

*Challenges
to Christian Spirituality*



Challenges to Christian Spirituality



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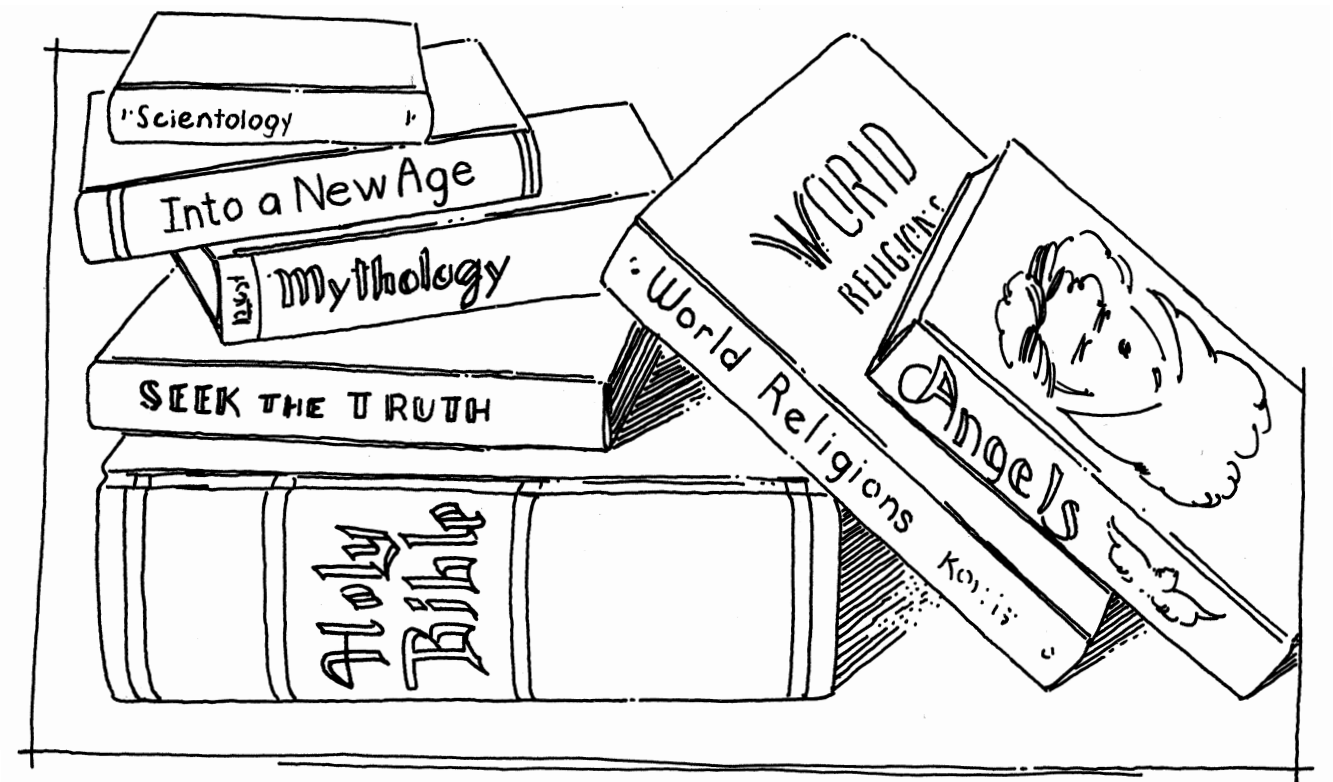
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Introduction



An Overview of This Course

Archaeologists tell us that every human culture expresses some religious tradition, that is, a communal belief in a higher power and the desire to ritually acknowledge and respond to that power. Therefore, religion appears to be a universal human response to the experience of mystery at the center of life. Skeptics might argue that religion simply reflects people's fear of the unknown and their desire to control in some way the forces of nature. Believers would counter that religion is a response to the experience of God's revelation to humanity.

Historically religion has been expressed in both healthy and unhealthy ways, in ways that both elevate and lower the human spirit. Some religious expressions enhance the meaning of life and lead to the personal growth of adherents. Others, at least from the perspective of a modern believer, seem destructive and even inhuman. Extreme examples of the latter are traditions that include human sacrifice as part of their worship. Less extreme are the many traditions, including some Christian traditions, that incorporate practices such as self-mutilation. In addition, though religion commonly seems to appeal to the hunger of people for the good, the true, the beautiful, and the holy, some religion also reflects the seemingly innate fascination of people with the powers of evil.

Therefore, religion cannot be blindly accepted as always and everywhere good and life-giving. Every tradition seems to reflect the tension between healthy and unhealthy beliefs and practices, between that which uplifts persons and that which dehumanizes them, and between good and evil. This should not surprise us. Roman Catholicism acknowledges the reality of sin at the center of human experience. It has been said that original sin is the only Christian dogma that can be proved every day simply by reading a newspaper.

The allure of unhealthy, destructive, and even evil religious beliefs and practices may be most evident in social fringe groups and bizarre cults, such as white supremacist groups that claim to be true followers of scriptural Christianity and fanatical groups that have committed mass suicide. Such beliefs and practices grab the headlines but are readily rejected by mainstream believers. However, even the most widespread and respected religious traditions have embraced unhealthy beliefs and practices. The Inquisition and the Crusades offer well-documented examples in the history of Roman Catholicism.

Practitioners of ancient religious traditions were deeply inculcated from birth into a worldview expressed through certain beliefs and practices. They probably seldom confronted optional, much less contradictory, belief systems. The same might be true for members of some modern traditions, particularly those that attempt to shield their adherents from the effects of contemporary culture. However, most young people today, even those raised in solid families that faithfully adhere to healthy and authentic religious beliefs and practices, are confronted with almost unlimited options in terms of beliefs and ways to respond to those beliefs. Never has it been more necessary, therefore, to help young people develop the skills of discernment, to enable them to assess accurately the relative health of the options available to them.

Discernment skills are particularly important in contemporary culture. Ours is a fast-moving, predominantly materialistic, and pleasure-seeking culture, in which individual rights are so emphasized that many have lost a sense of communal connection or responsibility. In addition, advancing technological expertise and sophistication have contributed to an inflated sense of human power. The combination of these and other cultural elements has for many resulted in a kind of spiritual vacuum. This has prompted some, particularly baby boomers, to return to conventional religious practice. It has also

led some to view religion as mere superstition, an unnecessary holdover from a time when we needed answers to life's mysteries. And it has caused others to see religion as more a fulfillment of cultural expectations than an expression of true commitment. Finally, it has induced many to seek spiritual experiences outside the bounds of traditional religion. In our society these nontraditional and highly individualized religious and spiritual expressions are often collectively called New Age.

For this course the term *New Age* denotes a popular, multifaceted, quasi-religious cultural trend that involves spiritual experimentation, religious imagination, and often personal license. Many New Age practitioners claim as their goal the expansion of human potential, often emphasizing what one does more than what one believes.

Ironically, much of what is termed New Age actually has roots in ancient practices. Tarot cards, crystal balls, and astrology, for example, have been around for centuries, as have various forms of spiritual meditation and techniques for contacting the dead. New Age practices borrow from Asian and African sources, from Hinduism and Buddhism, and from mythical, religious, philosophical, and magical spheres. Their themes include reincarnation, psychic powers, and nature lore. In contemporary culture those ancient practices are being given a particularly American twist and are becoming increasingly fashionable among some segments of the population, including entertainers and other high-profile people who lend them an air of glamour and high visibility.

Many New Age practices may have a strong appeal for young people because much of what they naturally need and want can appear to be obtainable in those practices. *Challenges to Christian Spirituality* deals with five categories of New Age and related practices that commonly fascinate adolescents: fortune-telling, superstition, spiritism, magic and sorcery, and cults. It uses these five categories to launch the participants on their own exploration of Christian spirituality, focusing primarily on developing skills to evaluate the validity and relative health of various religious beliefs and practices.

We presume that this course will most commonly be offered as an elective to juniors and seniors in high school. Therefore, we also presume a rather high initial interest, openness, and maturity on the part of the participants. So motivation should not be a major concern. Rather, the primary challenge will be to present in a positive and affirming way a

complex subject that is likely to provoke strong emotions. The course content has been developed to help you meet that challenge.

Challenges to Christian Spirituality is designed to be taught as three 2-hour sessions presented one a week for three consecutive weeks. Extended breaks between the sessions might interrupt the flow of the course. The activities are intended for a group of about ten young people. If your group has considerably more or fewer members, you may have to make minor adjustments in the session plans. If you need assistance with this task, consult your program coordinator.

Session 1, "Learning About New Age Practices," offers the young people an opportunity to develop a basic working knowledge of the five types of New Age practices noted above. It then asks them to reflect on their own feelings and opinions about these practices.

Session 2, "Assessing Spiritual and Religious Practices," introduces five categories of basic human needs and invites the young people to consider how involvement with various New Age practices can play off those needs and lead to unhealthy outcomes. It presents a discernment guide, a helpful resource for evaluating how certain religious practices affect human development in healthy and unhealthy ways. It then asks the young people to apply the guide to scenarios involving four of the New Age practices identified in session 1.

The first part of session 3, "Pursuing Spiritual Health in Our Culture," is designed to help the participants focus their discernment skills on key areas of popular culture that affect their life, often negatively. It guides them to reflect on three negative cultural influences that often dominate the life of young and old alike: materialism (an overemphasis on material wealth), hedonism (pleasure seeking), and relativism (the belief that there are no absolutes, that meaning and value shift constantly with personal opinion).

The second part of session 3 recalls the significant connections and distinctions between faith and religion that were explored earlier in the Horizons Program. It then examines three potentially unhealthy tendencies found within all organized religions: fundamentalism or fanaticism, minimalism or legalism, and superstition or magic. The intention is to help the participants develop realistic expectations regarding the limitations of any religious tradition, because religions are practiced by flawed and limited human beings. We do not want their

faith in Jesus Christ to be jeopardized by the faults of individual religious leaders or by the inadequacies of some practices.

Scripture-based prayer experiences are carefully woven into the *Challenges to Christian Spirituality* minicourse. These experiences affirm the participants' basic goodness and worth as persons with God-given needs and capacities, including a capacity and hunger for the holy. They remind the young people of the God who trusts them enough to let them make free choices about who they are becoming. They awaken the participants to the presence of the God who loves them so much that they need never fear being abandoned, the God who will remain with them through all life's challenges and choices, the God of love and mercy who continuously offers to teach them how fulfilling their most basic needs in healthy ways can lead to real security and real fulfillment.

Background for This Course

Culture Connections

Although the destructive cultural influences of materialism, hedonism, and relativism take their toll on us, they are also our sacred cows. As products of our culture, the young participants in this course will already have incorporated some materialist, hedonist, and relativist elements into their own lifestyle, and they may consciously or unconsciously resist having those things challenged. They may not be pleased, for instance, to hear that overdependence on material things is unhealthy, or enjoy the notion that pleasure should not be a Christian's primary goal. They might recoil from the idea that everything is not relative, that some things are simply right or wrong. Young people—like older people—are steeped in consumer culture and strongly influenced by it. They fear deprivation and loss of control as much as anyone else. In addition, many of their parents and teachers might have strong materialist, hedonist, or relativist values—even though they are good people who consider themselves to be good Christians.

In some respects, therefore, *Challenges to Christian Spirituality* is *countercultural*, and some young people may resist some of its concepts on that basis. But most will be grateful for solid information and clear guidelines about healthy religious practices.

The Adolescent and This Course

In our day the powerful human drive for religious experience is lived out within a complex culture that offers seemingly endless choices—among them a wide variety of socially accepted religious practices. In such circumstances it can be difficult for anyone to make healthy decisions. Young people can be particularly susceptible and unwary and are often poorly equipped to make healthy selections from a wide array of new and enticing possibilities.

Adolescence is a time of transition and frequent tension. On the one hand, young people may cling to the security of childhood and the comfort of parental protection; on the other they may crave a sense of separateness and personal autonomy. Many adolescents naturally—and healthily—question their acquired religious beliefs and practices, and some embark on a search for new ones. As young people question and at times drop former external religious practices, they tend to replace them with more private and more internal beliefs and practices. They may be less inclined to go to church but more inclined to ponder quietly when alone. Some young people are drawn to New Age practices as they seek a replacement for rejected childhood beliefs and practices, and as their inner pondering leads them to explore new possibilities. As a result many young people will enter this course already intrigued with and even excited about New Age practices. Some might already have dabbled with things like Ouija boards, séances, and fortune-telling. Others might even have limited experience with witchcraft or Satanism. Almost all will be at least mildly superstitious in one way or another—perhaps keeping a friendship ring for good luck, or wearing a cap backward in the hope that it will help them win a game.

Young people also commonly experience a tension between needing to be different and needing to conform. Both needs could lead them to try out New Age experiences. Experimenting with witchcraft might appeal to one young person as a way of being different from the majority of people in society, and to another as a way of fitting into a group of friends who are practicing it.

In general, anything new almost immediately appeals to adolescents. Therefore, the young people in your group are likely to seem genuinely excited about what New Age has to offer. However, you

might also detect two other reactions below this surface excitement. The first is anxiety, reservation, or fearfulness. What is unknown is usually exciting—but scary at the same time. The second reaction you might detect is veiled hostility. The course participants might be expecting you to lecture them about things they should and should not be doing. In their drive to become their own master, most young people will resist such a heavy-handed approach. However, because *Challenges to Christian Spirituality* is likely to be an elective course freely chosen by the young people, such a negative attitude is unlikely. Also, if such an attitude is present, the course is designed to defuse it. *Challenges to Christian Spirituality* is grounded in respect for the young people's freedom, and aims to help them claim responsibility for making their own careful discernments and wise choices.

While acknowledging and respecting human freedom, the course also recognizes that good people can make evil choices. Evil has its own glamour, and certain practices amount to the adoration of evil. Young people need to learn that even innocent experimentation in such practices can devolve into pleasure derived from evil.

Young people who come to know the God of love, the God of Jesus Christ, will be able to partake joyfully of the good things of this earth, and care for their own needs and the needs of others with confidence and right judgment. They will be responsible persons with a healthy sense of identity and personal esteem, young people who can channel the energies of freedom, imagination, and creativity into the building of healthy relationships, communities, and religions. Young people who come to know the God of love will recognize their own spiritual hunger for what it is: a profound and sacred capacity that God created and only God can satisfy.

The Theology of This Course

Theological anthropology attempts to answer the question, What kind of persons are we, and what kind of God has made us this way? For Christians the answer is multifaceted: We are made in God's image; we are created good by a good God; we are created with basic needs; we are dynamic beings in a constant state of personal change and growth; and what most characterizes us as persons is our freedom to choose.

Along with freedom God gives us responsibility. We are called to be persons of discernment and right judgment. Christians learn to make responsible choices based on the results of those choices. That “the tree is known by its fruit” (Matt. 12:33, NRSV) is a basic lesson of the Christian Testament.

The writers of the Gospels often referred to Jesus' concerns over the ills of “the world.” Daily, Jesus taught people the dangers of material wealth, of seeking their own happiness more than someone else's, and of fooling themselves into thinking they were doing good when really they were not. Today's materialism, hedonism, and relativism are expressions of the same human tendencies.

Within the broad range of human experience, what are we to make of the paranormal and the supernatural? Are these harmful or beneficial, evil or good? Jesus himself worked miracles. Although our God is all-powerful and the created order includes elements of the supernatural, God comes to us more often in the ordinary than in the extraordinary. In the Gospels Jesus continually called people to the basics of hope, love, and forgiveness. The Acts of the Apostles show over and over how the followers of Jesus got sidetracked by their own needs for success, novelty, excitement, control, power, and quick results.

Unhealthy tendencies in organized religion are not new. Much of Jesus' ministry was spent helping people to see healthy and unhealthy tendencies in what they were doing in the name of religion. Jesus showed how the Pharisee's need for social acceptance led to his boasting about his own good deeds (Luke 18:9–14). Jesus exposed the human need to control when he condemned the prayer of endless babbling and, in its place, taught a courageous, trusting surrender to an unseen God (Matt. 6:7–15).

History has demonstrated again and again that religion is subject to extreme misuse and abuse. Christian religious practices—both communal and individual—need our ongoing attentiveness. Remaining aware of what we are doing and why helps us to keep our religious practices healthy and life-giving.

Human development is based on relationships of love. The God of love is continuously, intimately present with us, affirming us in our goodness, guiding us to healthy, healing pathways. Prayer is vital for those who truly want to discern the ways of love. And the Christian church is the community within which the faithful support one another in making right choices, reminding one another of who God calls us to be and what God calls us to do.

A Christian is one who learns to face life's varying choices, challenges, and uncertain paths with God, in a community following Jesus Christ. The Christian way of life is one of balance and moderation, shared hope and confidence.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* treats the subject of Christian spirituality within its discussion of the first commandment, in paragraphs 2084 to 2141. You are encouraged to read this entire section. Of particular interest are paragraphs 2110 to 2117, covering superstition, idolatry, divination, and magic.

This Course and Evangelization

In *The Challenge of Catholic Youth Evangelization*, evangelization is described as “the initial effort by the faith community as a whole to proclaim through word and witness the Good News of the Gospel to those who have not yet heard or seen it, and then to invite those persons into a relationship with Jesus Christ and the community of believers” (National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, p. 3). Evangelization is also the ongoing witness of the community of believers and, as such, the basis and energizing core of all the ministries in the church.

The Horizons Program is grounded in a commitment to evangelize young people effectively. Each course reflects that commitment in both content and methodology. All the courses, even those on topics that do not appear overtly “religious,” explore the connection between the lived experience of the young person and Jesus' proclamation of the Good News. All the courses employ strategies that actively engage the whole person, demonstrating that religious education can be not only informative but life-giving and even fun! In other words the Horizons Program tries to *be* “good news” not just proclaim the Good News.

Challenges to Christian Spirituality offers a particularly rich opportunity to evangelize young people in two ways. First, it sets up straightforward and open discussion of religious practices that might be considered taboo, which can lead young people to a greater sense of confidence in the Catholic Tradition and teachings. Second, it provides the teacher with the chance to model healthy and mature spirituality and stand as a positive witness to Catholicism at its best.

Teaching This Course

A Video Resource for Teachers

The information presented in this section identifies the elements requiring special consideration when leading *Challenges to Christian Spirituality*. The creators of Horizons developed an informative video to prepare teachers to lead any of the courses in the program. The video is accompanied by a guide that summarizes the content of the tape, offers additional tips for teaching adolescents, and invites the teacher to track her or his experience with the program.

Both the video for teachers and its companion guide are included in the resources developed for coordinators of the Horizons Program. Contact the program coordinator in your parish for further information.

Preparing Yourself

You may wish to do some background reading before teaching *Challenges to Christian Spirituality*. However, the course does not require that; the session plans provide all the information you will need to teach the course effectively. If you do care to pursue further study, see the list of suggested resources at the end of this course introduction.

As you prepare to teach this course, keep in mind that it deals with a wide range of spiritual and religious practices, from harmless occasional glancing at a horoscope to depraved immersion in a satanic cult. Your job is to help the young people learn to make wise choices about what is healthy and what is unhealthy in terms of religious practice, rather than to provide them with ready-made judgments about persons, groups, and activities. Throughout the activities in this course, keep the focus on the young people's responsibility in making wise choices. If they are to mature as persons and as Christians, they must learn to say no because *they recognize* a practice as harmful, not just because *adults have told them* that it must be avoided. Remember, the intent is not to cause a fear of the strange or the unfamiliar but to teach the skills for assessing the strange or the unfamiliar in a balanced, honest, and prudent way.

Also note that whereas you should avoid making blanket condemnations of all New Age practices, there is a place in Christian formation for naming evil as evil. Satanism, for example, should not be

presented as a practice that could bring about good or evil depending on how it is used; worship of Satan is evil and should be named as such. Remember that *Challenges to Christian Spirituality* is designed to present a solid Christian perspective on religious practice, and to do so in a way that enables young people to freely adopt that perspective as their own.

Preparing the Learning Environment

The effectiveness of a course such as *Challenges to Christian Spirituality* depends, in part, on the physical surroundings of and community climate among the members of the group. Young people are likely to share their thoughts more readily and respond more positively if the space is comfortable and somewhat different from a typical school setting and the atmosphere is conducive to introspection and sharing. Here are two suggestions for creating that type of environment:

Create a good physical atmosphere. You will need a physically comfortable space with sufficient room for the participants to move around. Some sessions require the participants to spend reflection time alone. It will be easier for them to resist the temptation to visit with other participants if they have enough room to separate from one another. Comfortable furniture and living-room lighting will help create a homey feeling. A flip chart or an easel with a pad of newsprint will be helpful for many of the activities. The traditional classroom is the least desirable situation. If such a room is your only option, try using music, candles, icons, or other sensory devices to create a more inviting environment.

Clarify expectations. At the beginning of the course, establish among the participants an atmosphere of mutual respect. Stress the importance of listening to one another and of refraining from hurtful remarks or put-downs. When necessary remind the participants of these rules. Because this course is designed as an elective for older participants, behavior and discipline problems should be rare.

Preparing the Material

Before each session read through the session plan and try to picture the processes happening in your group. You may need to make some adjustments based on your knowledge of the participants and

the physical setting. Some of the activities require preparation. This ranges from copying a simple list onto newsprint to creating flash cards and finding ads in newspapers and magazines. Allow yourself adequate time to get ready.

All the sessions for this course include brief periods of teacher input. Some of these presentations are informational; others are intended to bring closure to a portion of the session so that the participants might understand the connections between life and faith, between themselves and God. The session plans offer guidelines for these brief talks. Spend time putting these presentations together so that they are clear and hold the attention of the participants. Where it is helpful and appropriate, do not be afraid to share parts of your own story with the young people.

Sharing Your Own Story

Every course in Horizons connects elements of the Christian faith with the life experiences of young people. As an adult you have much to share from your own life that will be of value to the young people. Your willingness to share your experiences will enrich this course. It will also send the message that telling one's personal story in the group is okay. When you share your experiences with the young people, you show that you trust them enough to speak from your heart. And without saying it you also invite them to do the same.

Some commonsense guidelines can help you share your story in a way that adds to the understanding of the participants but does not distract them from their own life story:

- Be brief and to the point. Remember, the young people are there to reflect on their own life story, not yours.
- Talk about your experiences as a teenager without preaching or moving into the fatal "When I was your age . . ." mode.
- Share only the things that adolescents are emotionally prepared to handle.
- Be realistic. Talk about your struggles, triumphs, and growth over the years. This will let the participants know that self-knowledge is indeed a process. Do not mislead them into thinking that adults have all the answers. It is also unfair to suggest or imply that adolescents have no answers.
- Be honest and sincere. The young people will see through you if you are not, and your effectiveness as a teacher will be diminished.

Using Journals

Keeping a journal, or simply writing an occasional journal exercise, is a good way for young people to internalize learning, record the events of their life, keep track of feelings, or explore a topic further. Like most of the courses in the Horizons Program, *Challenges to Christian Spirituality* offers suggestions for including an optional journal component. One journal activity is designed to be included in the session as an alternative approach; others are intended for use by the participants between sessions.

Journal activities present an opportunity for one-to-one ministry to young people. A young person might write something in a journal that she or he would not feel comfortable sharing in a group or even talking about at all. If you do assign journal activities, take the time to read the young people's responses—with *their permission*—and then write in comments or words of encouragement or affirmation. Your personal attention might make a big difference to a young person who is struggling, searching, or just growing up.

Though we strongly encourage you to consider using at least some of the journal activities in *Challenges to Christian Spirituality*, they are not an integral part of the course. In fact, some practical reasons can be given for *not* including the journal component. First, if *every* teacher of *every* course in the Horizons Program chose to include journal keeping, the young people would quickly tire of the activity. Second, journal keeping is a time- and energy-consuming process for teachers. Teachers of multiple courses could become frustrated, if not exhausted, by having to monitor a large number of journals. Finally, some people simply do not like to keep a journal. It is better to encourage journal writing as a form of personal exploration for young people than to demand it of them.

Carefully assess whether the journal option is a good one in your particular situation. Consult the program coordinator and teachers of other courses. If you decide to incorporate journal activities into your course, some nitty-gritty questions must be answered: What materials are required? Will you respond to journal entries, and if so, in what way? What will you do if a young person reveals in a journal concerns or issues that demand a response beyond your ability or your authority as a teacher? For helpful information on these and other issues related to journal keeping, consult your program coordinator.

Using Music

Some of the activities in *Challenges to Christian Spirituality* suggest using music. No activities in this course *require* music or suggest specific pieces of music, because cultural preferences and individual tastes differ and specific tapes, CDs, or needed equipment may not be available. But music is a central part of the world of most adolescents, and you are thus encouraged to use it in the suggested places as well as in other activities where you think that it might be appropriate. Circumstances in which music can be used effectively include the following:

Popular music for prayer. Depending on the character of the group, the community environment, or even the area of the country, different types of music will be popular among young people. If you are not certain about what might work in activities for your group, ask a few young people for their advice; ask them well in advance of the session, so that they can listen for songs that will be useful. Besides helping you, this experience can be affirming for young people, who are usually thought of as learners and are not usually consulted for their expertise.

You might even consider forming a music advisory group of participants, whose job is to listen to popular music and point out some things that pertain to your topic. Each week this group of young people can suggest to the rest of the participants selections that can be used for prayer—and also for reflection or as a starting point for journal writing.

Background music for reflection. Some groups are easily distracted by the sounds around them. If your group has a hard time concentrating in silence, consider using background music to help the participants focus. Even for those who do not have trouble concentrating, music can alter the mood and contribute to a sense of peace and inner silence. For background music use slow, soothing instrumental selections, preferably something that is unrecognizable to the group. Labels such as Windham Hill and Narada, which are known for their alternative adult-contemporary recordings, are particularly useful for this purpose. Some classical music can also help to create the type of environment you need. Or use recordings of natural sounds, such as those produced by an ocean surf, rain forests, or running streams.

Contemporary Christian music for discussion starter or prayer. Contemporary Christian music is produced by Christian artists and comes in styles for all tastes: rock, hard rock, country, alternative, rap, and easy listening. By using contemporary Christian music, you expose young people to an inspirational spiritual message in a form to which they may easily relate.

If you are familiar with contemporary Christian music, you probably can think of songs to introduce a discussion or to enhance a prayer service. If you are not familiar with contemporary Christian music, ask the young people in your group to help choose appropriate songs. Or visit a Christian bookstore. Many of them have an extensive music collection and a previewing area. Often their sales staff can point you in the right direction if you tell them what you are looking for.

New Age music. New Age music can include anything from lyrics of devil worship to light and lilting piano pieces meant simply to help a person relax. A major goal of *Challenges to Christian Spirituality* is to enable the young people to discern between what is healthy and unhealthy religious practice in general. They should learn to apply that ability as well to more specific things like music. Therefore, although New Age music is not the focus of discussion in this course, you are encouraged to use relaxing instrumental New Age music in some of the minicourse's activities. Obviously, your choice should be of the positive variety, not the satanic or otherwise destructive kind.

Using This Course as a Retreat

This course is not recommended as a retreat. Though it includes a focus on prayer and faith, which is a good focus for a retreat, it also involves a lot of rational thinking and step-by-step analysis, which do not work particularly well in a retreat setting. In addition, the course content is best delivered in small blocks of time, rather than the large blocks of time that generally constitute a retreat experience.

Special Preparation Needs

For most teachers the content and activities in *Challenges to Christian Spirituality* will not require any unusual preparation. Depending on your circumstances, however, you may want to note the following items:

Flash Cards

In session 1 you are asked to create a set of flash cards that give definitions of New Age terms, preferably photocopying the material on heavy paper or card stock. You may wish to seek help from a parish secretary or at a copying store in your area.

Discernment Guide

A central feature of session 2—indeed, a pivotal element of the entire course—is a rather complex instrument for assessing spiritual and religious practices, *handout 2-A, "Discernment Guide."* Given this guide's centrality and complexity, you may wish to take some extra time to become fully familiar with its content and use. Especially consider applying it to personal life experiences, so that you can draw from that application as you present the material to the young people.

Local Concerns About New Age

New Age and other religious practices can become the focus of very heated discussion, if not controversy, in some communities. This reaction is often triggered by an incident that captures the attention and concern of the populace. A psychics fair or signs of satanic worship discovered in a local cemetery might serve as such an incident. As this course was being developed, one community was garnering national attention by posting guards in Catholic churches to ensure that everyone swallowed the host after Communion. This action was taken in response to a rumor that some people were saving the host for use in satanic rites. Older teachers may recall the great fuss created in the 1970s by the film *The Exorcist*. Major magazines did cover stories on demonic possession, and many in youth ministry had to deal with the fallout of the controversy among their young people.

So local circumstances can radically affect how people both perceive and receive the teaching of a course like *Challenges to Christian Spirituality*. In the vast majority of cases, brief forthright communication about the course with the parents of participants will allay any concerns (see the Family Connections section later in this introduction). However, if interest in the topic is intense owing to local events or concerns, you may want to approach your use of this course more thoughtfully and gingerly. You may find yourself in a kind of catch-22 here. In areas where circumstances have piqued interest and concern over New Age or other religious practices, people's need for and interest in the course may be intense. However, the same circumstances may cause some people to resist strongly the teachings of this course. They may fear that merely discussing these practices will encourage young people to become involved in them. Our view is that solid information presented within the context of a caring Christian community offers the best guidance and support for young people.

Depending on your local circumstances, therefore, you may wish to discuss thoroughly the content of this course with key parish leaders, ensuring that you have their full support and understanding. Then, in consultation with them, you can determine the most helpful approach to introducing and teaching the course.

This Course and Total Youth Ministry

Additional Youth Ministry Program Suggestions

The Horizons Program includes a manual entitled *Youth Ministry Strategies: Creative Activities to Complement the Horizons Curriculum*. It contains a variety of activities and strategies organized into thematic categories and cross-referenced according to the courses in the curriculum. It includes suggestions for shortened and extended programs, off-site events, intergenerational gatherings, parish involvement, and prayer and liturgical celebrations.

This valuable resource can enhance the young people's experience of the Horizons Program and help your parish fulfill a commitment to total youth ministry. Contact your program coordinator about the availability of the manual.

Parish Program Connections

A religious education curriculum is, ideally, just one component of a total parish program in which all those responsible for the formation of young people work together with the entire parish to meet the holistic needs of its youth. *Challenges to Christian Spirituality* can be a springboard for connections with other youth ministry experiences. You might develop these connections by doing the following:

- Offer a discussion session to address local incidents involving New Age or related issues. For example, you might focus on a recent psychics fair, a newspaper article related to New Age, and so on. If appropriate, invite the young people to suggest alternative responses for the main characters in each situation and to explore their own reactions to the situation, basing their discussion on the discernment guide presented in session 2 of this course.
- If a movie that deals with a New Age theme is shown in a local theater or on television, or is available on videotape, invite the young people to view it together and then process the experience in light of the course content. Be sure to inform their parents of this activity and request their approval, perhaps even their participation.

Family Connections

Parents of teens may already have concerns about New Age practices. Some may fear that even talking about such practices could excite and entice their children into involvement with New Age. This is an important concern. Parents will likely want to know how this minicourse intends to handle the question of New Age, and they have a right to that information.

When you have identified those who will attend the course, write their parents a letter explaining the rationale and basic content of *Challenges to Christian Spirituality*. Include a copy of the course's discernment guide with a suggestion that parents use it to help their children discuss important decisions. This can allay fears and build trust.

Encourage the parents to use this course as an opportunity to ask their children about New Age practices in which they are interested or with which they have experimented. Inform the parents of your willingness to meet with them if they have further concerns about the content of the course.

Goals and Objectives in This Course

Why Use Goals and Objectives?

Curriculums take on greater clarity, direction, and purpose if they are described in terms of their goals and objectives. This observation is based on a commonsense principle: We have a difficult time getting somewhere if we do not know where we are going. Educators who design learning experiences must identify their destination as a first step in determining how to get there. The statement of goals and objectives is a practical way to identify the desired outcomes for a program.

In the Horizons Program, goals and objectives are used in the following ways:

Goals. Goals are broad statements of what we wish to accomplish—learning outcomes we hope to achieve. The coordinator's manual for the Horizons Program provides the goals for the entire curriculum. Each course within the total program also includes a statement of its goals. The goals often have an idealistic quality, inviting the teacher to reflect on how the course relates to the personal and faith development of the young people. At the same time, the course goals are realistic, measurable, and attainable. As a teacher, at the end of the course, you should be able to look back and determine if you have in fact achieved the course goals.

Objectives. Objectives are statements that define how to get to the goals. They name the specific tasks that must be accomplished if the goals are to be achieved. Each course supplies a clear statement of objectives for each session in the course.

The Goals and Objectives of *Challenges to Christian Spirituality*

Goals

The goals of *Challenges to Christian Spirituality* are as follows:

- that the young people recognize their own needs and see religious practice as a way of fulfilling human needs

- that they understand what New Age practices are and how they can appeal to basic human needs
- that they acquire discernment skills for assessing what is healthy and what is unhealthy among New Age practices
- that they grow healthier in their own religious practice

Objectives

Each session has its own objectives, which will help realize the goals of *Challenges to Christian Spirituality*:

Session 1: "Learning About New Age Practices"

- to help the young people reflect on and assess their current understanding of, experience with, and interest in New Age practices
- to provide them with a basic working knowledge of five types of New Age practices: fortune-telling, superstition, spiritism, magic and sorcery, and cults
- to lead them to understand that New Age practices are potentially unhealthy but nevertheless appeal and respond to human needs that are God-given and therefore good

Session 2: "Assessing Spiritual and Religious Practices"

- to help the young people identify potentially unhealthy effects of involvement with New Age practices
- to provide them with a guide for discerning between healthy and unhealthy spiritual and religious practices and with an opportunity to sharpen their discernment skills
- to help them appreciate their basic human freedom as an expression of God's trust in them and of their potential to bring light into the world's darkness

Session 3: "Pursuing Spiritual Health in Our Culture"

- to help the young people understand how unhealthy cultural values play on basic human needs and influence our self-image
- to lead them to recognize the tendency of religious institutions to be affected by negative cultural values, and to help them assess healthy and unhealthy religion
- to call them to share Christ's redemptive work of bringing light to the world through their personal pursuit of spiritual health and wholeness

Suggested Resources

The following materials may be helpful to you as background reading or to expand on the concepts and activities in this minicourse:

Books

Chandler, Russell. *Understanding the New Age: The Most Powerful and Revealing Analysis of the New Age, Now with Discussion Guide*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1993.

LeBar, James J. *Cults, Sects, and the New Age*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1989.

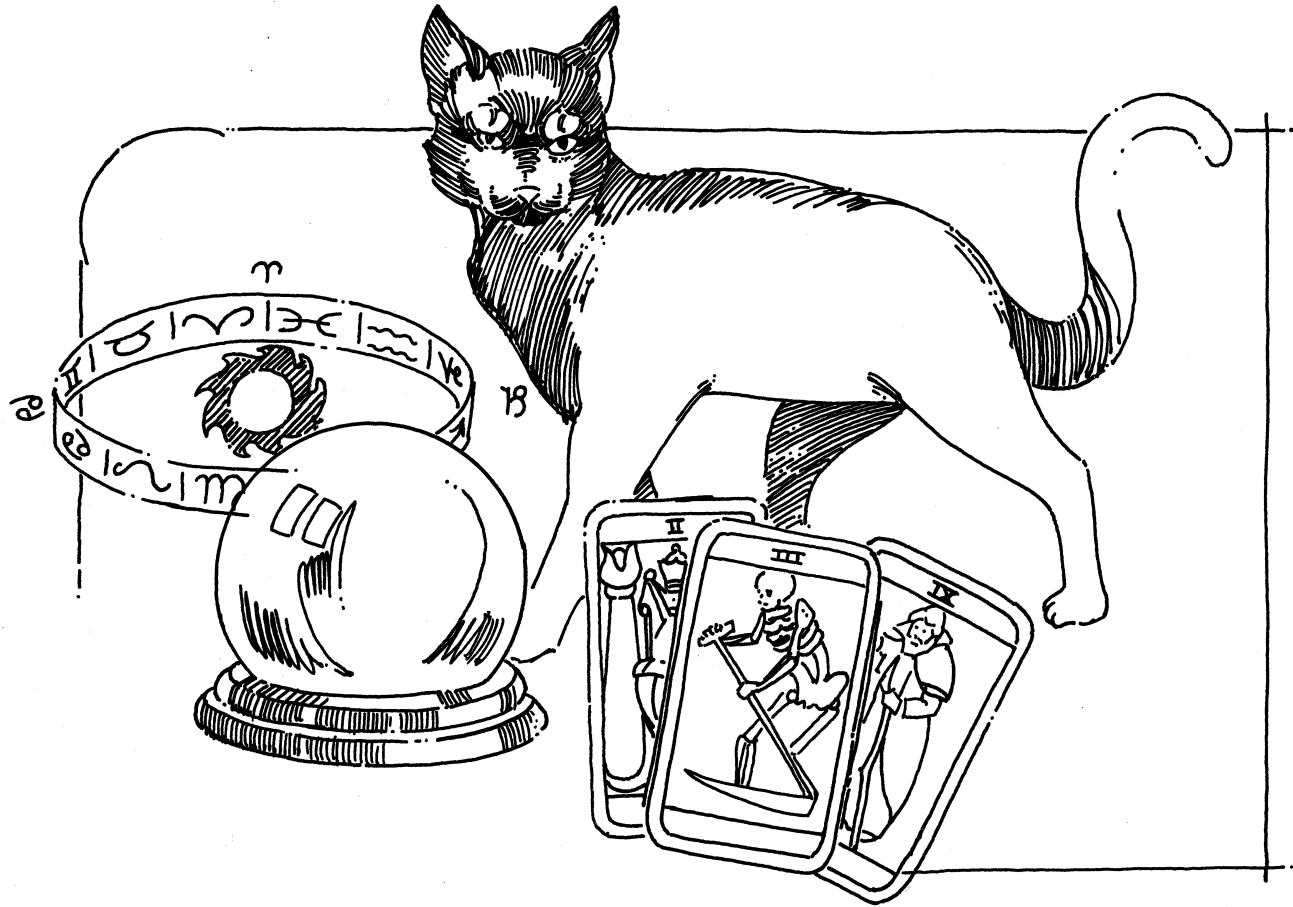
Melton, J. Gordon, Jerome Clark, and Aidan A. Kelly. *New Age Encyclopedia*. Detroit: Gale Research, 1990.

Audiotapes

Fragomeni, Richard. *Shaping the Christian Response to New Age*. Cincinnati: Saint Anthony Messenger Press, 1995. A set of four audiotapes that outline the evolution of New Age practices, show how they may seem to meet people's spiritual needs, and describe the healthy Christian response to them.

SESSION 1

Learning About New Age Practices



Objectives

- to help the young people reflect on and assess their current understanding of, experience with, and interest in New Age practices
- to provide them with a basic working knowledge of five types of New Age practices: fortune-telling, superstition, spiritism, magic and sorcery, and cults
- to lead them to understand that New Age practices are potentially unhealthy but nevertheless appeal and respond to human needs that are God-given and therefore good

Session Steps

- A. a welcome, personal introductions, and an introduction to New Age practices (15 minutes)
- B. a forced-choice activity on personal reactions to New Age practices (10 minutes)
- C. a course overview (5 minutes)
- D. a flash card exercise on defining New Age terms (20 minutes)
- E. a flash card exercise on categorizing New Age terms (10 minutes)
- F. a break (10 minutes)
- G. a reflection and discussion exercise on personal reactions to New Age practices (10 minutes)
- H. a discussion linking basic human needs to the appeal of New Age practices (20 minutes)
- I. a closing prayer (20 minutes)

Background for the Teacher

This first session of *Challenges to Christian Spirituality* is designed to introduce the complex theme of New Age practices, tap into or spark the participants' interest in this topic, and equip the young people with enough basic information to engage the subject effectively. The primary challenge in this session is to introduce properly a theme that is not only highly complicated but potentially laden with emotion and open to much misunderstanding. The session strategies are designed to respond creatively to that challenge.

The session opens with an activity in which the participants share stories about New Age practices. This storytelling is intended to accomplish two purposes: (1) to immediately involve the young people in personal reflection and then conversation with their peers on the topic, and (2) to give you an opportunity to assess your group's current knowledge about and interest in New Age.

Then comes a forced-choice activity in which the young people are asked to place themselves along a continuum ranging from "Do not buy it" to "Totally believe it" in response to specific New Age practices. This gives them an opportunity to get in touch with their gut reactions to such matters. In addition, it gives you another snapshot of their current attitudes toward and understanding of New Age.

Following a brief overview of the course content, two related flash card exercises provide the central focus of the session: an introduction to the wide range of practices that fall under the umbrella of New Age. In the first of these exercises, the participants have a chance to learn reliable and accurate definitions for a wide variety of New Age terms, information that is required for any balanced and reasonable exploration of the topic. In the second flash card exercise, they are asked to assign each of these terms to one of five general categories of New Age practices: fortune-telling, superstition, spiritism, magic and sorcery, and cults. This effort helps them begin to bring some sense of order and comprehension to a range of concepts that might otherwise be confusing, if not overwhelming.

After a break, a reflection and discussion exercise allows the young people to explore more deeply their personal reactions to New Age practices, beginning with the various emotions triggered by those practices. Then a discussion guides them to assess and interpret their personal reactions in terms of the relation between New Age practices and the

God-given needs of human beings. This discussion poses questions such as, What New Age practices might attract a person experiencing a particular type of need? and How might those practices seem to satisfy that type of need? It then leads the participants to begin to reflect on their own needs and the hungers of their own heart.

The session closes with a prayer that focuses on the Christians' conviction that only the God revealed in and through Jesus Christ can truly satisfy the hungers of the human heart. This prayer presents the image of a star-filled night sky as a metaphor for the profound human yearning for connection with the Infinite, for communion with the Sacred Mystery we call God. It points out that the desire to satisfy that longing for union with God, when improperly directed, can lead us on unhealthy and ultimately fruitless spiritual journeys. It further notes that the Gospel of Jesus shows us a way to wholeness, holiness, and happiness.

Preparation

Materials Needed

- poster board
- markers
- tape
- playing cards, one pair (matching in color and number) for every two participants
- copies of handout 1-A, "Help-Wanted Ad," one for each participant
- pens or pencils
- three sheets of blank paper, preferably construction paper in different light colors
- a scissors
- an 8- to 10-foot length of string or masking tape
- one copy of resource 1-A, "New Age Terms Flash Cards," on heavy paper or card stock
- newsprint
- one copy of resource 1-B, "Session 1 Closing Prayer Readings," cut apart as indicated on the resource
- a Bible
- items for the prayer space (such as a small table and a cloth to cover it)
- about two dozen vigil or tea candles in holders, and matches
- a tape or CD player, and a recording of relaxing instrumental New Age music (optional)

✓ Other Necessary Preparations

Prepare to lead this session by doing the following things and checking them off as you accomplish them:

- ☐ For step A. Copy the ad from handout 1–A onto a large piece of poster board and hang it in your meeting space where all can see it.
- ☐ For step A. Prepare an example of a story that responds to the ad in handout 1–A, for possible use in part 3 of step A.
- ☐ For step B. Create a continuum for personal reactions to New Age practices as described in step B.
- ☐ For step D. Create two sets of flash cards as instructed in step D.
- ☐ For step E. Prepare five newsprint triangles as explained in step E.
- ☐ For step F. Decide whether to set up the prayer space before the session or during the break. If you choose to set it up during the break, prepare to do so as described in step I.
- ☐ For step H. Prepare a newsprint list as directed in step H.
- ☐ For step I. If you choose to set up the prayer space before the session, do so as described in step I.
- ☐ Determine if you wish to change this session by using one or more of the alternative approaches described at the end of the session plan.

🕯️ Opening Teacher Prayer

As you prepare to teach this course, ponder the following words of an adolescent describing his yearning for self-understanding and his hunger for a relationship with God. As you read these words, imagine that they express the thoughts and feelings of each young person you are about to encounter.

Sometimes I wonder who I am
and what it means to be me.
I look in the mirror
and see my reflection,
but all I get is another question.
“Who am I?”
“Who made me?”
“Who created this world of ours?”

As I look up into the sky,
looking for the answers to my thoughts,
a powerful sensation hits my face
and fills me with warmth and compassion.
At first I say
it’s just the sun,
but then I realize
it’s the answers to my questions.

The one who created the sun and the sky
and filled my heart with love and compassion
is the same one who let me be
and placed me in this world.
God is the answer to all my questions
and fills my mind with thoughts.
God is truly the light of the world,
the light that fills my heart.

(Michael Kassouf, in Koch, ed.,
Dreams Alive, p. 65)

Spend a moment getting in touch with the thoughts and emotions reflected in Michael’s musings. Then offer your own prayer to God, perhaps in words like these:

Good and gracious God, creator of the universe
and of all the wonders in it, calm my concerns
and diminish my insecurities as I prepare to
meet young people like Michael. Fill me with a
conviction of your presence among us, and with
a deep trust in the Spirit who guides us. Help me
to see in the unquenchable curiosity of such
young people a deep desire for knowledge of
you. Let me be in some small way a source of
that knowledge. I ask this in the name of Jesus,
the one we know as the Way, the Truth, and the
Life. Amen.

Procedure

A Welcome, Personal Introductions, and Introduction to New Age Practices (15 minutes)

1. Warmly welcome the young people to this first session of *Challenges to Christian Spirituality*. Briefly introduce yourself with a word or two about your own enthusiasm and interest in teaching this minicourse—refraining at this point from giving details about the course content.

2. Direct the young people’s attention to your poster of the ad from handout 1–A, “Help-Wanted Ad.” Read it aloud or ask a volunteer to do so. Without any explanation simply point out that this ad introduces the course’s first topic: New Age and the practices associated with it.

3. Give the group a moment to think quietly of any stories that might be suitable responses to this ad. Then invite a volunteer to recount one such story. If no one volunteers, share an example of your own. Next, ask the young people which of the five categories listed in the ad might correspond to the story.

4. Shuffle the pairs of playing cards that you gathered before the session. (Include one trio of cards if you have an odd number of participants.) Mention that playing cards have their roots in the fortune-telling tool known as tarot cards. Explain that the young people will have an opportunity to find out more about that shortly. Then give one playing card to each participant. Tell the participants to quickly find the person holding the card with the same color and number as their own, introduce themselves, and very briefly tell the other person one thing they find exciting or interesting about the topic New Age.

5. After a minute or two, give each pair a copy of handout 1–A. Explain that in the next 5 minutes, the partners in each pair are to exchange as many stories as possible about strange spiritual or religious practices that fit the five categories listed in the ad. For each story they are to record next to the appropriate category on their handout a key word to help them later recall that story.

You might give the participants an example using the sample story volunteered earlier. For instance, if the sample story was about a psychics’ fair, suitable key words might be *psychic* and *crystal ball*. Or if the sample story had to do with contacting spirits of the dead, a key word might be *séance*.

Once all understand the instructions, tell the pairs to begin.

6. After 5 minutes reassemble the whole group and invite the pairs to take turns reporting to the group. Partners are to introduce each other and then write each of their key words beside the appropriate category on the poster. Make several markers available for this task.

7. When all the pairs have reported, check the poster. If the young people have not provided key words for all five categories, add key words to do so. The final list should include words such as *astrology*, *black magic*, *crystal ball*, *crystals*, *cults*, *horoscope*, *lucky charms*, *medium*, *Ouija board*, *palmistry*, *satanism*, *séance*, *tarot cards*, and *voodoo*. (See resource 1–A, “New Age Terms Flash Cards,” for more examples.)

8. Point out that most of these spiritual or religious practices have been around since ancient times and have their roots in cultures other than our own. However, today they are being given increasing attention and importance in our own culture, and are often referred to collectively as New Age.

Note: Leave the help-wanted ad posted for use in steps B and H.

B Forced-Choice Activity: Personal Reactions to New Age Practices (10 minutes)

Before the session. Create a continuum for personal reactions to New Age practices as follows: First, cut three equal-size circles, about 9 inches in diameter, from separate sheets of blank paper, preferably construction paper in three different light colors. In each circle print a different one of these headings: “Do not buy it,” “Accept parts of it but not all,” and “Totally believe it.” Then, in your meeting area, tape an 8- to 10-foot piece of string or masking tape along one wall or on the floor. At one end of the string or tape, tape the circle entitled “Do not buy it”; at the other end, tape the circle entitled “Totally believe it”; and in the middle tape the circle entitled “Accept parts of it but not all.”

1. Tell the participants that this activity provides an opportunity to compare personal opinions about the validity and credibility of the New Age practices indicated by the key words they listed in the preceding activity. Draw their attention to the continuum you have created on the wall or floor. Explain that their opinions may fall under one of the headings “Do not buy it,” “Accept parts of it but not all,” and “Totally believe it,” or somewhere in between two of those headings. Announce that you will read aloud their key words from the help-wanted poster. As you read each word, the participants are each to move to the point along the continuum

that best expresses their own opinion about the practice indicated by that word. If the group is large or if participants share opinions, they may have to line up behind one another at points along the continuum.

2. Call out the first key word and give the young people a moment to arrange themselves along the continuum. Make or invite brief comments, avoiding lengthy discussion. Then call out the next word and allow the participants to rearrange themselves accordingly. Keep the activity moving quickly from key word to key word. Its purpose is not to elicit in-depth analysis but to quickly generate ideas, feelings, and concerns.

C Presentation: Course Overview (5 minutes)

1. You might begin with an observation about the young people's reactions in the first two activities—how many (or few) stories they generated in response to the opening ad, how animated (or reticent) they seemed about expressing their personal opinions in the continuum activity, how involved (or uninvolved) they seem to be with the various practices mentioned. Then, in your own words, describe the purpose and structure of this course as follows:

- Explain that this course is designed to help young people deal with their own thoughts, feelings, and responses to New Age practices. It does so in three ways: by presenting the facts about such practices, by exploring the effects of getting personally involved in such practices, and by revealing how the Christian faith can help us accurately assess the influences related to New Age practices.
- Add that this course goes one step further: it shows how the young people can use the same tools that help them assess New Age practices to assess other influences, including negative cultural values and unhealthy dimensions of even mainline religious institutions.
- Close by noting that the ultimate goal of the course is to help the participants live their Christian faith authentically and fully within a culture that offers increasing and serious challenges to healthy and mature spirituality.

2. Respond briefly to any questions the young people raise.

D Flash Card Exercise: Defining New Age Terms (20 minutes)

Before the session. Create flash cards from resource 1–A as directed on the resource. Then separate the cards into two sets: one whose terms are marked with an asterisk, and one whose terms are not. Have both sets handy for this exercise.

1. Spread out the set of flash cards whose terms *are not* marked with an asterisk, definition-side-down, on a table or on the floor, so that all the participants can easily see them. Explain that the terms on these cards describe common New Age practices. Call for a volunteer to take one of the cards and give his or her best guess as to the dictionary definition of the term on the card. Then invite the others to volunteer their best guesses. Next, instruct the first volunteer to turn the card over and read aloud the definition on the back. Take a moment to ensure that this definition is clearly understood by all. Direct the volunteer to keep the selected card for the time being.

Continue this pattern until all the flash cards have been selected. The New Age terms on these cards will probably heighten interest and generate more storytelling. This is good. Allow and encourage as much of it as time permits.

2. If your group is very knowledgeable, it will probably work through this first set of flash cards with time to spare. If this is the case, spread out the cards whose terms *are* marked with an asterisk and explain that they contain terms that are used to describe less common New Age practices. Then help the participants work through as many of these cards as possible before the allotted time is up.

If your group does not have time to work through the second set of cards, draw the participants' attention to it and announce that it contains additional New Age terms and definitions that they may want to check out in later activities, as time and circumstances permit. Then simply set aside this set of cards and move on to the next activity.

3. At the end of this activity, each participant should be holding one or more flash cards. Instruct the young people to keep their card or cards for use in the next activity.

E Flash Card Exercise: Categorizing New Age Terms (10 minutes)

Before the session. Cut five large triangles from five sheets of newsprint. On each triangle print a different one of these headings: "Fortune-telling," "Superstition," "Spiritism," "Magic and sorcery," and "Cults."

1. Gather the participants in a large circle in your meeting area. On the floor in the center of the circle, arrange the five newsprint triangles you created earlier. Elicit discussion to review with the young people the meanings of the five categories written on the triangles, clarifying as follows:

- *Fortune-telling.* Strictly speaking, fortune-telling means predicting the future; in terms of New Age practices, it now includes predicting how one should deal with life events that are to come and how those events might affect one's own strengths and weaknesses.
- *Superstition.* Superstition is a notion, not based on knowledge or reason, about a particular thing, or about the supposed predictable effects of doing a particular action or failing to do a particular action [paraphrased from *Random House Unabridged Dictionary*].
- *Spiritism.* Spiritism is the belief that spirits of the dead, continuing to exist after earthly life has ended, can communicate with the living, especially with the help of a medium (someone thought to have the ability to enable such communication).
- *Magic and sorcery.* Magic refers to the creating of illusions through sleight of hand or deceptive devices. Sorcery has to do with the practices of a person thought to exercise supernatural powers through the aid of evil spirits. These two practices may be intertwined [paraphrased from *Random House Unabridged Dictionary*].
- *Cult.* A cult is a worship of something or someone, usually by a group of people professing together their shared devotion [paraphrased from *The Oxford English Dictionary*].

Then make two related points:

- The Catholic church believes that spirits of the dead live on after earthly life has ended and that prayer allows the living and the dead to commune with one another through Jesus Christ, who has died and risen. This communion consists of a relationship transformed through love and faith rather than a conversation or dialog between persons. In spiritism as it is practiced in a séance, the power to communicate is thought to come from the personal ability of a human medium rather than from faith, love, and Jesus Christ.
- Under a strict definition of the word *cult*, Catholicism could be classified as a cult. However, in popular and current usage, the term *cult* refers to a nonconventional and nontraditional group, often with leaders who manipulate, control, and deceive their followers. This latter meaning is the one used in this course.

In some areas, often because of recent events, concern about cults can be intense. If you believe that is the case in your area, see the alternative approaches at the end of this session plan for additional information to present to your group.

2. Call the participants' attention to the triangles you have arranged on the floor. Tell the young people to place each of the flash cards they are holding from the preceding activity on the triangle to which it corresponds. You might demonstrate by asking a volunteer to give you one of her or his flash cards, and then placing the card on the appropriate triangle. For example, if the card is "Palmistry," place it on the triangle marked "Fortune-telling." Announce that the young people do not need to take turns laying down their cards, but may all do so at once.

3. Once all the flash cards have been laid on the triangles, invite the group to reflect on the placements, determining whether any should be changed.

Take a few moments to hear comments about which flash cards might be moved to another category and why. Help the group come to a consensus about the final placements. In working toward this consensus, the young people can fine-tune their understanding of the nature of the New Age practices discussed in this course.

Note: At the end of this activity, gather up both sets of flash cards and save them for use in steps H and I.

F Break (10 minutes)

During the break recruit up to six volunteer readers for the closing prayer. (Depending on the size of your group, it may be necessary to ask one person to do more than one reading.) Give each volunteer one or more readings from resource 1–B, “Session 1 Closing Prayer Readings.” Instruct the volunteers to practice reading slowly in a loud, clear, solemn voice.

If you wish to prepare the prayer space for the closing prayer at this time, do so, following the directions in step 1.

G Reflection and Discussion: Personal Reactions to New Age Practices (10 minutes)

1. Tape a sheet of blank newsprint to the wall. Call two volunteers forward to act as recorders. Give each a large marker.

2. Direct the young people to name as many human emotions as they can, and instruct the recorders to list the emotions on the newsprint. Be sure that the finished list includes a wide range of emotions, such as fascinated, strong, weak, loving, thankful, sad, discouraged, embarrassed, jealous, suspicious, afraid, tense, worried, happy, peaceful, relaxed, curious, confident, frustrated, excited, confused, surprised, angry, and guilty.

3. Tell the young people that your next instruction involves looking inside their heart and that they might find it helpful to close their eyes. Then ask them to recall the session’s activities so far. Invite them to reflect individually on all the different emotions they may have experienced during those activities. Allow a minute or two of silence for this reflection.

4. Direct the young people to open their eyes. Give them a moment to scan their newsprint list of human emotions. Then lead them to discuss the range of emotions they have experienced during their exploration of New Age practices. What do they think might have stirred those particular emotions? You might extend and deepen this discussion by posing questions such as the following:

- Which of the New Age practices covered in this session might be particularly attractive or interesting for people your age?
- What might encourage them to get involved in those practices?
- Which of these New Age practices might people your age deliberately stay away from?
- Why might they choose to stay away from those practices?

H Discussion: Linking Basic Human Needs to the Appeal of New Age Practices (20 minutes)

Before the session. On a sheet of newsprint, list the following headings, leaving room for notes below each heading: “Physical needs,” “Security needs,” “Belonging needs,” “Esteem needs,” and “Meaning needs.”

1. Explain that all human beings have needs because God made people that way. It is good and important for us to experience and acknowledge the needs with which God made us.

2. Post the newsprint list of headings that you prepared earlier. Then, with input from the young people, name and discuss our basic human needs according to the categories on the newsprint. During the discussion jot down under their respective headings key points from the participants’ responses, and elicit as many of the following points as possible:

- *Physical needs.* To have food, air, water, shelter, and sleep
- *Security needs.* To feel safe; to feel protected; to have a sense of orderliness and predictability; to feel sufficiently in control of things, able to cope, and able to manage; to feel that we have a certain measure of personal power and autonomy
- *Belonging needs.* To feel accepted, wanted, known, loved, and appreciated by others who know us well; to have a sense of personal identity and affiliation with a particular group or groups; to have an understanding of oneself as a male or female sexual being who can integrate sexual energies appropriately in healthy, loving relationships

- *Esteem needs.* To have a sense of purpose, fulfillment, and accomplishment; to feel good about oneself and our life, that we are making a personal and unique contribution to the world, and that we are responsible and capable
- *Meaning needs.* To use our talents and skills to discover meaning in life; to explore new ideas; to create; to understand oneself; to be convinced that life has purpose and that our existence fits into that purpose; to have a sense of hope for the future

Note that we all have these needs and that in themselves human needs are good. Our needs and our awareness of them can propel us forward with our life and help us to learn more about who we are, who God made us to be, and who we are becoming.

3. Direct the young people to form up to five teams of at least two people. Divide the five categories of human needs evenly among the teams. Explain that sometimes people turn to New Age practices to satisfy their basic human needs. Announce that the teams are to consider what New Age practices might attract a person experiencing each of their assigned types of needs, and to ponder why or how those practices might seem to meet that type of need. For example, someone who is experiencing security needs might be attracted to tarot cards because they offer a sense of what is to come and a feeling of being prepared for what life might dish up.

Note that the teams may refer to the posted help-wanted ad and the New Age terms flash cards for help with this task, and make the cards available. Tell the teams they will have 5 minutes for discussion and will then be asked to report their findings to the large group.

4. After time is up, call for a report from each team. In each report help the team members to name as clearly as possible the connection between specific human needs and New Age practices. Lead the group to recognize that New Age practices do not meet human needs fully and in ways that are healthy and inspire spiritual growth and maturity. Mention that this issue is explored in detail in session 2.

5. Tell the young people that it is helpful to stop periodically and ask ourselves questions like these: What needs in my life right now are least met? What do I find myself yearning for or struggling to find? and How do I try to satisfy those needs and longings?

Point out that through prayer God can help us to recognize our basic needs and show us how best to have them met. God always has our best interests at heart, God created us good, and God wants us to have our heart’s deepest desires satisfied. Christian faith is meant to make us freer, more alive, more joyful, more fruitful partakers of the very rich and exciting life God has given us.

6. Invite the young people to move quietly into the prayer space. Remind the volunteer readers to bring their readings along.

Note: Save the newsprint list of basic human needs for use in session 2.

I Closing Prayer (20 minutes)

Before the session or during the break. Choose a location for the prayer space and place a Bible there in a central spot. Add other items—a small table, a cloth to cover it, and so on—as you wish. Place about two dozen vigil or tea candles, in holders, where they will be handy for distribution in this prayer space.

1. Involve the group in setting the proper mood for the prayer space. Tell the young people that the goal is to simulate a starry night. They might dim the lights and draw the curtains. Give them about two dozen vigil or tea candles to place throughout the prayer space—on bookshelves and windowsills, tabletops and filing cabinets, and so on. Light the candles as they are placed.

2. Assemble the group in a circle amid the lit candles. Direct the participants to sit on the floor with their back to the center of the circle, facing outward.

Enhance the mood by asking the young people to recall their experiences of a star-filled night sky.

Begin to play relaxing instrumental New Age music, if you wish to, inviting the participants to relax, breathe deeply, and prepare themselves to enter into a prayerful meditation “under the stars.”

3. Slowly decrease the volume of the music until it is playing softly. Then read aloud the following meditation, pausing briefly at the ellipses (. . .) and longer where it is marked “[Pause.]”:

- You are sitting by yourself on a hilltop. . . . You find yourself under an unusually beautiful night sky, rich, deep, and dark in its silky blackness. . . . You see countless stars of various intensities—some very close, and some very distant. . . . You sense constellations and galaxies far beyond what the naked eye can see. . . . You feel yourself being drawn irresistibly into the mystery of the night. . . . The stars, in their tranquil, unearthly beauty, seem almost to be calling out to you, inviting you to experience what has always seemed beyond your reach. [Pause.]

You find yourself praying:

God of the night sky, creator of shining brightness and immense beauty, it is you who fill the sky with stars, and you who created us as we are. You formed in us a capacity for wonder and fascination. . . . You gave us a curiosity that knows no end. You created desires and needs in us, making us yearn for what lies beyond us. We are made in many ways to reach for the stars.

Long ago you breathed your own Spirit into us, and our deepest, Spirit-guided yearning is for union with you. It is that yearning which motivates all who seek to enter into the mysteries of life. [Pause.]

4. Softly and with few words, ask that the participants each quietly pick up one candle and return with it to their place—sitting in the same circle, still facing outward.

5. Signal the volunteers to read the first three passages from resource 1–B in order. When the third passage is done, invite the young people to thank God silently for the capacities given to them and for the exciting possibilities of the creation into which they have been born, the exciting possibilities of their own being. Then pause for a minute or two of silent prayer. You may wish to increase the volume of the background music during this prayer time.

6. Decrease the volume of the music, if necessary, and continue the guided meditation by reading the following words:

- You started out alone on a hilltop. Alone, you experienced the night with its beauty and the stars that beckon. Yet people were not made to stay alone. We naturally seek to share the light of the stars and the excitement inside of us. We want to belong. We want relationship. We want to be called by name.

7. Instruct the young people to silently pick up their candle; turn so that they are facing inward, still in the same circle; and place their candle by their side or directly in front of them.

After all have become still again, ask the volunteers to read the last three passages from resource 1–B in order. When the sixth passage is finished, pray the following words aloud:

- Creator God, we are called by you to share in the work of shaping the universe—including both outerspace and our own innerspace. Guide us to know our basic needs and the deepest longings of our heart, and to seek healthy and holy ways to satisfy them.

8. Place the New Age terms flash cards in the center of the circle. Make a brief statement that the New Age practices referred to in these cards exist in our world, that some of them might even attract us for a variety of reasons, or seem to hold the promise of satisfying our needs for excitement, for discovery, for what is new, and for belonging. As wondrous creations of God, we know that such longings and needs are good but that satisfying them in improper ways can lead us on unhealthy and fruitless spiritual journeys. We also know that God wants us to satisfy our longings and needs only in ways that can make us truly whole and happy.

Then ask the young people to silently formulate a petition based on a particular unmet longing or need they are experiencing right now. After a moment invite each participant, in turn, to place his or her candle in the center of the circle. Tell the participants that as they do this, they are to offer their petition to God, either aloud or silently.

9. When all the participants have placed their candle in the center of the circle, pause for a moment. Then end with a prayer similar to this:

- May the Spirit of God walk with each of us as we seek to know and live the mystery that is life.

10. Thank the young people for their attentiveness and involvement in this first session’s activities, mention the journal option if you have decided to use it, and wish them a good week.

Note: If you can do so safely, leave the candles burning so that you can return to their light for the closing teacher prayer.

Alternative Approaches

After reading the session plan, you may choose to do some things differently or to make additions to an activity. Consider your time limitations first and then these alternative approaches:

For step E. If concern about cults is intense in your area, you may find the following information helpful and interesting. Consider creating a handout with this information if you think your group would appreciate it.

Cults are harmful or evil, or both, when they involve some or all of the following:

- an inordinate preoccupation with fundraising
- the use of mind control and mind manipulation techniques in recruiting and training members
- severe personality changes in members
- a sudden and complete separation of a member from friends, family, or anyone who might draw that member away from the group
- a deep-rooted hatred for anyone outside the group
- total obedience to the group leader
- the surrender of the right to leave the group
- a reduced self-esteem
- a fear of questioning the group’s tenets
- undue guilt
- physical or sexual abuse
- ritual sacrifice of animals or humans
- a self-appointed messianic leader who focuses the followers’ veneration on himself or herself, claims divine selection and exercises autocratic control over members’ lives, and so forth

(Based on LeBar, *Cults, Sects, and the New Age*, pp. 15, 17, and 181–182)

For step G. In part 3 of this step, instead of asking the young people to reflect silently on their emotions stirred by the activities dealing with New Age practices, suggest that they write about those emotions. After recording their insights and reflections, the participants might share them with one or two other members of the group. You might then conclude this step by calling the group together to share key insights.

For step H. If your group has fewer than seven members, this step can be done without forming teams in part 3. Simply use a roundtable discussion approach, following the procedure as given.



Journal Option

Suggest that the young people try the following journal exercise between this session and the next:

- At night, preferably when at least a few stars are shining, go outside by yourself. Allow yourself to feel the immensity and mystery of God’s creation. If it is bright enough and not too cold, write a letter to God while you sit underneath the stars; if it is too dark or too cold, go inside to write. In your letter describe for God the kinds of things that most excite you about being alive.



Closing Prayer and Evaluation

Before doing the closing teacher prayer, you may want to complete the evaluation at the end of this session.

Closing Teacher Prayer

When all the young people have departed, re-enter the prayer space and spend a moment in silent thanksgiving for whatever transpired during the session, trusting that God was present throughout. Then, sitting amid the still glowing candles, read Psalm 8, part of which was included in the closing prayer for this session:

O LORD, our Lord,
 how awesome is your name through all the earth!
 You have set your majesty above the heavens!
 Out of the mouths of babes and infants
 you have drawn a defense against your foes,
 to silence enemy and avenger.

When I see your heavens, the work of your fingers,
 the moon and stars that you set in place—
 What are humans that you are mindful of them,
 mere mortals that you care for them?
 Yet you have made them little less than a god,
 crowned them with glory and honor.
 You have given them rule over the works of your hands,
 put all things at their feet:
 All sheep and oxen,
 even the beasts of the field,
 The birds of the air, the fish of the sea,
 and whatever swims the paths of the seas.
 O LORD, our Lord,
 how awesome is your name through all the earth!

(NAB)

Peacefully disassemble the prayer space, trusting that you have sown some seeds and that God will help them to sprout.



Evaluation

After the session take a few moments to evaluate how it went. Think about the following questions and, for future reference, write your answers in the spaces provided:

1. At what points in the session did the young people seem most attentive and focused? What might account for this?
2. At what points in the session did the young people seem distracted, uninterested, or uninvolved? What do you think was the cause?

3. How well did the session meet the objective of providing the young people with a basic working knowledge of five types of New Age practices: fortune-telling, superstition, spiritism, magic and sorcery, and cults?

Did not meet objective ↔ Met objective well
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Comments:

4. How well did the session meet the objective of leading them to understand that New Age practices are potentially unhealthy, but nevertheless appeal and respond to human needs that are God-given and therefore good?

Did not meet objective ↔ Met objective well
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Comments:

5. Did anyone in the group seem to be having a hard time dealing with anything that was raised? If so, what kind of follow-up might be necessary or helpful with that person or persons?

Help-Wanted Ad

holidays. Position may vary on weekends. Mail your resume and references to P.O. Box 577, New York, NY 45734

YOUNG PEOPLE WANTED

to tell stories of the following types of strange spiritual or religious practices:

- fortune-telling
- superstition
- spiritism
- magic and sorcery
- cults

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NEW AGE TERMS FLASH CARDS

On heavy paper or card stock, copy the pages of this resource back-to-back as they appear here. Then cut apart the pages to create a set of flash cards with each card having a term on one side and the term's definition on the other side.

♈ ♉ ♊ ♋ ♌	♈ ♉ ♊ ♋ ♌
*CHANNELING	ASTROLOGY
♍ ♎ ♏ ♐ ♑	♍ ♎ ♏ ♐ ♑
♈ ♉ ♊ ♋ ♌	♈ ♉ ♊ ♋ ♌
*CLAIRVOYANCE	BLACK MAGIC
♍ ♎ ♏ ♐ ♑	♍ ♎ ♏ ♐ ♑
♈ ♉ ♊ ♋ ♌	♈ ♉ ♊ ♋ ♌
CRYSTAL BALL	BLACK MASS
♍ ♎ ♏ ♐ ♑	♍ ♎ ♏ ♐ ♑

Astrology

"[The practice of using] the placement of the fixed stars and of the sun, moon, and planets to forecast events on Earth. In its classic form, astrology was a type of fortune-telling used to predict the future for people, businesses, and nations. Modern or New Age astrology instead focuses on delineating the individual personality; here the planets are seen as giving the person various strengths and weaknesses that will influence the way in which he or she deals with life in general" (Melton, Clark, and Kelly, *New Age Encyclopedia*, number 39).

Black magic

"Magic used for evil purposes" (*Random House Unabridged Dictionary*).

Black Mass

"A blasphemous ceremony mocking the Christian Mass" (*Random House Unabridged Dictionary*). A Black Mass would be performed by alleged worshipers of Satan and would involve abusive treatment of God and of sacred things (based on *Random House Unabridged Dictionary* and on Avis and others, editors, *The Senior Dictionary*).

***Channeling**




"[The] process of receiving information from some level of reality other than the ordinary physical one and from beyond the 'self' as it is generally understood. A 'channeler,' or medium, usually goes into a trance to establish contact with a spirit, ascended master, higher consciousness, or some other entity, and then receives and repeats messages from 'the other side' of the physical world" (Chandler, *Understanding the New Age*, page 338).

***Clairvoyance**

"Mental 'seeing' of physical objects or events at a distance by psychic means. Distinguished from telepathy, which involves ESP" (Chandler, *Understanding the New Age*, page 339).

Crystal ball

A ball of clear crystal, glass, or the like, into which one gazes in order to predict the future (paraphrased from *Random House Unabridged Dictionary*). *Crystal gazing* is "the practice of staring into a crystal ball . . . to see distant happenings, future events, etc." (*Random House Unabridged Dictionary*).

 <p>*ESP</p>	 <p>CRYSTALS</p>
	
 <p>FORTUNE-TELLING</p>	 <p>CULT</p>
	
 <p>HOROSCOPE</p>	 <p>*DIVINATION</p>
	

Crystals

Gems or crystalline stones. Among those involved in New Age practices, there is a belief, not based on any scientific evidence, that crystals possess energies to increase spiritual awareness, to reduce stress and stress-related disease, and to raise consciousness. Crystal ball gazing rose from similar roots. Also, from ancient times gemstones have been associated with certain astrological signs and therefore months of the year. For example, the garnet is for January and the sapphire for September (based on Melton, Clark, and Kelly, *New Age Encyclopedia*, number 98).

Cult

“A religious organization founded by and built upon the teachings of a central charismatic figure” (Chandler, *Understanding the New Age*, page 339). A cult involves devotion or worship by a group of people professing their shared belief in the cult’s leader and whatever he or she teaches to be worthy of worship (based on *The Oxford English Dictionary*).

***Divination**

“Methods of discovering the personal, human significance of present or future events. [Such methods could] include dreams, hunches, involuntary body actions, . . . consulting the dead, observing the behavior of animals and birds, tossing coins, casting lots, [etc.]” (Chandler, *Understanding the New Age*, page 339).

***ESP**


“Extrasensory perception; the experience of, or response to, an external event, object, state, or influence without apparent contact through the known sense[s]” (Chandler, *Understanding the New Age*, page 339).

Fortune-telling

Strictly speaking, predicting the future. In terms of New Age practices, fortune-telling now includes predicting how one should deal with life events that are to come and how those events might affect one’s own strengths and weaknesses.

Horoscope

Fortune-telling by means of a diagram of the planets and stars. The position of the planets and stars relative to one another at the time of a person’s birth is thought to influence that person’s life (paraphrased from Avis and others, editors, *The Senior Dictionary*).

 <p>MEDIUM</p>	 <p>*I CHING</p>
	
 <p>NUMEROLOGY</p>	 <p>*IDOLATRY</p>
	
 <p>OCCULT</p>	 <p>MAGIC</p>
	

***I Ching**

"[A] Chinese book of divination associated with Taoism; the ancient system of telling fortunes by throwing sticks into six-sided figures" (Chandler, *Understanding the New Age*, page 340).

Medium

"A person through whom spirits of the dead can supposedly communicate with the living" (Avis and others, editors, *The Senior Dictionary*).

***Idolatry**

The worship of anything or anyone in place of God.

Numerology






The study of the occult or secret use of numbers, such as the figures designating the year of one's birth, to determine their supposed influence on one's life and future (based on *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* and on Chandler, *Understanding the New Age*, page 342).

Magic

"The art of producing illusions as entertainment by the use of sleight of hand, deceptive devices, etc." (*Random House Unabridged Dictionary*). Although two types of magic are distinguished—white, which is considered magic for good purposes, and black, which is considered magic for evil purposes—both are fundamentally the same thing: an expression of human curiosity and power seeking (based on "The Satanists," in Maple, *Witchcraft*, page 13).

Occult

"Hidden . . . ; concealed . . . ; not exposed to view" (*The Oxford English Dictionary*). "That which is not easily understood, revealed, or apprehended. Matters [thought to involve] the action or influence of supernatural agencies or some secret knowledge of them" (Chandler, *Understanding the New Age*, page 342). In modern usage *occult* refers to things such as satanism, witchcraft, spiritism, and fortune-telling.

 PSYCHIC	 OUIJA
 	 
*PSYCHOKINESIS	PALMISTRY
 	 
*RITUAL	*PARANORMAL
	

Ouija

"A device consisting of a small board . . . on legs that rest on a larger board marked with words, letters of the alphabet, etc. . . . [B]y moving over the larger board and touching the words, letters, etc., while the fingers of spiritualists, mediums, or others rest lightly upon it, [the Ouija is thought] to answer questions, give messages, etc." (*Random House Unabridged Dictionary*).

Palmistry

"The art or practice of telling fortunes and interpreting character from the lines and configurations of the palm of a person's hand" (*Random House Unabridged Dictionary*).

***Paranormal**

"Beyond the 'normal' in terms of cause and effect as presently understood" (Chandler, *Understanding the New Age*, page 342).

Psychic













"A medium, 'sensitive,' or channeler. Also . . . paranormal events that can't be explained by established physical principles" (Chandler, *Understanding the New Age*, page 342).

***Psychokinesis**

"Power of the mind to influence matter or move objects. Popularly known as PK" (Chandler, *Understanding the New Age*, page 342). *Telekinesis* is considered a form of psychokinesis (paraphrased from page 343).

***Ritual**

A ceremonial act or series of acts intended to express the beliefs or values of a person or group.

 SORCERY	 RUNE
  SPIRITISM	  SATANISM
  SUPERSTITION	  SÉANCE
	

Rune

“Any of the characters of certain ancient alphabets . . . of . . . the Germanic languages, [especially] of Scandinavia and Britain, from c200 to c1200” (*The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*). Runes are used to create poems and sayings with supposedly mystical meanings that are in turn used for casting spells and fortune-telling (based on *Random House Dictionary of English Language*).

Satanism

“The worship of Satan or the powers of evil” (*Random House Unabridged Dictionary*), often expressed through a perversion of Christian rites. “[*Satanists*] are people who, deciding that the spirit of evil is the dominating force in life, conclude that Satan, the master of evil, is God” (“The Satanists,” in Maple, *Witchcraft*, page 8).

Séance

“A meeting in which a spiritualist attempts to communicate with the spirits of the dead” (*Random House Unabridged Dictionary*).

Sorcery

“The art, practices, or spells of a person who is supposed to exercise supernatural powers through the aid of evil spirits” (*Random House Unabridged Dictionary*). Also called *black magic* or *witchery*.

Spiritism

The belief or teaching that the spirits of the dead, surviving after life on earth, communicate with the living, especially through a medium (a person considered to be particularly susceptible to their influence). Also called *spiritualism*.

Superstition

A belief or notion, not based on reason or knowledge, that gives frightening significance to a particular thing, circumstance, occurrence, proceeding, or the like (paraphrased from *Random House Unabridged Dictionary*).

 <p>WITCHCRAFT</p>	 <p>TAROT</p>
	
 <p>*ZODIAC</p>	 <p>*TRANCE</p>
	
	 <p>VOODOO</p>
	

Tarot

A deck of cards widely used in New Age activities for fortune-telling. Its origins go back centuries and are shrouded in obscurity. There are now many different variations of cards. The standard deck contains twenty-two major cards, each assigned a certain meaning such as mercy, justice, prudence, or strength. There are also fifty-six minor cards, each assigned a meaning. When the cards are used for fortune-telling, they are laid out in one of several patterns whose meaning is interpreted by a tarot reader. Ordinary playing cards with their four suits of clubs, hearts, spades, and diamonds evolved out of tarot decks (based on Melton, Clark, and Kelly, *New Age Encyclopedia*, number 302).

***Trance**

"An altered state of consciousness, induced or spontaneous, that gives access to many ordinarily inhibited capacities of the mind-body system" (Chandler, *Understanding the New Age*, page 343).

Voodoo

"A polytheistic religion [a religious based on a belief in multiple gods] practiced chiefly by West Indians, deriving principally from African cult worship and containing elements borrowed from the Catholic religion" (*Random House Unabridged Dictionary*). "A body of beliefs and practices involving the use of magic" (Avis and others, editors, *The Senior Dictionary*).

Witchcraft

"The exercise of supernatural power [thought] to be possessed by persons in league with the devil or evil spirits" (*The Oxford English Dictionary*). Practitioners of witchcraft are called witches. *Wicca* is an old English term meaning "male magician" (paraphrased from Chandler, *Understanding the New Age*, page 344). White witchery claims to be witchery for the purposes of good.

***Zodiac**

"Imaginary belt in the heavens that encompasses the apparent paths of the principal planets except Pluto. Divided into twelve constellations or signs based on the assumed dates that the sun enters each of these 'houses' or symbols, the [z]odiac is used for predictions in astrology" (Chandler, *Understanding the New Age*, page 344).