

A Dark World Down Under

In Australia, where people create their own religion with crystals, spirit guides and holistic medicine, Christians are offering New Agers the path to truth.

After years of searching for lasting quality in a bazaar of esoteric beliefs, Dorothy Bond's pursuit of New Age enlightenment foundered. Her quest had taken her around the world, relieved her of many thousands of dollars and even gained her a seven-year internship at the exclusive Gurdjieff School of Philosophy in New York.

Back in Melbourne, Australia, she attended a retreat with a Sufi sheik from Turkey whose teachings held a worldwide following. He seemed, Dorothy admits, a "lovely, gentle old man who spoke peace and love all the time." Then she met his wife and heard quite a different story. "She said to me: 'I don't understand why you people look at this man as god. You should try living with him!' And it was, like, where's the integrity here?"

Bond lives in the town of Wandin in the Dandenong Ranges, an area of forest-roofed hills on Melbourne's eastern outskirts where Buddhas and goddess-idols have long since replaced gnomes as most-favored garden statues. The sheik's wife reinforced Bond's growing conviction that New Age was founded on deception, a conviction that had gained strength as she had scaled the hierarchy and faced the transition from student to teacher.

"I knew I had techniques, but I knew I hadn't found what I was looking for," she says, "and I found it very difficult to take the responsibility for other people's spiritual journeys and pretend that I knew more than I actually did."

The Age of Aquarius

Since its appearance as a fringe phenomenon in the 1960s, New Age has leaped into the mainstream of Western culture. It embraces a hodgepodge of beliefs and practices and derives its name from the “Age of Aquarius” that astrologers claim the world is entering.

Some of these claim scientific respectability, but others are unreservedly mystical. Holistic medicine, Western Buddhism and fortunetelling are some of its better-known spheres, but it also claims such unlikely fields as psychoanalysis, feminism and quantum physics—the latter being one of the “new science” disciplines that offer a more nature-friendly body of knowledge.

Wicca, the modern-day gloss for witchcraft, is spiraling, particularly among women, as it purports to be a natural expression of feminine spirituality. Modern witches say they are tapping into the “all-pervading life force.” They deny any supernatural element to their activities, claiming the church has falsely tarred them as devil worshipers.

A major lure of New Age is its perception that modern society’s problems stem from a suppression of the spiritual—and that Christianity is largely to blame for this. Bond is determined to correct this view.

Fourteen years ago she cried out to God, admitting she was lost. The next day she found in her mailbox a pamphlet titled *I Am the Way, the Truth and the Life*. She followed it up, accepted Jesus and is today a founding member of the Eternity Team—a Melbourne-based mission to New Agers that includes many former adherents.

“We really wanted to go back in and talk to people about our experiences, about how we’d perceived Christianity in a certain way and how, when we encountered Jesus, it really did change our whole worldview. It blew us out of the water—we didn’t expect to find what’s in the gospel,” Bond says.

The New Age expo Mind, Body, Spirit has been in Australia since 1989 and now holds annual festivals in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and many smaller centers. Theologian Philip Johnson is one of Australia's foremost Christian authorities on New Age, and his organization—Global Apologetics and Mission—has maintained a booth at the Sydney event since 1991.

“New Christian churches hopelessly enmeshed in a system of thinking and being that is dying,” Johnson says. “It does not see the church speaking forthrightly in any meaningful way that touches people at their points of need or addresses the kinds of crises that Western society finds itself in.”

Johnson believes the church has “circled the wagons” against the esoteric onslaught and has failed to ask the vital question: “Why are people over there looking for answers rather than in our for these answers?” New Agers generally have no problem with Jesus—as long as He is not presented as the Son of God or the only way to salvation.

Johnson has traced an emerging New Age mythology about Jesus. One school claims He traveled as a teenager to India, Tibet or Japan to gain spiritual wisdom. “The underlying thread there is that Jesus’ message is compatible with all religious traditions,” Johnson says. Other schools maintain Christianity was originally a pagan mystery religion that turned a purely mythical “Jesus” into a historic figure.

Lee-Anne Benn of Coastlands International Christian Centre in Adelaide also encounters these distortions. Benn trains teams of evangelists for the city’s annual Mind, Body, Spirit festival and warns them they will meet people with “Jesus consciousness” who will nonetheless deny the deity of Christ.

“I ask the guys to listen a lot and speak as little as possible because I genuinely believe that when you don’t believe truth, there’s going to be that cry in the heart,”

Benn says. "So I try to train them to listen for it and go in on it when it opens up."

She finds people are particularly receptive to personal testimonies of a loving, giving God. Lack of compassion and an obsession with self are major elements she identifies in New Age that differ from Christianity. "They basically say that it's all about karma. You're creating your own problem [through] thinking negatively in the first place," Benn adds.

Perhaps surprisingly, the teams have been received favorably at the festivals. Benn has been recognized as having good "energy," and she, like Paul and Barnabas did, has had to fend off claims that she has divine status.

"I've been told by people in there that they can see the light around me and I'm one of the chosen," she says. Yet Christianity remains only one of many samples in an endless search. "People may be into crystals one year, then the next year they're into auras, and the next year they're into angels," Benn says.

Eternity Team member Debbie Lisibach compares New Age to a huge mix-and-match supermarket where seekers can customize their belief systems and ignore inconvenient items like accountability for sin. Lisibach, like Bond, spent many years in New Age.

In the picturesque Dandenongs town of Sassafras she ran a shop selling esoteric books and crystals. She recalls the spiritual hunger her customers sought to assuage.

"People used to come to me for crystal healing," Lisibach says. "I firmly believed that crystals had an energy of their own, and people would pay any amounts of to have it done to them."

Reaction against the intrusive treatments of Western medicine has fueled a whole new industry in interests such as ayurveda,

reiki, chakras and even “psychic surgery,” whose practitioners claim to heal using the heat energy of their hands with the help of spirit guides who were doctors in previous incarnations.

Time Australia devoted its August 26 cover story to the attempts of medical science to analyze traditional Chinese medicine. The report revealed that scientists are unable to say how some of the most undeniably effective potions and treatments work—acupuncture being a prime example.

Lisibach believes many of the substances and practices God originally meant for healing have been misappropriated. Though former New Agers like her warn against a blanket condemnation of holistic medicine, misplaced faith in alternative remedies has erupted into controversy in Australia after several cases of death or aggravated suffering. Last September a group of prominent Melbourne physicians called for more government regulation of the natural-medicines industry and for public debate on the ethics of withholding conventional treatments.

Professor David Ashley of Melbourne’s Royal Children’s Hospital told of the death from cancer of a boy whose parents had withdrawn him from chemotherapy in favor of a natural remedy. The boy began treatment, Ashley said, with a 60 percent chance of recovery. He said he was “surprised” by the high number of similar cases he was hearing about from physicians, including the death “in a terrible state” of a boy whose parents had denied him palliative care because they believed an alternative treatment would cure him.

In another instance, child protection authorities in Victoria issued an order requiring the parents of an epileptic baby to administer anti-convulsant medicine a doctor had prescribed. Although the baby was suffering many prolonged seizures every day, the parents were relying solely on a natural therapist’s treatment. With the alternative-health industry now such a powerful influence, the debate is set to be long and loud.

A Crystal Clear Gospel

Despite the difficulties of evangelizing New Age adherents, there are encouraging reports. Eternity Team member Rob de Bruyn is also on the Jesus Evangelism Team of St. Martin's Anglican Church in the Dandenongs township of Belgrave Heights. Once a month the team heads deeper into the hills to Kallista, where the town's community market has become a pretext for a New Age expo.

After chatting with one stallholder, de Bruyn gave him a Bible and some literature on forgiveness. For the next hour he watched the man as he retired to the back of his stall and pored over the text, leaving his wife to deal with customers. Then the man came back wanting to give his life to Jesus.

"He looked deeply disturbed, and he couldn't understand how his past—he was a soldier, and he did some bad things—could be forgiven by God," de Bruyn said. He answered the man's questions and led him to Christ.

However, all teams agree it is hard to settle former New Agers into the church. "They're scared stiff of churches," Bond observes, and stresses the importance of committed mentoring to provide a firm grounding in the faith.

Benn also knows it can be a long process. "Their spirit can be born again, but they've still got to work through that mind-set that says it's all about their personal peace and happiness," she points out.

Lisibach is living testimony to this, having encountered a very bumpy road during the year after she accepted Jesus. For a while she continued earning her living by talents such as Tarot readings.

"I was still fighting with the church and my beliefs," she says. "I had a foot in both camps and was very confused. I had lots of people saying they'd pray for me and trying to tell me

my beliefs were wrong, but I had nobody I could actually talk to who had been down the same road. So to come into a church with all that was very hard.”

The reactions of some Christians to her dilemma almost wrecked her faith, she admits. Fortunately she met Bond, who was able to disciple her from a basis of shared experience.

Philip Johnson’s book *Jesus and the Gods of the New Age*, scheduled for release in the United States this summer, addresses this task of having an effective Christian mission to the New Age movement. Johnson believes the church needs to discard its New Age phobia and learn how to work the subculture as a fertile mission field.

He points out that it has many altars to unknown gods, like the one the apostle Paul found in Athens. Even astrology presents an opening for the gospel through the three wise men of the nativity—whose star led them to Jesus.

Bond calls her salvation in Christ a homecoming that finally satisfied her spiritual hunger. Her experience refutes the criticism that Christianity is too narrow. “Because it is narrow,” she says, “I’ve been able to put roots down, I’ve been able to grow, I’ve been able to flourish. I was never planted in New Age. I had hundreds of options, but you’re never planted, you’re never home.”

Yet, Johnson insists, it is just the sort of place where Jesus would have been—introducing the God who is permanent, unchanging and greater than all other options combined.

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NEW AGE

Adherents worldwide:Unknown

Largest concentrations:Europe, South America, United States, Australia

History:The New Age Movement is the result of the teachings, practices and philosophies of many different religions, primarily Hinduism and Buddhism. It is not a true religion but a set of beliefs from which adherents may pick and choose based on their own spiritual interests. It became prominent in the United States as a result of the influence of various Eastern philosophers and 19th century spiritualists. It wasn't until actress Shirley MacLaine declared her affiliation with the movement in the 1980s that people saw how widespread it had become.

Core beliefs:

God is the divine energy that flows within all things—the “Ultimate Reality,” “Universal Mind or Self” or divine “Oneness.”

Everything is fundamentally divine—and therefore good—because it flows from this divine Oneness.

Mankind's problem is that we have lost sight of our true nature as beings who are connected to the Universal Self. We need enlightenment to see ourselves as we are.

Man is able to shape reality through the power of his mind.

Reincarnation is necessary for the process of spiritual evolution.

Though God Himself is impersonal, there are spiritual beings who can be contacted through various means (channeling, for example) to act as spirit guides.

The goal of the New Ager is to relinquish his individuality and achieve unity with the Universal Self.

'Sedona Calls People'

A small town in Arizona has become a New Age stronghold in the United States.

Yoga and dance teacher Beth Rigby can't really explain why so many people are attracted to Sedona, Arizona. But she knows that this small community of 12,000 people—surrounded by the red-rock formations of Oak Creek Canyon—is “magical.”

“Sedona calls people,” Rigby says. “I can't explain it. When people come, they often have a deep sense of home.” After moving here in 1997 she founded Healing Retreat Adventures. Several times a year she takes tourists on seven-day excursions into the wilderness for yoga, “transformational dancing” and what she calls “past-life remembrances.”

Her clients come from all over the world. What calls tourists to Sedona?

Rigby believes the town is in the middle of a New Age “vortex,” or power center, where “electromagnetic energy comes out of the earth.” She doesn't exactly know how the supposed energy field works, but she suggests that Native American tribes tapped into the source of it centuries ago.

“There are so many power spots here,” says Rigby, who compares Sedona to Stonehenge in England, or the Egyptian pyramids. She hires Native American healers to accompany her on the outings.

Rigby is not alone in her pursuit of Sedona's magic. Despite its tiny size, the town has more than 70 New Age bookstores, astrology centers and healing studios. One Web site advertises the city as a new “spiritual capital” and claims that psychic energy is released from a spiritual portal created by nearby

Bell Rock, Table Top Mountain, Boynton Canyon and Cathedral Rock. Another group in town, Ashtar's Trinity, is using crystals and light rays to lay a metaphysical "grid" over Sedona so that extraterrestrial beings will help earthlings "ascend" to a higher realm.

Current research suggests that New Age spirituality is growing in the United States. While there are many other cities with larger numbers of New Age bookstores and crystal shops, Sedona probably has the highest number per capita. Other communities with unusually high New Age activity include Seattle; Boulder, Colorado; Austin, Texas; Gainesville, Florida; and Asheville, North Carolina. (One directory says that Asheville has 422 New Age establishments, more than some entire states.)

In Sedona, spiritualist groups outnumber evangelical churches at least 3 to 1. "We are definitely the minority," says Gordon Story, 55, pastor of First Assembly of God, one of only two charismatic or Pentecostal churches in the town. His congregation, which has about 50 members, is "larger than most evangelical congregations here," he says.

But Story adds there are signs that the gospel is making an impact: Bible-believing pastors are working together, and new doors are opening for outreach. "Good things are starting to happen," he adds. "We are determined to push back the darkness."

J. Lee Grady