

A LESSON IN COUNTERING 'NEW AGE' PHILOSOPHY

'A New Slant on St. Patrick'

BY

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The term 'New Age' is one of the great misnomers of our generation for there is nothing new about it. Its beginnings go back to the fall of man and its philosophy can be seen in the thinking of the ancient Druids of Patrick's day, which "does not seem to have worshipped idols, but rather some form of nature."

It is noteworthy that in astrology, from which the 'New Age Movement' draws much of its symbolism, Pisces is the fish and Aquarius the water carrier. As an 'Age' can be thought of as approximately two thousand years, the present day symbolism, of the fish (symbol of Christianity) being superseded by the water carrier (symbol of man having an ample supply of his own), is that of the new Millennium marking the ending of the 'Christian Age' and heralding 'the dawning of the Age of Aquarius', or the 'New Age' when man sees himself as having become spiritually self sufficient and no longer depending for his spirituality on 'the water Christ can give him'. Interestingly some sources have already described us as living in the 'post-Christian era', so the issue is relevant to the Church today.



Slemish (pictured above) from the Irish: *Sliabh Mis*. Tradition holds that Saint Patrick, enslaved as a youth, was brought to this area and tended herds on Slemish, and that during this time he found God.

It is difficult if not impossible to concisely define exactly what the 'New Age Movement' stands for, but in the following quotation, Simpson gives an adequate yet succinct synopsis of its popular advocates, its philosophy, its spiritualistic appeal, its relevance to the twenty first century and its feminist, ecological, astrological, psychological, and religious forms, together with a warning that it can even be lurking in the Church.

"As popularised by film stars such as Shirley McLane, the New Agers claim that we are leaving the Age of Pisces, which is characterised by the imposition of divisive norms (e.g. dogmas and morals),

particularly from the Judeo-Christian tradition, and we are entering the Age of Aquarius. 'New Age' is a reaction against the artificiality of materialism that has ignored and starved the body-spirit nature of human beings. In its feminist form, it is a reaction against domination by the male ego through economic or cultural imperialism. In its ecological form, it is a reaction against scientific and industrial abuse of nature. In its astrological form, it is a return to awareness of the forces and rhythms of the elements. In its psychological form, it is an opening up to abandonment to the flow of unconscious forces through dreams, etc. Its religious aspect may take the form of eastern pantheistic meditation, theosophy, spiritism, white or black magic, or Druid revivalism. In the Church, there are mild expressions of it in some courses at retreat houses, and in creationist theology."

Describing the religious background into which Patrick was reaching, Hopkin says that "the main impression we have of the religion of pagan Ireland is one of animism dominated by superstition." Inasmuch as she is writing of 'pagan Ireland' before the arrival of Patrick, she is quite right, but in the earlier section entitled 'A lesson in Pioneering', she quotes historian Kenneth Neil, seeming to infer that the end product of early Christian mission in Ireland was little more than Christianised pantheism, (the belief that God is everything in the universe and that everything which exists constitutes God.)¹ That inference can and must be refuted, for it misrepresents the teaching of the early Celtic church leaders by taking the fact that they loved nature and trying to twist it into saying that they worshipped nature. On the contrary, their love of the creation led them into their worship of the Creator and in turn, to their rejection of anything that usurped the place that rightfully belonged only to God. Here are two such leaders who are typical of those in the Celtic church who resisted the pantheism of the 'worship of the elements', renounced the animism of 'the personified forces of nature' and contrary to Kenneth Neil's suggestion of their being "willing to accept Christ as just another divinity", rejected the polytheism of the fertility deities.

"St Kentigern (also known as Mungo) (Bishop of Cumbria in 543)..... called on the people to renounce their worship of what God had created and to worship only the creator himself. ... In Ireland, Brigid had also taken the offensive against worship of the elements. She called God 'the Lord of the elements' and in the name of the Triune God she called forth fertility and blessing in crops and dairy. People actually witnessed that better results came from living God's way than from manipulating the personified forces of nature. Patrick was the first to model this way of turning the tables on nature worship. He loved and cherished creation as much as anyone; but he confronted the Druidic religion in the most daring and dashing way, with momentous consequences."

In showing the present day relevance of Patrick countering the age-old subtleties of Druidism Simpson says "The 'New Age' world-view today requires a similar challenge from Christ's people. Like Druidism, it is pervasive; there is much that is right about it as well as much that is wrong, but it ultimately leads to a new slavery. 'New Age' is an umbrella term for a range of ideas and practices, but I believe that, at heart, it can be described as 'modern nature worship'."

The early Celtic Christians knew what it was to pay a price to fulfill their callings. They knew that following the call of God was costly. They followed a God who called on them to die daily and whom they knew would settle for nothing less than their all. In stark contrast and with his own incisive, philosophical perception, C.S. Lewis exposes the facile calling of pantheism, its lack of challenge, its 'no cost', 'no charge', 'no commitment', 'no conviction' offer to those who want to take it or leave it.

"The Pantheist's God does nothing, demands nothing. He is there if you wish for Him, like a book on a shelf. He will not pursue you. There is no danger that at any time heaven or earth should feel awe at his glance. But Christ the creator King is there. And his intervening presence is terribly startling to discover."ⁱⁱⁱ

It is hard to think how anyone reading the 'Lives' of Patrick and those early Celtic saints could ever align their 'do or die' lifestyles with such a 'non-committal' philosophy of faith as 'pantheism'. In the present day, many of those who espouse 'New Age' philosophy and practice go to the Neolithic passage tomb at Newgrange in the Boyne valley in Co. Meath to draw on the 'spiritual' power source they find there. To give some idea of the national and international recognition still given to Newgrange, on the 21st December 1999, BBC 1 in cooperation with RTE did a live broadcast from the north side of the Boyne River in Co. Meath. The Taoiseach (pronounced Tea-shock) of the Irish Republic, Bertie Ahern, together with a number of members of the Dail government and other dignitaries stood in the burial chamber at daybreak, to witness the first rays of the rising sun entering

through the roof-box above the entrance and illuminating the passage, as it does only at the Winter Solstice. When asked for their comments on the way out, they said among other things that it was “a very spiritual experience”. Indicative of the ‘New Age’ interest in the event, Irish Visual Artist Emer O’Connor described the passage as “a visual representation of the female earth”. Her thinking as to how the whole five thousand year old event could be associated with the subject of fertility was obvious. She saw it as a manifestation in nature of an interrelationship between something which represented the passive female principle (Yin) and something which represented the active male principle (Yang). In her own words, she interpreted what was happening when the sun’s life giving rays flooded the passage of this earthly womb/tomb as “the spiritual counterbalance of Yin and Yang”.

Newgrange could be thought of as Ireland's own Glastonbury or Stonehenge for according to ancient historians and archaeologists, the site was a centre of Pagan worship that pre-dated the building of the Egyptian Pyramids by a thousand years. i.e., by the time of Patrick's arrival in Ireland, he was battling against an occultic stronghold that had been established for over three thousand years.¹ Yet in spite of the resistance he had to face, (which must have been considerable), Patrick refused to give in until he got the breakthrough, and carried on a spiritual struggle in the power of the Holy Spirit, manifesting the power of God over Satan, against the odds. Of his opposition to these Druidic practices, D.H. Farmer says that, "Patrick had a sincere simplicity and deep pastoral care. He was concerned with abolishing paganism, idolatry and Sun-worship;" He obviously reckoned that the practice of Sun-worship and everything that went with it must have been highly offensive to God, for the Druids quite possibly may have led the people in godless acts of Pagan worship to invoke the favour of their fertility deities. Seaton reckons that “the powers of magic were to be constrained to a positive end by placating the gods with sacrifices and rituals. ...human sacrifice was undoubtedly heavily involved. Fertility rites sometimes included the sacrifice to the nature goddess of a man from each kinship community.”

The pagan Celts gave their devotion to many such deities, not least of which was the Sun God. In an expression of disgust at them, Patrick says, "Those wretches who adore it (the Sun) will be miserably punished." The Celts held their new year's day on 1st November

Cahill goes further still and argues, that although it cannot be proven, in all probability human sacrifice was still continuing in Patrick's day. “We know – from Julius Caesar and other ancient witnesses and from incontrovertible archaeological evidence – that the Celts practiced (sic) human sacrifice. There is no reason to think that the Irish had stopped this practice before Patrick. Since we know that culture changed little in Ireland over many centuries, the likelihood is that human sacrifice was still being carried out in Patrick's day. But we have no direct proof.”

“These were the spiritual forces to be placated at *Samain*. Indeed the paganism of contemporary Hallowe'en (sic) harks back to the idea that the night before *Samain* was the great occasion in the year when the material world was overrun by forces of magic.” To this day the number of churches in Ireland that still celebrate Halloween in their youth organisations, oblivious of its occultic source (or influence), is incredible.

Arguably, ‘New Age’ influence can also be said to have the potential to stifle theological expression as a result of having hijacked certain words from our Christian vocabulary. For example, when Simpson speaks of the Celtic saints having “the longing for a return to a holistic (Emphasis mine) approach to life that does not put the natural and the supernatural, the sacred and the secular, into separate compartments” no ‘New Age’ association is inferred. (The ‘New Age Movement’ cannot claim copyright on the use of words like ‘holistic’.) Simpson is simply countering the philosophy of dualism, which makes a distinction between the spirit and the body, or sees a dichotomy between the spiritual and the natural.ⁱⁱⁱ Biblically there is nothing automatically virtuous about the spirit (or things spiritual), nor is there anything intrinsically evil about the body (or things material). The Bible shows Divinity manifested in both forms with no hint of any clash between the two, hence the two statements, ‘God is a spirit’ (John 4:24) and ‘**The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us**’ (John 1:14). Under the definition of ‘Manichaeism’ Baker's Concise Dictionary of Religion says that “The Manichees saw women and matter as inherently evil. St. Augustine (of Hippo) was at one time a Manichee before becoming a Christian.” His neo-platonic, neo-gnostic thinking was later to influence the teachings of the Church of Rome, but not so those of the Celtic Church. Ellis says that the Celtic Christians

“were less marred than the Roman church by the dualistic influence of the ancient Greek philosopher, Plato. It was Augustine of Hippo’s neoplatonism that taught the rigid separation of the spiritual and the material worldsIn contrast, the worldview of the Celts was remarkably holistic.”

He further gives a classical illustration of the contrast between these two philosophies showing up in the thinking of a Celtic Church leader (Patrick) and a pre-Celtic Church leader (Augustine of Hippo). We do not know if Patrick ever married. We do know however that he had no hang-ups with womanhood and that he could unpretentiously express his appreciation for femininity without the slightest hint of impropriety or lust. Alternatively, Augustine (of Hippo) has betrayed the typically ascetic characteristic of ‘denying the body in the hope of elevating the soul’ by expressing overt displeasure in heterosexual affection.

Such is his revulsion at the thought of physical contact with a female that he has left himself open to being called a ‘woman hater’. (One wonders what Freud would have made of him!!)

“Patrick delights to write about ‘a blessed woman, Irish by birth, noble, extraordinarily beautiful – a true adult – whom I baptised’. On the other hand, the Neoplatonic worldview produced not only asceticism, but often misogyny as well! For example, Augustine of Canterbury (sic) describes a woman’s embrace as ‘sordid, filthy and horrible.’” Ellis goes on to highlight how the Jewish mindset viewed the everyday routine things of life as being, “done within a God-framework – they were not secular activities” pointing out that “The Celtic Christians were the same.”

Simpson cites C.S. Lewis writing about a principle in the universe that he called ‘transposition’, which was his way of defining ‘the power of the higher to be incarnate in the lower’. Applying it firstly to the doctrine of the eternal Word being made flesh^{iv} and secondly in the more general sense to the Celtic church seeing and admiring God’s handiwork in everything, Simpson says “This idea of the Logos, of spiritual hierarchies penetrating the world of flesh and blood, was natural to Greek and Druid ways of thinking. The principle of transposition, in a wider form, was clearly taught in the catechism that tradition attributes to St Ninian. It ends: ‘And what is the fruit of study? *To perceive the eternal word of God reflected in every plant and insect, every bird and animal, and every man and woman.*’”

Today, in the twenty first century, both Patrick and his successors have much to teach the contemporary Irish Church in countering philosophies like neo-Druidism, animism, pantheism, syncretism and neo-Gnosticism masquerading under the guise of ‘New Age’.

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And finally...we couldn't let St. Patrick's Day go without a few of auld Irish Blessings...

‘May the road rise to meet you, May the wind be always at your back, May the sun shine warm upon your face, The rains fall soft upon your fields and, Until we meet again, May God hold you in the palm of His hand’

‘He who loses money, loses much; He who loses a friend, loses more; He who loses faith, loses all.’

*"In Ireland the inevitable never happens and the unexpected constantly occurs."
~By Sir John Pentland Mahaffy~*
