



Designer Religion

The New American Religion of Choice

German philosopher Georg Hegel (1770-1831) once asked: *What religion would a free people have?* His answer to this rhetorical question was that religion had to divorce itself from the absolute certainty of divine revelation because it could not be accepted in a democracy. The United States, which prides itself on religious pluralism or what can be described as the right to believe in everything or nothing, is a democracy that personifies the Hegelian query. Americans now fear any religion that suggests a trace of absolutism.

THE INNER DRUMMER

One of the underpinnings for this revolt against orthodoxy and moral absolutism is the fundamental nature of American life. Americans live in a society that stresses communal individuality. They may relish large public gatherings but inwardly, Americans like to march to the beat of their own inner drummer. Americans tailor their homes, clothes, and social activities to fit their individual desires fueled by mass media and commercialism. The frightening world of Frankenstein genetics promises *designer babies* for people who want children that will reflect their life style. Their approach to religion is no different.

Millions of Americans, especially young people, are susceptible to the idea of a *designer religion*. As the New York Times proclaimed in a December 30, 2005 article they seek a *faith that fits*. Theirs is a consumerist approach to religion that reflects America's prevalent materialistic attitude. They apply the same pleasure principle to religion as they do to their bodies. If it feels good then it must be true for them, like unhealthy food, sex, a new sweater, or a skiing trip. It is not about worshiping God but about getting their emotional needs addressed. It is a mysterious inversion that extracts the spiritual from the sacred. Materialistic America's new religion will not inspire guilt for refusal to change an immoral life style. A designer religion does not genuflect before a god that preaches sin, judgment, and Hell.

With the decline of moral absolutism and the belief in a

transcendent God, Americans had to build a new paradigm of belief to fill the conscious void in their lives. This indifference to or denial of God has had lasting consequences. Americans have lost an irreplaceable source for meaning. The frailty of human nature led them to search for meaning in all the wrong places. Darwin found his meaning in the godless theory that reduced God's creation to a meaningless accident. Freud, Kinsey and Hefner found meaning in the liberation of human beings from restrictions on sexual behavior.

The underlining tragedy of this situation is that psychology has replaced theology as the instrument of counsel. Freud, Watson, and Jung became the source of spiritual comfort, not Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But with the changing of the emotional guard, a queasy feeling of *angst* filled the void that revealed religion once occupied.

GNOSTIC ROOTS

The need for a personally designed religion did not just happen. The early Christian heresy, Gnosticism, lies at the root of any debate on the modernist approach to religion. The Gnostics denied the wholesome unity of the spirit and the body. Only a certain elite had the gift of spirituality, described by some as *a spark of the Divine Being*. With ideas such as enlightenment and the identity of the divine with the human, Gnosticism revealed a perceptible kinship with the religions of India and the Far East.

A derivative of this Gnostic spirituality emerged during the early days of the 19th century in the United States. It was called Transcendentalism. It first appeared as an outgrowth of Unitarianism, which was a liberal religion that believed in the basic goodness of mankind. The Unitarians were forerunners of the secular *free-thinkers* who opposed the need for any type of revealed religion. While the Unitarians announced that man's human nature was excellent, the Transcendentalist found it to be *Divine*. Though as a theological counterpart to democracy it lacked passion, Unitarianism served as an incubator for the new American spirituality which would replace all organized religions.

According to Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager's standard American History text, *The Growth of the American Republic*, Vol. I, Transcendentalism identifies a *manifestation of the revolutionary spirit in the Northern states between 1820 and 1860*. It asserted the inalienable worth of man and the transferal of supernatural attributes to the natural constitution of man. In some men it appeared as an intense individualism. In others it surfaced as a deep sympathy for the poor and oppressed.

Transcendentalism gave to writers Nathaniel Hawthorne a deep understanding of the beauty and the tragedy of life and to Walt Whitman a robust joy in living. It inspired both the labor and the abolitionist movements. It had extracted its spirit and power from the Declaration of Independence that flowered in Lincoln's Gettysburg Address in 1863. It aimed to liberate America spiritually, as independence and democracy had liberated her politically.

AN ENDLESS SEEKER

The apostle of the evolving American religion was renowned essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), an *endless seeker* for whom Christianity ceased to have meaning. He believed that all forms of ministries were anachronisms. His spiritual uneasiness led him to the Far East where he immersed himself in the meditative thought of the Orient, not unlike what Trappist monk Thomas Merton would do over a hundred years later. Oriental religions never think in terms of eschatology. He embraced the alien idea that there was no sin, heaven, or hell, just an endless cycle of birth and rebirth. This was the perfect fit for what would be the new American religion.

Emerson's family was nearly wiped out by the dreaded tuberculosis that ran rampant through his generation. He suffered from it for most of his life. Despite his physical travail, he was a serene optimist who revolted against the dominant pessimism of his day. According to Vernon Parrington's *Main Currents in American Thought*, Vol. II, Emerson was a *bookish recluse, in love with the printed page*. According to Jacques Barzun in his *From Dawn to Decadence*, Emerson merged the new spirit of religious freedom with the cosmology of eastern religions to form a new religious synthesis. Along with his fellow transcendentalists, he developed the idea of *the imperial self*, which stressed self-reliance and individualism. His was the apotheosis of an individualism similar to that which had inspired Jean Jacques Rousseau and Thomas Jefferson and given rise to the French Revolution with its reign of terror.

THE MODERNIST RELIGION

Emerson's celebrated legacy to American religious and intellectual life has been to generate a new era of good feelings. Feeling good about oneself is the essence of his

spiritual legacy, which is more about man than about God. His new religion traded sanctity and devotion for spirituality and mysticism. While traditionalists kneel in the quietude of prayer and adoration, Emerson's faithful stand tall in the sun of their own reflection. It is a modernist religion, fueled by *metaphysics of subjectivity*. Their mores have become entangled in a net of narcissistic individualism, working for the end of organized religion.

The sense of the sacred that had once been reserved for religion has been transferred to the human body as a sacred temple. Like the moneychangers in the temple, the Holy Spirit has been chased from the body's temple and been replaced by a den of materialists selling sensual pleasures and existential thrills. The metaphysical implications of this materialistic preference have underscored such issues as abortion, in vitro fertilization, cloning, organ donations, and a host of other ethical and legal questions. In effect, secular man has effectively *humanized the divine*.

THE NOTION OF CHOICE

At the heart of the *sovereignty of self* is the notion of choice. The supremacy of individual choice fuels the think tanks of social change in American life. Personal choice runs unbridled through the fields of a designer religion. It has been the linchpin of the abortion defense for the past 30 years. The act of choosing, whether it be a new outfit or an abortion, not the moral right or wrong of what is chosen, stands as the sole deciding factor for a free human being. The new religion has reduced the Divine to a human level and deified man's will through his ability to choose. His new spirituality will not frustrate his will nor hamper his appetites with a list of rules, restrictions, or commandments. Under the rubric of *freedom of conscience* anything goes.

The lack of a sound moral basis can lead to an *ethics of discussion*, where moral issues like abortion, assisted suicide, and embryonic stem cell research are relegated to the voter and the lobbyist. Headlines in Palestine and Iraq have revealed the hidden flaws of Democracy, which is at the pinnacle of the choice ethic. Without a moral basis the majority can enact laws that legalize theft, murder, libel and even genocide. As the United States moves further away from its republican ideals, the country has already experienced popular support for abortion and euthanasia laws. The new self-made religion dictates what is right and wrong with help from the voting booth and the talk show.

GOOD FEELINGS

No one serves as a better model for this modern search for spirituality than Oprah Winfrey. Through her massive media empire, she urges her millions of listeners and readers to relax

and feel good about their lives. While the TV megastar promotes many good works on literacy and helping the indigent, they emanate from a secular humanism and a lack of a structured religious thinking. Her spirituality is conveniently fostered on an emotional “now” with an aura of good feelings without the need for teaching about sin, judgment, eternity, or Jesus Christ.

Oprah’s long-term relationship with her paramour is illustrative of her exemplary public life and her scandalous private life. Her designer religion is a vain attempt to mute the lingering protests of a 21st century conscience that has already been dulled by steady cries of unrestricted freedom in moral choices.

In their search for a religion that speaks to them personally, many Americans have advanced past themselves into esoteric religions, such as Islam or Scientology, and, now, more as a fad the Kabbala. The Kabbala is a system of mystical theosophy, which has played a limited part in Jewish religious thought. It has become more controversial today because so many of Hollywood’s glitterati have espoused a deep belief, including, Madonna, Demi Moore, Mick Jagger, Barbra Streisand and Shirley MacLaine.

A MYSTICAL CONTRAST

In his mystical search for his inner divinity, the modern seeker encountered not God but his own *human divinity*. His search for meaning of life found its satisfaction in helping others, not worshipping God. Modern man’s new religion has evolved into a form of enlightened self-interest, which stroked his own ego. The self is not really emptied, as it usually is in Christian good works but filled by its self-indulgent good feelings, derived from assisting humanity.

In contrast, there have been many Catholics who have had a religious experience so intense they underwent bodily transformations. St. Therese of Lisieux, (1873-1897) the *Little Flower*, was a Carmelite nun and a mystic. While she spent her short life performing the daily tasks of her order, her prayer life revealed a woman with a burning passion for the love of God that transformed her soul. This she revealed in her autobiography, *The Story of a Soul*.

The other St. Teresa, the Spanish Carmelite nun from Avila (1515-1582) was the first woman to be declared a Doctor of the Church. In her book, *El Castillo Interior* (The Inner Castle), she revealed her mystical journey toward the innermost chamber of her soul, the place of complete transfiguration and communion with God.

As religious organizations have declined those without a religious character have multiplied, and they are making the world a better place though often without concern for the individual’s moral well-being. French author Luc Ferry put it

best in his 2002 book, *Man Made God: The Meaning of Life*, when he called this *an eclipse of the vertical dimension of the sacred*.

THE SPLENDOR OF TRUTH

According to Father Thomas Williams, writing in The National Catholic Register, *the notion that religious truth really does not matter is a Child of the Enlightenment*. Neither the French Revolution nor 150 years of Darwinism has been able to explain away the religious impulse. In the 21st century most Americans sense the need for religion but they do not want one that is too demanding or that will change their materialistic life styles. They want a religion that will adapt to their chosen life styles.

Everyone wants good health but few want to diet or discipline their appetites. A half-century ago Bishop Fulton J. Sheen preached that it is hard to say *no* to one’s desires. As a result, society has evolved into a hedonistic regimen that encourages people to say *yes* to their every personal demand without concern for consequence. Religion starts with one’s self, which must be emptied to allow God’s love and his grace to enter. If the ego is present it is difficult for true religious fervor to enter one’s soul.

Detachment from material things is essential for attachment to God. According to Sheen, the human heart is *like a stream that loses its depth as it divides its waters of affection into many channels*. A patriot cannot serve more than one country, and *a truly religious person cannot serve both God and Mammon*. This is the choice that the designer religion has failed to make.

The crux of the problem is the arbitrary nature of the man-made law, which has no connection to the moral or natural law. Just as secularists have effectively divorced morality and Christian ethics from politics, there is a concerted effort to divorce morality from religion, and that would be Satan’s final victory. Marriage, child rearing, and one’s relation to his money or his body—all these questions that had been the jurisdiction of a religion-based morality, are no longer governable by identifiable rules. To correct this problem, the late John Paul II called for the re-establishment of a moral theology, anchored in *the splendor of truth and theological humanism*. This is a cultural imperative!

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