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# The 'Campbellites' and The New Age Movement

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*The 'Campbellite' churches and the more Eastern-orientated New Age Movement are both developing in such a way as to be troubling some Christian churches in Britain and in the United States. This article is a response to those who have requested reliable information about these two radically different movements.*

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## The 'Campbellites'

In Britain, concern was expressed soon after the founding in 1982 of the Central London Church of Christ which now calls itself just the London Church of Christ (LCC). There are other Churches of Christ in London but the LCC now claims over 800 members and it is in the process of establishing other branches in Britain. For example, the Central Birmingham Church of Christ was founded in 1988 and is growing apace. The LCC in turn was the product of a missionary initiative taken by the Boston, USA, Church of Christ; the latter being only 10 years old.

**Four areas of concern** have surfaced in Britain recently concerning the LCC. **First** of all, the LCC has concentrated its work amongst students. The church has set up Bible Study groups in a number of colleges and halls of residence without identifying themselves clearly to the students. Some college chaplains and leaders of Christian Unions in the London area have been unhappy about the Bible Study groups but in some cases LCC members have also joined in the activities of CUs without revealing their motives and affiliation. Due to this intense activity within the student population, a high proportion of LCC members are or have been students.

**Another area** of concern relates to the demands which the LCC makes upon its members. They are expected to attend several meetings each week and also engage in evangelistic activity as well as personal Bible Study and Scripture memorisation. There are claims that this pressure has caused examination failures and nervous breakdowns. While LCC leaders deny encouraging students to give up their studies, some proceed to full-time work for the LCC immediately after completing their studies. INFORM<sup>1</sup> know of a medical student who does not plan to do his 'house-jobs' year and will therefore fail to register as a doctor. There is also a tendency for members to withdraw from outside friendships.

**A third area** of concern is the degree of supervision exercised over LCC members. INFORM refer to a student who recently joined LCC and was telephoned each day during a three week vacation. Similarly, there are members who left the movement but were persistently telephoned over several weeks afterwards. Some ex-LCC

members have talked freely about their decision to leave the movement and mentioned reasons such as leadership pressure, the level of time commitment involved, etc. These people have shared too the attraction of LCC and have referred to factors such as the style of worship, commitment to Bible Study and the friendliness of the members.

**The final area** of concern has been the extent to which the LCC resembles genuine evangelical churches. For example, the LCC appeals to the Bible as its only source of authority and emphasises the importance of group/personal Bible Study whilst it actively seeks to evangelise and recruit new members. However, the LCC and other Churches of Christ are not biblically sound in theology and cannot be regarded as evangelical. One INFORM worker reports that an LCC leader spoke to him in a derogatory manner about evangelicals. Even more important are some of their distinctive beliefs which are in error. The LCC and similar churches, for example, deny major gospel truths by insisting that baptism is essential for salvation and that salvation in fact is never certain in this life. They also regard doctrines such as Original Sin, Predestination, Once Saved Always Saved as 'false doctrines' which made 'their official debut' in the fifth century.<sup>2</sup> Sadly, young students and even older Christians are often ill-taught themselves and are unable to discern between truth and error in the teaching of the LCC and related churches.

We must be careful how we use the term '**Campbellites**' in relation to the LCC and other Churches of Christ. Historically, the term 'Campbellites' is associated with the Christian church (Disciples of Christ) which began in the early 1800s in America with three ex-presbyterian ministers, namely, Thomas and Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone. The Campbells were Irish but educated in Scotland and, while they were Presbyterian, they had been influenced by free church attitudes towards state churches and other matters such as creeds, liturgies and lay-oriented leadership. Within weeks of arriving in America and joining the Philadelphia Synod of the Presbyterian Church, Thomas Campbell's name was removed from the rolls of the Church in May 1807 because of heresy. Thomas then established the Christian Association of Washington (Pennsylvania) and was joined by his brother, Alexander, who broke his link with the Scottish presbyterians.

Various congregations were founded and for 17 years from 1813 they joined the Red Stone Baptist Association. This was a formative period for the Campbells in which their main doctrines were developed and articulated. However, some of these doctrines conflicted with Baptist principles and there was consequently a break with the Baptist Association in 1830. Alexander was by now teaching a sharp distinction between grace and law as well as the opposition between the Old and New Testaments. Both brothers now aimed to restore New Testament Christianity and one result was that they condemned any structure which impinged on the independence of local churches. In 1832 Campbell's churches merged with those of Barton Stone and they were commonly described as Christian Church and Disciples of Christ. By 1849, these churches had grown rapidly. Regional fellowships were arranged, colleges established and a publishing programme was launched. A convention was held in 1849 which adopted the name 'American Christian Missionary Society' and for the following 60 years it facilitated the work

of church extension and overseas mission. Since 1849, several divisions have taken place among the Churches of Christ in the United States and Britain.

Many of these groups acknowledge a link with the nineteenth-century 'Campbellites' but it is difficult to ascertain how many of them use the name to describe themselves. The situation is complex and this is illustrated in relation to Britain. For example, a representative of the Fellowship of Churches of Christ in Britain commented recently, 'we are of course Campbellites in origin'. The FCC represents only 37 Churches of Christ, previously there had been about 70 in the Fellowship. Nearly half of these churches in the FCC joined the United Reformed Church in 1980 so the FCC was depleted. It is interesting that in the UK CHRISTIAN HANDBOOK 1989/90 Edition<sup>3</sup> the Churches of Christ which left the FCC are included under the United Reformed Church and named in a footnote as the Reformed Association of Churches of Christ.

To illustrate the complexity of the situation further, there is another separate group of churches called the 'Old Paths' Churches numbering as many as 90 which split from other Churches of Christ in the 1920s. This group is closest to the LCC; in 1987 the LCC was listed in their directory but omitted from it in 1989.

Despite all these divisions, there are **basic doctrines which all these groups have in common**, namely, the necessity of baptism for salvation,<sup>4</sup> the possibility of losing one's salvation and a strictly congregational form of church government. A major reason for past divisions relates to the departure of some Churches of Christ from congregational principles by the establishing of a structured organisation threatening to exercise authority over local churches.

An FCC representative adds that the London Church of Christ differs from them not in any important points of doctrine but rather in methods and organisation. In fact, the mainline Churches of Christ in the United States have repeatedly criticised the Boston Church of Christ for its authoritarianism. One major difference between the older and newer Churches of Christ is the more aggressive missionary zeal of the 'new' Churches and a tendency to adopt a more authoritarian structure and approach. In the United States, some Churches of Christ have become quite liberal in theology and practice.

## The New Age Movement

Although the New Age Movement (NAM) emerged in the 1970s, it has developed significantly in America and Europe since the 1980s and is now enjoying considerable popularity. **The roots of this movement**, however, go back at least to the early 1960s when Western society was exposed increasingly to Eastern, mystical teachings with their occult bias. But it has several precursors including Transcendentalism, Spiritism, Theosophy, New Thought and Christian Science.

Regarding the Christian Church as both irrelevant and lacking in spiritual vitality, many young people in the 1960s, including the Beatles, consequently joined groups such as Transcendental Meditation, Rajneesh Foundation, Zen Buddhism and the Divine Light Mission, etc. However, some people refused to restrict themselves to one particular guru or group. While committed to the basic ideas they were

especially attracted to the prospect of a new age in which they believed that differences of culture, religion and politics would be replaced by universal love and unity.

In his valuable *ENCYCLOPEDIA HANDBOOK OF CULTS IN AMERICA*, J Gordon Melton claims that the Movement can best be dated from 1971. With the relaxing of immigration laws both in the United States and Britain in the 1960s, Asian religious teachers moved to these countries along with many other immigrants. The result was 'a major missionary thrust by the Eastern religions towards the West'.<sup>5</sup> Various ashrams and centres were established in key areas while in 1971 the *EAST-WEST JOURNAL* was launched by a Boston group. This may have been the 'first national periodical to focus the issues of the New Age Movement'.<sup>6</sup> The same year saw the publication of *BE HERE NOW* the earliest book popularising the ideas of the New Age and written by Baba Ram Dass. A Jew, Dass's real name is Richard Alpert who had been a professor of psychology at Harvard before going to India in search of a guru. By 1972, New Age directories were issued and groups had been linked together through national periodicals such as *NEW AGE?*, *NEW REALITIES* and the *YOGA JOURNAL*.

Among the early leaders of the movement were Marilyn Ferguson, David Spangler, Judith Skutch, Patricia Sun, Sam Keen, Shirley MacLaine and Paul Solomon. The latter was a Baptist Pastor in the United States but is now a committed and leading teacher in the New Age. He offers seminars/workshops on subjects such as guided meditation, dream analysis and master-victim consciousness. Solomon established a group called Inner Light Consciousness with a community in Virginia Beach. To the question, 'should Jesus be my Lord of life, or should I seek my higher self?', he answers: 'Both paths are valid since the historical Jesus is supposed to be one with the Consciousness of God, and if you seek your Higher Mind, you seek the expression of God that is the source of your being'.<sup>7</sup> David Spangler served as a leader of the Findhorn community in Scotland for three years before he established a New Age community called the Lorian Association near Madison in Wisconsin. In 1976 he published *REVELATION, THE BIRTH OF A NEW AGE* in which he expressed in popular style New Age ideas. Perhaps even more influential than Spangler is Marilyn Ferguson who is the editor of two bulletins, namely, *BRAIN/MIND* and the *LEADING EDGE BULLETIN*. What gave her greater prominence was her book in 1980 entitled, *THE AQUARIAN CONSPIRACY*, which is regarded as one of the best statements of the beliefs and aims of the Movement. Similarly, it was the publication of her book, *A COURSE IN MIRACLES*, in 1975 by the new Foundation for Inner Peace which gave prominence to Judith Skutch. This became a popular and well-used study book and between 1975-1985 several hundred groups were established in North America alone.

**Basic to the New Age philosophy are two convictions.** First of all, that all religions and secular systems of thought lead eventually to God. Secondly, they believe that New Age philosophy is superior to all other faiths, including Christianity. This can be illustrated in many ways but I want to use the example of the New Age community based in Findhorn.

The small village of Findhorn is situated 40 miles east of Inverness in Scotland. In 1963, a community called '**The Findhorn Foundation**' was established and as many as two hundred people have been living together there. Members are accommodated on a caravan site in the village and also in a nearby hotel in Forres which the Foundation owns.

Findhorn is an important centre for the movement in Britain. One workshop available there deals with 'Christianity in the New Age'. It offers 'an experiential exploration of the Cosmic Christ in the light of the Western mystery tradition and the Ancient Wisdom'. It will include a suggestive reading of the Gospel narratives both as an allegorical presentation of stages of subconsciousness in the unfoldment of the soul and as a practical path to "enlightenment" given us by the Master Jesus'.<sup>8</sup> Peter and Eileen Caddy founded the community. They claimed that 'the work of this centre is to usher in the New Age, to raise the vibrations by the awareness of the Christ consciousness within each one, to find contact with ME; to create light and more light and radiate it; to bring down my Kingdom on earth and see it start right here and go out to the four corners of the earth'.<sup>9</sup>

In order to understand this quotation, one needs to remember the New Age belief that mankind is in the process of moving into the age of Aquarius from the age of Pisces. Each age continues for about 2000 years and they further claim that the different ages are influenced by the earth's movement. They regard the Pisces age as the age of Christianity but they believe **that the age of Christianity is now ending**. The adjustment from one age to another is supposed to mean that we are affected by different and higher energies from the cosmos. These energies are believed to enter the planet by means of 'lay-lines' (that is, lines which criss-cross the globe) and the 'power-points' are precise places where these lines cross. Stonehenge is thought to have been built on such a 'power-point' but for the New Age the three main power-points for Britain are Glastonbury, Iona and Findhorn.

While Findhorn is an important centre in Britain, there are other and more important communes in the United States reflecting New Age ideals. These include the Lama Foundation and the Stelle Community while some eastern teachers have established their own organisational communes such as the Ananda Co-operative Community of Swami Kriyananda and also the New Vrindvan which belongs to the International Society of Krishna Consciousness in West Virginia.

New Age devotees attach great importance to occasions such as the full moon, equinoxes and solstices when they believe that the cosmos energies are at their strongest. Meditation is an indispensable means of adapting to these energies but it is also deemed important to develop a high regard for nature generally. Even man-made objects tend to be personalised in the New Age philosophy and one practical result of their reverence for nature is the claim to be able to grow exceptionally large vegetables/flowers even in poor soil and without the use of chemicals.

Eventually, the New Age for them will be characterised by one universal religion and a perfectly harmonised mankind committed to caring for the planet. This allegiance to the planet already finds expression in concerns such as ecology.

peace, natural/wholesome foods, co-operation in community living and the desire to effect social/political changes of a radical nature but by peaceful means.

They believe this New Age will be accomplished by means of a basic, universal energy distinct from other forms of energy such as heat and light etc. The energy is believed to pervade and undergird the whole of nature and human existence. Different names are used to describe this basic energy: mana, odic force, prana, the ch'i, the healing force but is transforming in its effects and is available to us by meditation and psychic development, etc.

In his detailed bibliography relating to the New Age Movement, J Gordon Melton refers to at least 97 specialist books or articles but observes correctly that 'the prime critics of the Movement are Evangelical Christians who see a challenge to the Christian faith in a revived gnosticism'.<sup>10</sup> **The charge of gnosticism is a fair one.** Jane Grumbridge, a former member of the Movement and of the Findhorn community who became a Christian in the early 1980s explains:

'The New Age belief is very close to gnosticism, for man is seen as being born without the knowledge of his soul and his true identity as part of God... It is from knowledge about oneself and the universe, and by then changing one's life to live according to that knowledge that release and salvation come...however, unlike gnosticism, matter is not seen as evil. We are meant to be making everything physical into something spiritual and beautiful by earthing the higher energies, rather than running away from the physical into an ascetic life-style.'<sup>11</sup>

Their brand of gnosticism involves a radical re-interpretation, and rejection of biblical truth and this can be illustrated in relation to **some major doctrines.**

For example, New Agers generally claim that **God is a power rather than a person** and that this power resides in each human person. One aim of their followers is to realise they are gods and to achieve the higher consciousness of their divinity. A prominent leader, Shirley MacLaine, once stood on the shores of the Pacific Ocean chanting, "I am God, I am God, I am God"! Their doctrine of God is clearly pantheistic; divinity is within, and identifiable with, everything including humans and nature.

How do they view the Lord Jesus Christ? Although they call Jesus a Master yet his unique Person as God the Son is denied. Their claim is that Jesus was the first one to realise and express the Christ-energy/consciousness. For them, **Jesus was only a man while the Christ is the God essence which indwelt him and all other humans.** Influenced to a certain extent by Teilhard de Chardin they prefer to talk about 'the cosmic Christ' rather than the Jesus of history. All humans, too, are regarded as 'gods in the making' who can become God! Because man has a higher nature of consciousness, there is no mention of the Fall and no real distinction is made between right and wrong. Sin is thought of only as ignorance of one's own divinity.

**Salvation** is a word and doctrine rarely found in their writings but it is interpreted as the recognition and appreciation of one's own divinity. Man, according to the New Age teaching, needs to develop his psychic powers and reach his higher

consciousness in order to become aware of his personal divinity. Meditation, yoga, drugs, martial arts, hypnosis and various occult activities are all legitimate means of attaining one's divinity. Because man is not regarded as a sinner nor as being guilty and exposed to the wrath of the holy God, there is no need of a Saviour and atonement. They further insist that **Heaven/Hell** are only good or bad conditions of consciousness in this life with no real counterpart beyond death. In New Age thinking, there are repeated reincarnations; these are not a curse or punishment but a spiritual path or SADHANA. This may involve following a guru or developing one's own Sadhana but the goal is the same, a kind of mystical awareness described as self-realisation, higher consciousness, or New Age awareness of Christ consciousness. Such a Sadhana is rarely completed in the span of one life on earth; through several lifetimes in a physical body spiritual development can occur culminating in a mystical consciousness of one's own divinity.

In one respect, the New Age Movement is unlike many cults for it discourages submission to one or more leaders. Believing each person to be a 'co-creator' and a part of God himself, they insist on personal freedom for all individuals to develop alongside others. In the Findhorn community, for example, 'every department functions as a group, not a group centred upon a leader who gives the orders, nor a group working democratically by majority votes but a group who are learning to receive direction with a vision on the good of the whole.'<sup>12</sup>

While far removed from biblical truth, **this Movement offers hope, albeit a false one, for the future**, also a mystical consciousness as well as freedom, an appreciation of nature and the support of a caring community. Here is a major challenge to Christian churches to preach the true gospel of Christ and at the same time to live as godly, loving fellowships in their own communities.

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