



CATECHESIS IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

Emotive Religiosity and the New Age

In 2004 the Pontifical Council for Culture published, *Where is Your God? Responding to the Challenge of Unbelief and Religious Indifference Today*. This document deals primarily with unbelief and religious indifference which have secularism as their cause, and a new subjective, emotive religiosity as its consequence. In this article we will explore the problem of this new emotive religiosity and its manifestation in the New Age.

Even though we are surrounded by a culture of unbelief and religious indifference, there is what seems to be a contradictory consequence, namely 'the rise of a new religiosity' (Introduction, §2). This is because man is in his very nature a religious being oriented toward God. All people have some sense of the supernatural, how it becomes manifest in their lives is a completely different story. For some, it is not much manifest at all. For others, their sense of the supernatural finds an outlet in such things as astrology, tarot cards, palm reading, and all sorts of New Age type of involvement. It is a fact that involvement in the New Age, 'by its nature contributes to religious confusion' (I.2.5).

'People are searching once again for spirituality...in a whole variety of ways...' (Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture, 24). Frequently, however, there is often not a return to traditional religious practices, there '...is a search for new ways of living and expressing the religious dimension inherent in paganism' (Introduction, §2). The Council identifies certain characteristics of the new religiosity of which the catechist must be aware.

First, 'this 'spiritual awakening' is marked by a complete refusal to belong, and the search for an experience which is entirely individual, autonomous and guided by one's own subjectivity. This instinctive religiosity is more emotive than doctrinal' (Introduction, §2). There is the mentality of 'religion yes, God no' or even 'religiosity yes, God no,' at least not a personal God.

Second, the Council speaks of a 'faceless God.' 'Questioned about God... they believe in the existence of a force or superior transcendent being, but who has no personal attributes...The fascination of oriental religions, transplanted into the West, resides in the depersonalization of God' (I.4.1).

Third, this new religiosity has the characteristic of a 'religion of the self' (I.4.2). 'Sociologists speak of a 'Biographical Do-It-Yourself Religion' in which each person creates a new image of God' (*ibid.*).

Fourth, there is the characteristic expressed by Pilate's question to Jesus, 'Quid est veritas? What is truth?' 'For many truth has a negative connotation, associated with concepts such as "dogmatism", "intolerance", "imposition", and "inquisition"' (I.4.3). Truth is seen to be only opinion, or what 'I' think is the case.

Responding to emotive religiosity and the New Age

How then might we respond to all of this in our catechetical work?

First, 'In this spiritual thirst an anchor point can be found for the proclamation of the Gospel, through the 'evangelization of desire'' (Introduction, §2). Every human person has the same fundamental desires of the human heart. We do well to contemplate and teach the truth put so eloquently by St. Augustine, 'You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you' (*Catechism of the Catholic Church 30*).

Second, there is the need to identify more clearly 'what is uniquely Christian both in terms of research and also in terms of preparing catechists...The difference

between eternal life and the spirit world, transcendental meditation and Christian contemplation, miracles and faith-healing, the liturgical year and the ecological cycle need to be clearly explained and clearly grasped' (II.2.3). For aid in this catechists should read, *Jesus Christ, the Bearer of the Water of Life: A Christian Reflection on the 'New Age,'* from the Pontifical Council for Culture.

Third, John Henry Cardinal Newman spoke of an evangelization of *head and heart*, through reason and feeling. In a culture where the emotional, subjective dimension of the person is emphasized there is all the more need to speak to the heart, but without forgetting the head. The way of life and culture that youth find themselves in uses a strongly emotive language. 'Adopting to a certain extent this kind of strong emotive language, and of course purifying it, the Church's dialogue with youth is facilitated, and through a direct and meaningful relationship established with the people, the aspects of their culture which are negative can be transformed from within, and those which are positive sustained' (II.2.5). In this context the Council mentions using music, whether liturgical or popular, to attract the young.

Fourth, 'the *culture of the meaningful relationship* is indispensable if Christian witness is to involve 'the other' in an itinerary of faith. The primacy of the person and of personal relationships is essential for evangelization' (*ibid.*). The Council continues, 'interpersonal relationships permit people to *feel at home* in the Church' (*ibid.*). This of course means that the whole of the work of catechesis must be rooted in a genuine love for the other. ✠

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