Shopping for a God

by Gary DeMar

When we speak of the whole man, we know that he is more than a skeleton with meat on it. Man, created in the image of God, is a whole entity comprised of body, mind, and soul. People are spiritual beings as well as material entities. We could say that this goes without saying, but it does not. We no longer operate from the same philosophical base as earlier generations.[1]

The physical world abhors a vacuum. Remove the water from a glass and air will rush in to take its place. You can actually hear this principle at work as you open a vacuum-packed can of coffee. The rush of air is almost immediate. Once the lid is off, the vacuum is filled with the surrounding atmosphere.

Man is like a can of vacuum-packed coffee. Remove the Triune God of Scripture from his life, and you can be sure that some other god will rush in to take His place. Herbert Schlossberg, in his foundational study of contemporary idol worship, said it this way: "Western society, in turning away from the Christian faith, has turned to other things. This process is commonly called *secularization*, but that conveys only the negative aspect. The word connotes the turning away from the worship of God while ignoring the fact that something is being turned *to* in its place."[2]

Keep in mind that you are a spiritual creation. You must nourish the part of you that the Bible describes as your "spirit." Just like there are all types of food for the body, there is food for the soul or spirit, "spiritual food" (1 Corinthians 10:3). But not just any food will meet the nutritional demands required by your spirit. Just as there is "junk food" that can rob your body of essential nutriments and can turn a healthy body into an anemic one, there are all types of spiritual junk foods that can wreck your spiritual health. If you don't eat the right spiritual food, you will starve to death or you will seek any nourishment that promises to satisfy your hunger.

The American public has sensed that something has been missing when man and his needs are discussed. In a recent survey of 80,000 of its readers, *Better Homes and Gardens* learned some startling things about the belief patterns of its subscribers. But what stood out was the recognition that the media, our nation's largest source of speedy and seemingly accurate information, are ignoring man's spiritual needs. This comment is representative:

> I am answering your questionnaire because I believe you have hit upon a part of our nature that too often is neglected in secular magazines. The physical and mental faculties are discussed in depth, but, in essence, they depend on our spiritual well-being. I think religion plays a far more important role in many families than most of the media realize.[3]

The spiritual spectrum of the survey varies widely: from "New Age" Spiritualists to Christian "Fundamentalists." Most believe in eternal life (89%), heaven (87%), miracles (86%), and hell (76%). But some believe in non-Christian doctrines like a spiritual/astral realm (30%), channeling messages/lessons from spirits (13%), and reincarnation (11%).[4] The survey showed that people crave spiritual things. For some, almost any type of spirituality will do. As one respondent wrote, "Faith is what you believe in."[5] But what is that "what"?

In this article we will look at what conditions make it easy for people to be seduced by spiritual counterfeits and what you can do to avoid being seduced by false prophets, promises, and messiahs.

The Smorgasbord Mentality

People are so confused about what is true that they tend to believe *anything* and *everything*. Students today are given "options," with no consideration that one of the many options under study could be correct. In fact, it seems to be an unwritten law among teachers not to say "this is right" or "this is wrong." It's fashionable to have an open mind. Like an open sewer, you never know what will drain there. Our society has moved from absolutism to an undiscerning openness. "Openness -- and the relativism that makes it the only plausible stance in the face of various claims to truth and various ways of life and kinds of human beings -- is the great insight of our times. The true believer is the real danger."[6]

The true believer is the outcast. A belief in norms, absolutes, and certainty is undemocratic. The student who enters college with an uncritical open mind will find himself swept away by every wind of doctrine, every appealing opinion, and every spiritual counterfeit to fill the void of a spiritual vacuum. The doctrine of pluralism is the key that will be used to open your vacuum-packed mind.

> Pluralism refers to a diversity of religions, worldviews, and ideologies existing at one time in the same society. We are socially heterogeneous. One religion or philosophy doesn't command and control the culture. Instead, many viewpoints exist. We have Buddhists and Baptists, Christian Reformed and Christian Scientist -- all on the same block, or at least in the same city. This can have a leveling effect on religious faith.[7]

Our nation is steeped in pluralism, tolerance, diversity, freedom, and the "democratic spirit."[8] All lifestyles are permitted. Homosexuality is tolerated because we live in a "diverse society." Abortion is legal because "you cannot impose your morality on someone else who has a different set of moral standards." The only view that is not tolerated is the view that does not tolerate all views. Christianity came on the scene with Jesus saying, "I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by Me" (John 14:6). How intolerant of Him to exclude Mayan spirits, the Buddha, Mohammed, and just plain decent folk!

> Modern pluralism presents one prevailing opinion about Jesus Christ. Like all great religious leaders, he is special but not unique; and he is certainly not exclusive. That would be closed- and narrow-minded. He is classed with the multitude of masters, grouped with the gurus, but not exalted as supreme. He is tucked into a comfortable corner of the religious pantheon so as to disturb no one.
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> The assumption is that Jesus just couldn't have claimed to be the only way; that's undemocratic! So instead of facing Christ's challenge as it stands, the whole idea is dismissed as anti-pluralistic, and closed-minded.[9]

There can be no true religion over against all false religions. Christianity is a religion but not the religion. The Bible can sometimes be taught as fictional literature like Shakespeare, but it cannot be taught as the Word of God. This would offend Moslems, Buddhists, Mormons,[10] and most certainly atheists. Unsuspecting students are then open to any and all philosophical gurus who are ready, willing, and seemingly able to lead the way to a new vision of reality. New world views are a dime a dozen. Those best able to express their views get the greatest following.

From Rationalism to Irrationality

Christianity is rational. Surprised? Well, you shouldn't be. The Christian faith offers the best, that is, the only rational, explanation of why man and the universe operate the way they do. As Christians we do not take a leap into the void of irrationality when we decide to believe in God and the authority of His Word. Although there are people who believe that religion, any religion, is simply one way to make people feel good and to give them a sense of security and meaning. The skeptic might say something like this: "Some people turn to drugs and alcohol, others 'get religion.' " The sad thing is, many people do turn to religion, all types of religions, to make themselves feel good. For the religious experimenters, there is no real understanding of what biblical Christianity is all about. As long as you believe in something. Faith is a personal thing that should not be judged. One religion is good as any other. Jonestown taught us otherwise.

The Lesson of Jonestown

Why would 900 men, women, and children voluntarily take a lethal dose of Kool-Aide laced with cyanide? In November 1978 the nation viewed the horror of 900 bloated bodies lying peacefully in the remote jungle of Guyana, South America. There was no sign of a struggle. For these people and the families they left behind, it does matter "what" one believes. But what led these people to join up with a religious leader like Jim Jones that they were willing to go with him to their death? A letter left behind by one of the suicide victims tells it all.

> For my part -- I am more than tired of this wretched, merciless planet and the hell it holds for so many masses of beautiful people -- thank you [Jim Jones] for the only life I've known.[11]

These desperate people saw something in Jim Jones that for a time filled a spiritual void. When it seemed it was all going to be taken from them by outsiders, they ended it all. They believed the only hope they ever had would be ripped from their very being. Death was better than life if it meant that their spiritual void could not be filled. For them, religion was nothing more than a personal harbor from a mounting storm.

Christianity is not a crutch or simply a haven for the restless. The Christian faith brings rebellious and hell-bound sinners into a right relationship with the Creator of the universe. Christianity works in the real world because it is true. It explains why things are the way they are and what can be done to change man and creation for the better. Therefore, the Christian faith can be put to the test in the real world. The presuppositions that we hold regarding God, the Bible, and our ultimate destiny will work in the real world. Deep in his heart, Jim Jones knew that his religion could not weather the storms of life. The only "salvation" was in death.

Try testing the presuppositional claims of non-Christian world views. They will lead to despair and uncertainty. All the mysteries and complexities of the universe cannot be explained by the finite reasoning abilities of man. But with God shoved out of the universe, man alone is the interpreter of the Cosmos. But how can a finite and fallible creature come to any definite conclusions about anything? There will always be facts that he has not taken into account. There will always be doubt about present-day explanations for the operation of the universe. How does the rationalist know for certain that his world view is the right one? What will happen to the rationalist after death? Is the grave the end? Or is there a hell? He can never know outside of Christ and His Word. A world view whose foundation is pure autonomous rationality can never offer certainty. C. S. Lewis, in an address to the Oxford Socratic Club (1944), shows that the naturalistic world view invariably reduces itself to skepticism: