

BOOK REVIEW

Michael T. Schaefer, M.F.C.C.
Redondo Beach, CA

Gods Within: A Critical Guide to the New Age, by Michael Perry.
London, England: SPCK, 1992, 178 pp + viii, £ 11.99

Archdeacon Michael Perry's latest book is a balanced approach that attempts to orient Christians to the New Age movement and subtly evangelize New Age believers to take a second look at what "true" Christianity has to offer. He does better at delineating various facets of the New Age belief system or paradigm for Christians serious about fruitful dialogue with New Agers than at trying to persuade New Agers over to Christianity.

This book is well researched and has an extensive bibliography. Drawing from philosophical, theological, psychological, scientific, and spiritual sources, Perry addresses near-death experiences, crystals, wicca, care of mother earth, reincarnation, channeling, and various mantric methods, including astrology, tarot, I-Ching, scrying, ouija, human aura, and dowsing.

In the chapter on near-death experiences (NDEs), Perry lists and briefly examines some of the major theoretical viewpoints that have arisen to explain this phenomenon. He reminds the reader that the NDE is not intrinsic to New Age beliefs, since accounts of NDEs date back to antiquity (Kelsey, 1982; Zaleski, 1987).

One explanation that caught my attention was Kenneth Ring and Christopher Rosing's preliminary study of the correlation between

Michael T. Schaefer, M.F.C.C., is a psychotherapist in private practice and a part-time faculty member at Trinity College of Graduate Studies in Orange, CA. Reprint requests should be addressed to Mr. Schaefer at 2850 Artesia Boulevard, Suite 202-B, Redondo Beach, CA 90278.

NDEs and child abuse, dissociation, and psychic sensitivity. Many of the NDErs they interviewed for their study had a history of child abuse or similar trauma. Part of my caseload as a psychotherapist consists of clients suffering from multiple personality disorder (MPD), some of whom report having had out-of-body experiences as the severe abuse was occurring. Studies published on MPD have reported that an inherited predisposition to dissociation is a critical factor in its etiology (Braun, 1986). Does the same apply to persons who had an NDE rather than severe childhood abuse or trauma?

After citing studies done by medical personnel, psychologists, neurologists, and physiologists, Perry explains why the NDE is used by New Agers to support their beliefs: the out-of-body experience during the NDE, supporting the existence of the astral or spiritual body and the phenomenon of astral projection; the positive experience of NDErs regarding the inherent natural goodness of humanity and the favor the universe manifests toward us; the experience of a "higher self" supporting the New Age belief in the godhead in each person; the NDErs' experience of cosmic oneness or togetherness; the experience of being sent back for various reasons hinting at reincarnation after death; and the NDErs' frequent espousal of a nonsectarian, nondogmatic, non-institutionalized religion in which the religious feeling is not tied to any particular faith, but is diffused in a syncretistic way.

In the final segment of this chapter, Perry addresses how Christians should interpret NDEs. He affirms that the NDE is a valid phenomenon that must be taken seriously, because "faith is a faith based upon the world as it is experienced, not about the world as one might fantasize or wish it to be" (p. 93). He concludes that the NDE is in accord with the Christian doctrine of God's love and of the value to Him of the human soul.

Throughout this chapter, Perry attempts to explore every angle of the NDE he can perceive through the lens of Christian theology and spirituality, and for that he should be commended. But there is more I would have liked to have seen included in this chapter. Perry does not compare the Christian perspective on NDEs to other faith traditions, but only to New Age beliefs. He does not compare NDErs' changes in attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviors with the changes (metanoia) that occur in Christians who are maturing in their relationship to and experience of God. There were no detailed accounts of NDErs' personal testimonies, which would have enriched the reader. And finally, there is more to the NDE in accord with Christian doctrine than just God's infinite love and mercy and the value of the human soul. Jesuit theologian Donald Gelpi (1978) wrote:

The presence of benevolent psychopomps and the review of the being of light would seem to be thoroughly convergent with three age-old Christian beliefs: belief in the communion of the saints, belief in guardian angels, and belief in a personal judgment at the moment of death. The psychopomps who greet the moribund are from among those who have gone before. Their assisting presence at the moment of death suggests that devotion to the saints and belief that the church on earth stands in communion with the blessed of God is a sound one. The psychopomps have an angelic aspect; they come bearing messages and they seem to have a special care for the person who is dying, in the manner of guardian angels.

Moreover, the description of the review of life in the presence of the being of light well accords with the theology of divine judgment articulated in the fourth gospel. In Johannine theology, God judges the world by the simple expedient of revealing the full scope of His love and demanding from humankind an appropriate response. Those who encounter the being of light are encompassed by a sense of acceptance and are lovingly challenged concerning their stewardship. (p. 380)

Throughout this book, I found Perry's writing style easily accessible. My understanding and knowledge of wicca, channeling, and the New Age position on caring for creation was broadened. Of particular interest is the final chapter, "The Stigma of Dogma." Perry examines how Christians from various denominations have responded to New Agers in ways that turn them away from Christianity, and he draws the line between what is open for further discussion and exploration between New Agers and Christians and what is not. *Gods Within* is an excellent primer for anyone who wants to learn more about the New Age movement and the Christian response.

References

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