone any essential change. Even most evolutionary scientists would agree that over the past few centuries man has simply realized under favorable conditions a potential that he has had for thousands of years. Therefore, rapid social evolution does not suggest, as John White thinks, that ‘Homo Noeticus’ is waiting in the wings.

What about the increasing number of people experiencing altered states of consciousness? ASCs have always been just as possible as they are now, and at various times in various places mystical movements have thrived (e.g.: India in the eighth century B.C., and at several later points in its history; also fourteenth-century Germany). The fact that such states need to be induced, and come no more naturally now than they did millennia ago, should give pause to those who reason that their current frequency signals a change in human nature itself.

Will punctuated equilibrium convert humanity’s current mega-crisis into an evolutionary leap forward? It should be noted first of all that even a serious Punctuationalist would derive little hope from the fantastic New Age application of the hypothesis. Second and more importantly, punctuated equilibrium is not at all established as a scientific theory. Creation science writer Henry Morris points out that “it has no known mechanism and has never been observed in operation.”¹¹ Even many evolutionary geneticists and biologists reject the model as pure fantasy, maintaining that “so many other delicate systems would be set awry as a result [of such a major change in structure] that the organism could not survive.”¹²

We have seen that the “facts” summoned to support belief in “conscious evolution” and “Gaia” can just as easily be interpreted within a biblical framework. And while (macro)evolution has not been proven, biblical reliability has been.¹³

Nonetheless, might it not be desirable to keep the new myth alive for utilitarian purposes? In other words, wouldn’t the earth and its ecosystems be better served by belief in a sacred planet than by biblical ‘dominion theology’?

A Biblical Basis for Ecology

It cannot be denied, nor should we wish to deny, that God told man in the beginning: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Gen. 1:28). But since when does the scriptural model of rulership allow for the ruler to exploit and abuse his subjects? On the contrary, it calls for care, protection, and wise, just administration (e.g., Ps. 72; 82; Jer. 22:1–5; Ezek. 34: 1–22).

When God entrusted the earth to man it did not cease to belong to Him (Ps. 24:1; 50:12). Adam’s responsibility in the Garden of Eden was to “cultivate and *keep* it” (Gen. 2:14). Man’s role on the earth, then, must be understood in terms of *stewardship*, and stewards are responsible and accountable for that which has been entrusted to them (Luke 12:42–48; 1 Cor. 4:2). Since God established an order in His creation, and gave us the capacity to understand it, then to the best of our ability, we are responsible to maintain it.

Truth Vs. Myth

The most serious error underlying New Age mythology is the unwarranted assumption (based in monistic subjectivism) that there are no truths “out there” that we need be concerned about. If, as Christians argue, the Bible is a trustworthy divine revelation, such thinking is grievously false, for God is an objective, not subjective, reality as far as humanity is concerned. Therefore, certain propositions are objectively true, and others objectively false.

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Because the Lord is a God of truth (John 17:17; Rom. 3:3–4; Tit. 1:2; 1 John 5:20), to disregard truth is both morally wrong and spiritually dangerous. Therefore, in spite of whatever ecological value the new myth might appear to have, we are obligated to reject it because it lacks a basis in objective reality.

The truth question makes our choice of a belief system a moral issue. This is evident in the scriptural warning that “the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but...will *turn away their ears from the truth*, and will *turn aside to myths*” (2 Tim. 4:3–4). The sobering *objective* truth is that each one of us will one day face the God who is there in judgment, and He will hold us accountable for the truth He has made known to us. For many, this encounter will not be pleasant (Rom. 1:18, 25):

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.... For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator....

In the light of such a solemn apostolic oracle, all who harbor even a residual fear of the biblical God must feel uneasy with Barry McWaters’ call “to serve the wellbeing of the living planet Earth, Gaia.”

Certainly, the earth has suffered much abuse under the pretext of biblical sanction. Human greed often twists Scripture to suit its own ends. The answer to this regrettable situation is not to abandon biblical truth for pagan mythology. We must recover a biblical appreciation for creation and man’s role in it without falling into the opposite and more damning error of worshipping the creature rather than the Creator.

NOTES

- 1 See Dave Hunt and T.A. McMahon, *The Seduction of Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1985), 191.
- 2 Duchrow’s paper, accompanied by responses from several Christian scholars, appeared in *Gospel in Context* (Oct. 1978), 4-23. All quotes from Duchrow are taken from pp. 5-6.
- 3 See, e.g., Mark Davidson, *Uncommon Sense* (Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, 1983), 199.
- 4 See Robert Lilienfield, *The Rise of Systems Theory—An Ideological Analysis* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1978).
- 5 *Gospel in Context*, 15-16.
- 6 Davidson, 159.
- 7 Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1982), 38.
- 8 Ian G. Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971), 289.
- 9 For an incisive treatment of the claim that the biblical God *is* process, see Norman Geisler’s chapter on process theology in *Tensions in Contemporary Theology*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry and Alan F. Johnson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1976).
- 10 Barbour, 297.
- 11 From a letter to this writer dated April 11, 1986. The reader interested in more information on punctuated equilibrium is referred to Dr. Morris’ Institute for Creation Research (P.O. Box 2667, m El Cajon, CA 92021).
- 12 Jerry Adler with John Carey, “Is Man a Subtle Accident?”, *Newsweek*, 3 Nov. 1980. 96.
- 13 See e.g., Josh McDowell, *More Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA: Here’s Life Publishers, 1975).

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