Synopsis of Concerns regarding Sr. Maureen McDonnell, O.P., Sr. Lynn Lisbeth, O.P., Paula Hirschboeck, Ph.D., and Ms. Beth O'Brien (oblate of Holy Wisdom Monastery) and their Formal Associations

November 27, 2012

1. Background

- a. New Age
 - i. Description of New Age Thought
 - 1. It is not a single, uniform movement, but rather a loose network of practitioners whose approach is to think globally and act locally.
 - 2. The "new" about "New Age" is a syncretism of esoteric and secular elements. It would seem that at its core the New Age way of thinking calls for a "paradigm shift," in a number of fundamental areas, including, a shift from Newtonian mechanistic physics to quantum physics, from modernity's exaltation of reason to an appreciation of feeling, emotion, and experience, and from a dominance of masculinity and patriarchy to a celebration of femininity, in individuals and in society.
 - 3. With regard to the New Age and Christianity, "when the understanding of the content of Christian faith is weak, some mistakenly hold that the Christian religion does not inspire a profound spirituality and so they seek elsewhere... People feel the Christian religion no longer offers them or perhaps never gave them something they really need. The search which often leads people to the New Age is a genuine yearning: for a deeper spirituality, for something which will touch their hearts, and for a way of making sense of a confusing and often alienating world."
 - ii. Christian Response to New Age Thought
 - 1. "An adequate Christian discernment of New Age thought and practice cannot fail to recognize that, like second and third century gnosticism, it represents something of a compendium of positions that the Church has identified as heterodox. John Paul II warns with regard to the "return of ancient gnostic ideas under the guise of the so-called New Age: 'We cannot delude ourselves that this will lead toward a renewal of religion. It is only a new way of practicing gnosticism that attitude of the spirit that, in the name of a profound knowledge of God, results in distorting His Word and replacing it with purely human words. Gnosticism never completely abandoned the realm of Christianity. Instead, it has always existed side by side with Christianity, sometimes taking the shape of a philosophical movement, but more often assuming the characteristics of a religion or a para-religion in distinct, if not declared, conflict with all that is essentially Christian'".
 - iii. Some themes of New Age Thought:
 - 1. Cosmos is seen as an organic whole
 - 2. Cosmos is animated by an Energy, which is also indentified as the divine Soul or Spirit
 - 3. There is a "perennial knowledge" which predates and is superior to all religions and cultures.
 - 4. People follow enlightened masters. All religions are the expression of the same inner reality of the manifestation of Spirit, of Unknowable, of that supreme consciousness known by many different names in many different cultures.
 - 5. Perfectability of the human person by means of a wide variety of techniques and therapies (as opposed to the Christian view of cooperation with divine grace).
 - 6. It uses esotericism (a search for knowledge) and/or magic (the occult). The latter is a means of obtaining power motivated by a will to power or the dream of becoming divine. Often, mind-expanding techniques are meant to reveal to people their divine power, and by use of the power, people prepare the way for the Age of Enlightenment. This overturns the correct relationship between Creator and creature.
 - 7. A "deep" ecology's emphasis on biocentrism that denies the anthropological vision of the Bible in which human beings are at the center of the world since they are qualitatively superior to other natural forms.

- 8. People are born with a divine spark that links them into the unity of the Whole (in a sense reminiscent of ancient Gnosticism). People may be seen as essentially divine, and/or as co-creators in their own reality. The goal is the transformation of the individual self into "cosmic consciousness".
- 9. Androgyny the awareness of the presence in every person of male and female elements; it is a state of balanced inner harmony of the animus and anima. The more this spreads, the more it will assist in the transformation of interpersonal conduct.
- 10. Great respect may be given to ancient agricultural rites and to fertility cults. "Gaia", Mother Earth, is offered as an alternative to God the Father, whose image is seen to be linked to a patriarchal conception of male domination of women. There is talk of God, but it is not a personal God; the God of which New Age speaks is neither personal nor transcendent. Often the entire range of living matter on earth, from whales to viruses and from oaks to algae, is regarded as constituting a single living entity (earth-Gaia is our mother and each of us is a neuron of earth's central nervous system).
- 11. When received by men and women, "divine energy" is often described as "Christic energy". The talk of Christ doesn't mean Jesus of Nazareth. "Christ" is a title applied to someone who has arrived at a state of consciousness where he or she perceives him or herself to be divine and thus claim to be a "universal Master." Jesus of Nazareth was not the Christ, but simply one among many historical figures in whom this "Christic" nature is revealed, as is the case with Buddha and others. The innermost psychic level on which this "divine cosmic energy" is "heard" by human beings is also called "Holy Spirit".

iv. Some key questions:

- 1. Is God a being with whom we have a relationship, or something to be used or a force to be harnessed?
- 2. Is there just one Jesus Christ, or are there thousands of Christs?
- 3. The human being: is there one universal being or are there many individuals?
- 4. Do we save ourselves or is salvation a free gift from God?
- 5. Do we invent truth or do we embrace it?
- 6. Prayer and meditation: are we talking to ourselves or to God?
- 7. Are we tempted to deny sin or do we accept that there is such a thing?
- 8. Are we encouraged to reject or accept suffering and death?
- 9. Is social commitment something shirked or positively sought after?
- 10. Is our future in the stars or do we help to construct it?
- v. Source: *Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life: A Christian Reflection on the "New Age"*, by the Pontifical Council for Culture and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.
- **b.** Panentheism a belief system which posits that the divine (be it a monotheistic God, polytheistic gods, or an eternal cosmic animating force), interpenetrates every part of nature and timelessly extends beyond it. Panentheism differentiates itself from pantheism, which holds that the divine is synonymous with the universe.
- c. <u>Indifferentism</u> In Catholic theology, indifferentism is the belief that no one religion or philosophy is superior to another. The Catholic Church ascribes indifferentism to all atheistic, materialistic, pantheistic, and agnostic philosophies. There are three basic types of indifferentism in Catholic theology: absolute, restricted, and liberal or latitudinarian indifferentism. Indifferentism was first explicitly identified and condemned by Pope Gregory XVI, in his encyclical *Mirari vos*.
- **d.** Marcus J. Borg is an American New Testament scholar, theologian and author. He is a fellow of the Jesus Seminar and was formerly Hundere Distinguished Professor of Religion and Culture at Oregon State University, a position from which he retired in 2007. Borg is among the most widely-known and influential voices in progressive Christianity and is a major figure in scholarship related to the Historical Jesus.

- **e.** <u>Albert Nolan, O.P.</u> is a Roman Catholic priest and member of the Dominican order in South Africa. Nolan became famous for his 1976 book, *Jesus before Christianity*, in which he presented an account of Jesus' radical involvement in the struggle for full humanity in the context of first-century Palestine: he "challenged the rich to identify in solidarity with the poor, a spirituality of solidarity that resonated with white Catholics seeking a new, progressive direction.
- 2. Formal Association of Sr. Maureen McDonnell, O.P., Sr. Lynn Lisbeth, O.P., Paula Hirschboeck, Ph.D., and Ms. Beth O'Brien with Wisdom's Well (see http://wisdomswell.org/).
 - a. Wisdom's Well Interfaith Spirituality Center is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization located in the Diocese of Madison. As evidenced mainly from its website, grave concern exists with regard to the teachings and animating spirit of the center, namely that the center and its members may espouse certain views flowing from New Ageism, panentheism, and indifferentism, and may not share an authentic view of the Catholic Church's approach to interreligious dialogue.
 - b. Examples from Wisdom's Well website [underline emphasis is added]
 - i. "Wisdom's Well serves to support those who desire to grow spiritually, seek inner wisdom, and yearn for a transformative spirituality. Grounded in the Christian tradition, while embracing the wisdom found in other religious traditions, we offer resources for the journey through spiritual guidance, educational programs, retreats, and the teaching of contemplative practices. Our vision is to provide companionship for the spiritual journey, helping others live a balanced life of contemplation and action as members of our sacred Earth community." Mission Statement (Home Page)
 - ii. "I see life now more in the context of the <u>Universe Story</u>, which leads me to profound gratitude for all the gifts of creation. I feel a greater sense of responsibility to live justly and simply, study important issues, and encourage others to join me in those efforts, widening the circle of compassion to care for Earth." Sr. Maureen McDonnell, OP
 - iii. I have also been opened to a <u>new understanding of Jesus</u> (via <u>Borg, Nolan, and others</u>) Sr. Lynn Lisbeth, O.P.
 - iv. My spiritual practice includes an <u>Earthling's</u> contemplative way of <u>BE-ing</u> in the NOW, continuing lively work in <u>quantum awareness</u> and honoring the <u>Oneness of the diversity of all</u> life. Sr. Lynn Lisbeth, OP
 - v. We invite women who wish to create a community for exploring and practicing the wisdom and compassion of the <u>divine feminine</u> to register for this year's Sophia Circle.

 THEMES honoring an interfaith aspect of <u>Sophia</u> in our lives and in the world are:

October 1: Her ABUNDANCE

November 5: Her WISE COMPASSION

December 3: Her DARKNESS

January 14: Her SILENCE

February 4: Her RADIANCE

March 11: Her SIMPLICITY

April 29: Her BLOOMING

June 10: Her FRUITION

- Paula Hirschboeck, Ph.D. (She left religious life in 1989 and she eventually joined Wisdom's Well. She was lay ordained a Zen Buddhist in 2000 and joined the "Udumbara Order of Bodhisattva Chaplains" in 2001. According to the website, she was ordained a Soto Zen priest exactly 40 years after [her] profession as a Dominican.)

- vi. WHO IS SOPHIA? In the West, divine wisdom is known as Sophia. In the East she is Mother Tao and Prajnaparamita. Sometimes she is recognized as incarnate in Mary and Kuan Yin. Indigenous peoples and others of Earth based spiritualities know her by many names, from Spider Woman to Danu to Tonantzin. She is celebrated as the Soul of the World. She is the wisdom of Earth as Gaia. The wisdom of evolution calling to us from the future is seen as a manifestation of Sophia. These are just a few of her aspects which cross cultures, eras and faith traditions. Many contemplatives say that manifesting Sophia's wisdom and compassion is the task of our time. Paula Hirschboeck, Ph.D.
- vii. Gracious Sophia, (Co-created prayer) You, arising out of ineffable Silence and Depth, are the womb of all being (1). Your radiant wisdom and compassion embraces all beings (2). Your splendor makes us completely luminous (3). May we reorient our lives to be in constant resonance with your silence (4). In you, as we awake to awareness of each moment, and to openness to what is, we are given back to ourselves (5). At the same time, through you, we take the whole universe as our body (6). Help us stretch ourselves out until we span the chasm of contradictions we so regularly create (7). We persist in contradicting our truth, our beauty and our goodness. Help us stretch out to find ourselves within the divinity of the world (8). As we sit on the rim of the well of darkness (9), may we not waver from our emptiness (10). May we break free from the wounding of our own anxieties (11). Your beauty triumphs over the suffering inherent in life (12). Your cloak is the very fabric of the cosmos (13). Within the invisible embrace of your beauty we kneel at the feet of all creatures (14). Just as the temple bell stops but the sound keeps coming out of the flowers (15), you, Sophia, are coming to us from the future. May we see you in the unforeseen. You are teaching us that the known way is an impasse (16). It is said that we do not hear the birds' favorite songs (17). Just so, a soul who loves you often hears what she hears not and often sees what she sees not (18). May we trust the effortless effort from which deep healing and transformation flow (19). You, gracious Sophia, Soul of the World, are longing for a mirror (20). May your radiance be the light shining in our own eyes. Blessed Be. - Under "Litany in Honor of Sophia"
 - 1. Alleged Sources 1 "alaya vijnana" or "womb of all being" is a Buddhist phrase 2 Chandrakirti 3 Marguerite Porte, 14th c. Beguine burned at the stake 4 Robert Sardello in his book, Silence 5 Jon Kabat Zinn 6 Simone Weil 7 Rainer Maria Rilke 8 Rudolf Steiner 9 Pablo Neruda 10 Meister Eckhart 11 John O'Donohue 12 Friedrich Nietzsche 13 Sara Jane Boss in her book, Mary 14 Mechtilde of Magdeburg, medieval Beguine 15 Basho, from a haiku 16 Heraclitus, early Greek philosopher 17 Hafiz, Sufi mystic 18 Marguerite Porete 19 The Dalai Lama 20 Susan Griffin
- viii. "Running Elk was a <u>believer in all religions</u>. He participated in the old traditions of his people and was a member of several Christian churches. He prayed to Mecca every day and also practiced several Buddhist meditations. Running Elk was known to say, I want to cover all the spiritual bases. Since you have to step on four different bases to hit a home run, I'm not going to take any chances with my spirituality. He made certain he always practiced at least four different traditions faithfully, one from each direction of the world." Inter-faith quote found on Wisdom's Well website

3. Specific Statements in reference to individuals

a. Proposed Advertisement for Parish Bulletins – "Based on the teachings of Fr. Thomas Keating and Rev. Cynthia Bourgeault, this series of six classes will look to Christian meditation as a means of transforming consciousness. The six evenings will focus on Relational Aspects of Prayer, Method of Centering Prayer, Distractions on the Path, and Awakening to God's Presence in Our Everyday Lives. Each class will include time for meditation, as well as dialogue for others. ... Whether you are new to Centering Prayer or have practiced it for years, we invite you to join us in the on-going search for the Holy One." – Beth O'Brien, Spiritual Guide, Oblate of Holy Wisdom Monastery, "Listening and reverencing the Holy within all".