

Preamble – church schools as both distinctively Christian and inclusive

In considering an approach to New Age philosophies it is first important to remember the purpose of Church of England schools. This is to deliver an excellent education within a context that is both distinctively Christian but also inclusive of the community within which they are situated.

Church schools must be inclusive. They were founded to provide an education for all in the neighbouring locality. The Church of England parish system means that church and school can work together in serving and reaching out to all in the local community, not only Christians, but also those of other faith or of none.

There are many areas of shared values and beliefs between faiths and worldviews that can provide a starting point for understanding and contact. Our schools should be positive in the way in which they relate to the diversity of faith and culture that now characterises much of our society, seeking to build bridges of mutual understanding, and so help to develop cohesive communities in which the school plays an important part.

Being inclusive does not, however, mean compromising on key Christian teaching and belief. Jesus Himself, while seeming to accept and teach all that He met, did not condone the misuse of the Temple or the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, but rather reacted with anger. Christians, in following His example, should always continue to show His love and acceptance to the people with whom they come into contact, but not to accept beliefs or behaviours which are directly opposed to their own core beliefs. Schools must be distinctive in the way they teach and reflect the Christian faith, as it is this that distinguishes them from others. The foundations, ethos statement and trust deeds, which determine church school status, state that the school should preserve and develop its religious character in accordance with the principles of the Church at parish and diocesan level. While the school aims to serve its community by providing education of the highest quality this should be done within the context of Christian belief and practice. The school should encourage an understanding of the meaning and significance of faith and promote Christian values through the experience and example it offers all its pupils, while not seeking to indoctrinate or force its beliefs on anyone.

The fundamental distinctive Christian belief is that in a triune God. This is summarised on the Church of England's own website (www.cofe.anglican.org) as:-

God understood and known as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

*...**Father**... God is love, caring for creation and for every human being as God's beloved child.*

*...**Son**... God is as he has revealed himself to be in the historical person of Jesus Christ. Jesus' life, death and resurrection holds the key to knowing and loving God, and to making sense of life, before and after death.*

*...and **Holy Spirit**... God is alive, loving and active today, inspiring faith, justice and truth, sustaining the life of the world, giving spiritual gifts to the church and bearing his spiritual fruit in the world - changed lives and a transformed society.*

Christians believe that this God existed before, and still exists separately from, his creation although he chooses to be actively involved within it. The earth is part of this creation and humans are unique in that they are made in God's own image, and therefore able to have a personal relationship with him. This gives each individual particular worth. The rest of creation is of great value, and humanity has a God-given responsibility to care for it. The Bible is recognised as the key resource for understanding and teaching about the reality of this life in a relationship with God and explains God's objective standards for right and wrong on which church schools can build their ethos and values.

It is within this context of inclusivity but also distinctive Christian ethos that church schools should approach New Age teaching.

The New Age Movement

The New Age Movement is not one unified faith but encompasses a number of ideas, beliefs and philosophies. The name derives from the belief that the new millennium coincides with the end of the astrological Age of Pisces, equated with Christianity: and the beginning of the Age of Aquarius, an age of harmony, light, love and understanding, a period of universal truth. New Age followers believe that established authority, including that of the Christian church, has often failed to deliver hope, peace and prosperity, and so alternatives are needed. Ideally the New Age will be a utopia in which there is an end to wars, disease, hunger, pollution, and poverty. Gender, racial, religious and other forms of discrimination will cease. People's allegiance to their tribe or nation will be replaced by a concern for the entire world and its people.

New Age philosophies are very diverse, although there is considerable mutual understanding between groups. Most incorporate the belief that the spiritual is present in all living things. This spiritual is derived from a single source of divine energy that may be identified with Mother Earth, who nurtures all those who exist on her planet, although there may be other spiritual beings that guide, support or hinder. This belief leads naturally to the concept of the divinity of the individual, meaning that all are in some way gods. God is not revealed in a sacred text or found in a remote heaven; but rather can be discovered within the self and throughout the entire universe. All humanity - indeed all life - is thus spiritually interconnected, participating in the same energy. This gives great importance to the need for people to unite to preserve the health of the planet, and take ecological responsibility, as humanity's fate is inextricably linked with that of the Earth's.

New Age teaching combines aspects of most world religions, including Christianity, especially the Celtic tradition. Many accept the importance of reincarnation, meditation and personal



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karma, drawn from Hindu and Buddhist thought, as well as strands of Chinese and Japanese philosophy. Indeed, a fundamental belief is that, since all is god, then only one reality exists, and all religions are simply different paths to that ultimate reality. This anticipates the evolution and acceptance of a new synchronised universal religion that contains elements of all current faiths. New Age beliefs and practices do not only derive from within the plurality of established world religions, but also draw on ideas that originate in cosmology, astrology, esotericism, alternative medicine, freemasonry, paganism and the occult. Many relate closely to the mystical Gnostic teaching common in the early centuries of the Christian era.

New Age spirituality is characterized by an individual approach, and is closely tied with the post modern philosophies which now pervade society. One key aim is the attainment of the highest individual human potential. Achieving this places importance upon a holistic approach which seeks the harmony of body, mind and spirit, looking to itself to find truth and meaning. Many New Age practices revolve about the search for personal wellbeing and wholeness. Because each individual is seen to be of such importance, the views of each person are held to be of great value. The human mind is believed to have deep levels, which may be expressed through dreams and psychic experiences, sometimes heightened by drug use. Through personal transformation believers hope to develop new potentials within themselves, the ability to heal themselves and others, and a new understanding of the workings of the universe. Right and wrong are not absolutes, but alternate sides of truth, as in yin and yang. This means that values and morals are subjective, and actions are judged by the effect they have on others. Great importance is given to love, the ideal state in which individuals co-exist in perfect harmony. Ultimately every interpersonal relationship is believed to have the potential to be a helpful experience in terms of each individual's own growth. The only reality is seen as existing through life in different forms, although there may be spiritual laws such as the principle of cause and effect (karma). Death is not the end; rebirth does not punish, but teaches the individual and ensures that the life force continues.

New Age teaching has already had a significant effect on modern society and its way of thinking, including its attitudes towards education. The focus on the individual and the drive for personal fulfilment seems to be at the heart of what schools are aiming to achieve, and would appear to be a very positive goal.

The response of Church of England Schools to New Age thinking

In our church schools we share many of the aims of the New Age movement. We want every pupil to build self-esteem and independence, to achieve their full potential and live a worthwhile and fulfilled life. We also hope that they will be independent spiritually, aware that there is more to life than the mental and physical. We want them to conserve and nurture the world around them, taking responsibility for its future. We long for an end to divisions within society, and we hope for peace and good government. These are very important objectives that we share with those who follow New Age philosophies.

However, although the goals are the same; for Christians the motivation for achieving them is very different, and so it should be for church schools. At the heart of New Age thinking is the



belief that god, or spiritual forces, exist within the world and all living things. There is no clear distinction between the divine and creation, as god is found within rather than outside of what he has made. If the world is divine, having created itself through evolution, then it can continue to improve and develop into something better without the need for an independent god. Christians, on the other hand, believe that God is the creator. He existed before and apart from his creation and is still active in caring for it, although he gave humanity the task of looking after the earth he had made. The variety and beauty of the world tells of the power and originality of its maker. Church schools should offer opportunities for pupils to reflect upon, appreciate and care for creation, and to understand that Christians believe it reveals something of God himself.

At the same time schools should help pupils to recognise the special role of humanity within creation. New Age thinking does not allow for this, as all life is sacred. Christianity gives value and worth to every individual, not because that individual contains something of the divine within itself, but because God created it 'in His image' as a friend whom He loves. This special relationship is heightened by the fact that God chose to take on human form in the person of Jesus. Church schools must embed the premise that every child matters, not only to the school but also to God, because He has created a huge diversity of personality, experience and talent within its pupils and these should be celebrated. Schools should avoid adopting a form of rigid egalitarianism, inspired by New Age thinking, which attempts to deny any distinctions such as faith, gender, ability and culture and so does not celebrate the unique contribution offered by each individual.

The belief in a Trinitarian God, which accepts that Jesus was God revealed in human form, is unacceptable to New Age philosophy because, if true, it gives Christian beliefs an exclusive place within world religions, an idea incompatible with the teaching that all faiths are equal paths to truth. Many are willing to accept that a historical Jesus was an inspired teacher and prophet, but not that he was God incarnate. Gnostic philosophies with beliefs very similar to those of the New Age were common in the first centuries after Jesus lived, and early Christians were active in writing and preaching against their ideas. The Christian creeds and canon of New Testament books emerged as part of the attempt to agree orthodox beliefs in the face of Gnostic interpretations. Such orthodoxy opposes the New Age belief that all faiths are equal and individuals to can therefore select their own truth from the various beliefs on offer. This idea also results in New Age practices that unite elements of Christian belief with non-Christian ideas. For example Reiki channels 'self healing' to create wholeness and wellbeing, using Reiki symbols alongside Christian within exorcism designed to remove forces which are seen as harming or hindering the development of an individual. Schools should ensure that they are explicit in sharing and modelling Christianity in a way that does not compromise the concepts at its heart. Use of the Bible, liturgy such as traditional prayers and creeds, and working in partnership with the local church can give practical support in this. While it may appropriate for secondary age pupils to be aware of the pressures from New Age thinking within society and to debate their impact, this should always be done in a way that ensures that the Christian viewpoint is clearly stated as that preferred by the school leadership.

For New Age thinkers the search for truth begins with the self, while for Christians truth is found by looking beyond the self for God. Christians the spiritual is not found by seeking a nebulous force or power, but by responding to a loving God, still active in the world today, through the work of the Holy Spirit. This Spirit is not innately part of an individual, but is God's



way of working through the person in order that they can live in the way that God intended and so achieve meaning and purpose in life – true wholeness. Christians accept that authority and the church have often failed to bring the peace, love and hope that Jesus came to deliver, but recognise that this is because people have constantly failed to live by God’s standards and follow Jesus’ example. There is indeed much that it can learn from the enthusiasm and positivity of the New Age movement. Christians have no place for pride in their own achievements, but should demonstrate an unselfish reliance on God, rather than their own efforts.

Christians would agree with New Age teaching that a sense of the spiritual is something found in all humans, regardless of age, gender, race, (dis)ability, cultural identity or religious belief, and that our schools should avoid valuing the intellectual and physical while marginalizing the spiritual needs of the learner. The challenge for all educators is to help pupils to recognise, value and develop their spiritual self, by offering opportunities for reflection, empathy and imagination. Church schools should be proactive in helping pupils to experience the spiritual, giving opportunities for awe and wonder, reflection and worship throughout the school day and across the curriculum. Reflection and stilling can be powerful ways of helping individuals communicate with God. However, meditation that is solely introspective, encouraging pupils to find stillness and inner healing within themselves is inappropriate. Within Church schools the focus of reflection should be the Trinitarian God known by individuals, not as a remote force, or something within themselves, but through the wonder of creation, the example of Jesus and by the work of the Holy Spirit. The Bible suggests that we should ‘Be still, and know that I am God’ (Psalm 46:10)

The idea of self-fulfilment and focus on self-esteem within New Age thinking may lead to inadequacy and depression in those who feel that they are not able to achieve, and are unable to attain wholeness and wellness, especially when faced with problems. Christians believe that, despite their special position within creation, human beings are not perfect and do not have the ability to attain perfection however hard they try. Indeed it was because of this failure that God sent Jesus to live as a perfect human, thus giving an example to follow. Moreover his undeserved death and subsequent resurrection not only show Christians how much God loves humanity, but also offers forgiveness and hope. It is through God’s grace that people can know and love God and so make sense of life, before and after death. Christians believe that individuals must look beyond themselves, and form a relationship with this loving God. The Holy Spirit can then work through that person to create a whole and fulfilled individual.

Christians agree with New Age thinkers that love is something to aim for, but not love found in perfect relationships between individuals, an ideal that is unrealistic in the light of human failure. Rather, for Christians, perfect and unselfish love is modeled by Jesus’ love and sacrifice for humanity. This then becomes the example on which to build relationships with others. Christians believe that God’s love is for the whole world, and that Christians everywhere are united by a common faith and purpose. This means that, when building different levels of community cohesion church schools begin from an additional point of contact –shared ethos and values build on something outside the individual school - that can be used to develop links and partnerships.

New Age beliefs are not clear on the boundary between right and wrong, which may be seen as different sides of same reality because actions are judged by the result that behaviour has



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on self and others. If a person is happy with his or her own actions, and they do not harm others, then the action is acceptable. Christians, on the other hand, believe that God has definite standards of right and wrong, good and evil, and that the Bible gives clear guidance as to what these are. Moreover it clearly states that God is holy, and so cannot tolerate evil, or its consequences in the life of individuals (sin). Morals and values are therefore not subjective or defined by the effect that actions have on others, but are based on absolutes. This means that, within a church school, issues of discipline and inter-personal relationships should be built on these clear Biblical principles. This should also have an effect across the curriculum, influencing the content of subjects such as SRE, PSHE and RE. For church schools the Bible should be central to the life and worship of the school, providing a focus for values and ethos, and for teaching about God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Although the sacred writings of other faiths may be respected, studied and shared, for Christians they are not to be considered the Bible's equal. While being distinctive in its values and ethos, the school must not attempt to impose beliefs on others. However, by modeling an alternative to New Age thinking and demonstrating God's love, forgiveness and strength to pupils, it can offer a choice in lifestyle and motivation.

There is no place within church schools for any New Age practices which involve witchcraft, the psychic, paganism, the occult or Satanism. This would include practices such as astrology, tarot cards and ouija boards as well as more explicitly pagan ceremonies. The Bible forbids these for Christians, stating that God is wholly good, holy, and so totally opposed to things which are wrong, evil or of Satan. For Christians, 'our struggle is ...against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.' (Ephesians 6:12) Christians believe that good and evil are not two sides of the same, but are in direct and uncompromising opposition. This leaves no place for compromise with things that are directly opposed to Christian teaching.

In our church schools we cannot ignore the fact that New Age and postmodern thinking is prevalent throughout much of Western society and has already had a great impact on the English education system, much of which has been positive. In our church schools we share many aims, in that we work to create fulfilled and motivated individuals who are equipped to face adult life with confidence. This should be our vision for every child in our care, as we strive to deliver an excellent and inclusive education. Church schools, like many others, have frequently failed in achieving this and must be willing to learn from others as they strive to move forwards. We should work with others, including those of New Age thinking, to celebrate shared ideas and concerns.

However, church schools should ensure that they maintain a clear and distinctive focus upon the triune God of Christian faith, and the belief that our pupils do not have an innate ability to achieve fulfilment in their own strength. The ideal is that they become God-reliant, rather than self-reliant. While schools cannot force their views upon our pupils, staff or communities, they can offer clear opportunities to teach about Him, respond in worship to God and see the Christian life lived out within the school, we are able to offer pupils excellence in education, confidence in themselves as a unique, valued and loved individual and an awareness that they may turn to God for help, forgiveness, guidance and hope beyond themselves. In this way our schools can offer a full and distinctive education that leads to 'life in all its fullness'. (John 10.10)

Hallowe'en

Hallowe'en is the festival which causes most problems for church schools as it has become an increasingly important part of the annual calendar of British young people. The festival has some roots in the Christian Festival of All Saints (All Hallows), but others in the pagan Samhain. In recent years it has grown enormously in significance, partly because of American influence, but also because of its importance within some New Age thinking.

Many festivals, including Christmas and Easter have taken the dates of older Pagan festivals and yet have assumed a focus on the Christian story. Samhain, the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon New Year marked the end of summer and included the use of bonfires to frighten evil spirits and souls of the dead who revisited their homes. It was also a time of divination and fortune telling. In the Middle Ages, when witchcraft was still strong, these observances continued to influence the Christian All Saints, with the belief evil forces would try and stop a festival which remembered all who had lived faithful Christian lives. Eventually Hallowe'en became a night of mischief making, which sometimes even involved praying to the devil for help and good fortune. Following the Reformation many of these ideas died out in England, or were replaced by the anti-Popish festivities of bonfire night. However, early Irish and Scottish immigrants took the traditions to America and the custom of trick or treating gradually evolved, continuing the ideas of mischief making and the reversal of normal moral behaviour.

In recent years the importing of much American culture to Britain has led to the reintroduction of Hallowe'en. It may appear to provide a safer alternative to fireworks and bonfires and celebrations of the religious divisions that set Catholic against Protestant in the past. It also provides a high point for those within the New Age movement who value the psychic, pagan and occult. It may also appear to offer schools an opportunity for a bit of fun half way through the long autumn term.

However, it is not appropriate for church schools to celebrate this festival. Even if spirits and witches are seen as harmless nonsense, paganism is hardly a cultural mainstay of what is best in our society. Within British folklore witches and demons represent moral evil. By encouraging pupils to dress up as witches and write their own spells and charms schools disturbs the polarization of good and bad, right and wrong in pupil's minds and so offer a negative stroke within moral education.

Hallowe'en has links with the least acceptable elements of New Age activities – occultism, witchcraft and Satanism. These can involve elements of sexual immorality, drug abuse, racism and sadism, all of which are particularly associated with Hallowe'en activities. Anything that may awaken the interest of our pupils to such things is to be avoided.

Church schools should explain in a relevant way to pupils and parents why the festival is not marked, but are encouraged to offer positive alternatives. One such would be a light party to mark All Saints Day when we remember people who lived for good and so brought light to the world. Other ideas can be found on the site <http://www.eauk.org/church/resources/halloween-resources.cfm>