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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_churchman\\_os.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

# New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response

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## A. What are the Typical Attractions of New Religious Movements?

In Britain alone there are very many different new religious movements, some well established and well known (for example, Children of God, Scientology, Transcendental Meditation, Hare Krishna), but others less well known and often relatively short lived (for example, Emissaries of Divine Light, Birmingham Church of Christ). Some seem to be deviations from the general Christian tradition, some have their roots in Hinduism, some in Buddhism, while others seem to owe most to various schools of psychotherapy. What do they have in common? Well in one sense nothing at all. *It is really only possible to speak of several clusters or types of new religious movements, but even then there are significant differences between them which can be as important as what they have in common.*

Only some of them fit the common stereotype of being ways to escape from reality. In fact many teach the importance of this world and affirm the need to live in it, to enjoy it, and indeed to try to improve it. There are of course others which deny the importance of this world, and of life outside of their group. *In other words it is not in the least helpful to lump all new religious movements together and say that a person who has joined one could just as easily have joined any other.* This is simply not true. To understand why any particular one is attracting members, or to understand why any particular person has been attracted to another, it is vital to discover as much specific knowledge as possible about both the person and the movement.

This search for knowledge, leading to understanding, leading to effective response, will take a lot of patient hard work, a lot of listening-before-talking, a lot of personal reflection, and often a lot of time. It will soon help us to discover how much we really do love the person for whom we are concerned! *The more we are motivated by genuine love, and particularly by genuine Christian love, the more willing we will be to undertake and persevere with this search.* It is always easier simply to blame someone or some system and then leave the hard work to someone else. Without exaggerating, it is tragic how often people take the easy path of blaming the person who is now part of a new religious movement, and leaving them to it, rather than become deeply involved to help them. It is

also easier just to pray now and again, but somehow to leave all the actual care and work to God. Blaming others is, of course, a typical human response to an experience of trauma, deep hurt, or severe helplessness. We must not be too critical of those who react in this way, but must gradually help them to be able to face their responsibilities.

In conversations with people who have joined, or who are seriously considering joining, a new religious movement, several reasons surface again and again, and other counsellors confirm that these are common reasons why people become attracted. While this does not mean that every person will fit one of these categories, or that every movement will fit one of the categories, these are the most common and *it is highly likely that anyone you are concerned with will acknowledge being attracted by one or more of them.*

### **1. Many new religious movements seem to consist purely of enthusiastic, involved, idealistic young adults**

Of course few movements have been around long enough to have members who have grown up to senior ages within the movement. Many do not have the presence of sizeable numbers of small children or elderly people to consider, and so are dominated by young adults. This in itself can be attractive to other young adults. Sometimes the leaders actively contrast themselves with the churches, which they present as institutionalized, lethargic, and dominated by old people who are out of touch with today's world, and who are selfishly comfortable with their own lives, lives which are generally portrayed as hypocritical. Young people often make this sort of contrast anyway, of course. On the other hand, the absence of young children and senior citizens from many of these groups may be leading to a lack of development in their sense of responsibility for others. They may not be learning the positive side of compromise.

A common caricature of the type of person attracted is that of someone with poor education, from an underprivileged home, and who is socially inadequate. Belief that religion is merely a crutch for the weak lives on! While there are people like this caricature who join, they are certainly a minority. Most members come from well-educated, privileged backgrounds. They see themselves as strong, idealistic, and committed to improving the quality of life in the world. They do not see themselves, or the movement, as marginal, or escapist, and resent any accusation of being susceptible or emotionally vulnerable people. *These are people positively searching for a positive rôle in life, not broken people negatively trying to hide from responsibility.* Many movements offer a corresponding sense of destiny, purpose and vision.

The family and friends of people who become involved usually confirm this readily. They have always perceived this person as intellectually able, stable enough, and generally responsible. And of course this adds to the sense of shock when this person, of all people, becomes involved.

Sometimes there is a powerful element of protest within this. It begins, perhaps, as a need to assert some form of independence from parental and societal values, to protest against being taken for granted and being treated as too young to influence the thinking of others. The movement may therefore be seen in the early stages as a community and forum in which to be taken seriously as an adult.

Particularly attractive are those new religious movements which focus on the need for a spirituality which will help in the search for world peace. Religion is frequently presented as contributing to alienation between people and peoples. In particular, Christianity is held up as an intolerant religion, arrogantly claiming to have all the truth. People whose vision of an ideal world contains the virtue, as they see it, of tolerance and pluralism, will be attracted to movements which stress the same thing.

An increasingly powerful attraction these days is the concern shown by many movements for the care of the environment. Ecological issues are very high on the agenda of many, and this is set over against a perception of the Judaeo-Christian tradition as responsible for the exploitation of nature. For many people this is their first link with a new religious movement.

It is also true that people with serious ego problems can be drawn to some movements because they offer what seems to them to be a chance to be released from all of society's constraints, and to experience the complete freedom which they see as their right. They are attracted by the chance to be at the centre of the universe, to be a world-changer, to take their rightful place in the scheme of things, to dominate others.

## **2. Many seem to offer a community life of love and loyalty**

It is often the case that people attracted to them are drawn simply by this offer of love and acceptance. What is more, these people need not be emotionally immature or unable to relate to others. Sometimes they are very mature people who desire above all else to find a community of people just like themselves. They are looking for real, deep friendship; for dependable, loyal relationships; for acceptance of themselves as they really are; in short, for a community in which they will be encouraged and helped to discover their true selves, a community in which their true self will be freed from the unhealthy conventions and bondages which others have forced on them and all of society.

Something has gone far wrong when mainline churches are primarily perceived as demanding rather than giving. People in need of love and support, particularly at really critical moments in their lives, will not be attracted to churches which speak to them of the need first to conform to specific doctrinal statements or behaviour patterns. New religious movements will make a point of being there simply to welcome and accept such troubled people. What happens next is a cause for concern, of course, but the initial contact is warm and non-judgmental—exactly what the person needs.

It is easy to caricature all of this as a pandering to selfish people who wish to indulge themselves in a context where no-one will bring criticism or correction to bear, but very many who join them out of such needs are no more selfish or hedonistic than anyone else. *They simply want just such a warm, supportive lifestyle, and want it enough to break from family and society to whatever extent is necessary to become part of such a community.*

A common attraction concerns those movements (very often various forms of yoga) which offer a view of reality which holds together in holistic fashion the unity of body and spirit. Increasing numbers of Western people, including Christians, are unhappy at the way in which Western society and many Western Church traditions divorce the body from the spiritual reality of our total life as human beings. Some new religious movements focus on presenting an integrated worldview in which the two are seen as completely interdependent and in which each aspect of life is to be treated reverentially.

Within this desire to find a holistic approach to life there is also the growing demand for a more holistic attitude to, and practice of, medicine and the healing arts. People want to be more involved in caring for their whole selves; they do not want their doctors to treat them as if they were mechanical objects; they want a better quality of life. Western medical attitudes and practices, combined with the time pressures on general practitioners and hospitals, do not seem to be able to offer the right balance and personal care. Dissatisfaction with Western medicine has been the first step for many towards the range of therapies and healing philosophies which promise to provide the complete integration of mind/body/emotions/spiritual power. And so we see a sharp rise in the number of people turning to health food practices, yoga, acupuncture, Eastern meditation techniques, and the like. Some movements make a point of stressing their commitment to holistic healing.

The impression given, then, is that such new religious movements will meet the needs for authentic community life. Churches are presented as places where all the focus is on words and concepts, where expressions of love are frowned upon, where emotional responses to God are devalued, and where active participation in worship is just not acceptable. Alternatively, the situation is not helped by the popular presentation of vicars and curates as well-meaning and caring, but hopelessly inept and out of touch with reality. People in real need are looking for someone or some group which can effectively help them.

### **3. Many seem to offer moral authority and spiritual security**

In an age where there is great insecurity, ranging from fear of nuclear disaster or global warming, to the anxiety of prolonged unemployment, to feelings of inadequacy in the face of high profile media marketing about the right image for today's successful people, there is a definite appeal to a

group which claims to know the real truth about life, values, and how to be secure within oneself. Contrary to predictions in the Sixties about the liberation which would come from a relativizing of all moral and spiritual values, and contrary to predictions from the nineteenth century onwards about how scientific progress would lead to a more peaceful and integrated humanity, people today are not at all confident about tomorrow. Nor is everyone happy to be rid of the days when there were set moral standards, and when life was lived in a clearly religious context. This is not to say, of course, that all traditional values are missed, but that there is a widespread realization of the need for such values and principles.

Church leaders are often presented by such new religious movements as unable or unwilling to give the kind of direction, or even actual spiritual and moral rulings, for which many young people are searching. *Considerable numbers of people still want to know about right and wrong beliefs, right and wrong lifestyles, and they are drawn to a group which speaks confidently and intelligibly about this.* They are impressed by strong charismatic leaders whom they sense they can trust, leaders who make decisions and stand by them, leaders who claim (and seem to show) special knowledge, insight, wisdom or power. They are often attracted by the fact that new religious movements are, by and large, anti-clerical, that is to say that there are no *ordained* leaders. It certainly is made to look as if all are equal, with equal potential to rise to leadership. Of course there usually is a hierarchical structure of some sort within the movement, but even this is often attractive to those who feel that society is too uncaring, abdicating its responsibility to nurture and discipline each individual.

Again, there is often a 'Scripture' of some sort central to the life of such a group, and the high view of its authority is contrasted by the leaders with the lax reverence given to the Bible by many who call themselves Christians.

*We must be in no doubt about the attraction of authority and security.* Large numbers of people join new religious movements as a result of looking for a way to protest against what they perceive as a betrayal by the Church and Western society of the duty to define true values and principles. More specifically, there are also people who are seeking for a personal teacher/rôle model to direct their spiritual journey through life. They express the need for someone to be there beside them, and yet also in some sort of authority over them, to act as guide, discipliner, confidante and friend. Many offer such a possibility.

#### **4. Many seem to be the only accessible endorsers of personal religious experiences**

Young adults today (and not only the young) are often vastly more concerned with an experience of God (however they want to define God) than with any particular set of religious doctrines or philosophies. New religious movements can seem to be more in tune with that search than local churches. Indeed even many Christians feel that the churches have largely lost this concern for a direct experience of God in one's life, over-

emphasizing instead the transcendence and otherness of God. This is of course also a large part of the background to the growth of the various charismatic and house-church movements within the Church. It is even sometimes said by mainline church leaders that the charismatic movement itself is a form of new religious movement!

*What is significant for us to realize is just how many people have had some form of life-enhancing or disturbing religious experience, which has demonstrated to them the existence of some power beyond themselves. Very often it is an experience which from the traditional Christian perspective is unorthodox, or which is interpreted by the person involved in an unorthodox way. Equally important is the fact that in many instances people who have had such an experience have never confided in anyone about it, not even an intimate family member or friend. What little research has been done might indicate that perhaps thirty to fifty per cent of the population of Britain has had some such experience. Why is it not being talked about then? Most people say they were afraid of being ridiculed or ostracized. Worse still, some fear being labelled as unbalanced or emotionally immature. Others are simply too confused and shocked to be able to sort out any way of understanding what has happened to them.*

People define experiences of the supernatural in different ways of course, but the point to be made here is that if they have had some sort of experience which strikes them as being an important religious one, then they feel a great need for someone to accept them with this experience, and to tell them it is all right to have had it. They need someone to help them interpret it and integrate it into their lives. They may simply need permission to welcome it and build upon it, or they may need to be warned about some aspects of it. The tragedy is that generally speaking such people are afraid to tell church leaders in case they laugh or patronise them, or condemn them. They may have had an experience of being out of their body, of meeting and talking to a deceased relative, of being aware of intense evil around them, and the like, and whatever knowledge of Christian teaching and practice they have may convince them that the local minister either would not understand or would stand in unsympathetic judgment.

Not only that, but society itself seems now to be altogether secularized, so it is considered to be some sort of weakness to admit to any form of religious experience or longing. The message given out is that such experiences just do not exist for today's mature adult! Into this situation of personal tension come new religious movements which seem to offer a community which will share these experiences, interpret them, and indeed value them.

## **5. Many seem heaven-sent for those who find life hard to cope with**

It does need to be said that some do attract people who are susceptible to the temptation to be dependent on others: people who wish to be protected from having to make decisions; to be responsible for their own lives. There are also socially inadequate, or marginalized, or traumatized

people: they just cannot cope with life. Others are drawn in at a time of personal crisis, when they are much more vulnerable than usual. Sometimes leaders have been found guilty of manipulating the emotions and psychological needs of such people.

What people often refer to as the crutch factor of religion does therefore play its part in the attraction of some movements in certain situations.

It seems to be a fact of life that some people can only function well within a tightly-structured framework, and there are new religious movements which cater for this need. Of course many Christians have joined convents, monasteries and other communities for the same reason down through the generations. Perhaps this also explains why some Christians in our day have been attracted to join highly authoritarian house churches.

Some people turn to them for short-term help in seeing them through a difficult period in their lives. This may be a breakdown in their marriage, severe stress at work, a realization of dependency on alcohol or drugs. One might simply say that desperation sometimes leads people to them.

## **6. Their range and variety seem tailor-made for today's consumer society**

It is not known what percentage of those who join are to be found within this category, but it is probably significant. Part of the spirit of the age is a desire to have exactly what suits me, and on my own terms as far as possible. Therefore someone with a selfish attitude to life, and perhaps an arrogance to go with it, may not wish to be part of a group in which private needs, desires, ambitions and concerns are not given top priority at all times. Others may be too lazy to work at their spiritual weaknesses and flaws. For many the whole concept of radical self-denial may simply clash unacceptably with the way that they have been nurtured in society.

And so if a movement is found which seems to fit their shopping list at that time in their lives, such people may well join it, or at least become very involved with it.

## **7. The need for discernment and prayer**

It would be irresponsible not to underline here that what is actually happening within a new religious movement is often quite different from that which is presented by its representatives to potential recruits, or from that which is perceived by inquirers. This is a cause for concern, and we should be alarmed at some of what goes on both in recruitment and in the inner life of many new religious movements. For Christians this is a grave matter, and it calls for considerable reflection and prayer.

Thus far we have been concerned with helping the reader to understand the types of reason why their family, friends and fellow church members are attracted to new religious movements at all. With a better and more sensitive understanding we will be better able to relate to such people, and perhaps to help them leave the new movement altogether. How then can we really help one another?

## **B. What is the best advice to offer to family and friends?**

### **1. It is important to find out as much as possible about the particular movement in question**

The person you are concerned about is neither a robot nor a statistic, but an individual who has seen something important enough in a movement to join it or become heavily involved in it. *So you show your respect and love for the person by obtaining as accurate information as possible about it.* Only then will you begin to understand what the attraction was in the first place and be in a position to analyze what is actually involved.

The following steps can be taken.

#### **a. Call in expert help**

The bibliography includes a list of agencies which provide useful information or which refer people to experts. Local clergy may know of such experts. In some areas there are support groups made up of people who have faced or are facing similar situations. Books and articles can also prove very helpful.

#### **b. Build up a file**

Keep copies of anything which has proved helpful to you. Make and keep notes from conversations which were held, or from meetings which you attended.

#### **c. Use common sense when checking material**

Do not assume you know more than you do, but be humble enough to check all your own assumptions. Information given out by the movement itself will be useful, but remember that it will be a mixture of straight information and propaganda. They will be selective in what they say about themselves; they may water down some material for those on the outside, and they may deliberately deceive. On the other hand, information given by opposing activists, or even by former members, may also be a mixture of information and propaganda. And of course media reports are frequently sensationalized, and often perpetuate stereotypes and myths which have no basis in reality. You will only succeed in further alienating the person for whom you are concerned if you come over as misrepresenting them and their movement! In short, use some critical judgment at all times.

#### **d. Keep records**

This can be very useful indeed, but it must be kept in a healthy perspective, so that one does not become obsessive, paranoid, or legalistic. Keep a record of all the names, addresses and telephone numbers of people and groups known to you to be associated with the movement and your family member or friend. Keep a record of all meetings, correspondence and calls between yourself and the movement, and between yourself and the person concerned. Never part with any original documents; instead you can give copies.

## **2. It is important to find out as much as possible about the individual concerned**

We have already stressed that the person involved is neither a robot nor a statistic, *so he or she deserves your best efforts on his or her behalf*. What was it that this person felt was missing from life? Did they join as part of an active, positive search for meaning and purpose in life, or as a symptom of a deep malaise which was making life too difficult to cope with, or what? Are they happier now than they were before, and if so is there a good and healthy side to that happiness, or is it merely escapism? Questions like these need to be asked and answered honestly.

It may need to be admitted by close family and friends that they never really knew the person at a deep, personal level. One other matter that must also be looked at is the timescale involved in the person's 'conversion'. So often it appears to others that it all happened overnight, or within a very brief, intensive period of time. However this is not always what happens. There has often been dissatisfaction, frustration and pilgrimage in varying degrees for some considerable time. For some people there seems to have been some form of catalyst to the search—the death of someone close, or a strange 'religious' experience, whereas for others no such perceived catalyst was present.

It will always be worth speaking to more casual friends or workmates of the person, since they may well have shared something of their feelings or plans with them. It's a common enough experience not to be able to share very intimate things with people who are close to us, yet, paradoxically, to be able to do so with those not so close to us.

## **3. What about the possibility that the person has been brainwashed?**

Brainwashing is everyone's favourite reason to explain why someone was persuaded to join. But what do we mean by this term? The use of drugs? Psychological manipulation of the weak and vulnerable? Physical threats and the use of fear? It is part of the tragedy that this sort of activity does go on, but it is by no means the usual story. What is more, it is sobering to realize that some evangelical Christian groups are themselves accused of brainwashing techniques. Some people use the charge of brainwashing as an excuse for not becoming too involved in any hard work of caring for the person, since that person is supposed to be beyond any kind of normal help. Others use it as a means to escape any personal responsibility for what has happened—it's all the fault of the brainwashers. Some Christians even use it as an attempt to protect God from any blame!

It is unacceptable to make the assumption that someone has been brainwashed. We must find out whether or not that is true. Did the group *in fact* use deceptive or coercive means to trap the person? Did they employ drugs, or other means, to alter the normal thought processes of the person involved? If there is any hard evidence to suggest that they did, then contact the police. If that is unsuccessful,

consider informing your Member of Parliament, and local churches.

An important point must now be made however. Whether or not immoral and illegal means are used to induce someone to join a new religious movement, it is very often extremely difficult, if not virtually impossible, for that person to leave it. In *this* sense there is a great deal of mental conditioning that goes on. People are not given any opportunity to reflect critically on what has been going on in their lives since becoming part of the group. People's individuality is often repressed. There may well be sleep or food deprivation. Reading material is usually censored. Friendships are often selected and monitored. Visits by family and friends from outside may be limited and also monitored. Some groups demand that each recruit gives up all money and property, and even passports have been taken into the hands of the leadership. All of this activity is geared to controlling exposure to attitudes, knowledge, relationships and perspectives which do not come from within the group itself, or which do not fit the group's objectives. When this happens, the situation has become very serious indeed.

You must make quite sure of your *facts* before you make charges of brainwashing or conditioning. If you obtain evidence which disturbs you, let the appropriate authorities know. And finally, if such activity has been going on, especially for any length of time, then be prepared for changes in the behaviour or personality of the person for whom you are concerned. Be prepared and be ready with extra reserves of love and patience!

#### **4. Some general good counsel**

##### **a. People very commonly assume that the person was weak and unbalanced**

It is amazing to find out how often this is most assuredly not the case. People must be helped to see that the person might have been positively searching for an expression of values and principles, and that therefore pity is an entirely inappropriate response. Perhaps there is something in the person to be commended? If this is so, then unless respect is shown, that person may never really be fully integrated with family and friends again.

##### **b. People are often extremely angry with the person who has joined a new religious movement**

This can be especially true if the family of the person has a strong faith which comes into direct conflict with the movement's ideology: the person is often seen as guilty of ingratitude and betrayal, and their joining is taken as a personal rejection.

How can help be given here? First of all, they must be helped to understand their anger, and how to express it in appropriate ways. Assure people that they will most probably feel confusing and frightening emotions of shock, anger and bitterness for some time, and that they must

not make matters worse by trying to bury these emotions, or by turning them in on themselves. Help them to explain their anger to themselves and to work it through. If there was an element of rejection of parental beliefs or values this must be faced sensitively and honestly.

**c. People on the outside are usually extremely angry at the movement**

This is, of course, entirely understandable, but people must be encouraged not to try to score points against it, as if it were some academic debate. Instead they must be persuaded to concentrate on making accurate observations and responses. They may also need help in working through emotions which want to see their leaders destroyed or inappropriately punished.

**d. People concerned very commonly feel irrationally guilty**

Somehow they manage to convince themselves that it is all their fault. They have let the person down in a fatal way—was it in childhood or adolescence? It is so easy to become unhealthily self-critical. Sometimes people even begin to doubt the soundness of their own faith. Such guilt can never be a basis for effecting genuine reconciliation and healthy growth, and so people must be helped to rid themselves of this guilt and its causes. But if there was an element of responsibility in the way the parents (or whoever) related to the person, constructive ways must be found to deal with this.

**e. Commonly enough, people are too ashamed to share their shock with others**

How can they admit to their minister that their son, or whoever, has joined such a heretical cult? How can they face other members of the family with the news that they have so badly failed in bringing up their child? Somehow we must help them to let others share their burden and their sense of loss. We may be able to introduce them to support groups made up of people just like them. They may themselves need in-depth counselling. There may be a need for legal help, and an expert may be to hand. We need to encourage people gently but definitely in seeking help to move gradually out from themselves.

It is not uncommon for people to be unable to pour out their hearts even to God about what has happened. Somehow they have failed Him most of all. If you can take a lead—modestly and briefly—in praying with such a person, this will often help.

### **f. Relatives or friends sometimes want to cut themselves off entirely from the person who has joined**

It is important to do all in one's power to ensure that this does not happen! It is *always* vital that communications are kept open wherever possible. Encourage them to see to it that all their communication with the person is sincere: that they convey genuine acceptance, love, and respect; that they do not preach; that they do not indulge in great sweeping criticisms, and that they themselves do not use emotional blackmail, even unconsciously, to win back the person.

It is important to stress that the lines of communication are there for listening as well as talking. The person needs to know that you are listening.

## **C. Where are the Churches going wrong?**

Someone has said that the rise of all sorts of new religious movements in today's society stems from the unpaid debts of the Church. Is there any truth in the claim that the Church has neglected or suppressed vital areas of human spiritual life, areas which need to be expressed and lived out, and so these new religious movements have arisen to try to meet the human need for this expression? It is this writer's firm conviction that there is a great deal of truth in this claim. The Church has a lot to learn from the new religious movements. God is surely trying to rouse the Church to what is going on in people's spiritual lives.

Evangelical churches in particular are often deaf when confronted by them. There can be a powerful desire simply to respond with a loud proclamation of the full Gospel truth. No listening is done. Now while it is true that there must be a clear presentation of the Gospel in appropriately sensitive ways, challenging others to examine their own lives may not be the only response which is necessary. The Church must also look at itself critically to see where things may have gone wrong. The Church might have let God down in some way. Not only that of course, but how are we to be good pastors if we do not listen to what is hurting our people?

What, then, are some of the key challenges to the Church and the local churches?

### **1. Perhaps there has been too much readiness to swallow the propaganda of the secular society**

We need a thorough critique of the popular message that ours is a society unconcerned with spirituality or questions of ultimate importance about the nature and purpose of life. There is plenty of evidence to the contrary. There may well be a strong move away from the traditional expressions of

British church life, but this does not mean that people have cut themselves off from an openness to the world of the spirit.

It could be that the Church is letting others define and claim that spiritual world for today's generations while it mistakenly mourns the supremacy of secular values.

## **2. There is often a reluctance to welcome people's spiritual experiences**

Some have received only a patronising response, or even censure, if they have spoken to church leaders about supernatural or strange experiences that they have had. The Church needs to assure people that she very definitely does believe in the reality and presence of a spiritual world, and in the reality of spiritual warfare. Church leaders should be delighted when people have had some experience of the spiritual world, and should be ready to build upon this in teaching about God and His relationship with humanity, especially through Jesus Christ. Many such experiences are frightening, though, and seem to be entirely harmful and alarming, but even in such cases Christians should encourage people to share those experiences. The opportunity will then present itself to share back the Good News that Jesus has achieved victory over death and evil forces, and that his power is available for us too.

It is important, without being gullible or naive about it, for the Church to give people 'permission' to have these deep experiences. There are, no doubt, those who would love to deceive or ridicule the Church, and there are others with psychological disabilities, or with various addictive problems, whose 'experiences' will be suspect, but this does not invalidate the genuine experiences of others.

The time might also have come for the Church to ask herself whether she has become too concerned with correct doctrine *at the expense of* the centrality of a personal meeting with God. Many today no longer sense that churches are made up of people with utterly life-changing experiences of God. Christians themselves often contrast their personal, devotional life in Jesus with the formal, sometimes arid, times of public worship. Perhaps the time has come for a re-examination of these matters by the churches. Perhaps the time has come for a more creative re-examination of the teaching about the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and the challenge of the modern charismatic movement.

In short, the Church dare not despise the search for experience.

## **3. There is a need to re-discover proper models of authority**

For too long the Church was allowed to enjoy authority and privilege in ways that did not reflect the love of God for His people, especially for the disadvantaged and the oppressed. True humility, a spirit of loving service to others, and a self-sacrificial attitude were often tragically lacking. It can only be a good thing that those days are fast disappearing.

However, there does seem to be an unfortunate consequence of this change as well, in that there has been a loss of confidence in many church circles in the proclamation of the Christian faith. There is a valid authority which God has entrusted to the Church, and people are still looking for certainty in life, for a sense of purpose, for moral authority, and for direction in life. *The Church needs to learn how to relate this proper, Godly authority and confidence to the fact that the world is a multi-faith and multi-cultural one.* The question is how to be a good witness to the uniqueness of Christ, and yet also a good neighbour.

#### **4. To what extent are our churches truly caring communities?**

Many people today associate their local churches with moral condemnation and judgment, and so do not approach them or their leaders when they feel in need of help or forgiveness. Each congregation is meant to be known as a community of people who are characterized by love and forgiveness, by acceptance and reconciliation, but this is not always the image given. When people are deeply anxious, or paralysed by fear or guilt, then they need someone to be there with them, and if they sense no welcome or relevance in a local church, then they will turn to whomsoever seems ready and keen to come alongside them.

Of course this is part of the context in which to see the rise of much of the charismatic movement, and of the house-church movement. These Christians feel the need for their congregations to be communities of people who really care for one another, who spend time together, who put themselves out for one another, who study and pray together. Of course many churches have now created networks of home groups and special interest groups which meet regularly to meet the needs of their members for this kind of fellowship and commitment. This is all movement in the right direction.

#### **5. Have some churches become too heavenly-minded?**

The preaching and teaching programmes of some churches seem to have as their sole focus the preparation of each person's soul for the world to come. Many new religious movements, on the other hand, attract people because they hold out help for life in this world. The churches must meet this challenge as well. It is part of their ministry to prepare Christians for daily life as members of society—coping with the stress of unemployment, working through marital problems, coming to terms with the ecological crises, and all the other stresses of modern life.

Beyond this of course are the issues of political justice, of social concern, particularly for the disadvantaged. There are many groups in society ready to direct people's idealism and passion for justice, and the Church is indebted to the liberation theologians for reminding her most forcefully that God has spoken to her about this in the Scriptures. The local

churches must also commit themselves to this work of social justice.

## **6. There is an urgent need for a rediscovery of God's gifts which are distributed among all church members**

The days of passive involvement in local congregational life are passing quickly. Christians are simply less and less prepared to leave all ministry to the professional clergy, wishing instead to put into practice the New Testament teaching about the Holy Spirit giving various gifts to all church members. Many movements make a great deal of this very thing, namely the search for one's God-given gift or talent, and this is appealing to increasing numbers of people frustrated in churches where there is neither encouragement nor teaching on these matters.

God has been speaking through the Charismatic renewal to the churches about this, and this has raised people's expectations about the ministry of the whole body within the Church. It has to be granted that there is a danger of excess and aberration in some manifestations of the renewal, but some of the lessons to be learned by the Church today are being wrestled with in that renewal movement. *Whatever our view and experience of such matters, churches need to re-assess their position on the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the ministry of encouraging every Christian to explore his or her gifting from God, and the ministry of every member in the life of the Church.*

## **7. Have we become soft on sin?**

The very word 'sin' seems so hopelessly old-fashioned and quaint nowadays. But the reality behind it is only too real, and some people feel that the Church has compromised too much in trying to fit in with modern ideas of the progression of humanity to more enlightened and moral levels. *Part of the Church's response to new religious movements must be a challenge to them, and to society as a whole, to acknowledge that there is a gulf between people and God, a gulf which prevents any full and fulfilling relationship with God, with other people, and even with oneself, a gulf which can only be bridged by Jesus Christ.*

In our consumer society there is among many an assumption that whatever they want should be made available to them. However, the Church needs to witness clearly to the Lordship of Christ, and to the fact that only God's will has ultimate value. God has laid down in the Bible certain basic principles and standards for life, and what is more, He has shown the way to come to a personal relationship with Himself. Fulfilment can only come to people if they live the life of faith in Christ. It is true that some movements are offering alternatives to this way of thinking, but many realize the truth of alienation from God, and they are promising a way to overcome that alienation, a promise to which more and more people are attracted.

## **8. There is a fine line between self-denial and the repression of the personality**

Part of the authentic emphasis of the Church in its teaching about sin is on the importance of denying our selfish nature its own way. The need for self-discipline is immensely important in the Biblical witness. However, a non-Biblical dimension has become part and parcel of much of the Church's teaching on this matter, a dimension which owes its origin to Greek ideas of the baseness and wickedness of the body as opposed to the spirit. That kind of dualism is not found in the Bible, since God created our bodies as well as our spirits, and saw that the whole person was good. And the whole person, body and spirit, was involved in the Fall.

Much of the attraction of Eastern spirituality in the West today lies specifically in this area of the integration of body and spirit. Because of the Church's fascination with the 'sins of the flesh' there has been a tragic repression of the emotions of Christians, of human sexuality, of innocent pleasures that can be found in theatre or music. The Church needs to rediscover the Biblical roots of the holistic view of humanity, and so learn how to release its members in Godly and healthy ways. Judaism has never suffered from this fear of the human side of religious life, and in large part this is due to a more faithful commitment to the worldview found in the Bible.

Another way in which one can see an unhealthy repression of the human personality in church tradition is in the teaching on the complete unworthiness of humanity. It is right to stress both our total dependence on God and the deceitfulness of the human heart, just as it is right to stress that it is by His grace alone that we live. But on the other hand, if this is put over in an unhealthy and un-Biblical way, then people made in God's image, people loved and valued by Him, can be treated almost like robots, or empty, insignificant shells. It is surely right to acknowledge that people have a God-given value, and that we are good things spoiled, not worthless pieces of debris.

Large numbers of people have left the churches disillusioned by the tension which is obvious there between an elevation of the 'spiritual' life and a denigration of the 'material' life, a distinction which they intuitively recognize is not correct. Others have left because they were made to feel insignificant and unloved as real, actual people. *The Church must find the right balance between self-denial and the repression of the person.*

## **9. Who are making the decisions in the churches?**

Large numbers of idealistic, committed, intelligent and experienced young people join new religious movements because they are frustrated in their desire to contribute to making changes in society, and because these movements seem to open up such opportunities. At the very least they feel that they will be taken seriously and given a real chance. Our churches must open their decision-making bodies to young adults as well as to the senior generation. *Young adults must be involved in the setting of goals*

*and strategies for the Church, not just in running its programmes.*

Are there appropriate numbers of women represented at all levels? Is there a mature and proper mix of white and blue-collar workers? Are unemployed people invited to the groups that make the decisions? Are people from ethnic minority backgrounds properly represented? The frustration of people in these 'categories' is not only real, it is often justified! The leadership of the churches must reflect the membership of the churches.

## **10. Christians must be re-introduced to the Christian spiritual traditions**

Many people today are attracted to Eastern spirituality, and go on to contrast it with what they see as the static, arid, selfishly comfortable Christianity of the West. And yet Christianity is, in its origins, an Eastern faith! Abraham came from Mesopotamia to Canaan, both in the Middle East, and Jesus never left that area.

The fact is that there is an Oriental branch of the Church, standing alongside the Roman Catholic and Protestant branches, which has in many ways kept hold of the Biblical and Eastern patterns and disciplines of spirituality. Several streams within the Roman Catholic tradition have also kept in close touch with these paths of prayer, meditation, and worship. Unfortunately it is the Protestant branch of the Church which has lost most of its roots in these areas. One must not so much as light a candle in some churches, or one will be accused of 'popery' or the like!

But it needs to be said that increasing numbers of Protestants are also learning the value of retreat, meditation, different forms of prayer, and symbolism. These disciplines in themselves are not cultic or humanistic, but can be powerful and beautiful aids to devotion and self-discovery, a self-discovery which helps one to come much closer to God. Unfortunately, these disciplines are often shunned by Christians precisely because some movements have been developing them within their own programmes of study and personal development. This is a great shame, and it is important that the Church re-claims its heritage of inner pilgrimage.

*What can we do, then, to help the churches re-discover the rich heritage of spiritual exercises and insights which belong to the traditions of the Church?* For one thing, we can let our brothers and sisters from the Middle East, Asia and Africa teach us from their Christian ways of worship and prayer. For another, we can study the works of those Western Christians from the various traditions which have developed real ministries in these areas.

## **11. Are there local resources to help people deal with them?**

The final challenge to be presented here is a very practical one: there is a need for local or regional church resources on these matters to be available to clergy and laity alike, to bodies like schools and local authorities, in

order to help them when faced with new religious movements.

There is certainly a need for church leaders to be aware of where to turn for expert advice and experience. This matter should be taken up by the relevant church bodies. Some organizations already exist to provide accurate information and counselling.

## Conclusion

Having written this paper on the challenge of the New Religious Movements, and having offered some counsel on healthy and constructive responses to that challenge, I recognize that much of the advice may be seen by the ordinary church member to be beyond their power to effect. However, if working through this material has brought a new awareness of the actual problems and issues involved, then this is in itself important. If people feel unable to take initiatives based on something that they have read here, then I can only encourage them to approach their minister for help. Indeed it would be a service to the church to make sure that the minister is aware of the whole issue.

My overall goals are to help the Church better to come to terms with the challenge of the New Religious Movements; better to prepare herself to deal with that challenge; and better to help those individuals who become involved with them, whether directly, or *via* the involvement of someone close to them. My prayer is that this paper will prove to have been of some use to the Church.

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For information and referral to expert help, contact:

**Centre for New Religious Movements**, Selly Oak Colleges, Bristol Road, Birmingham B29 6LQ (021-472-4231).

**Housetop Centre**, 39 Homer Street, London W1H 1HL (071-402-9679).

**Inform**, The Lionel Robbins Building, 100 Portugal Street, London WC2A 2HD (071-831-4990).

For further help, contact:

**FAIR**, BCM Box 3535, P.O. Box 12, London WC1N 3XX (081-539-3940).