

A Pastoral Approach to the New Age:
Neopaganism and Reincarnation

by

Robert D. Fath, Jr.

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This thesis has been read and approved by:

Dr. Owen Cummings
Director

Date: _____

Rev. Jerome Young, O.S.B.
Second Reader

Date: _____

Sr. Mary Timothy McHatten, O.P.
English Standards Committee

Date: _____

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I. Introduction

From the time of the ancient pagan civilizations of the world, to the dawn of Christianity, to the age of the Enlightenment and social upheavals of the recent centuries, humanity has eternally been in search of the meaning of life. In the last 150 years, this search for the meaning of existence has become acute as technology and science have advanced, revealing more about the world and humanity itself. Cardinal Ruini recently said that “It is paradoxical, and at the same time very significant, that exactly when the technical-scientific capacity has been made stronger to intervene in the human being, man runs the risk of losing sight of the meaning and value of life itself” (“Genome”). As information has grown so has the distrust of it. As a result there has been a renewal of efforts to search for answers to the perennial questions of existence from a spiritual perspective instead of from a purely scientific perspective. Within this search old ideas have reemerged that challenge the established religious framework, particularly in North America and Europe, in order to lead individuals to the answers which they earnestly seek. These ideas have been put forth by individuals such as Helena P. Blavatsky foundress of the Theosophical Society, actress Shirley MacLaine, and Starhawk the pagan theologian. The revival of esotericism was fueled by the cultural upheaval of the 1960’s. The common link between each of these individuals and others is the search for answers outside of the history and tradition of Christianity and in the esoteric movements of ancient pagan mystery cults as well as Eastern religions and philosophies. The movements have come to be labeled collectively as the New Age.

Why should the Catholic Church be concerned with the esoteric ideas of people such as Shirley MacLaine or Starhawk? The answer is three-fold. First, many Catholic

Christians are being affected by the New Age movement. They feel the Church is not providing answers to the questions that accompany their spiritual journey, such as what is humanity's relationship to the environment or the relationship between men and women? Second, before the New Age was labeled as such, the Second Vatican Council in *Gaudium et Spes* called for the Church to “[read] the signs of the time and... [interpret] them in the light of the Gospel” (§ 4). Examination of the signs of the times reveals that “men are today troubled and perplexed by questions about current trends in the world, about their place and role in the universe, about the meaning of individual and collective endeavors, and finally about the destiny of nature and men” (§ 3). Third, the Catechism of the Catholic Church states that “The Catholic Church recognizes in other religions [and philosophies] that search, among shadows and images, for the God who is unknown yet near...the Church considers all goodness and truth found in these religions” (§ 843). To this end Pope John Paul II authorized the release of a document in 2003 entitled Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life: A Christian Reflection on the ‘New Age’ in order to address some of the more pressing concerns that the New Age movement presents for the Church and humanity. The purpose of the document was to encourage those in the Church charged with catechesis to reflect on the movement in order to impart to others how the New Age differs from the authentic teachings of the Catholic faith but also to learn from the legitimate concerns that the movement presents to society (Pontifical Council 1).

This paper seeks to explore the Vatican's current document on the New Age, and others like it promulgated by various episcopal conferences and mainline Protestant communions. Since the New Age movement is so large and lacks the dogmatic and

creedal structure of other spiritualities, an emphasis will be placed on three aspects of the movement: what the New Age movement is in general, current trends in the New Age (including its infiltration into mainstream culture) and the specific New Age topics of reincarnation and neo-paganism. It is hoped that this will be a resource for catechists and Church leaders in conversations with those within the Catholic community who have been affected by New Age ideas.

II. What is the New Age?

Before addressing specific issues regarding the New Age it is important to define what it is. An all-inclusive definition of the New Age is difficult to establish because of the loose organization of the movement and the different spiritual and philosophical tenets of those within the New Age. It is also difficult to establish a definition because many Christians and academic scholars describe it in vastly different ways. Since each group analyzes the New Age from its own perspective, it may be helpful to look at a representative sample of definitions from those involved in the New Age, from academic scholars and from Christians who examine the New Age in an attempt to grasp the general idea of what constitutes it.

A. What the New Age Movement Says About Itself

First, those involved in the New Age view the movement, not as one opposed to established religious traditions, but acting as a bridge to bring them together in one unified movement. They claim that they have discovered the core beliefs of all humanity, those beliefs that transcend sectarian dogma. David Spangler, a New Age professor teaching at the University of Wisconsin explains the New Age as a movement that:

...explores a sense of holiness and wholeness that is life-affirming and world-affirming, intimate with nature and seeking out the spirit of God in the incarnate cosmos....One of the characteristics of the New Age faith is that it embodies a global spirit. The journey is not confined within a specific body of teachings but is conducted with openness to all the great faith traditions, including those that have a specific affinity with the spirituality of the land...by exploring the boundaries where faith traditions touch and begin to commune with one another,

one can begin to discern the primal voice of the Mystery from which all these traditions ultimately emerge, the God of the ecology as well as the God of the cathedral. (101 ff)

Dr. Spangler's definition seeks to emphasize the oneness of all the world's religions Eastern and Western, indigenous and industrialized, to further the journey of the individual. In Spangler's opinion, the secondary dogmas and creeds of individual religions have concealed the essential truths of spirituality, the mystical and transcendent existence that all individuals know to be true. New Age simply strips away these non-essentials to unify humanity and its search.

Another definition is put forth by the actress Shirley MacLaine who has written numerous accounts of her spiritual journey within the New Age. In an interview with the Los Angeles Times, Ms. MacLaine states:

It is a new way of thinking that allows a connection with the 'kingdom of heaven within,' and each person makes his or her connection in a different way. It is what I call soul physics, because when a connection is made, there is a palpable reaction in the mind and physical body...Who are we really? Where did we come from...Dare we believe that we have access to wise and divine spiritual knowledge?

New Age consciousness doesn't believe these things. It knows them. And that knowledge is setting people free. Free from fear, rage, anxiety, anger, frustration, helplessness, futility and willful destruction. (1)

Like Spangler, MacLaine focuses on the unity of everything, the perennial questions of all world religions and philosophies, and the apparent solutions of following the New

Age path: unity with all creation and freedom from volatile emotional experiences. She also emphasizes the inward search for a connection with the divine as opposed to a search within an organized faith community.

These definitions from New Age participants represent only a fraction of the characterizations that are available. Other notable definitions are advanced by individuals such as Marilyn Ferguson, Alice Bailey and Sri Aurobindo, to name a few (Kemp, New Age 5), but overall they all focus on a primal knowledge of humanity and on extreme individuality through a search of the inner self.

B. What Scholars Say About the New Age

In recent years, scholars from various disciplines, some of whom are themselves adherents to New Age, have become involved in the academic study of the New Age phenomenon. Whole academic departments in sociology, psychology, and religious studies are organized and annual conferences held to study the movement. One of the more notable conferences is the Alternative Spiritualities and New Age Studies conference which has been held for the past three years at various academic institutions in the United Kingdom. The conference has attracted notable New Age scholars such as Wouter Hanegraaff, Paul Heelas, J. Gordon Melton, and Daren Kemp, the latter being the organizer of the conference. The scholars approach to the study of New Age has focused on the historical, psychological and sociological implications of the movement.

The most concise definition of the movement has been advanced by Wouter Hanegraaff. He states:

The New Age movement is the cultic milieu having become conscious of itself, in the later 1970s, as constituting a more or less unified 'movement'. All

manifestations of this movement are characterized by a popular western culture criticism expressed in terms of secularized esotericism. (New Age Religion and Western Culture 522)

Basically, for Dr. Hanegraaff the New Age represents the individual's personal knowledge united with others that is separate from the dogmatic statements and revelation of the established Western religions, particularly Christianity. It views organized religion, as well as rampant secularization and modernization, as suspect. Much of this movement, while tracing its roots to the European Enlightenment, gained real force in the 1960's and continues through the following decades (New Age and Western Culture: Esotericism 10).

Paul Heelas gives a more detailed definition of the movement trying to capture the implications of the movement. He defines New Age as:

...a highly optimistic, celebratory, utopian and spiritual form of humanism, many versions...emphasizing the spirituality of the natural order as a whole.

Ultimately—God, the Goddess, the Higher Self—lies within, serving as the source of vitality, creativity, love, tranquility, wisdom, responsibility, power and all those other qualities which are held to comprise the perfect inner life and which, when applied in daily practice (supposedly) ensure that all is utopian...And more analytically, as an internalized form of religiosity, the New Age is (albeit to varying degrees) detraditionalized. That is to say, autonomy and freedom are highly valued; and authority lies with the experience of the Self or, more broadly, the natural realm. (28 ff)

Heelas' definition serves to emphasize the individualistic nature of the New Age, its opposition to traditional religions, particularly Christianity, and the utopian mentality that all is well if one believes hard enough.

A group of psychologists from Sweden offer an explanation of the New Age movement that underscores the plethora of ideas that are involved in the movement, which makes it difficult to form a universal definition of New Age. Pehr Granqvist and Berit Hagekull state that:

...various forms of metaphors can be applied, one of which is a smorgasboard [*sic*] with various blends of ingredients that the individual can choose from. Some of these ingredients concern broad systems of thought (e.g., Eastern thinking, astrology, Jungian psychology) and myths (e.g., the "new age" itself, the animate cosmos); others concern more specific beliefs, such as in the occult, in parapsychological phenomena, and in UFOs. Some ingredients refer to activities proposed to be of benefit to human health (e.g., alternative medicine, vegetarianism, various forms of healing), spiritual development (e.g., meditation, yoga, rebirthing), and self-actualization (e.g., outgrowths of humanistic therapy, such as encounter groups and the human potential movement). Finally, some ingredients refer to holy places (e.g., the pyramids of Egypt, Sedona in Arizona), holy animals (dolphins, whales), healing objects (e.g., crystals and amulets), rituals (e.g., affirmations, regressions to previous forms of existence [reincarnation]), holy scriptures (e.g., "a course in miracles"), and contemplative music and sounds (e.g., pan flutes, the sound of dolphins). In trying to find common threads, some key words underlying the diversity are emphases on

“intuition” (rather than rationality or intellect), holism (as opposed to reductionism), religious syncretism (as opposed to exclusivism and “dogmatism”), immanence (rather than transcendence), and epistemological subjectivism and relativism (as opposed to objectivism and again, presumably, “dogmatism”). (530)

As one can see from such a description, New Age can be said to take in a flood of varying ideologies making it almost impossible to characterize it in any definitive way. Different aspects of New Age taken by themselves may not be indicative of New Age involvement, but together may suggest a leaning towards such a system of thought.

As a whole, scholars outside the movement see New Age as the logical consequence of the European Enlightenment and the anti-authoritarian, egocentric ideologies of the 1960's; a focus on the rational aspects of spirituality at the expense of mysticism. Also, beginning in the late 19th century there was a resurgence in the study of ancient and esoteric belief systems. By the middle of the 20th century, occult studies, theosophy, the social sciences and the political climate had combined to form an environment for New Age beliefs to enter mainstream society. While most scholars study the development of New Age ideas from a purely academic point of view those who do offer a personal or experiential opinion of it and view it with mixed emotions (Anthony and Robbins 12; Dillon 427; Ellwood 66; Haanegraaff, New Age and 10; Pontifical Council §1.1; Leach 384; Kemp 31; Mears and Ellison 291; York 9).

C. What Does Christianity Say About the New Age Movement

Adherents to mainstream religions have also offered their interpretation of the New Age movement. Interestingly, most of the opinions of the movement have been

offered by Christians even though many of the philosophical ideas of New Age find their root in Eastern religion and philosophy. Christian definitions cover the entire gamut of reactions from those offered by fundamentalist Christians who tend to view the movement as a diabolical worldwide conspiracy threatening the very existence of Christianity with no redeeming qualities, to the more reserved approach of Catholics and Anglicans who acknowledge some of the positive aspects of the movement, and those who see New Age as compatible with Christianity, called Christaquarians¹.

Fundamentalist descriptions of New Age tend to be fearful and apocalyptic. For example, in 1983 Constance Cumbey described the New Age movement as:

...a worldwide network. It consists of tens of thousands of cooperating organizations. Their primary goal or the secret behind their 'unity-in-diversity' is the formation of a 'New World Order'. The Movement usually operates on the basis of a well-formulated body of underlying esoteric or occult teachings...it includes organizations teaching mind control, Holistic Health, esoteric philosophy; scientific workers, political workers; and organizations dedicated to peace and world goodwill. It also includes many consumers, environmental and nutritional organizations as well as religious cults of every shade and description.

(54)

Ms. Cumbey's description is a good example of the stance taken by fundamentalist Christians. Some writers have gone so far as to implicate anyone who has purchased

¹ The term 'Christaquarian' was coined by Daren Kemp to describe the growing number of Christians who incorporate New Age spiritual beliefs into traditional Christianity. The term was developed from the belief that as the world moves into the astrological Age of Aquarius there will be a transformation in the spirituality of humanity (Kemp 27; Scherer 8). Additional information on the movement can be found at <http://www.Christaquarian.net>.

products classified as New Age such as compact discs by the Irish vocalist Enya, the United Nations, and the Roman Catholic Church as contributing to the establishment of a new world order (Kemp 133; Mears and Ellison 291). Many of the apologetic treatises against the New Age come from this background and seem to be of little help in truly understanding the New Age movement as New Age participants express and experience it.

A more balanced definition of the New Age is offered by the Church of Scotland and has found similar acceptance within Roman Catholic, Anglican and mainline Protestant circles (cf. Irish Theological Commission; Pontifical Council for Culture; Methodist Church in England). They state:

New Age is an umbrella term which shelters a vast range of therapies, ideologies, cultural trends and beliefs which are drawn from many world religions and cults...It cannot be regarded as a religion; it has no belief system; it has no headquarters and no recognisable leaders. Yet, there can be no doubt that the New Age has become extremely influential in Western society...The New Age itself, in terms of the astrological calendar, is the Age of Aquarius which is an age of light and peace and harmony and plenty. At some time in the future, as men and women achieve higher levels of consciousness, this will replace the present Age of Pisces, an age of darkness, ignorance and disunity. (Church of Scotland)

Catholic, Anglican and mainline Protestant denominations have generally tried to recognize the relevance of the spiritual quest of New Age adherents. However, they all caution that while some aspects of the New Age movement may be compatible with traditional Christianity, e.g. Eastern meditative techniques, it should be avoided in

general because of its distortion of the reality of the gospel message and the egocentric, individualist mentality that it fosters.

In general, those movements which fall under the umbrella of New Age have several characteristics in common. First, there is the belief that humanity and all of creation is on the verge of a spiritual shift or transformation. Second, this transformation will come about through the embrace of various spiritual beliefs and practices from the East and West, especially those that incorporate esoteric beliefs systems. Third, there is a focus on self-empowerment and the realization that the fulfillment of individual aspirations are fundamental building blocks of social transformation. Finally, there is a need to reconcile various religious points of view with the scientific worldview (Lucas 192).

D. Who is involved in the New Age?

Depending on the different sources, the number of individuals involved in the New Age Movement varies. Many Fundamentalist Christian writers argue that anyone who has ever purchased a compact disc sold in the New Age/Alternative section of a store, taken up yoga, or visited a naturopath to treat an ailment is a New Ager. Most researchers, however, do not hold such an extreme view. A number of studies have been conducted to determine how many people are seriously involved in the New Age. Such studies are relatively recent, only going back approximately ten years. Due to the inconsistency in defining what exactly encompasses New Age, studies have consisted in either the researcher setting a definition prior to conducting the research or only interviewing those who are involved in groups that define themselves as New Age (Kemp 82). In general, researchers have tended towards checklists of common New Age

activities and Likert-type questionnaires² about involvement in alternative spiritual practices. A problem that Kemp came across in his own research and attempts to replicate past research was that such scales have been misleading. In a study he conducted in 2003, Kemp found that Evangelical Christians scored higher than expected using a scale developed by Stuart Rose (83); he counseled therefore that such scales should be employed with caution.

One notable study conducted by Mears and Ellison focused on consumer habits as a possible indicator of New Age involvement. Their study, conducted in Texas, examined the responses of 1,014 individuals by random dialing phone interviewing (296). Their questions focused on New Age concepts such as reincarnation, inner spiritual experiences, communication with the dead and the ability to heal oneself. In general they found that those who were unmarried, living in urban centers, were unemployed and held more liberal ideologies, tended towards New Age beliefs. Mainstream religious affiliation did not appear to be significant except among non-Baptist conservative Protestants, such as Pentecostals and members of the Church of Christ (305), although up to 25% of respondents in the other religious groups indicated drawing on New Age materials. Age had little correlation with New Age consumption, but women tended to be drawn more to New Age materials than men. In their analysis, Mears and Ellison noted that almost all of the respondents indicated affiliation with a Christian denomination, which suggested to the authors a blend of traditional Christian beliefs with New Age ideas, but that this blending may be mediated by regular involvement in church activities (309).

² A Likert-questionnaire employs a numbered scale on which the respondents record the intensity of their agreement with a given statement.

Another more widespread study focused on the prevalence of New Age beliefs among various Protestant denominations across the United States. Surveys were conducted among the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Christian Church, Presbyterian Church, United Church of Christ, United Methodist Church, and the Southern Baptist Convention through random samples within each national religious organization (Donahue 177). Overall, the endorsement of various New Age ideas was relatively low, only 7-9% across all the groups surveyed. However, statements supportive of New Age ideologies (e.g. that truth is found within oneself) was supported by almost one third of the respondents. Again, as in the previous study, higher support for New Age beliefs was found among those denominations considered to be theologically liberal, such as the United Church of Christ, and less so among more conservative groups, like the Southern Baptist Convention (181). Results were also analyzed by region of the country. It is usually presumed that the West Coast of the United States is a bastion of alternative spiritualities because of the number of New Age training centers and spiritual sites. According to this study, however, the West Coast, which included California, Oregon, Washington, Alaska and Hawaii ranked somewhere in the middle while the mid-Atlantic region, which included New York, Pennsylvania and New Jersey ranked the highest in support of New Age ideas (180). This particular result may be skewed given that individuals on the West Coast tend to be less involved in organized religion than those along the East Coast leaving out an important sample group in the study.

Similar results regarding New Age affiliation are found in Europe as well. In 1999, a study was conducted in the Netherlands which measured individuals' identification or non-identification with some Christian denomination, or lack thereof,

and interest in New Age ideas. Sixty percent of the population indicated no affiliation with a Christian Church, which was inversely proportional to one's age (Houtman and Mascini 455). Overall, the results indicated that the younger people were and the more educated, the more individualistic they were. More individualistic people were more apt to be involved in New Age activities. Interestingly, women, again, had more affinity with involvement in New Age activities than men, a difference which seemed unrelated to being more individualistic (466). The researchers also concluded that the process of individualization "drives [not only] a growth of New Age (*religious change*), but a growth of nonreligiosity (*secularization*) as well" (468). Secularization, in combination with the growth of New Age, is the only explanation for the flight from traditional Christian religions. Christian denominations seem to be losing a higher number of adherents than the growth in New Age can explain. Whether individuals are becoming more secular or involving themselves more heavily in the New Age movement are both problems that Christianity must address.

Another study of adherents to New Age focused on why, as opposed to whom, individuals were involved in the New Age Movement. The study was conducted on 193 volunteers in Stockholm, Sweden. The sample group consisted of mostly young adults, with a mean age of about 18, chosen mainly because the researchers felt that late adolescence and young adulthood was the time in which one's own religious identity is beginning to assert itself. A questionnaire was the means for collecting information from the participants (Granqvist and Hagekull 531-2). Granqvist and Hagekull found that there was a positive link between those involved in New Age and emotionally-based religious expression and a negative link with the yearning for socialization (538). This would seem

to support a stance of many leaders within New Age; if it feels good do it. The perception is that New Age is a spirituality that is turned inward and more egocentric than traditional Western religions. This study would also seem to show support for the use of the newer forms of pop-psychology that tend to be more emotionally based than behavioral or biological.

It is difficult in any definitive way to identify those individuals who are involved in the New Age movement. Given the research, however, some general statements can be made. The New Age movement is comprised primarily, but not limited to, individuals of higher socio-economic and educational levels. These persons tends to be younger, single and female who feel disconnected from traditional forms of religious expression. For some, this means trying to identify novel or innovative ways of approaching the spiritual life within the context of the faith in which they were raised, resulting in groups such as the Christaquarians. For others, it means casting off institutional religious ideas and seeking something less mainstream.

Two New Age issues that have found prominence both within traditional Christianity and outside of it are neopaganism and reincarnation. While there are many aspects of the New Age movement that are creeping into Christianity, these two seem of particular importance because they address fundamental religious questions. Neopaganism questions the relationship between humanity and God, and humanity and nature in this life. Reincarnation addresses the question of what happens after death. Both neopaganism and reincarnation attempt to struggle with life and the after-life.

III. Neopaganism

A. General Considerations Concerning Neopaganism

Of all the various aspects of the New Age Movement, the most well known is probably that of the neopagan movement. Although it summons up images of witches with pointed hats and broomsticks involved in secret ceremonies in remote wooded areas, Wicca is actually only one small segment of neopaganism. Like New Age itself, there is a diverse set of beliefs depending on the focus of the individual's spirituality. As of 1990 it was estimated that there were between 83,000-333,000 individuals involved in some sort of neopagan movement just in the United States (Melton 4). Again, like New Age, in general, the actual number of individuals involved in the movement is difficult to assess with any accuracy because a large proportion of its adherents are not part of easily identifiable groups or are not fully involved in the movement.

Neopaganism, in general, can be defined as a movement towards and predilection to religious and spiritual beliefs that pre-date Christianity. Their belief systems are based on the pantheon of pre-Christian deities from the ancient Greek, Roman, Norse, Druid, and Egyptian religions as well as the nature religions of the Native Americans of North and South America (Heelas 88; Reid and Rabinovitch 514). Many adherents to neopaganism argue that the roots of their religious beliefs have been passed down through the centuries despite Judeo-Christian persecution; however many researchers find this claim to be rather dubious (Hutton). For instance, the Celtic strain of neopaganism appears to have its roots with two different individuals. Gerald Brousseau Gardner, after the repeal of England's Witchcraft Act in 1951, wrote several books on witchcraft claiming that he had been inducted into an ancient coven of witches that pre-

dated Christian persecutions on the island. In a similar vein, Alex Sanders claimed to have been initiated into a coven at the age of seven by his grandmother. In reality, it seems that Alexandrian neopaganism may actually have been a slightly later version of Gardenarian neopaganism. Regardless of this fact neopagans with an understanding of the history of the movement in North America and the United Kingdom claim roots in one of these two traditions which have only existed for about 50 years (Hanegraaff, New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism 88; Hutton; Reid and Rabinovitch 515).

While neopaganism is a highly individualized form of spirituality there are loose federations of practitioners of “the Craft” in different areas of the world. The most notable and active groups include the Pagan Federation in the United Kingdom, the Covenant of the Goddess in North America, and the Pagan Alliance of Australia and New Zealand. These three organizations provide resources for and about neopaganism as well as forums for organizing movements which may be of interest to neopagans in various areas of the world.

Since neopagan beliefs are quite diverse it is important to understand the basic beliefs that those involved in the movement hold. Since the focus of neopaganism is on the individual’s own spiritual journey most are open to acknowledging any spiritual tradition, including Christianity, even though they may not agree with it themselves. There are a few neopagans, such as Zseyanna Budapest, who take an extreme position against Christianity as the sworn enemy of what she defines as a “wimmin’s religion” (Hanegraaff, New Age Religion and Western Culture 91). In general there are three basic principles that guide the neopagan. First, there is an intense focus on and reverence towards the natural world (Pagan Federation; Robinson). The so-called green-movement

or deep ecology is an integral part of the ecological orientation of neopaganism (Albanese 19). Nature is venerated and in many cases seen as god-like itself, leading to tendencies towards pantheism. Neopagans tend to blame current ecological problems on the Judeo-Christian worldview. They believe that:

the problems of the modern world, particularly the ecological crisis, are... a direct result of the loss of pagan wisdom about man's relationship to the natural world, and a recovery of this wisdom is regarded not only as desirable but as urgently needed. (Hanegraaff, New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism 77)

Often times this attitude is expressed through participation in ecological movements that seek to protect natural resources, endangered species, and as of yet untouched pristine areas of wilderness. Involvement in radical environmental groups such as Earth First, the Animal Liberation Front and Greenpeace are not uncommon but not all neopagans are radical environmentalists and not all environmentalists are neopagans. Many would agree that environmentalism is a good thing. However, participation and ecological conservation are not necessarily done by neopagans because they are good *per se* but because nature itself is composed of divine beings in their own right who are threatened by humanity's destruction of the earth. Often times neopagans will refer to the entire planet as one living, divine organism known as Gaia. While not known to be originally expressed by neopagans, a number of scientists have formulated the hypothesis that the earth itself is one giant living organism in which the different aspects of the natural world, from viruses to whales, are its constituent parts, in many ways like the different components of a cell. Known as the Gaia Hypothesis, it is believed that the ecosystem dynamically acts and reacts to changes much in the same way that plants and animals

adapt to changes in their own environment. It is believed, though, that humanity's impact of the environment is outpacing the adaptability of Gaia which is causing major damage to the ecosystem worldwide. It is argued that if humanity does not recognize its place within the system, as just one constituent part, then the prospects for the earth's survival is grim (Scharper 207ff).

Thomas Berry³, a cultural historian, is a major supporter of the deep ecology⁴ movement. He has devoted his career to criticizing the "domination" perspective that Western religions hold towards the natural world based on Sacred Scripture. It is his contention because of its redemption-based focus, Christianity has created a fundamental disconnect between humanity and the created world. As a result the original earth-based spirituality of early Christianity has been lost. Berry claims that nature has rights that must be respected by humanity. To this end he has developed a list of ten precepts that constitute the rights of the earth:

1. Rights originate where existence originates. That which determines existence determines rights.
2. Since it has no further context of existence in the phenomenal order, the universe is self-referent in its being and self-normative in its activities. It is

³ Thomas Berry was a Catholic priest of the Passionist Congregation. His views on the environment are very much in line with the understanding of the environment found within the neopagan movement.

⁴ William Cunningham defines deep ecology as:
a philosophy that calls for a profound shift in our attitudes and behavior based on voluntary simplicity; rejection of anthropocentric attitudes; intimate contact with nature; decentralization of power; support for cultural and biological diversity; a belief in the sacredness of nature; and direct personal action to protect nature, improve the environment, and bring about fundamental societal change.

also the primary referent in the being and activities of all derivative modes of being.

3. The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects. As subjects, the component members of the universe are capable of having rights.
4. The natural world on the planet Earth gets its rights from the same source that humans get their rights, from the universe that brought them into being.
5. Every component of the Earth community has three rights: the right to be, the right to habitat, and the right to fulfill its role in the ever-renewing processes of the Earth community.
6. All rights are species specific and limited. Rivers have river rights. Birds have bird rights. Insects have insect rights. Difference in rights is qualitative, not quantitative. The rights of an insect would be of no value to a tree or a fish.
7. Human rights do not cancel out the rights of other modes of being to exist in their natural state. Human property rights are not absolute. Property rights are simply a special relationship between a particular human “owner” and a particular piece of “property” so that both might fulfill their roles in the great community of existence.
8. Since species exist only in the form of individuals, rights refer to individuals and to their natural groups of individuals into flocks, herds, packs, not simply in a general way to species.
9. Their rights as presented here are based upon the intrinsic relations that the various components of Earth have to each other. The planet Earth is a single community bound together with interdependent relationships. No living being

nourishes itself. Each component of the Earth community is immediately or mediately dependent on every other member of the community for the nourishment and assistance it needs for its own survival. This mutual nourishment, which includes the predator-prey relationships, is integral with the role that each component of the Earth has within the comprehensive community of existence.

10. In a special manner humans have not only a need for but a right of access to the natural world to provide not only the physical need of humans but also the wonder needed by human intelligence, the beauty needed by human imagination, and the intimacy needed by human emotions for fulfillment. (Angyal 40-41)

Berry claims that these rights are based on his understanding of Thomistic philosophy and an appeal to a natural rights argument. What seems to be lacking in this rights-based statement is the fact that Thomistic philosophy, assuming that it would be able to conceive of such an expression towards the created world, would necessarily balance rights with the subject's duties and responsibilities. If a subject, like the earth, is unable to understand, let alone fulfill, the requisite duties and responsibilities that accompany such rights, the question becomes do the rights exist and, if they do, can the subjects claim that which they do not have an understanding of?

The second principle can be summed up in the phrase "Do what you will, as long as it harms none" (Pagan Federation; Robinson). The Covenant of the Goddess gives general guidelines as to what constitutes harm including making someone uncomfortable, imposing your will upon others, cursing others, working spells on others or harming

oneself. This phrase could be described as the “golden rule” of neopaganism and as the only commandment of neopaganism, it leaves individuals free to express this in their own way along their own path. This humanistic and relativistic approach to ethical decision making and morality is believed to maximize personal freedom and personal responsibility. The Pagan Federation elaborates by stating:

[The rule] does encourage us to be aware of the context in which our actions operate, to consider the probable consequences of the choices we make, to choose those which are reasonable and proportionate in the circumstances and thus minimise such harm as cannot be prevented, and to take responsibility for our contribution, by either action or inaction, to the outcome. Hard ethical decisions are not about whether harm will happen, but about where it will fall.

In essence the final authority in a given ethical dilemma is the individual who, after careful consideration and weighing of the possible outcomes, determines the rightness or wrongness of an action and, theoretically, accepts the consequences of those actions. In the neopagan belief system the objectivity of right and wrong are part of an individual ethic of life as opposed to a collective, objective ethic of life. While there are general guidelines as to what constitutes harm there is a wide range in how this is exercised. For instance, the Covenant of the Goddess asserts that cursing another is a form of harm. However, an article published in [The Wren's Nest](#), a neopagan newspaper in the United Kingdom, reported that a group in St. Edmundsbury had cursed the developers of a new shopping center that was being built after the contractor missed a deadline set down by the group to discontinue work. Interestingly enough, the group known as the Knights of St. Edmund, are considered to be pagan-Christians (Bury Free Press).

The third basic tenant of neopaganism is the recognition of the divine in both its male and female aspects. Again, the Pagan Federation states:

It requires us to acknowledge that where the divine is understood as deity or deities having gender it must include a Goddess or Goddesses as well as a God or Gods. It also recognises that there are Pagan understandings of divinity which cannot be thus categorised. Modern Paganism tends to approach theology through a synergy of multiple understandings of the divine or Divinity in the abstract, and modern Pagans tend to regard the honouring of the Gods, of the divine as it is manifest within this living world, as of greater importance than theological speculation to its or their precise nature.

This tenet seems to be one that is ambiguous or largely overlooked by a majority of those following neopaganism. As the statement suggests there should be a balance between deities of the male and female persuasion, where gods and goddesses exist. However, when one begins to look into the writings of authorities in the movement, such as Starhawk, there is a preference for and focus on the goddess and a minimization of the god. In fact, many adherents talk about being involved in goddess worship or the religion of the goddess, minimizing or discounting altogether the role of a god (Hangraaff, New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism 88). Researchers offer two possibilities as to why this is so. First, there is the belief that a matriarchal organization attunes one more with nature and the concerns of the natural world than does a patriarchal system (Albanese 23). This reason has its roots in the sketchy theory discussed by Cynthia Eller that matriarchal systems pre-date patriarchal systems of governance and that due to some sort of cataclysmic event men eventually overthrew such a system and have dominated

society ever since (qtd. in Barger 694). Secondly, it is seen as a backlash against the world's major religions, both East and West, because of their focus on a hierarchical system dominated by a male deity which tends to minimize the contribution of the feminine to society and has led to discord in the world and the current crises of war and ecological instability (Albanese 178).

Neopagan points of view have not been confined to the New Age movement or secular society. In some ways they have entered into the Church as well, often times brought in as well-meaning individuals begin searching outside the confines of Catholicism for the answers that they seek. One notable example of this is the case of Matthew Fox a former Dominican priest who was expelled from the order by the Undersecretary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life February 22, 1993 because of his teachings regarding what he called Creation Spirituality (Benkovic 55). Beginning in 1978, Fox founded the Institute of Culture and Creation Spirituality in Chicago which eventually moved to Holy Names College in Oakland, CA in 1983. With the help of Starhawk, Fox attempted to blend "Christian mysticism, feminism and environmentalism" (York 87). Eventually, Fox went on to found Wisdom University in California which has a commitment to "spiritual activism" (Garrison).

Neopaganism has also raised the ire of some in Hinduism. Meera Nanda has concerns that the spread of neopaganism in Western society is contributing to the spread of Hindu fundamentalism in the Indian subcontinent, not because of dual involvement but because the basic tenants of neopaganism (deification of nature, positive morality, and recognition of divinity in both its male and female forms) are seen as a first step towards

Hinduism becoming a dominant religion in the world. Nanda states that “Hindu nationalists want to project India as the sole surviving nation that has preserved its polytheistic, pagan culture” (19). Her concerns go deeper in that she sees a strong connection between neopaganism and fascist ideologies, although she states unequivocally that not all neopagans are fascists. She bases this on four observations. First, there is a long history of Nazi and neo-Nazi involvement in the occult and paganism. Secondly, because of the focus on local and regional gods, there is a tendency towards defending those gods against nonbelievers. Next, because neopagans believe they are doing the will of nature and the gods there is a tendency to disregard what are seen as human-made laws. Finally, well-meaning, sincere neopagan groups can attract those with extremist tendencies (20-21). While Hinduism most likely has its own objections to the Western neopagan movement that do not intersect with Christian concerns, it is interesting to note the concerns that are presented. These should be taken into consideration by anyone entering into dialogue with individuals involved in the movement.

B. What Are the Problems With A Neopagan Worldview and a Catholic Response

While there are a number of directions in which neopaganism can go, depending on the individual’s own path, the three general principles of the movement present several points that need to be taken into consideration when entering into dialogue. First, there is the idea of pantheism, that the natural world is somehow divine. Flowing from this divinization of nature are the difficulties associated with involvement in radical environmental movements and deep ecology. Next, there is the problem of relative

morality. How is one to judge objectively what is moral or immoral if there is no objective truth from which to operate? Finally, there is the problem of radical feminism which seeks to raise the status and consciousness of women and feminine ideals but at the sacrifice of the complementarity of the sexes. These issues should not be viewed by Christians as irreconcilable differences, but rather as opportunities to enter into dialogue not only with those firmly entrenched in neopaganism, but more importantly with those who may be drifting into the movement because of discontent or frustration with Christianity.

1. Pantheism and Deep Ecology

Pantheism is a concept that is not accepted within Christianity. For the Catholic believer God is the creator and sustainer of nature but is not nature itself. The natural world as a created object shows forth the love and goodness of the Creator, God (Catechism §293-294). The deification of nature has several fundamental flaws which necessarily must be corrected. First, there is the limiting factor that is placed on God if he were to be nature itself. If God were nature and vice versa then one is asserting that what is seen in the world is the sum of who and what God is. This, of course, would beg the question, if God is limited to the natural world and is thus a created thing, then who or what created God? Rather creation is a mystery of the transcendence of God. Bryan Eyman & Marijo Ryan state that:

The universe was created by the will of God. It is of a nature other than the nature of God. Nowhere in Orthodox Christian thought is there the idea of creation being a part of God's nature or a stage in the ongoing evolution of the Godhead.

Creation is totally apart from God, so that in...Christian thought God can always be viewed as totally other.

This mystery is very difficult to contemplate and accept. It is impossible to really understand, except in accepting creation as a loving activity of God's will. In fact, it is an activity of the sovereign will of God. Being of a nature, other than the nature of God, is very difficult to fathom. This is especially true when we have a God that is viewed as omnipotent, immutable, "everywhere present and filling all things." (14)

In other words, creation in all its beauty and splendor is not God himself but rather the end product of his loving activity. It is easy to understand how one could fall into the error that something so complex and beautiful, something so difficult to fathom would cause one to think that it was divine in and of itself.

The second problem with the concept of pantheism for Christians is that within this understanding of God the object of worship becomes the created instead of the Creator. This is at best a pale understanding of God and at worst it is a sin against the First Commandment by engaging in idolatry (cf. Catechism §2112). In many ways pantheism is like an individual who would praise the canvas on which a painting has been produced instead of the artist. There is a failure to go beyond the created image to the person behind the painting. This seems like an odd idea particularly given that individuals regularly see beyond created things, be they great artistic masterpieces or their mother's homemade soup, to the person who created them. In the same way "the Finger of God (*digitus Dei*) was not only there [in nature]...it left traces, patterns, impressions, calling cards (*vestigia Dei*)" (Akers 75) calling humanity to look beyond the created to the

Creator. What Akers is arguing for is a Christian understanding of panentheism⁵; creation as separate from God, but held in being by the Creator. When one deifies nature there is a failure to look beyond the tapestry of life to the God who is the Creator and author of life itself. Panentheism solves this conundrum by acknowledging God as the author of life without deifying nature in the process.

Another issue that arises when one has a pantheistic worldview is a misunderstanding of humanity's place within the natural order. Pantheism by its very nature assumes an equality between all living things and because of this a minimization of humanity as having a special place within God's created world by virtue of being made in the image and likeness of God (cf. Gen. 1:26). It also sets up a dangerous thought process which allows nature to take precedence over the legitimate needs of human beings. This assumption defies nature itself by virtue of the fact that animals are set over plants and animals over other animals. There is a fundamental inequality inherent in the natural order. Raising all of nature up to the dignity of humanity threatens to remove humanity from its rightful place as uniquely special. "Humanity, each human person, is a microcosm of creation. In other words a person contains everything—every part of creation within him or herself" (Eyman and Ryan 19). Both creation accounts in Genesis give a pride of place to the creation of the first man and the first woman in a way that is fundamentally different from the foundation of the rest of the world. In fact, as God's pre-eminent creation, humanity is given dominion over the rest of creation (cf. Gen. 1:26).

⁵ This particular term has come under scrutiny by Vatican officials because used liberally it could be misinterpreted as a form of Gnosticism. Panentheism in this context is being used keeping in mind the Pauline understanding of the relationship between the Creator and the created (cf. Col. 1:12-20).

This “dominion” over creation is one reason for neopagan involvement in deep ecology. Deep ecology comes out of the fact that many individuals have found themselves at odds not only with the Judeo-Christian misrepresentation of God’s command to subdue the earth (cf. Gen. 1:28) but also with those who adhere to the post-modern supremacy of science and technology that is devoid of any feelings of spirituality or fundamental connection with the natural world. Surprisingly, neopagans and those involved in the deep ecology movement have the same goals as Catholic Christians do as far as environmentalism is concerned, albeit with some substantial philosophical differences. To be Catholic is to be an environmentalist at heart. This is an area of Church teaching that has either been largely ignored or misunderstood by those charged with teaching the faith. This does not, however, mean that all Catholics should run out and join the deep ecology movement. There are some very important clarifications that need to be made between an authentic understanding of Catholic environmentalism and deep ecology; mainly what does it mean to have “dominion” over nature.

The idea of “dominion” is something that has driven many faithful Catholics towards deep ecology and, unfortunately, into the neopagan movement. Environmental issues are, in a way, a gateway to neopagan belief systems as faithful Catholics unfamiliar with Church teaching on the environment recoil at the contemporary understanding of dominion and seek out what they consider to be a more balanced earth-friendly environmental movements. In contemporary understanding, dominion is understood to mean total domination over something else, in this case the environment. Society assumes that nature is “an instrument in the hands of man, a reality that he must constantly manipulate, especially by means of technology” (Compendium 201). This sets

up the conflict between humanity and the rest of creation and in a way places humanity as an other within the grand scheme of creation. This misunderstanding has led many to exploit the environment to the brink of ecological disaster. In recent years, this domination of the environment has been made worse by the fact that instead of turning to a traditional Christian understanding of humanity's relationship to creation there has been a turn towards science and technology. To understand Catholicism's teaching on the environment one has to recognize two important points. First, humanity is in a relationship with God, the Creator and second, by virtue of this relationship humanity has been given dominion over creation in so far as they are subservient to the will of God. In many ways, humanity's role can be likened to the parable of the talents in which the master of the household gives part of his fortune to three different servants prior to going away. Upon his return the three servants bring back the portion of the money that was given to them; two having made more and the third having squandered the opportunity by burying the money in a field. The servants realized that they were given the money to take care of it for their master (Matt. 25:14-30). In the same way, humanity has been given the whole of Creation to take care of for God. Uncontrolled exploitation of the environment is poor stewardship of God's creation, an exploitation that prevents one from being fully human and acting in the image and likeness of God. Creation came into existence *ex nihilo* through the profound love of God. If humanity is not involved in utilizing that which love created for their benefit as well as the continued sustenance of creation itself then we humanity is not acting in accord with what God intended when Adam and Eve were placed in the Garden of Eden.

Unbeknownst to many Catholics there are a number of letters and encyclicals from both the universal Church and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops related to environmental protection. As early as the late 19th century the popes have made reference to the dangers of the use of science and technology devoid of Christian values. In the United States the Catholic bishops have released several letters concerning the environment, in general, as well as specific regional issues such as the Columbia River Watershed and changes in the subsistence hunting laws in the state of Alaska. One of the most important documents released by the USCCB was Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action on the Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching in which the bishops remind Catholics that:

The wonderful variety of the natural world is, therefore, part of the divine plan and, as such, invites our respect. Accordingly, it is appropriate that we treat other creatures and the natural world not just as means to human fulfillment but also as God's creatures, possessing an independent value, worthy of our respect and care. This does not force one to deify nature but rather to put into the perspective that the way the environment is treated by humanity reflects on the value that we place on ourselves and the gifts that the Creator has given to us.

At a recent Vatican conference hosted by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace on the environment a Decalogue of environmental issues was proposed by Bishop Giampaolo Crepaldi. The points that were included were:

1. The Bible must dictate the fundamental moral principles of God's plan on the relationship between man and creation.

2. It is necessary to develop an ecological conscience of responsibility for creation and humanity.
3. The question of the environment entails the whole planet, as it is a collective good.
4. It is necessary to confirm the primacy of ethics and of the rights of man over technology.
5. Nature must not be regarded as a reality that is divine itself; therefore, it is not removed from human action.
6. The goods of the earth were created by God for the good of all. It is necessary to underline the universal destiny of goods.
7. There must be collaboration in the ordered development of the poorest nations.
8. There must be collaboration, the right to development, a healthy environment and peace must be considered in the different legislations.
9. It is necessary to adopt more sober lifestyles.
10. A spiritual response must be given, which is not worship of nature. (“A Decalogue”)

This seems to be more realistic than the principles proposed by Thomas Berry, despite his use of Thomistic thought.

What should be noted throughout Catholic teaching on the environment is that while placing humanity at the head of creation it does not deify nature or reduce humanity to just a tiny cog in a larger whole. At the same time it does not separate humanity from creation as a whole. A balance exists between the needs and demands of the human race and the legitimate concerns of those with a deep respect for the

environment and environmental issues. It is incumbent upon the teaching body of the Church, both ordained and laity, to understand what the Church teaches about environmental ethics and disseminate this teaching to the rest of the Body of Christ. It is only through a dissemination of this teaching that good Catholics will be kept from falling into the trap of deep ecology and possibly the neopagan movement.

2. Relative Morality

Unfortunately, relative morality is not a problem that is found just outside the Church. There are many factions within Christianity that contribute to the spread of this problem, so in a sense addressing this issue also addresses the problem from within as well. For the neopagan an understanding of the natural law, which the Church acknowledges is written on the hearts of all of humanity (John Paul II, Veritatis §4), would probably read “do good.” Neopagans do not acknowledge the existence of evil as such. Rather, there is a spectrum of good that is accomplished when one acts and theoretically there is an acceptance of negative outcomes for one’s personal behavior. This allows for the maximum amount of freedom for one to follow a personal path in life, allowing the individual to determine for themselves how much good they want to do. For the neopagan, morality becomes an exercise in proportionalism, weighing the amount of good that one “feels” is appropriate. With such an outlook morality takes on a highly individualistic tone in which what is good for you may or may not be good for someone else. It allows the individual to be totally free from the concerns of the rest of the community because it is an arelational morality turned inward.

Relative morality is diametrically opposed to a Catholic outlook on life, particularly the individualistic nature that neopagan morality takes. Two thousand years

ago, Saint Paul countered the idea that there is such a thing as total freedom and individual morality (cf. Rom. 3:9-20). For Saint Paul, and for Catholics, all are enslaved to something, be it things, ideologies, etc. The only path to true freedom is submission and enslavement to God. It is only through an other-focused morality, grounded in the fundamental dignity of every human person based on the moral precepts that come out of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures that true morality can be based. Pope Benedict XVI, in an address to the International Theological Commission stated that:

[it] is particularly important in understanding the foundation of those rights that are rooted in the nature of the person and that, as such, derive from the will of God the creator himself. Prior to any positive law emanated by states, such rights are universal, inviolable and inalienable, and must be recognized as such by everyone, especially by the civil authorities who are called to promote them and guarantee that they are respected. (“Benedict XVI”)

A Catholic morality is consistent and logical because it is not subject to the feelings of the individual or constantly changing societal norms but grounded in the objective truth of natural law. The Holy Father went on to say that “negating an ontological foundation of the essential values of human life, inevitably leads to positivism and makes law dependent on the trends of thought dominant in a society; thus rendering law an instrument of power, rather than subordinating power to the law” (“Benedict XVI”). For instance, neopagans could justify abortion because it contributes to their individual good and possibly what they consider to be the common good, say controlling overpopulation, but could be opposed to capital punishment because they feel it is mean. There is no objective standard by which to judge the rightness or wrongness of an action. A Catholic

morality, on the other hand, would say that because of the fundamental dignity that every human person has, all innocent life, in all its stages must not be destroyed because the taking of a human life, even in legitimate self-defense, devalues the worth of all humanity. Catholic morality is fundamentally based on an interrelation between God and humanity and between every individual human being. There is no such thing as a person who exists outside a relationship with God and others. A person by very definition is who they are in relation to the other. For the Christian this relationship with others is visioned and exemplified in Jesus Christ. Through his historical interactions Christ gave humanity examples of how the moral life is supposed to be lived. Neopagans and other nonbelievers would probably counter that Christ lived within a certain historical timeframe and his actions were dictated by the social and cultural norms of his day and do not apply to contemporary situations. William Spohn writes, though, that:

Jesus did not come teaching timeless moral truths or a uniform way of life to be replicated in every generation. Rather his words, his encounters, and life story set patterns that can be flexibly but faithfully extended to new circumstances. These patterns lead us to envision analogous ways of acting that are partly the same and partly different. As disciples become more conformed to Christ, their imagination spots these patterns and carries them creatively to new realizations. (qtd. in Billy and Keating 90)

Catholic morality is not based on a fundamentalist interpretation of Sacred Scripture in which all the answers to all the moral problems of contemporary society can be found verbatim. Rather it is a morality that is based on living and encountering the life of Christ and the working of the Holy Spirit within the Church to guide it in making moral

decisions. It is a morality that is not relative, changing with the tides of culture and feeling, but adaptive to the ever changing needs and circumstances of a broken world providing the stability and constancy that is so lacking when employing a relative moral view. One can not grow as an individual if the rules of life are constantly changing. There are only two outcomes to such a lifestyle; either people becomes stagnant because they are afraid to advance or one becomes morally schizophrenic as they try to constantly adapt to a changing moral playing field. Either way, full human potential cannot be reached.

3. Radical Feminism

One characteristic of neopaganism that is often seen as its hallmark is the focus on the feminine. The third general principle of neopaganism claims that there should ideally be a balance between the expressions of male and female deities where gender specific deities exist. However, when one looks at the corpus of neopagan works as far back as Gardner and Sanders and contemporary pagan theologians such as Starhawk, one notices that the goddess is dwelt upon more than her male counterpart (Albanese 178; Barger 694). One reason that there is such a focus on the feminine within neopaganism is the fact that it helps to offset the brutalization of women by men through sexual violence and exploitation (Chandler 121). It is seen as a way of helping to empower women to take control of their lives by appealing to a feminine deity they can relate to. Many in the neopagan movement, as well as those who are drawn to it but not totally committed find inspiration in this “neglected aspect of Judeo-Christian traditions” (Hanegraaff, New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism 89).

A distinction needs to be drawn between radical feminism, which is often experienced by those who encounter neopaganism, and authentic feminism. Authentic feminism calls the Church and society to a greater understanding of the role women and the feminine play in both secular and salvation history. Radical feminism supports extreme behavior and assertions that tend to unfairly attack the Church. Mary Daly, a feminist theologian who is regarded by many to be extreme once commented that “Christianity can ‘include’ feminism only in the sense that a cannibal includes his meal” (de Haardt 249). Daly’s view is not held by most feminist theologians. While there may be hostility and suspicion among some this is not the case for all. According to feminist theologians there is a three fold process involved in their method: critiquing the past, recovering the lost history of women, and revisioning theological categories (Dallavalle 537). The Catholic Church recognizes three different forms to feminist Biblical scholarship: radical, neo-orthodox, and critical. Radical feminist scholarship tends to deny the authority of Scripture and views history and scholarship as being filtered by an androcentric point of view. The neo-orthodox approach acknowledges the Bible as prophetic and tries to draw out those aspects of Scripture that could be viewed as liberating women from oppression. Finally, the critical form seeks to rediscover the role women played in the ministry of Christ and the early church (Pontifical Biblical Commission 69-70). The Church acknowledges the validity of feminist scholarship, particularly in helping to correct misinterpretations of Scripture that have been used to justify the oppression of women. However, it also counsels that this point of view should not be the sole point of view because it may lead to an eisegetical interpretation (71).

While radical feminism is certainly not something that Catholicism would support there is an important lesson that can be learned: the voice of women is important both inside and outside the church and this voice must be protected and encouraged by all members of the faithful. John Paul II acknowledged that “women’s dignity has often been unacknowledged and their prerogatives misrepresented...this has prevented women from truly being themselves and it has resulted in a spiritual impoverishment of humanity” (Letter §4). Catholic feminist theologians note that the feminist perspective should be encouraged based on two assumptions from the New Testament. The first is “Jesus’ prophetic ministry to the disenfranchised...[and the second] how this ministry was directed toward and included women, taking as its foundational text Gal. 3:28” (Dallavalle 535). There is also a call to learn from the religious experience of women to inform the faith life of the church as a whole. Mary Farrell Bednarowsky distinguished five themes that she found running through the religious writings of American women:

1. an ongoing, creative and increasingly cultivated ambivalence toward their religious communities;
2. an emphasis on immanence—that is, the indwelling of the sacred;
3. a regard for the ordinary as revelatory of the sacred;
4. a view of ultimate reality as relational; and
5. an interpretation of healing, both physical and spiritual, as a primary rather than secondary function of religion. (qtd. in de Haardt 251)

This is not to say that these same themes do not run through writings by men or that they have been completely ignored by the religious establishment, but rather that these are common experiences that women have focused on in their writings.

Some feminist theologians are also not arguing for throwing out the collected works of 2000 years of Christian history but rather digging deeper to discover the knowledge and understanding that appeals to the feminist heart and mind. An example is the work of Michelle Gonzalez who analyzed the collected works of Hans Urs von Balthasar and found what she called an unlikely ally for feminist theology. For Gonzalez she sees von Balthasar's focus on a relational anthropology and humanity as *imago dei* as important to feminism because it argues for the importance of both sexes as well as for their complementarity. In fact, in von Balthasar's theology, all of humanity is feminine in relation to God in that they are receptive to the action of God in their lives in the same way that women are receptive to men in their sexual make up (Gonzalez 570). She is critical of von Balthasar as far as his understanding of the contribution of women to the science of theology. He seems to argue that the contribution of women is more in spirituality than theology (581). This understanding of the contributions of women is perpetuated because a majority of the treatises from women that we have are not systematic theological discourses, but are grounded in mysticism and experiential faith (Schumacher 173). This is but one example of how feminist theologians are looking into the work of previous generations to raise the profile of feminism in the church without taking a stand that is hostile towards the past.

What can be done, however, on a practical level in the parish in order to aide women in their spiritual journey and growth, especially if they feel that the Catholic Church is anti-feminist? First and foremost there is a responsibility of those charged with teaching the faith to teach the authentic stand of the Church on the relationship of men and women to the Church. That is that:

“Male” and “female” differentiate two individuals of equal dignity, which does not however reflect a static equality, because the specificity of the female is different from the specificity of the male, and this difference in equality is enriching and indispensable for the harmony of life in society.... Woman is the complement of man, as man is the complement of woman: man and woman complete each other mutually, not only from a physical and psychological point of view, but also ontologically. (Compendium §146-147)

A failure to honor the uniqueness of both men and women is a failure to understand or recognize the totality of what it means to be human and in our humanity to be made in the image and likeness of God. It is also important to recognize, though, that equality does not mean sameness. This may be an area where irreconcilable differences with Church teaching arise, particularly if women are hoping for a change in the status of women with regard to ordination. This is an area in which the Church has declared that the issue is settled and closed to discussion. Those who take issue with this particular teaching should be supported with compassion and helped to understand the Church’s position. This can be done by focusing on sex complementarity which stresses the ontological equality and dignity of men and women that is compatible with different offices and vocations; neither men or women are inferior to the other nor are they so similar that the reality of differences is abolished meaning that there are certain roles that are *defacto* closed to men or women because of gender (Elshtain 289). While women’s ordination is a closed issue, there are other ways in which women can exercise leadership in the Church.

The second practical way to encourage women in the parish is to make sure that women have the opportunity to exercise leadership within the life of the local church. In

2001 a report was issued from the USCCB's Secretariat for Family, Laity, Women and Youth regarding women's role in the Catholic Church. The survey highlighted several key issues that were seen as important to women. First, there is a need for real collaboration between clergy and women which means including women in decision-making processes as well as being treated with respect in the roles which they have. Second, there is a need to be aware of justice in the work environment, including respect for women and providing access to continuing education and financial assistance to further that end. Third, there is a need to make sure that minority women are represented in the Church, particularly in diocesan leadership. In the survey 83% of the women were White, 6% Hispanic and 5% African-American. Fourth, there is a request that Canon Law be reviewed in order to clarify what positions within the Church require ordination and where laity can exercise jurisdiction. Finally, those surveyed requested that there be continued advocacy for women and women's issues in the church and society (USCCB Contribution). So, it is incumbent upon bishops and clergy to make sure that women are represented in the leadership of the Church in a meaningful way at all levels.

Honoring various vocations is another important way to encourage women in the Church. Women who have chosen the married life, the religious life, or the single state should be encouraged in their respective vocations. Particularly within the married state, women need to know that their decision to either work outside the home or to stay home and raise families is supported by the Church and society. There is a need to fight the tendency to view women as solely defined by procreation (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith §13) or to completely discount this important contribution to the life of the Church. The Church has a responsibility to defend a woman's right to either work outside

of the home because of desire or financial necessity, but also to help change the unfair opinion that women who choose to raise a family are not working in the traditional sense (§14).

Another way to encourage women is by fostering a strong devotion to the Blessed Mother and the great women saints and mystics of Catholic tradition. Mary is the epitome of womanhood in the Church:

Far from giving the Church an identity based on an historically conditioned model of femininity, the reference to Mary, with her dispositions of listening, welcoming, humility, faithfulness, praise and waiting, places the Church in continuity with the spiritual history of Israel. In Jesus and through him, these attributes become the vocation of every baptized Christian. (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith §16)

Even feminist Protestant theologians are beginning to rediscover the role of Mary in their respective theological traditions. For example, Kathleen Norris writes:

Mary is useful to us as a corrective to our ordinary state of mind, the epitome of “both/and” passion over “either/or” reasoning. She has a disarming way of challenging the polarities that so often bring human endeavors to impasse: the subjective and objective, the expansive and the parochial, the affective and the intellectual. (x)

In many of the great women saints of the Church there are examples of courage, faithfulness, and strength, many times where men failed. Two great examples of such women are Sts. Teresa of Avila and Catherine of Siena. Teresa was known as a great reformer of the Carmelite Order who also contributed greatly to the spiritual life of the

Church (McGinn 139). Catherine too made great contributions to the Church's spiritual life but also encouraged Pope Gregory XI, living in Avignon, to return the papacy to its rightful place in the city of Rome, an act that took great courage (133). Modern women including Dorothy Day and Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta also offer fine examples of women in the Church.

Finally, there is a need to encourage women's scholarship within the Church. Feminist theologians who understand the Church's theology and teachings should be encouraged to contribute their experiences and understanding. Women should be given the opportunities to explore the depth and breadth of the role that women have played in the growth of theological and spiritual knowledge. John Paul II noted that:

The Church gives thanks *for all the manifestations of the feminine "genius"* which have appeared in the course of history, in the midst of all peoples and nations; she gives thanks for all the charisms which the Holy Spirit distributes to women in the history of the People of God, for all the victories which she owes to their faith, hope and charity: she gives thanks for all *the fruits of feminine holiness*. (Mulieris §31)

Without the contribution of women to the Church and to society the world would be poorer. It is only in the shared experiences of both men and women in the Church that the spiritual richness of the Catholic tradition is brought out. Mary Shivanandan, on the back cover of Women in Christ states that authentic feminism:

...is the biblical revelation of the human person—man and woman—in Christ, a vision that directs women beyond the “male” standard against which they have too often been measured. Far from constraining women to an “eternal essence,”

[authentic feminism] encourages each woman to realize herself in perfect
Christian freedom. (Schumacher)

As an example of what the perfect society should be, the Church should be the first to
acknowledge and promote feminist scholarship and contributions.

IV. Reincarnation

Every culture has grappled with the question of what happens after one dies. The answers have varied from annihilation, to resurrection, to reincarnation, but whatever the answer there has been some sort of answer given (Chandler 262). A poll conducted among 2,201 adults in the United States revealed that 84% believed that the soul survived after death and 27% believed in reincarnation (Taylor). For Christians, resurrection has been the consistent authentic teaching of the church from the very beginning. However, in the last century or so, reincarnation has been coming to the forefront as a possible Christian alternative to the doctrine of the resurrection. A number of texts from various sources have advanced the idea that reincarnation was a doctrine of Christ and the early church that was suppressed for political reasons. Among the more prominent proponents of such a position are Helena P. Blavatsky, William Q. Judge, and Elizabeth Clare Prophet (Howe 19). These, and many more assert, that there has always been a teaching regarding reincarnation in Christianity and that they are simply passing on this suppressed knowledge.

A. A Short History of Western Reincarnation

1. Sources of Western Reincarnation

Reincarnation in Western civilization can be traced through two main sources: Western philosophy and the emergence of the Western esoteric tradition. Western philosophy, particularly Greek philosophical thought, has throughout the centuries contained speculation about reincarnation. Two of the most important Greek philosophers to expound the idea reincarnation were Pythagoras and Plato (Howe 34-35). Pythagoras, while more well known for his mathematical genius, was also known to have taught the

idea of transmigration of the soul, which he probably learned while studying in Egypt (Gorman 27; Guthrie 126). Pythagoras taught that if one lived a life of virtue and temperance then one would eventually be able to leave the confines of the physical world and become pure spirit. However, if one lived a disingenuous life then there was the distinct possibility that one would end up coming back in the body of a plant or animal doomed to a pitiful existence (Gorman 35). Pythagoras used his interest in mathematics to help individuals grasp the concept of reincarnation. For instance, Pythagoras put special emphasis on the number six as he believed there were six levels to the animate world from the spermatozoa up to the life of the gods. They were ranked from lowest to highest starting with the germination of seeds, moving into the life of plants, animals, and humans and culminating in the world of demons and the gods (Gorman 150).

The great philosopher Plato also espoused a belief in reincarnation. In the Republic Plato speaks of the souls of the just and the unjust. Those who lived a moral life they were destined to spend eternity with the gods (Book X, 614c). However, those who lived unjust lives were destined to be punished ten times over for their offenses until they paid off their debt (Book X 615a). What seems to be unclear, though, in Plato's understanding of reincarnation is how much control, if any, the soul had on its next incarnation. In one section he talks about the soul choosing its next incarnation but then makes reference later that one's next incarnation was based on the virtue, or lack thereof, in the previous life (Book X 621a ff). Plato makes additional reference to the transmigration of souls in Phaedrus (249c), Laws (Book X 903d-e), Meno (81b), Phaedo (70c, 81, 113a), and Timaeus (41e, 90e).

Another source for reincarnation in the West is through the work of Helena P. Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society in the late 19th century. Blavatsky was a well-traveled Russian heiress who took great interest in matters of the occult. In 1873 she emigrated to the United States and with the aide of Henry Olcott, and William Q. Judge established the Theosophical Society, a modern Gnostic movement based on the religious traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism (“Helena”). In her first written work, Isis Unveiled, she argued that all the world’s religious traditions were in search of the same thing, divine knowledge, and she hoped to persuade people to transcend sectarian dogma and embrace esoteric knowledge. In this work she also argues that transmigration of souls has always been a part of the Western religious tradition, yet was silenced by those who opposed it in the early church (Blavatsky 152). Her Theosophical Society has grown into an international organization with two main offices.. The Theosophical Society holds three main points:

1. promotes a vision of wholeness that inspires a fellowship united in study, meditation, and service.
2. encourages open-minded inquiry into world religions, philosophy, science, and the arts in order to understand the wisdom of the ages, respect the unity of all life, and help people explore spiritual self-transformation.
3. holds that our every action, feeling, and thought affects all other beings and that each of us is capable of and responsible for contributing to the benefit of the whole. (“Introduction”)

On the surface the aims of the Theosophical Society seem to be geared towards a deeper understanding of world religions and spiritualities and how they interact with areas of life

such as philosophy and science. However, the Theosophical Society is religious syncretism in that it borrows from the various religious traditions to serve its own end instead of understanding doctrine and dogma within its proper historical and theological context.

Several other more contemporary figures have been influenced by the work of Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society and have helped to advance the cause of reincarnation in the West, particularly within Christianity. Geddes MacGregor, a former Anglican priest, has written a number of books and has lectured around the world on the plausibility of incorporating reincarnation into Christianity (Cranston and Williams 199). In general terms, MacGregor argues for Western reincarnation through silence by using the example of the Trinity stating:

Nowhere in the Bible is there any mention of [Trinity] except in the verse in the first letter of John, which is know to all biblical scholars to be a very late interpolation and is usually omitted from modern translation of the New Testament...So the objection that reincarnation is not expressly taught in the New Testament carries little or no weight. (Reincarnation as A Christian 7)

He makes the same argument in other works which he has published as well stating that Christians do not flatly reject this dogma (MacGregor, Reincarnation in Christianity 18). His argument is that reincarnation need not replace the one life, one resurrection doctrine of Christianity but be used to supplement this understanding to broaden the appeal of Christianity to others who may not believe in resurrection.

Another influential writer on Christian reincarnation is Elizabeth Clare Prophet. Prophet argues for a Christian doctrine concerning reincarnation from a historical and

logical perspective stating that the Christian doctrine of one life followed by an eternity either in heaven or hell depending on one's temporal and temporary actions is too harsh a punishment from a God who is to be considered just and loving. She believes that through reincarnation we "learn from our mistakes on earth and to pursue God" (Prophet xii). For Prophet reincarnation "could resolve many of the conflicts plaguing Christianity today" (xiii).

2. New Age Reincarnation Is Not Eastern Reincarnation

Before going any further it should be pointed out that there is a distinction between reincarnation in the New Age movement and the doctrines that come out of Eastern religions such as Buddhism or Hinduism. While the Western idea of reincarnation, or transmigration of souls, borrows heavily from these two Eastern religions there are some very important distinctions that should be made. First, the Eastern understanding of Reincarnation is linked tightly with the idea of karma, that a person's actions have consequences, both positive and negative, in the next life (Chandler 264; Pham 6). If a person is honorable and treats others justly this will have a positive effect on their next incarnation. If a person lives a life of selfishness and immorality then this will have a negative effect on their next incarnation. The more just the person the sooner they will stop being reincarnated and will eventually be removed from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. This differs from the New Age conception of reincarnation because often times in the New Age movement there is no concept of evil or immorality, therefore, it does not have a negative effect on one's life. Instead, each life is meant to bring the person to a deeper knowledge of who they are and, if there is a belief in the divine, their relationship to a Higher Power.

The second important distinction that needs to be made is in what forms individuals are reincarnated. For Buddhism or Hinduism, the individual, depending on their karma, can be reincarnate as either a plant, animal or a human being, with the understanding being that one incarnated as a human being is further advanced in the spiritual or moral life than a one who comes as a plant or animal and that depending on the socio-economic status of the individual those higher in status are also further advanced. It is possible to move up and down the scale depending on one's actions or inactions in the current life (Pham 6). Interestingly, in the New Age understanding almost all believe that they are reincarnated as human beings and that they have some level of control over who, how and when they are reincarnated. This is fundamentally opposed to the Eastern understanding (Bartner; Pham 7).

B. Why Is Reincarnation Superior to Traditional Christian Eschatology?

1. General Objections to Resurrection

Obviously, if individuals support the doctrine of reincarnation there must be reasons why they see this idea as superior to the doctrine of the resurrection. Different New Age authors give different reasons for why they believe in reincarnation over resurrection. Prophet provides four reasons why she views reincarnation as superior to resurrection. First, she states that "most people find the idea of bodily resurrection at the end of time absurd and difficult to accept" (154). She bases this claim on the fact that different Christian denominations have different ways of explaining what form the resurrection of the body will take. In particular she cites the differences between fundamentalist Christians who view the resurrection as literally living eternally in a glorified world and a Roman Catholic understanding that comes straight out of the

Catechism of the Catholic Church that it “exceeds our imagination and understanding; accessible only to faith” (qtd. in Prophet 156). In addition, Prophet contends that bodily resurrection is becoming increasingly difficult to believe because of the number of organ transplants and grafts that would complicate such a process (156).

Next, she claims that resurrection “robs us of a personal path of salvation” (Prophet 154). Her understanding is that in a sense humanity is predestined to be in heaven because through some miraculous process all the shortcomings of our life on this earth are eradicated in death by virtue of our baptism (158). This understanding seems to come more out of a fundamentalist Christian understanding than a Catholic or mainline Protestant understanding. Prophet poses the question “If God solves everything in heaven [meaning our shortcomings and sinfulness], when do we reap what we have sown on earth?” (158).

A third reason for accepting reincarnation over resurrection is probably the most important objection. A resurrection doctrine reinforces the idea of a “one-shot theology” (Prophet 154). This objection to resurrection asks the question, if God is loving and merciful, why would he condemn an individual to an eternity separated from his presence for sins committed temporally, when the period of physical life is so short in comparison to eternity? In addition, Prophet objects to this theological stand because it seemingly excludes the salvation of those who do not profess a belief in Jesus Christ. She supports this by quoting Robert Lightner, a theologian at Dallas Theological Seminary who states “those who reject the Lord Jesus Christ as their personal Savior will go to a place of eternal torment that the Bible calls the ‘lake of fire’” (qtd. in Prophet 159). She does admit, however, that such a hard line position is not necessarily the stand of mainline

churches who at least admit the possibility that some who are not Christian may be saved (160).

Her final objection to resurrection is based on whether or not Jesus was actually resurrected, as this serves as the basis for the doctrine of the resurrection (Prophet 155). To support such a position she claims that most Scripture scholars do not believe that the post-resurrection interactions where Jesus ate with the disciples or invited them to touch him actually occurred (cf. John. 20:27; 21:15). After calling into question these passages Prophet states that the other post-resurrection interactions between Christ and the apostles “[does not] mention Jesus doing anything that would have required a physical body” (161).

Despite not believing in the resurrection doctrine of Christianity, Prophet does believe that once the cycle of death and rebirth is completed then one will eventually be united with God and continue the cosmic journey freed from the bonds of human existence. In fact she offers a list of four basic elements that will aide someone in transcending earthly existence. The four elements are:

1. Fulfill your karmic obligations to all of life by making up for your past negative actions.
2. Learn to identify with your spiritual self rather than your material self.
3. Access divine grace, which awakens you to your divine nature and enables you to find your way out of the bonds of karma.
4. Focus all your mind on the purpose of reunion with God. This is often facilitated by various mystical techniques such as prayer, contemplation and visualization (302).

Depending on one's current state, this may take a number of incarnations to take its full effect.

Wouter Hanegraaff also provides five reasons why individuals believe reincarnation to be superior to Christian resurrection. The first is the idea that this world is a meaningful illusion that should be experienced to the fullest and then transcended (New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism 262). For the individual involved in the New Age one single incarnation is not enough time to experience all that one can learn from physical reality. It is only over successive incarnations that one is able to complete the learning task which "serves the cosmic process of progressive spiritual education and evolution of consciousness" (263).

The second reason proposed for the superiority of reincarnation is that it is just logical from an emic, or insiders, perspective. According to Hanegraaff:

The emic persuasiveness of these and other core New Age beliefs...seems not ultimately to be based on (and therefore not dependent on) empirical or argumentative proof, but on the feeling that they invest human existence with *meaning*. (263)

Those who believe in reincarnation do not worry about the empirical evidence that may support their position, or for that matter, detract from their position. This is not to say that they do not welcome evidence that may aide others in their search for the truth, but ultimately it is a belief based on intuition and feeling not on statistics.

The third argument made in favor of reincarnation is aimed directly at the Judeo-Christian doctrine of resurrection. It is believed that reincarnation provides a more logical account of life after death. For the New Age adherent to reincarnation it simply seems to

make more sense to speak of reincarnation than some future “reconstitution of a dead body” (Hanegraaff, New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism 264).

The fourth idea is that reincarnation is seen to be morally superior to the doctrine of resurrection in that it seems to be founded in a rational ethic. Within the New Age ethic there is a general acceptance that the unequal distribution of wealth and power, suffering and happiness and talents will be balanced out through successive incarnations of the individual based on one’s karma (264). It can be assumed that the idea of grace in suffering and looking towards a heavenly reward as opposed to immediate reward in this life is frowned upon within New Age cosmology.

Finally, as Prophet mentioned, there is a general dislike of the idea of judgment and the possibility of eternal punishment for sins committed in this life. Reincarnationists believe that “one single life on earth and a possible eternity in hell [is] felt to be out of all proportion, and therefore unfair” but they also “fail to see what is so attractive about eternal life in an apparently static and unchanging heaven” (264). So basically, resurrection and the one life, one death theology of Christianity are considered to be at worst unfair and at best boring.

It is interesting to note that when one reads about Christian eschatology that it is rare to find mention of the exact mechanism of how resurrection is going to happen. The exception to this, of course, are the fundamentalist interpretations that rely heavily on the Book of Revelation. With the New Age understanding of reincarnation there are multiple works that provide details about how the process of reincarnation works, why one under normal circumstances does not have access to memories from past lives, and in some

cases how one can go about recovering past life memories. However, this is outside the scope of this work.⁶

C. A Scriptural Basis for Reincarnation?

New Age adherents to reincarnation often claim that Christianity in its earliest forms contained a doctrine concerning reincarnation that was suppressed by the Church. It is asserted that a number of Church Fathers including Origen of Alexandria, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr and Tertullian taught reincarnation (Albrecht 45-47; Brox 75; Prophet 135). Over a period of approximately 300 years the doctrine of reincarnation was systematically removed from Christianity with anathemas against such a doctrine at the Council of Nicea in 325, the Council of Chalcedon in 451 and the Second Council of Constantinople in 553, although not directed specifically at the doctrine of reincarnation (Albrecht 44; Hanegraaff, New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism 322). Interestingly, there is no mention of exactly which canons of the Councils were directed at reincarnation. However, it can probably be assumed that anathemas directed at Arian thought at both Nicea and Chalcedon as well as the denial of the pre-existence of souls at Constantinople are probably the canons that New Age writers refer to. This assumption is supported by Quincy Howe who goes so far as to say that:

the Christian Church has never explicitly come to terms with the doctrine of reincarnation. It is only by inference from the controversies about resurrection, the nature of the soul, and the nature of salvation that one perceives a system of thought that is generally hostile to this belief. (62)

⁶ Two very good sources on the mechanics of New Age reincarnation can be found in Hanegraaff, New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism, pp. 265-275; Howe, pp. 19-38; and Sparrow, pp. 152-159.

In other words, Christianity has had debates regarding resurrection, the soul and salvation but has not officially anathematized the idea or the doctrine of reincarnation, leaving a glimmer of hope that it could one day be reintroduced.

Despite the supposed removal of reincarnation from the doctrine of Christianity, New Age writers insist that vestiges remain hidden in the Bible. A number of Scripture passages are cited by various writers, among them are John. 8:58, 1 Cor. 15:35-45, Eph. 1:4, Heb. 11:13-16, Jas 3:6, Rev. 3:12; 11-3-6; 12:5. In addition New Age reincarnationists make reference to a number of Gnostic works including the Gospels of Phillip and Thomas, The Secret Book of John, The Apocolypse of Paul, and the Pistis Sophia (“Christian”). While these source texts are not referenced by a majority of authors there are three that are universally accepted in New Age circles as making reference to reincarnation: Matt. 16:13-14; John. 3:3; John 9:1-4. Each of these scriptural references, according to New Age writers, are proof that Jesus taught a doctrine of reincarnation, a doctrine that was silenced by Church authorities. Geddes MacGregor states that one must turn to the Bible because it is the “primary witness of the Christian faith” and as such there is an obligation to study scripture and ask “Does the New Testament teach reincarnation or not” (Reincarnation as a Christian 42)?

1. Matthew 16:13-14⁷

This particular passage in Scripture is set within a dialogue between Jesus and his apostles while in the region of Ceasarea Philippi. Jesus poses the question to the disciples “whom do men say that I the Son of man am?” to which they answer “Some *say that thou*

⁷ For the purposes of the next three sections the KJV translation of scripture will be used. Although none of the authors specifically mention the translation they use, this seems to be the most likely because of both the Protestant background of the authors and the flow of this specific translation.

art John the Baptist: some Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets” (Matt. 16:13-14). Those who support the doctrine of reincarnation claim that the answers given by the apostles was given because they understood the concept of reincarnation and therefore assumed that Christ happened to be John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the other Old Testament prophets reincarnated (Hanegraaff, New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism 321; Howe 95; York 76). It is suggested that the idea of reincarnation was so common at the time of Jesus among the Jews that the “sole point of concern [was] the identity of the individual who was reborn” (Cranston and Williams 210). Some New Age scholars who are not convinced by this dialogue between the apostles and Jesus link Matt. 17:13 where Jesus says that John the Baptist was Elijah (Brehon; Hanegraaff, New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism 321; MacGregor, Reincarnation as A Christian 44; MacGregor, Reincarnation In Christianity 45; Oderberg). Prophet states that “John was indeed Elijah reincarnated and that he had performed the prophesied role of messenger of the LORD and preparer of the way” (99).

2. John 3:3

This passage from John begins the interaction between Jesus and Nicodemus, a Pharisee. Christ states “verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). This passage taken solely by itself, according to New Age reincarnationists, states literally that one must literally “be born again” in order to go to heaven, implying that one experiences more than one life (Brehon; Hanegraaff, New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism 321). Prophet adds that it is only through a successive number of lives that one is transformed into the “Divine Self,” the self which is able to enter into a lasting relationship with God in heaven (115).

3. John 9:1-4

For reincarnationists the most definitive proof for reincarnation is found in the story of the man born blind, in which the apostles pose the question to Jesus “Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2). Brehon states that “the question was put by them with the doctrine of reincarnation fully accepted, for it is obvious the man must have lived before...in order to have done sin for which he was then punished.” Cranston and Williams affirm this and add “because it was so well known, Jesus felt no need to make a special point teaching it” (208). Oderberg says that Jesus’ reply was one that was meant to show the cause and effect relationship between the sin of the man in his past life and his state in this life. Prophet affirms Oderberg’s understanding and believes that those who suffer today from congenital disabilities are living examples of reincarnation. She states:

Are people born with handicaps responsible for their own misfortune? The answer is, in many cases, yes. Their actions in previous lives may dictate that they experience and learn from limitations in another life. Limitations can actually lead to growth of the soul. The varying needs of the soul determine whether people are born either wealthy or poor, to kind parents or cruel parents. (102)

So for Prophet and many other New Age writers, disability is obviously the result of sinful behavior in previous lives, a thesis that is apparently supported by John 9:1-4. For those who believe in reincarnation and believe it was taught in the early Church, this passage, for them, undeniably proves the existence of the doctrine in the early Church.

D. A Catholic Understanding of Scripture

While New Age reincarnationists are convinced of their position and believe they have found Scripture passages to support them, reincarnation poses a number of problems for traditional Christianity. Before addressing some of the general concerns that such a doctrine poses it seems important to provide a Catholic assessment of the Scripture passages cited above as a Catholic and mainline Protestant understanding of these passages is radically opposed to the New Age interpretation.

1. Matthew 16:13-14⁸

Christian exegetes who have commented on this particular passage of Scripture place these verses into the larger context of the verses following these, vv. 15-20. When the passage is read in its entirety the focus of the passage moves from the naming of past Jewish heroes and focuses on Peter's response to the question posed by Jesus directly to him, "but who do you say that I am?" (v. 15). Peter's response that Jesus is the Messiah (v. 16) serves as the basis of Jesus blessing Peter and acknowledging that his response was not based on human knowledge or assumptions, but rather a gift of divine knowledge from God (Albright and Mann 198; Harrington 250). Nowhere is there discussion as to whether or not Jesus is the reincarnation of one of the important Old Testament Jewish heroes. Even if one tries to link this passage together with Matt. 17:13 regarding John the Baptist as the reincarnation of Elijah, the evidence is still lacking for the doctrine. Scripture scholars understand Christ's parallel between John and Elijah to be more spiritual than actual. W. F. Albright & C. S. Mann, in fact, state very clearly that in v. 13 that "this expression is, of course, symbolic and emphatically not some kind of

⁸ Scripture quotes for the next three sections are from the NAB unless otherwise indicated.

reincarnation” (205). For Harrington it is meant to show that the prophecies about the coming of the Messiah were actually taking place at that very moment in history (256).

William Barclay offers two explanations for the conversation between Jesus and the apostles. First, the encounter was meant to show that human categories were inadequate to explain the mystery of the Incarnation. When the apostles suggested that the “Son of Man” was one of the great prophets it was to honor him among the most honored of Israel. The second reason was to show that it was not sufficient to know *about* Jesus, but that one really needs to *know* Jesus. Peter’s answer was a “personal discovery” (Barclay, The Gospel of Matthew 138).

2. John 3:3

Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus can only be understood, again, when placed in the larger context of the interaction between the two (John 3:1-21). After Jesus tells Nicodemus that one must be “born again” or “born from above,” depending on the translation, one would assume that if Nicodemus had an understanding of reincarnation that the matter would have been settled. Rather, Nicodemus asks Christ “How can a person once grown old be born again?” (v. 4). Had the doctrine of reincarnation been an important part of Christ’s message would it not have been a perfect opportunity for him to have replied with an explanation in support of it? Instead he replies “no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit” (v. 5). In the remaining verses Jesus expounds on the meaning of this and its tie to redemption and salvation.

A number of commentators point out the connection that Christ makes between human birth and spiritual birth. Just as an individual is born of human parents and lives in this world, so too must they be born of a heavenly parent, God, in order to enter the

kingdom of Heaven (Barclay, The Gospel of John Vol. 1 128; Brown 138; Morris 213; Pink 107). In addition, scholars point out that Jesus is using a play on the word *ἀνωθεν*, which has a double meaning, either “again” or “from above.” By using this particular word Jesus is indicating that when one is born again in water and the spirit they are also born from above, causing a radical shift in the identity of the person (Moloney 92). Left only with this one line from Scripture it could possibly be understood as a doctrine for reincarnation, however, when Jesus explains that this is accomplished through “water and the Spirit” (v. 5) it removes the possibility of this explanation.

3. John 9:1-4

The encounter of Christ with the blind man is the most plausible Scripture passage to support the idea of reincarnation in Christianity because of the way the apostles pose their question to Jesus. “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind” (John 9:2). Christian Scripture scholars acknowledge that if reincarnation were a possibility that this passage, on the surface may support it. They note, however, that among the rabbis this would have not been an acceptable point of view (Barclay, The Gospel of John Vol. 2 38; Pink 65). A more plausible explanation has to do with the understanding and the concept of sin among the Jews during Jesus’ time. It was generally held that physical suffering was the result of sin either on the part of the individual or their parents. While it may seem counter-intuitive to hold blindness from birth results from sin, without holding a position favorable to reincarnation, one has to understand that Judaism of the time held that it was possible for an infant to commit sin *in utero*, although there is no elaboration on how a preborn could possibly commit sin. The other possibility, that the affliction resulted from the sins of the parents, was a concept arrived

at from Exod. 20:5 in which God threatens to pass on the sins of the parents to the third and fourth generations (Barclay, The Gospel of John Vol. 2 38; Brown 370; Morris 478; Pink 64). The idea of *in utero* sin seems to suggest, again, that reincarnation was not on the mind of the apostles when they posed the question to Jesus.

Jesus' response to the question needs to be taken into account because it offers insight into the mind of Christ. Had Jesus espoused reincarnation this would have been the perfect opportunity to speak about the effects that karma from past lives would have on the individual. Instead Christ almost ignores the question completely by answering "neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him" (John 9:3). Jesus' response completely diffuses the idea of sin being the cause of the affliction and instead reframes the encounter to show that it is through suffering that God's grace and power can be manifested (Barclay, The Gospel of John Vol. 2 39; Brown 371; Morris 479; Pink 66). For Jesus the question about who sinned was not the point, but rather the expression of the work of God in the world.

It should be pointed out that the KJV translation of the previous passages has marked differences from other standard English translations⁹ of Sacred Scripture. When other translations are consulted these proof texts, with the exception of John 9:1-4, prove more difficult to interpret in light of the doctrine of reincarnation. There is a consistency in translation among all the English translations with the exception of the KJV. The use of the KJV translation is not surprising given that many of the authors espousing the doctrine of reincarnation in Christianity come out of a Protestant background. It is also

⁹ NAB, RSV, NRSV, TEV, Oxford NET.

possible to attribute the isolation of proof texts and the lack of exegetical support for their position to the idea that personal inspiration and translation is possible.

E. A Catholic Appraisal of Reincarnation

Despite a number of attempts on the part of New Age adherents to prove that reincarnation was either part of the doctrine of the early Christian Church or to legitimize it today, there are a number of problems that such a notion holds. There are practical considerations, such as the exploding world population and its relationship to reincarnated souls, but these are outside the theological scope of this paper. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states definitively that reincarnation is not a possibility for humanity citing the words of St. Paul to the Hebrews that “it is appointed for men to die once” (qtd. in Catechism §1013). Some of the issues hinge on a misunderstanding of Christian doctrine while others place unchangeable truths of the faith in jeopardy.

1. God’s Condemnation of Sinners to Hell

One of the main arguments that reincarnationists use to call into question the doctrine of resurrection and one life, one death is the apparent contradiction between an all loving and merciful God and the possibility of an eternity spent in hell for temporal sins. This is a paradox that is difficult even for faithful Christians. However, there really is no contradiction when one takes into account humanity’s free will. If it is assumed that it is God who condemns an individual to an eternity in hell, this position should be reframed. It is never God who turns away from humanity but rather humanity who turns away from God. The only way that humanity is able to love anything, another person or God, is if there is free will. By virtue of free will human beings are able to choose whether or not they will love or turn their back, do good or do evil. God desires that

every human being love him, but does not force them to do so. Should an individual die having made the conscious choice to turn their back on God through sin without having reconciled, God only carries out the just sentence, an eternity spent separated from the love of God. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that “we cannot be united with God unless we freely choose to love him...To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God’s merciful love means remaining separated from him for ever by our own free choice” (§1033). In a sense it is like a parent punishing a child for behaving badly. Parents do not want to punish their children but there must be consequences for actions, both good and bad. It should come as no surprise that a life lived separated from God would warrant eternal separation.

2. All or None, or Is There an in Between?

Intimately related to the idea of God punishing is the apparent inequity of eternal damnation for sinful behavior carried out in what is such a short period of time in relation to eternity. This position seems to come out of a more Protestant understanding of eschatology; that there are only two possibilities after death either heaven or hell. It does not take a theologian to look around the world and see the inadequacies of humanity and the lack of perfection. If one holds the position that only that which is pure and perfect can enter the kingdom of heaven, and the only two options after death are heaven or hell, then it demands the question who actually makes it to heaven because there does not seem to be many perfect people (i.e. sinless) inhabiting the earth. If this is the case, and there are only two possibilities after death, then the odds of entering the kingdom seem rather bleak. But, a Catholic eschatology offers a more hopeful view of the possibilities for the afterlife. It is true that human beings are frail creatures who have difficulty

attaining perfection in this life. Unfortunately, this is a consequence of original sin and our rather self-centered desires. At the same time though, there are many people who are really trying to live a Christ-centered life. Does this mean that despite their best efforts and the grace of God that their failure to attain perfection will go unrewarded in the next life? Not if one understands the doctrine of purgatory. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states “all who die in God’s grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven” (§1030). The doctrine of purgatory recognizes that there are a number of people who truly love God and desire to be with him in the next life, yet are not sufficiently prepared to enter the kingdom after death. Instead of being condemned to an eternity of punishment there is the possibility of a final cleansing, a purgation, that will allow one to enter the kingdom.

3. Perpetual Rides on the Karmic Merry-Go-Round

New Age supporters of reincarnation make the claim that the cycle of birth, death and rebirth gives individuals the opportunity to correct the bad karma that they earned in previous lives. It is believed that after a number of incarnations the individual will have learned from past mistakes, eventually learn to live a virtuous life and finally break the karmic cycle and enter the kingdom of heaven. In addition, reincarnation is seen as a cosmic way of dealing with the injustices of the world such as hunger and unfair distribution of wealth by leaving open the possibility of living under better conditions in successive lives. What is problematic in this is the fact that one usually does not remember their actions from past lives. If eternal damnation for sinful behavior seems to be an unjust punishment for temporal sins, which many remember committing, it seem

just as unjust to condemn someone to the possibility of suffering in another lifetime for sinful behavior that they cannot remember. It seems that reincarnation has the possibility of leading to hopelessness, particularly if one is faced with worsening situations with every rebirth if they do not learn from their past mistakes. The traditional doctrine of one life, one death in Christianity appears to offer more hope for those suffering injustices because there is no worry about whether or not they will be hungry, cold, impoverished or mistreated in the afterlife. “Our experiences of evil and suffering, injustice, and death, seem to contradict the Good News; they can shake our faith and become a temptation against it” (Catechism §164), but this is a consequence of original sin and therefore will not be present in heaven. While it may be more difficult for someone in this life there is always the hope that comes from an eternity lived in the perfection of heaven as opposed to constant rebirth and experiences in a sinful fallen world.

4. Moral Issues Arise With Reincarnation

As stated above, it is held by those who believe in reincarnation that individuals in some way, whether consciously or unconsciously, choose their next incarnation in order to help them learn the lessons that will help them to progress in the spiritual life. This is used to help explain why individuals are subject to human suffering; in a sense it's a cosmic lesson. But this position poses a serious issue for the moral life for two reasons. First, it seems to presuppose that people invite suffering on themselves. Such a position makes individuals appear masochistic because they are allowing themselves to be abused by others and the world. While God allows suffering to happen, he does not will that his creatures suffer. While there is redemption and grace found through bearing suffering one should not will that they suffer needlessly.

Another, more grave issue that reincarnation poses with regard to the moral life is the responsibility for sinful behavior. If an individual chooses the life they are going to live in order to learn certain lessons, it begs the question about sinful acts being perpetrated against another. Theoretically, a woman who has an abortion or a man who euthanizes his friend could justify such behavior as morally good because the individual who they killed needed that experience to learn whatever lesson they needed to progress spiritually. This position is absolutely contradictory to Catholic moral teaching. For the Catholic Christian there are several rules that always apply in judging the morality of an act. They are:

- One may never do evil so that good may result from it;
- the Golden Rule: “Whatever you wish that men would do to you do so to them.”
- charity always proceeds by way of respect for one’s nature and his conscience: “Thus sinning against your brethren and wounding their conscience...you sin against Christ.” Therefore “it is right not to...do anything that makes your brother stumble. (Catechism §1789)

For Catholics, there are certain acts, no matter what the intention or the goodness of the outcome, that can be morally justified. However, a New Age perspective would allow for not only a proportionalist point of view but also a rampant moral relativism which ultimately leads to the perception that that there is no such thing as sin because some good will always result.

5. What Happens to the Incarnation in Reincarnation?

Finally, reincarnation completely drains the historical and theological significance from the Incarnation. Reincarnation is necessarily Arian in its understanding of the reality of Christ because, while there are many in New Age who profess a belief in Jesus, it is not because he is the redeemer of humanity but because he is seen only as one of a number of human examples of how we should live our lives. If humanity is incarnated a number of times it causes one to necessarily ask, how many incarnations did it take Jesus to finally get it right? This calls into question the significance, acknowledged or not, of the historical reality of Christ's coming once and for all to redeem humanity. The reality of the Incarnation is a mystery of Christianity, but a central belief that cannot be casually dismissed. It is through the reality of the Incarnation, the reality of Christ being true God and true man, that helps humanity to understand the unity between themselves and God (Catechism §476-477).

Reincarnation is an untenable position for Christians to hold. At its root it calls into question a number of the central mysteries and dogmas of the faith, including the doctrine of the resurrection, the sacredness of the one life lived, and the reality of the Incarnation of Christ who came once and died once for all, in all times. Reincarnation does not offer the hope that New Age proponents would like it to offer. Rather it allows for the perpetuation of suffering over multiple lifetimes and seemingly leads to the prospect of hopelessness and despair.

V. Conclusion

Those involved in the New Age movement, in many ways, are like any other individuals legitimately searching for truth and meaning in their lives. Unfortunately, they have headed down a path, that while seemingly offering answers to the questions of life, ultimately leads to an end that falls short of the Divine Reality. This paper is not meant to be an apology against those who are firmly entrenched in the ideologies of the New Age, but rather an aide to help those Christians who are searching for the truth outside Christianity either because of poor catechesis on the part of both clergy and laity or because they feel that the Church for some reason is not answering the questions about life that they are asking.

Neopaganism and reincarnation represent only a small part of the totality of the New Age movement but they represent important focuses for Christians because of the role of relationships both in this life and the next. Unlike traditional apologetics and dialogues between opposing religious and spiritual view points, the New Age represents a new challenge for Christianity and particularly Catholicism. The traditional way of approaching problematic theological and spiritual issues is inadequate for addressing the problems presented by the New Age. Traditional responses are based on an in-depth analysis of the doctrinal and creedal statements of opposing viewpoints. Unfortunately, the New Age is a loosely organized, fluid movement in which every individual can potentially hold a different position and be “right.” As a result, even attempts at addressing the problems posed by the New Age movement like this paper are woefully inadequate to the task. The syncretistic nature of New Age calls for a totally new approach to dealing with the problem. Instead of attempting a systematic polemic against

the New Age it will require that clergy and laity alike be educated in the truths of the Christian faith in order to enter into individual dialogue with those being swayed by the New Age. It is only through the building of individual relationships that the New Age movement can adequately be addressed. Papers such as this, while not helpful in the overall fight against the creep of New Age into Christianity or Christians into New Age from a traditional apologetic standpoint, do provide a basis to begin analyzing some of the problems that New Age poses in light of the faith. This is only the beginning of a dialogue which necessarily must continue indefinitely. New Age simply represents old ideas, old heresies, recast for the modern person. A familiarity with the long history of the Church can help to put these beliefs into perspective and keep people along the right path to union with God.

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