

# ABUSING MEMORY

the healing theology of Agnes Sanford

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# Introduction

The progression of events which led to the writing of this book began with the realization that the New Thought cult, in which I was involved before I became a Christian, had teachings similar to the New Age movement, especially in regard to healing. New Thought is the religious arm of the New Age movement.

I was asked to listen to the tape of a seminar given at a Baptist church by a Christian counselor. The morning session was within orthodox Christian boundaries, but in the afternoon, the counselor taught the participants to visualize “Jesus” forgiving the “inner child.” This involved relaxation, centering, and controlled breathing, which is the yoga discipline of yoking the mind with Brahman in the Hindu religion. In the West, this is called self-hypnosis.

I thought this lovely, personable Christian counselor must be uninformed or even deceived about her healing session. I prayed for guidance. As a physician and a Christian, I hoped she would listen to my concerns. She was gracious when I went to talk to her, but I was a little taken aback to find her husband was with her. He is head of the department of psychology at a church-affiliated college. He did most of the talking; I did not make much progress.

At that time, I knew little about Agnes Sanford, except for what I had learned during my days in the Unity School of Christianity (now called Unity Church). But I had some doubts about her ministry. As I was leaving, I mentioned Agnes Sanford. In

reply, the counselor's husband said, "Agnes is a much maligned saint." I decided to read Agnes Sanford's books to find out what she believed. This book is the result of my reading.

I started by leafing through Agnes's *The Healing Touch of God*. At one point, Agnes writes, "I taught him only the teachings of Jesus Christ, lending him Dr. Emmet Fox's *Sermon on the Mount*, still a standard for this purpose."<sup>1</sup> She also wrote in her autobiography that Fox's book "thrilled my soul"<sup>2</sup> and that she derived her theology of redemption from it. Her admiration for Fox set off the alarms in my mind. Emmet Fox was the preeminent lecturer for the cult Unity. I still have my copy of his book from the time when I was ensnared in New Thought.

Agnes is well-known as the mother of the Inner Healing/Healing of Memories movement. She almost single-handedly brought it out of Jungian psychology and New Thought into the Christian church. She was able to do this because of her impeccable credentials as the daughter of missionaries to China and as the wife of an Episcopalian pastor.

Most inner healing advocates acknowledge their debt to her, and her "theology" is evident in their ministries. John Loren Sandford (no relation to her) dedicated his books to her as his beloved mentor. Morton Kelsey learned healing of memories from her as well. Karen Mains of the Chapel of the Air was trained in inner healing at the School of Pastoral Care founded by Agnes and her husband. Similarly, spiritual therapist Leanne Payne is a disciple of Agnes, as was the late Ruth Carter Stapelton. Glen Clark, who established Camps Furthest Out, published Agnes's first book, *The Healing Light*. Glen Clark's books read like Unity textbooks. *The Healing Light* was also endorsed by Theosophy, the first of the modern New Age cults.

I realized that to understand Inner Healing/Healing of Memories, Christians must understand what Agnes taught since

1. Agnes Sanford, *The Healing Touch of God* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1983), 81.

2. Agnes Sanford, *Sealed Orders* (Plainfield: Logos International, 1972), 103.

she pioneered the work. For that reason, I am focusing on the writings of Agnes Sanford to explain Inner Healing.

## **The Bible is Our Standard**

Defenders of Inner Healing often claim that their critics are neglecting the good in their work. Their criteria for embracing a program is largely pragmatic—if it works, it’s worth utilizing. But we can know if a strategy truly works in the long run, only if it is compatible with biblical doctrine. Saul consulted the witches of Endor even though Deuteronomy 18 forbids it. It seemed to work, in the short term. Saul received the answer he had vainly sought from God. But 1 Chronicles 10:13 makes it clear, God didn’t condone an occult way of determining “His will,” even though it “worked.” Saul paid with his life.

God’s Word is truth, and so we need to examine the basic theological foundation of Agnes Sanford’s beliefs. If she taught things contrary to biblical doctrine, we must throw out the teaching, whether it appears to work or not. In the past, the name of these teachings was heresy. Throughout history, men have paid with their lives to defend God’s Word against the very heretical doctrines that are accepted today by many who take the name of Christ.

Agnes was a loving and multi-talented woman, who believed God had given her a very important mission in life. I am sure she thought she was a Christian because of her heritage, marriage, knowledge, and mystical experience. My intent is not to demean her as a person. Rather, I write this book in loving concern for my brothers and sisters in Christ. I ask you to consider prayerfully the evidence presented herein. Read Agnes Sanford’s books for yourself and then evaluate the Inner Healing/Healing of Memories movement. Jude 3 and 4 commands Christians to “earnestly contend for the faith” and to be wary of those who have “crept in unawares” into our churches and “deny the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ.” John tells us, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they be of God; because many false prophets have gone into the world.” (1 Jn. 4:1).

Basic to the evaluation of a person's Christian belief is an examination of their concept of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. This is the foundation. All cults start with unbiblical beliefs about God, and their other errors develop out of these misconceptions. The Inner Healing movement grew out of Agnes Sanford's mental image of God, so this is the first area that I will explore in this book, after some biographical sketches. Some other subjects will be:

- Her inner rebellion toward the orthodox church.
- Her struggle with the "why of suffering" and God's will, and its impact on her decision to develop a healing ministry.
- Her meaning of "a prayer of faith," "prayer from a distance," and "intercessory prayer."
- Her claim to have had a direct commission from God and had human mentors like New Age leader Emmet Fox.
- Her view of Jesus traveling through time today to do inner healing.
- Healing of Memories in light of the second commandment.
- Origins of the Inner Child concept and biblical teachings concerning the Inner Child.
- Her concept of the unconscious.
- Her frequent use of popular New Age terms.

# Mother of Inner Healing

Controversy continues to swirl around the memory of Agnes Sanford's life and work in the few years since her death in 1983. Was she a much-maligned saint? Was her theology biblical? Did she revitalize dead orthodoxy? Were her teachings disguised New Thought?

These questions deserve an answer in light of the increasing acceptance of Inner Healing by Christians in evangelical churches, and especially because so many Christian counselors and pastors use her Healing of Memories techniques.

The foundation determines the soundness of the superstructure. Without a firm foundation walls crack, bridges collapse, skyscrapers fall. Our spiritual well being relies on a biblical foundation that will withstand stress. We expect physical foundations to crumble eventually, but the foundation of our life must be eternally sound. Christian devotees of Inner Healing are building on the foundation laid by Agnes Sanford.

Children attending Sunday School learn the story Jesus taught about the man who built his house upon a rock in contrast to the man who built on sand and the dire consequences of his foolishness (Mt. 7; Lk. 6). Scripture gives us clear direction: "I laid a foundation and another man is building upon it. Let each man take care how he builds upon it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:10–11, RSV).



Jesus Christ must be the only foundation for the Christian life. Flawed foundations can be camouflaged. Therefore, it will be of primary importance to see if the foundation of Inner Healing and Healing of Memories is biblical in view of its incredible claim to being as important to the Church as the Reformation.

## Biographical Background

Her death leaves us with her beliefs as reflected in her writings. The preponderance of this book will be devoted to an in depth examination of her own recorded words, with only a brief discussion of the facts about her life. I'll start with a brief look at her life as gleaned from her autobiography, *Sealed Orders*.

Agnes White Sanford was born in 1897 into a distinguished Virginia family. Her ancestors included several professors at Washington and Lee University as well as Stonewall Jackson's chaplain. Her father, Hugh Watt White, was a southern Presbyterian minister and missionary to China. She spent her formative years in the Chinese towns of Hsuchoufu, Yencheng, and Shanghai.

She was sent back to the United States at age fourteen to attend Peace Institute, a small Presbyterian school for young ladies. She lived in the United States during World War I and spent her final school years studying at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Georgia.

Demonstrating her independent spirit, she gave up a B.A. degree so she could bypass "subjects I did not like: higher mathematics and science and French"<sup>1</sup> which were required for a degree and opted instead for "fascinating courses in short story writing and the science of poetry and the theory of beauty."<sup>2</sup> While in college she wrote, "I hungered to know all that I could learn about the stars and nebulae and all the company of heaven. Was I not one of them? We all entered into an expanded awareness of the universe that has been of tremendous value in my expanded awareness of God."<sup>3</sup>

1. Sanford, *Sealed Orders*, 43.

2. *Ibid.*, 43.

3. *Ibid.*, 44.

Sanford had determined at age twelve that she would not be a missionary, yet she had no real home except in China, so she returned to China. Later she taught at St. Mary's School in Shanghai, and then in Soochow Academy, an Episcopal school for boys, where she met her future husband, who ran a boy's school in the nearby town of Changshu.

Ted Sanford was a shy, young, Episcopal priest, nine years older than Agnes, whose "Chinese was so atrocious, he would never be appointed as a minister of a Chinese church,"<sup>4</sup> according to his bishop. Ted and Agnes married April 3, 1923. Thirteen months later she gave birth to a son. That summer Agnes had one of the bouts of depression which intermittently marked her life.

In 1925, they were furloughed home to Media, Pennsylvania. Resigned to always being a teacher in China, Ted began taking courses in education in Philadelphia with the goal of receiving an M.A. degree. Throughout all of this, Ted's secret desire was to be a minister of a church so he accepted with alacrity the call to be pastor of the Episcopal Church in Morristown, New Jersey. This was to the dismay of his wife, who would never again see her beloved China. Agnes had been looking forward to returning to China where her only duty would be that of a minister's wife:

The kind of person I used to be was dead. And the new person I was forced to be had much trouble in living. My work was to care for husband, children and house. That was made clear to me. Therefore, I closed the doors of my mind to childish notions of writing or creating beauty in drama or paint, and set myself to do my whole duty as wife and mother. . . . So I delighted in my little ones and longed for another. But underneath the domestic joys, there was always the feeling that the real me was dead.<sup>5</sup>

Agnes also made it clear that, although she loved her husband, they had difficulties in their marriage relationship. Her novel, *Lost Shepherd*, is a thinly disguised story of Ted's resistance to her religious theories and his eventual, reluctant acceptance

4. Ibid., 75–76.

5. Ibid., 88–89.

of them. She admitted that she fell in love more than once but “never thought of breaking the bond of marriage, even though it was founded more on spiritual values than physical ones.”<sup>6</sup>

After the birth of her third child, depression began to descend upon her once again. When Jack was eighteen months old she ascribed this “darkness of depression” to various “wounds” she had suffered. The wounds were disaffection with marriage, a longing for China, and nightmares over horrors she had seen in China. But “the basic trouble was that I had forgotten whence I came, and I did not know the sealed orders with which I had been sent to this earth.”<sup>7</sup> She contemplated suicide.

This was the pivotal time of her life. Through a minister who laid his hands on her head and prayed a “prayer of faith” she felt instantly “healed” of her depression, although depression dogged her footsteps periodically until she died. This exciting, emotional experience made her sing and shout all the way home and also caused her to begin to search for the reason for her healing. Her Inner Healing theory was the eventual result.

The remainder of her life was devoted to spreading the good news of the gospel of healing. She described this as a “driving compulsion” which consumed all her talents for writing and speaking. She began with a Bible class for young mothers and gradually developed a national ministry through her School of Spiritual Healing. “We renamed” it “The School of Pastoral Care as being a less alarming name for clergy to contemplate.”<sup>8</sup> For a long time her husband viewed her religious ideas with great skepticism but gradually began to accept them and even worked with her in establishing the School of Pastoral Care. After the death of her husband, she continued faithful to her “sealed orders” which she felt she had been called by God to obey. The last decade of her life she slipped into senility and probably Alzheimer’s syndrome.

In subsequent chapters we will examine why and how she developed her theology of the Inner Healing.

6. *Ibid.*, 192.

7. *Ibid.*, 92.

8. *Ibid.*, 241.