

good. Separation from God means annihilation, and cannot be endured. Discontinuity of that sort opens the gates of hell. To be separated from God is to be already in hell. Only a divine intervention can liberate us from ourselves. In our case that intervention is located in the miracle of Incarnation. By means of that act of self-giving love, God raises that which he has created to the point at which, in faith, men and women can experience an incomparable re-birth in which the self is consumed by the love of God.<sup>19</sup> Christianity is the history of that new life, of its divine origins, and of the fear and the reassurance it has provoked in human beings down the centuries.

In assessing the value of that miracle, in the light of which all other miracles become visible, Lewis concluded that the skepticism of the adult counts for nothing when compared with the spontaneous delight of the child who, in Wordsworth's line, is "surprised by joy, impatient as the wind." "Human creatures with their individual and collective illusions of self-sufficiency, their spurious claims to autonomy, their false certainties and irrational fears, have to change direction if they would be truly free. The price of their freedom is submission to the truth that is to be found in Christ, but the sacrifice is also the key to their freedom. Overwhelmed by miracle, the convert begins to discover that "The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of man, and his compulsion is our liberation."<sup>20</sup> □

## In search of the miraculous

*Stratford Caldecott*

Extraordinary or "paranormal" phenomena and apparently miraculous healings abound in the New Age movement. But what exactly is the challenge they represent, and how should the Church respond?

The term "New Age" is used to refer to a worldwide movement that believes a new age is dawning in the history of mankind, an age not necessarily of material prosperity but of "higher consciousness." In the 1960s, this began to be called the "Age of Aquarius," after the constellation which, astrologically, succeeds Pisces in supposedly determining the character of our historical epoch. New spiritual influences, we were told, were coming into play during the latter part of the twentieth century, spreading peace and enlightenment across the earth.

How did this movement come about? The material optimism of the late Victorian period, with its myth of inevitable progress through evolution, had been severely shaken by the experience of two world wars. It began to revive in the fertile soil of a post-war generation sheltered by relative prosperity (in the West) and "liberated" (in imagination) by the rapid development of new technology, from television and electric guitars to spaceships and the Pill. One manifestation of this new optimism was the United States moon program, and the growth of a scientific subculture that believed all problems could be solved by a combination of technological creativity and money. But the declining support for institutional religion and conventional morality also went hand in hand with a desire to discover meaning and values for oneself, starting from scratch. The new "Church of Science" did not have the capacity

<sup>19</sup>In. 10:10; Eph. 3:8.

<sup>20</sup>Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 183.

to satisfy everyone.<sup>1</sup> An original naive experimentation with drugs, with lifestyles, with communes, and with self-made religion among the hippies of the 1960s prepared the way for involvement in more established alternatives to institutional Christianity, such as occultism, spiritualism, theosophy, the imported Eastern religions and humanistic psychology, with all their various offshoots and hybrids.<sup>2</sup>

The spirit underlying the whole movement is individualistic, despite the fact that it is constantly throwing up new collectivist cults. It is often described by its exponents as a "spiritual awakening," or a "coming of age of the human race," in that the race is supposedly outgrowing the need for dogma, tradition, and external authorities such as the Church. These facts do not, however, prevent the New Age from being quite widespread among Catholics, who often remain committed to the Church with the conscious intention of influencing or transforming it from within. They sometimes take Teilhard de Chardin (rightly or wrongly) to be one of their prophets, because of his stress on the evolution of consciousness. Ironically, perhaps, it was Enlightenment individualism that cleared the way for this massive conversion to what the Enlightenment thinkers themselves would have regarded as forms of mere superstition. By splitting facts from values, the Enlightenment mutilated Reason in the very act of glorifying it, and increasingly the search for a supreme, unifying, and universal reality had to be pursued through the faculties of feeling and intuition.

#### *A course in miracles*

The three-volume *Course in Miracles*, which was "channeled" rather than written by a human author, was first

<sup>1</sup>The New Age movement is not against science *per se*, but materialism: it accommodates quite readily both the "new physics" and the "new biology." See, e.g., Marilyn Ferguson, *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (Los Angeles: Jeremy Tarcher, 1980).

<sup>2</sup>A still important study of spiritualism by Herbert Thurston, S.J., *The Church and Spiritualism* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1933), argued the case against Christians involving themselves in such practices. The opposite point of view is put by Morton Kelsey in *The Christian and the Supernatural* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), for whom "Psi" is a "natural phenomenon of the human psyche" which "can be used for the glory of God and the enrichment of human life."

published by the Foundation for Inner Peace in 1975.<sup>3</sup> Since then it has sold many hundreds of thousands of copies, and remains immensely influential. It sums itself up as follows: "Nothing real can be threatened. Nothing unreal exists. Herein lies the peace of God." It goes on, "All miracles mean life, and God is the Giver of life. His Voice will direct you very specifically. You will be told all you need to know. . . . Miracles are natural. When they do not occur something has gone wrong. Miracles are everyone's right, but purification is necessary first" (p. 1). "I am the only one who can perform miracles indiscriminately, because I am the Atonement" (p. 7).

The spirit dictating the *Course* continues for several thousand pages of close print:

You have a role in the Atonement which I will dictate to you. Ask me which miracles you should perform. This spares you needless effort, because you will be acting under direct communication. The impersonal nature of the miracle is an essential ingredient, because it enables me to direct its application, and under my guidance miracles lead to the highly personal experience of revelation. A guide does not control but he does direct, leaving it up to you to follow. "Lead us not into temptation" means "Recognize your errors and choose to abandon them by following my guidance" (*Ibid.*).

To what does this guide direct us? To monism: matter, embodiment and limitation are not evil (as the Gnostics taught), but illusory. "No one who carries Christ in him can fail to recognize him everywhere. Except in bodies. And as long as they believe they are in bodies, where they think they are he cannot be" (p. 482). "The name of Jesus is the name of one who was a man but saw the face of Christ in all his brothers and remembered God. . . . Jesus became what all of you must be" (*Manual for Teachers*, p. 83). "The Holy Spirit. . . represents your Self and your Creator, who are one" (*Ibid.*, p. 85).

The *Course* is by no means unusual, except in its use of Christian terminology. It is only one of the voices of the New Age, but it may stand here for many others. As will already be apparent to anyone who has stepped inside one of the many New Age bookstores, the movement is like a great river fed by many tributaries: the Hermetic and alchemical traditions

<sup>3</sup>It will be quoting from the one-volume paperback edition (London and New York: Arkana, 1985).

of Europe, mediated sometimes by Carl Jung; the neo-Platonism of the Renaissance or of Sufism; popularized Vedanta, Buddhism, and Taoism with the embroideries of Madame Blavatsky; Gnosticism, witchcraft, Kabbalah, Yoga and so on. Belief in reincarnation is common, although not essential. (The *Course*, with its stress on the "Holy Instant" and non-existence of past and future, refuses to be drawn on the subject.) The ultimate criterion of truth tends to be pragmatic: whatever helps you to find inner peace is true "for you." Thus the New Age keeps itself free to follow every kind of appealing idea (often merely for the sake of novelty), without exposing itself to the danger of refutation.

#### *The world between*

The realm of theory in the New Age thus tends to be subordinate to the realm of practice. Every "Teacher" offers to help their disciples toward a state of enlightenment, freedom, health, wholeness, and inner peace. Healing is the main purpose even of "white magic," whose practitioners liken their craft to a form of prayer, especially the invocation of saints and angels. Many magicians regard membership in the Church as quite compatible with their activities, since the strictures against witchcraft are clearly directed to followers of the "left-hand path," and the relevant authorities seem quite unaware of the existence of white magic. Those who involve themselves in magic, mediumship, and healing rituals on the one hand, and those who are trying to extend the natural sciences to cover such phenomena as telepathy, psychokinesis, precognition, and poltergeists on the other, may for our purposes be lumped together as explorers of the "twilight realm" of the *preternatural*. It is because the Church has developed no official science of this realm, despite the contributions of Hildegard von Bingen, Pico della Mirandola, Franz von Baader and others, that so many have been drawn to look for such a science outside. The work and experience of Emmanuel Milingo, one-time Archbishop of Lusaka, suggests that the need for a Catholic synthesis in this area may become urgent in the face of the problems of inculturation in Africa.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>E. Milingo, *The World in Between* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1984). The

In a suggestive Foreword to the German edition of *Meditations on the Tarot*,<sup>5</sup> Balthasar remarks that that such a synthesis may indeed be possible. It has not been definitively achieved in *Meditations* (the anonymous author of which was a Catholic convert from among the followers of Rudolf Steiner), but nevertheless some progress has been achieved. The book contains many clues, and will repay careful attention. Balthasar places it even above the work of Mirandola and Baader: "The mystical, magic, occult tributaries which flow into the stream of his meditations are much more encompassing; yet the confluence of their waters within him, full of movement, becomes inwardly a unity of Christian contemplation." The author of the *Meditations* issues the following appeal to both sides:

Now is the time for the Hermetic movement to make true Christian peace with the Church and to cease to be her semi-illegitimate child, leading a half-tolerated life more or less in the shadow of the Church—and to become eventually an adopted child, if not a recognized legitimate child. But "it takes two to love." And there is many a pretension to be abandoned in order to accomplish this. What is sure, however, is that if the two parties in question have at heart only the glory of God, all obstacles to this peace will evaporate in smoke. May the pretension of certain Hermeticists evaporate in smoke—namely to have the authority to found small churches under their own leadership and to set up altar against altar and hierarchy against hierarchy.

On the other hand, may the pretension of certain theologians evaporate in smoke—namely to be a supreme tribunal, without recourse to further appeal, concerning all planes of existence beyond the five senses (p. 189).

The challenge to develop a science of "miracles" (in the common and loose sense of the word) is perfectly serious. It will not do to dismiss the entire Hermetic movement as though it signified only a resurgence of heresy and devil worship.

#### *Esoteric Christianity*

Intertwined with the challenge of the preternatural there is another, perhaps subtler challenge, which sometimes

book is also important for re-emphasizing a neglected but important aspect of Christ's ministry and that of his Apostles—healing and exorcism.

<sup>5</sup>Anon., *Meditations on the Tarot* (Amity, New York: Amity House, 1984). The German edition was published by Herder (Basel, 1983), and was a translation from French, revised after the first German edition of 1972.

expresses itself as the quest for "esoteric Christianity." This is the demand not for the preternatural, but for the properly *supernatural*, not for miracles but for Miracle. As a way into this whole question, one may read the opening of P. D. Ouspensky's classic, *In Search of the Miraculous*:<sup>6</sup>

When leaving Petersburg at the start of my journey I had said that I was going to "seek the miraculous." The "miraculous" is very difficult to define. But for me this word had a quite definite meaning. I had come to the conclusion a long time ago that there was no escape from the labyrinth of contradictions in which we live except by an entirely new road, unlike anything hitherto known or used by us. But where this new or forgotten road began I was unable to say. I already knew then as an undoubted fact that beyond the thin film of false reality there existed another reality from which, for some reason, something separated us. The "miraculous" was a penetration into this unknown reality. And it seemed to me that the way to the unknown could be found in the East. Why in the East? It was difficult to answer this. In this idea there was, perhaps, something of romance, but it may have been the absolutely real conviction that, in any case, nothing could be found in Europe.

*In Search of the Miraculous* describes Ouspensky's encounter with G. I. Gurdjieff in Moscow, shortly before the Revolution, and the eight years of discipleship that followed. (Ouspensky later split from Gurdjieff and has his own followers.) Gurdjieff taught that most of the time human beings live like machines, at a sub-human level. They have no consciousness (they are "asleep"), no freedom (they cannot "do"), no immortal soul (no permanent "Essence" or "I," merely a flux of fragmentary personalities). Some of us, however, do have flashes of a higher state of consciousness, and this can be made permanent by special training. Starting with "self-observation," "persisting with "work on oneself" by means of certain exercises, one may achieve a state of "self-remembering," which is the necessary foundation for the "objective consciousness" which the religions refer to as Enlightenment.

Ouspensky describes the moment, early in his discipleship, when he "woke" out of his normal state of awareness in the words: "And suddenly I remembered that I had forgotten to remember myself." He and his companions realized that in this

<sup>6</sup>P. D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950).

taste of awakening "we had come into contact with a 'miracle,' and that it was something 'new,' something that had never existed anywhere before" (p. 121). What Gurdjieff offered them was a *science of consciousness*, on which all the religions of the world could be strung like beads on a necklace. It was through a change in *consciousness* that they could penetrate the thin film that separated them from "true reality," into the realm of the miraculous.

A more recent book in the Gurdjieff tradition puts very clearly the implications of all this for Christianity. *Lost Christianity* by Jacob Needleman is based on the premise that Christians are looking for something the official Church is failing to provide: not mysticism, but an "esoteric" or inner path that "produces real change in human nature, real transformation."<sup>7</sup> Most of us are in the position described by St. Paul: "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing that I hate. . . . Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:15-24). While we have no will, the virtues remain unattainable ideals. Needleman claims that the "how" of Christianity, the way to become "Christians without quotation marks" taught by Jesus to his disciples, was passed on for several hundred years within the Church, but its secret has long since been lost. The official guardians of Christianity, he writes, wasted all their energies on apologetics, defending an empty shell, teaching what Christ wanted us to do but without transmitting the power to *do*. In his book, Needleman encounters Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, Thomas Keating and several Christian teachers in the course of his search for Lost Christianity, only to find it in the (probably fictional) person of Father Sylvan, whose teaching echoes that of Gurdjieff.

It was a disaster for Christianity, according to Father Sylvan, when it adopted the notion that the soul of man already exists in finished form within human nature. This assumption about the given existence of the soul led to our identification of ordinary kinds of thoughts, emotions and sensations with the soul, the higher part of ourselves, and hence to the futile and mistaken effort to perfect our being by perfecting our thoughts, emotions or sensations. . . . Change, transformation, can come only through the action of an objectively higher force: the Spirit. And this Spirit cannot find channels of action unless there exists something in man that can receive it and

<sup>7</sup>Jacob Needleman, *Lost Christianity* (New York: Doubleday, 1980).

pass it on to all the parts of himself. . . . That function Father Sylvan identifies as the power of gathered attention" (p. 177).

Needleman's book is richer and more subtle than I have suggested. The author, after all, is an expert on the contemplative writings of most of the world's religions, including Christianity. This makes one particular omission for the book especially glaring. There is no mention of the Virgin Mary. Connected with this fact is another: there is very little mention of Jesus Christ, except as a historical personage, the founder of the religion that bears his name. The two facts are connected because it is Mary who gives us Jesus Christ as a real presence. It is she who stands at the center of the incarnational system, the spiritual ecology of the sacraments, and it is she—the heart of the Church—who initiates us into true "esoteric Christianity."

#### *The body of the Bride*

Many New Age groups, not just the followers of Gurdjieff, believe they have discovered the lost secret of Christianity (it is almost a unifying theme of the New Age). They think they have found the key to Miracle, to self-transformation and healing, to immortality. These groups are correct in thinking that there is a "Secret." Where they are wrong is in imagining that the Secret was entrusted to merely human hands within the Church, as though it could be lost by being forgotten.

Christ was not just another teacher of the perennial wisdom. His teaching does not survive by being *merely handed on*. He remains present in his Church in a way that no mere teacher can remain among his followers. The same God who sets in order the "accidents" and "coincidences" of history is the Holy Spirit who governs the Church as its Soul. The transformation worked by the Spirit in human beings is not primarily a change in feelings (that would be sentimentalism). Nor is it a change in consciousness. No one "wakes up" when a baby is baptized, and yet a Christian has come into existence. The change is ontological, and in human terms invisible. Changes in feeling, in consciousness, and in activity may be connected with the change in being, but the unfolding of the new creature is not something that needs to take place in *this* world at all.

The New Age has made few attempts to under-

stand the nature of the sacraments.<sup>8</sup> From the magician's point of view, they are rituals for the "collection and radiation of divine force" (Leadbeater). Or they may be designed to foster the "gathering of attention" spoken of by Father Sylvan. This is already to give them much more significance than the more materialistic, secular mentality is prepared to do: they are more than celebrations of good feeling or affirmations of solidarity. The New Age would be quite prepared to believe that Marthe Robin lived on nothing but the Holy Eucharist, or that the Sacrament sometimes floated out of the priest's hands into her mouth. But from the same point of view, another ritual, or a similar ritual performed out of communion with Rome, might do just as well or better. What has been missed here is not the power of the sacraments, but the truly supernatural quality of the life they make possible, and the intrinsic connection between each of them and the Church.<sup>9</sup>

A way of presenting the Church's sacramental system for New Agers might be based on the following organic analogy. The Church is the body of Christ's Bride; that is to say, it is his own Mystical Body. A body has bones to give it a shape and solidity in the world: in the case of the Church, this skeleton is the institutional structure centered in Rome. (The sociological method being akin to the use of x-rays, the "bones" are all that a sociologist will see of the Church. He does not see a Person.) Each individual who is united to others by the Holy Spirit is a cell in this body. Like my own body cells, in which the processes of life are at war with entropy, each member of the Church contains both the new life that comes from the Soul of the Church and the old selfishness that leads to spiritual death. The Church lives in us (and we in the Church) to the extent we shed that selfishness in a process of regeneration through love. And just as my own body regenerates itself by means of the vital organs called heart, liver, lungs, kidneys and

<sup>8</sup>Two interesting early attempts by the theosophical movement are Annie Besant, *Esoteric Christianity or The Lesser Mysteries* (London and Barnes: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1905), and C. W. Leadbeater, *The Science of the Sacraments* (Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1929). Leadbeater was the Presiding Bishop of the "Liberal Catholic Church."

<sup>9</sup>What follows is no doubt open to many objections. What it seeks to emphasize is the *incarnational* nature of Christianity, and therefore the Church as a sacramental organism. It is this alone which makes sense of Christianity, and it is this which the modern world most needs to hear.

so on, the body of the Bride regenerates itself by means of the seven sacraments.

These "vital organs" of the Church can be traced in embryonic form right back to the beginning of the Church's life. They have been discerned in the seven last words from the Cross, the seven "archetypal miracles" and "I am" sayings in the Gospel of John, and even in the seven sorrows of Mary. Their function being to feed, build up, and purify the body of the Bride, they necessarily do this *ex opere operato*, that is, in a way which does not depend simply on the subjective state of those who administer or receive them. Just like our heart, liver and lungs, the sacraments have to work all the time if the life of the organism is to be sustained (we would soon die if breathing depended on being in the right mood). That is the real reason why sentimental modern liturgies and ugly churches (and even drunk, hypocritical, and ignorant priests), though a terrible shame, should not prevent anyone from participating in the sacraments.

Since the Church exists as a Person in a world more real than the empirical, namely the *intentional* world, we may pursue the analogy a step further and say that, in addition to the other things I have mentioned, the Church must have sensory organs, corresponding to the eyes, ears, tongue, nose, and skin. These sensory organs or modes of receptivity in the Church are the virtues. Purity of heart, which is the summation of the virtues, is the Bride's organ of sight. ("Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.") In the body of the Bride, all the senses are turned inward, and look only for God: the *eyes of the heart* open in the theological virtue called faith. They look only for beauty. For no one, I think, has faith except in someone or something they perceive to be (in some way) beautiful, and it is only beauty that can compel belief without compromising our freedom. By following the track or trajectory of beauty we are led, beyond surfaces, to the inner dimension of the world; from faith, through hope, towards love. If faith is the opening of the eyes in the heart, hope is the looking towards God with those eyes, and love is the filling of them with light from the face of the Beloved.

### Conclusion

The virtue of faith is made possible by divine action in the soul, not by our own action or desire alone. It renders the

soul teachable by God, but it does not immediately transform or unify the psyche, and this makes it seem useless from the point of view of the New Age. The person who is searching for the miraculous expects to experience a change in feelings or consciousness. Such changes can and do take place. The experience of "awakening" as though from sleep is both real and important.<sup>10</sup> (So is the more common experience of *unreality*, which gave rise to Ouspensky's search.) The question is whether *awareness* should itself be made the object of the search, or instead gratefully received as the fruit of another quest altogether. Happiness, similarly, eludes our grasp if we aim at it directly. The quest for the self—even the "higher self"—ends in the trap of Lucifer. This highest of created intelligences had much better reason than we to glorify the Self. His "fall" measures the depth of the abyss separating nature from supernature. We can only avoid falling into the same trap (from a less elevated position in the natural order) through sacrifice, *kenosis*, humility.

That the "ego" or false self must die is well understood even by Lucifer. That the true self, the Self, must also be abandoned to death is shown by Jesus Christ. All that we own or have attained becomes deadly if we do not return it freely to the Giver. This applies even to the understanding of truth, and helps to explain why every spiritual level has its own characteristic form of hypocrisy. The devil is much more subtle than we realize. Indeed, for excellent metaphysical reasons we may assume that he is always exactly one jump ahead of us. We are therefore beset with dangers whenever we set out to "work on ourselves."

The New Age repeats many stories about the obedience demanded by gurus of their disciples in the East (Mylarepa, for example). It is generally accepted that such obedience may be required by one who is supremely wise, in order to transmit his teaching. The submission or assent required by

<sup>10</sup>The inward progress in a Christian's life is linked to a process of awakening to an ever-increasing degree of consciousness. Conversion itself is comparable to an emergence from a state of somnolence. "These lines recall the earlier quotations from Ouspensky. They form the opening of the chapter "True Consciousness" in *Transformation in Christ* (New York: Helicon Press, 1948), in which the author, Dietrich von Hildebrand, distinguishes the new level of consciousness from various forms of false consciousness, including "an excess of reflective self-observation," which "nourishes pride."

the Church, however, is not viewed by New Agers in quite the same light—unless the bishop or abbot in question happens to possess the qualities of a genuine sage. Once again, it is the *personal* nature of the Church that has been lost sight of. For the Church as Person may require obedience in her own right, regardless of the particular qualities of the prelate who provides us with the occasion to obey. In a way, it does not matter whether a human authority in the Church knows what he is doing or not, as long as the Church knows. It is the Bride who “kept all these things in her heart” (e.g., Luke 2:51). The degrees of assent and obedience required by the voice of the Church vary, of course, depending on the level of the teaching and its synergistic relation to the rest of Catholic dogma. There is also the difficulty of distinguishing the voice of the Church from the voices of the individuals who make up the Church. It is necessary to be *listening for* the one voice in order to hear it.

The miraculous, the higher magic, the deeper esotericism of Christianity is entered through the eye of a needle. There is an act of humility, a form of submission asked of one who has been given the beginnings of faith. This “submission” is abhorrent to the modern world, which compares it to that required by the Nazis, in which the integrity and freedom of the person was lost. The difference lies in the nature and reality of faith. Obedience is *Christian* to the degree it is demanded by the person’s own conscience. Once the supernatural dimension and unity of the Church has been so much as glimpsed, it would be a betrayal of conscience to pretend it had not. Submission (always in the context of an overriding loyalty to the truth perceived) then ceases to be a denial of one’s intellectual integrity and becomes essential to its affirmation. Obedience in *this* sense creates the conditions for interior freedom, by destroying an interior slavery. A choice has arisen between two masters: the truth, and the self to whom the truth has been revealed. It was the purpose of the Incarnation to offer us that choice.

Often the best way to find something one thinks has been lost or hidden is to look afresh in the most obvious place. Esoteric Christianity has been hidden well and truly under our noses, in the very practice—or even in the attempted practice, continually renewed—of exoteric Christianity. In other words, esoteric Christianity can be found only by those humble enough to believe that God would not hide it from the simple and ordinary.

Even so truly a “Church of the People” as the Catholic Church does not abolish genuine esotericism. The secret path of the saints is never denied to one who is really willing to follow it. But who in the crowd troubles himself over such a path?<sup>11</sup> □

<sup>11</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 34.