ABSTRACT: This article contrasts traditional spiritualities with those offered by the contemporary New Age movement. An appeal is made for the recovery of the spiritual core in various faith traditions as well as for the necessity of moral growth and social commitment in New Age culture.

The latest batch of New Age catalogues to crowd my mailbox includes these wonderful items: incense to induce feelings of bliss—"The aroma is so sweet and satisfying that your consciousness will transcend the mundane"; a mandala poster which is offered with an inviting promise—"Gaze upon this sacred image and transcend all limitations"; a copper plate called "The Balancer" comes with the inviting promise that if I stand or sit on it or hold it between my palms, I can attain "a feeling of deep centeredness." One tape set touting "consciousness technology" promises I'll be meditating like a Zen Master in 28 minutes; I can attain "higher consciousness" in a matter of hours rather than years. Another promises to induce "complex patterns of brainwave activity associated with heightened states of consciousness." Numerous trinkets, books, and meditation aids promise enlightenment, good-luck and serenity. Crystals can extract negative energy from my body and induce feelings of wholeness and balance. My favorite is a book by Thaddeus Golas, The Lazy Man's Guide to Enlightenment. I have not read it.

One trip to Barnes & Noble will testify to our current spiritual thirst. Yards of shelf space are devoted to books on topics ranging from the classic spiritual themes in the major belief systems, to the esoteric and occult—a virtual spiritual shopping mall. Specific topics, some hardly known a few decades ago, include Angelology, Reincarnation, Native American Spirituality, Gnosticism, Goddess worship. The long-familiar occult arts are enjoying a new currency—astrology, tarot, palmistry. All manner of esoterica is available. One can dabble in one or another or mix and match according to one's spiritual needs and tastes. After all, this is America. We are free to choose our spiritual path.

None of this is new. Most offerings of the current New Age spiritual menu make claims of "ancient knowledge," "hidden secrets," or "esoteric wisdom."

Frederick Drobin, Ph.D., is an Episcopal priest and psychotherapist in private practice in Nyack, NY.
The implication here seems to be that because a certain practice pre-dates Judeo-Christian history, it is therefore more authentic. Of course, all of this was present a century ago. Fin-de-siècle Europe experienced a similar spiritual explosion, which gave birth to the Theosophical Society, founded by Helen Petrovna Blavatsky in 1875. Contemporaneous with the explosion of esoteric spirituality in fin-de-siècle Europe was the advent of the American Spiritualist movement. Blavatsky emigrated to the United States and took up residence in Hollywood, capitalizing handsomely on the spiritualist zeitgeist. Perhaps our current spiritual thirst is an aspect of pre-millennium fever. Western Europe went through a similar experience a millennium ago.

But again, none of this is new. In fact one might trace the parallel development of two spiritualities, one within, another outside Judeo-Christian history. At the Spring 1996 meeting of the Jesus Seminar, Dominic Crossan said, “Catholic Christianity and Gnostic Christianity have always been with us.” The parallel development of the two spiritualities certainly predates Christianity. The conflict between them may have been played out in Moses's rejection of Egyptian religion, with its elaborate mythology, ritual magic, and elitism, in favor of a monotheism which supported a new and demanding social justice ethic. So if “Catholic Christianity and Gnostic Christianity have always been with us,” one might venture a phenomenological assessment of the latter.

The New Age understanding of spirituality would seem to be the following: 1) Spirituality is an easy matter. It can be “attained,” like a consumer item or commodity, rather effortlessly. 2) Spirituality is basically a psychological condition, either as a feeling-state, that is a “feel-good” state, like bliss or ecstasy, or some form of “higher consciousness,” which sets one apart and yet makes no moral demand on the person. 3) The test of spiritual advancement or development is that one gains some special power. 4) Spirituality is frequently devoid of any God-image or relationship to a transcendent divinity.

It was in 1844 that Karl Marx wrote, “Religion is . . . the opium of the people” (Marx, 1964, p. 42). Marx was criticizing the oppressive status quo of nineteenth-century German society wherein religious institutions indirectly ratified social ills. Oppression, disenfranchisement, and poverty had to be endured for the sake of heavenly reward. Thus religion supported the oppression and exploitation of the impoverished many by the greedy and power-hungry few. It contributed to humanity's alienation rather than its liberation.

But religion has changed, no small thanks to Marx, who oddly enough inspired the liberation-theology movement and other expressions of socially conscious faith. We now hear new slogans. For instance, all of Western Christianity seems to have adopted the slogan coined in 1962 by the Latin-American Catholic Bishops, “the church's preferential option for the poor.” I wonder if Marx would recognize this church as the institution which he criticized, the dispenser of opium to the masses. We also seem to have incorporated Harvey Cox's 1965 injunction, “. . . the church's task in the secular city is to be the