

New Age

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interest in Christianity, noting that it contains its own contemplative heroes who people could look to when pondering the fruits of meditation.

"(T)he saints meditated, contemplated communion with God in that way," DeRosa said, though he stressed that those seeking to meditate should choose an authoritative book or personal guide to help direct them.

It is the desire for a sense of direction in general that seems to characterize much of what is considered New Age, De-Rosa commented.

"People come from so many different backgrounds — people in recovery, people looking for wholeness with the earth, people experiencing physical and emotional problems," he said of the customers that frequent New Voyage.

Sheila Hand, owner of New Voyage, asserted that giving those people information useful in attaining their goals is one of the purposes of her store. And — depending on what an individual considers to be valuable on such journeys — the average customer of the store could find a host of guides offering alternative lifestyles away from the nation's mainstream.

Books in the store include titles on healing practices of the spiritual and physical kind; the perils of electromagnetic pollution; feminine gods in pagan mythology; the use of crystals, herbal diets and tarot cards; and a psychologist's look at the method of forgiveness preached by Jesus.

The New Age Bookstore & Psychic Center, 3121 W. Ridge Road, also contains several such titles, including an autobiography of an Indian Hindu yogi and books on astrology. Colored by what the Vatican would definitely consider an unorthodox pair of theological glasses, an interpretation of St. John's Gospel found in the store views God as "Father-Mother," and utilizes the Eastern spiritual concepts of reincarnation to interpret events in Jesus' life — including Judas' betrayal.

Owners of both stores claim that former and current Catholics often make their way

inside to browse their bookshelves. What is it about New Age literature and goods that attract Catholics to look outside their own faith for spiritual answers?

"A real thirst for the supernatural," noted Nathan Kollar, professor of religious studies at St. John Fisher College.

Kollar was skeptical about the use of the term New Age. "I think that what New Age is is a marketing tool ... a catalog of old religions put out by California publishing houses," he said.

Putting a new face on some very old ideas, the New Age phenomenon attracts many people looking for answers to spiritual questions, Kollar said, citing statistics illustrating that one out of every two people has had a mystical experience. He commented that through their own ignorance or the ignorance of their church leaders, many spiritually inclined people, including Catholics, have failed to find the rich tradition of alternative religious experience that the meditative and contemplative traditions of Western religion can offer.

The New Age phenomenon particularly appeals to U.S. citizens because the nation's culture emphasizes an individualistic approach to life, Kollar argued.

"Most of the New Age religions ... are very private religions," he said, adding,

"Every religion demands that you do something in your society. A lot of New Age religions don't demand that."

Although some area New Age adherents acknowledged that their peers may not be on the forefront of social action, such reluctance to participate in public life stems from a sound basis, argued Hand.

"We believe that everything outside of us is a reflection of what's inside us," she said. "If we see violence inside ourselves, we address what's inside."

She added that while many New Agers eschew political involvement, they often make up for it by participating in such movements as those for a cleaner environment and humane treatment of animals.

Hand also dismissed some of the harsher critics of the New Age movement who see an evil hand at work behind some of its more shadowy elements.

Those critics include Constance Gumbey, a Detroit attorney and a Protestant, who has spent the last decade attacking much of the New Age phenomenon as a hoax perpetuated by people who are promoting worship of pagan, non-Christian gods and Lucifer, or Satan.

She wrote a 1982 book, entitled *The Hidden Dangers of the Rainbow*, which argued that "the motive behind the New Age movement is Lucifer's desire to be

worshipped as God."

Area New Age adherents, including Hand and Alice Jenkinson, a financial backer of the New Age Bookstore and Psychic Center, noted that certain proponents of Satan worship and questionable messiahs have cloaked their motives in New Age terminology, but they labeled such occurrences as out of the New Age mainstream.

"There have been devil worshippers all through the ages," Jenkinson said.

In fact, many New Agers believe that much of the "evil" that critics such as Gumbey advocate is merely non-Christian spirituality or makes up only a small part of the phenomenon. The spiritual thrust of New Age often emphasizes personal and ethical responsibility along with a respect for others, New Agers said.

Nonetheless, those who choose to seek out New Age works and products should be aware that the supernatural or mystical experience and knowledge they seek might not always be healthy if obtained, Kollar said.

"There's this presupposition that ... anything supernatural is good," Kollar said. "I think that people have to be very careful from the standpoint that things can look real good, but it's not necessarily of God."

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ROCHESTER — Grief Resource Information Education Forum, Inc., a not-for-profit organization providing information and services to grieving people and professionals working in the area of bereavement, is looking for volunteers to receive bereavement calls at its office.

Volunteers need to be sensitive and caring in assisting callers find appropriate support and services. Those interested in volunteering may call Gabrielle at 716/223-1888.

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Bells to ring for peace

Bishop Matthew H. Clark has asked the 160 parishes in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester to participate in the April 5-7 National Days of Thanksgiving, proclaimed by President Bush.

Bishop Clark has asked that church bells be rung for seven minutes on Sunday, April 7, beginning at 3 p.m.

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