

what we had." Reporters and editors, he said, used to be "of the public. But we got overeducated and forgot. Now, with embarrassment, with little apologetic titters, we're gathering up the courage to go back."

Critics, however, decry the trend. "You might as well not have newspapers if you can't give people the news they need to live full decent lives," Columbia University journalism professor Melvin Mencher said.

Editors "taking these paths, in a democratic society, are [not] giving people the news they need to give informed consent."

The publishers and editors who are trying to give the public what they think it wants are hoping that their newspapers thus will become more vital to readers. But, Stepp observes, the danger is that as newspapers provide less and less real news, people may find the newspapers even more dispensable.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

New Age Nonsense

"The New Age Movement: No Effort, No Truth, No Solutions" by Christopher Lasch, in *New Oxford Review* (Apr. 1991), 1069 Kains Ave., Berkeley, Calif. 94706.

The New Age movement "invites a mixture of ridicule and indignant alarm," University of Rochester historian Christopher Lasch observes, but the discontents it addresses are "supremely important"—and hence deserve a better response than the New Age one.

The movement's central teaching is "that it doesn't matter what you believe as long as it works for you." Actress-author Shirley MacLaine and other New Age enthusiasts have whipped up an eclectic mix of meditation, positive thinking, faith healing, environmentalism, mysticism, acupuncture, astrology, extrasensory perception, spiritualism, vegetarianism, organic gardening, ancient mythologies, chiropractic, herbal medicine, and other ingredients.

But something vital is missing, Lasch contends. While the New Age concoction may occasionally provide temporary spiritual relief, it "cannot bring about the equivalent of a religious conversion, a real change of heart . . . [or] even an intellectual conversion to a new point of view capable of standing up against rigorous questioning." What is missing, he says, is "spiritual discipline—submission to a body of teachings that has to be accepted even when it conflicts with immediate interests or inclinations and [that] cannot

constantly be redesigned to individual specifications." Genuine religion, by contrast with the New Age substitute, aims to produce not inner peace so much as "a sense of falling short of an absolute ethical ideal," with the result being "as much spiritual discomfort and even anguish as emotional security."

Nevertheless, the "intuition" underlying the New Age movement must be taken seriously, Lasch says. This intuition is "that mankind has lost the collective knowledge of how to live with dignity and grace; that this knowledge includes a respect not just for nature but for the nurturant activities our society holds in such low esteem; and that man's future depends on a renewal of prematurely discarded traditions of thought and practice. Those traditions [provided] answers to old questions about the meaning and purpose of human life, questions our own society has unwisely chosen to ignore as either unanswerable or unimportant (or both)."

Lasch argues that the New Age movement is best understood as a revival of the second-century heresy of gnosticism—"the belief that the material world was created by evil deities and that salvation lies in the soul's escape from the flesh into the spiritual realm whence it came." The New Age version, however, is "considerably

adulterated . . . and mixed up with imagery derived from science fiction—flying saucers, extraterrestrial intervention in human history, escape from the earth to a new home in space.”

The New Age movement is to gnosticism, Lasch says, what fundamentalism is to Christianity. “Both rest on a therapeutic view of religion, a belief in its immediate power to produce health and peace of

mind The question is not whether New Age therapies really work but whether religion ought to be reduced to therapy. If it offers nothing more than a spiritual high, religion becomes another drug in a drug-ridden society.” Yet a “more rigorous” version of gnosticism is not the solution. “[The] only corrective to the ersatz religions of the New Age,” he concludes, “is to turn to the real thing.”

Divorce from the West

“The Islamic World and the Latin West, 1350–1500” by Archibald R. Lewis, in *Speculum* (Oct. 1990), Medieval Acad. of America, 1430 Mass. Ave., Cambridge, Mass. 02138.

When did today’s split between the Islamic world and the West occur? During the 14th and 15th centuries, said the late University of Massachusetts historian Lewis. The attitudes “that these two great world civilizations formed” then toward each other “still govern much of how they interact today.” By the mid-14th century, while Western Europe was falling on hard times (with the Black Death, economic depression, the Hundred Years War, and pervasive loss of confidence in the papacy), the Muslim world was starting to emerge from a difficult era of its own. In the decades that followed, Islamic strength and confidence returned, and there was an extremely important religious revival.

The Muslim world had been all but torn apart in the 13th century by the expansion of a crusading Latin Europe and the attacks of Mongol armies. But the clouds gradually lifted after the mid-14th century. Slave armies the Muslims created proved able to defeat the Mongols in battle. And Ottoman sultans from Asia Minor crossed into Europe and within decades controlled most of the Balkans. A major European crusade in 1396 to check this menace was repelled. Constantinople, the thousand-year-old Christian capital, fell to the Ottomans in 1453. The Muslim world stretched from North Africa to Southeast Asia.

But even more important than the Muslims’ new military strength, Lewis said, was a religious revival. Muslim religious law (*Shari’a*), “interpreted by legal scholars known as *ulema* in courts throughout

the entire Islamic world, came to govern every aspect of [Muslims’] lives.” The growth of Sufi mysticism, which “dealt with the hearts,” also strengthened Islam. And schisms ceased to divide Muslims after 1350, as orthodox Sunni Islam largely prevailed. But the new religious ardor, Lewis noted, was “hostile to [the] philosophical and speculative thought that had been the glory of . . . medieval Islam.”

Meanwhile, in the West, despite many conflicts and difficulties, “much that was hopeful also was at work.” A new capitalism was stirring, the nation-state appeared, and vital institutions such as the medieval town came into existence. The number of universities increased fivefold between 1300 and 1500. And scientific progress continued, “laying the basis for the [modern] secular intellectual world.”

As Latin Europe thus prepared itself “for its world role in a way that was to be more effective than that of its Islamic neighbors,” a divorce between the two great cultures took place. Much of the blame, in Lewis’s view, “rests on the Islamic side where, after 1350, all Western European influences, except military technologies, were rejected.” But much blame, he said, also rests with Western Europe, which “closed itself off from the same Islamic culture it had earlier found so stimulating Western Europeans were to advance into the wider world, separated from and hostile to the culture of the great Islamic civilization nearby. And this was to remain so for centuries to come.”