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Newsweek's Search for Spirituality

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Newsweek sets its cover story in contrast to a now famous April 8, 1966 cover story in *TIME*. Dated for Good Friday that year, *TIME*'s cover story asked the question "Is God Dead?" *TIME*'s iconic article represented something of a high watermark for atheism and secularism as emerging movements. The magazine's focus was on a new generation of technocrats and scientists who saw any truth claim that could not be tested by the scientific method as "uninteresting, unreal."

Newsweek understands that the times have changed. "Nobody would write such an article now, in an era of round-the-clock televangelism and official presidential displays of Christian piety." But *Newsweek* sees something else behind *TIME*'s article. The 1966 *TIME* cover story didn't even consider what was going on beyond the liberal Protestant denominations. Henry Luce's *TIME* was, in *Newsweek*'s analysis, obsessed "with the experience of a handful of the most prestigious Protestant denominations." Accordingly, "no one looked for God in the Pentecostal churches of East Los Angeles or among the backwoods Baptists of Arkansas." Furthermore, the magazine was not concerned with Muslims, Hindus, or Buddhists.

Newsweek now documents the fact that the "angst-ridden intellectuals in *TIME*, struggling to imagine God as a cloud of gas in the far reaches of the galaxy, never did sweep the nation." Instead, the years after 1966 saw the nation involved in various waves of religious and spiritual fervor. This era saw the rise to prominence of groups such as Pentecostals and the development of a vast evangelical network of schools, churches, and ministries. The Southern Baptist Convention grew dramatically in terms of both numbers and influence. All this after *TIME*'s intellectuals declared that God was slipping from the scene.

Nevertheless, *Newsweek* documents the fact that the religiosity and search for spirituality that currently marks American culture does not represent a return to orthodox forms of Christian belief. "Whatever is going on here, it's not an explosion of people going to church," *Newsweek* reports. Even as megachurches gather thousands to their services, attendance reports submitted by churches reflect the same basic percentage of Americans attending services from 1966 to the present. A falloff in attendance has actually been noted among African-American churches, "for whom the church is no longer the only respectable avenue of social advancement."

Instead of a return to orthodox patterns of belief and discipleship, Americans have found their way into a playground of various "spiritualities." *Newsweek*'s cover story, "In Search of the Spiritual," documents the fluid and eclectic nature of the current quest for spirituality. Increasing numbers of Americans are turning to forms of Buddhism, Paganism, eco-religion, and Jewish mysticism. The magazine reports that the Web site Beliefnet sends more than eight million daily e-mails, each containing a spiritual message, to more than five million subscribers. These five million subscribers include 460,000 who receive a Buddhist message, 313,000 who prefer the Torah, 268,000 subscribers to "Daily Muslim

Wisdom,” and 236,000 who receive a “Spiritual Weight Loss” message.

The diversity of American spirituality does not stop there, of course. The current interest in Paganism reflects an entire spectrum of various beliefs and practices. “Even nature-worshipping Pagans are divided into a mind-boggling panoply of sects,” the magazine reports, “including Wicca, Druidism, Pantheism, Animism, Teutonic Paganism, the God of Spirituality Folk and, in case you haven’t found one to suit you on that list, Eclectic Paganism.”

Significantly, *Newsweek* links the current rage for eclecticism with “a degree of inclusiveness that would have scandalized an earlier generation.” Indeed, the magazine commissioned a poll that indicates a vast embrace of inclusivism, with eight in ten Americans—including 68 percent of those identified as evangelicals—indicating the belief that more than one faith can lead to salvation. *Newsweek* notes that this “is most likely not what they were taught in Sunday school.”

Sociologist Alan Wolfe of Boston College suggests that the current American search is about the empowerment of the self. “Rather than being about a god who commands you, it’s about finding a religion that empowers you.”

By nature, Americans are a “can do” people, and Americans “like the idea of taking responsibility for their own souls,” *Newsweek* explains. Thus, even when Americans embrace a path like Buddhism, they tend to do so in their own American way. As the magazine explains, “In most Buddhist countries, and among the immigrants in America, the role of the layperson is to support the monks in their lives of contemplation. But American converts want to do their own contemplating.” Surya Das, a Buddhist lama asserts, “People are looking for transformative experience, not just a new creed or dogma.”

Newsweek’s report introduces readers to individuals like Bridgette O’Brien, a graduate student in the University of Florida’s new program in “Religion and Nature.” According to the magazine: “Her worship consists of composting, recycling and daily five-mile runs; she describes herself as ‘the person that picks up earthworms off the sidewalk after the rain to make sure they don’t get stepped on.’” But the magazine also introduces Allen Johnson, a conservative Christian who has started an environmentalist movement in West Virginia known as “Christians for the Mountains.”

The awkwardness evident when Americans clumsily take up the practices of others is graphically—and humorously—depicted by Madonna’s recent embrace of Kabbalism, a Jewish method of devotion that focuses on esoteric wisdom drawn from early Jewish texts. David Blumenthal of Emory University’s Institute for Jewish Studies responded to the rock star’s very public embrace of Kabbalism, noting that “anyone who claims to be a Kabbalist and then sings in public largely in the nude is hardly a Kabbalist.”

In articles that accompany the cover story, *Newsweek* covers a considerable waterfront of emerging spiritualities. The impression left by the total package is of a nation that increasingly embraces soft and self-centered forms of spirituality even as it rejects more demanding forms of belief. Contemporary Americans are rejecting hard-core secularism, but most are not embracing orthodox Christianity. To the contrary, they see spirituality as a means of self-development and as an avenue for expanding the consciousness. They want to get in touch with the universe and with their inner selves, but are not particularly concerned to know what the Creator would demand of them.

The forms of spirituality that form *Newsweek’s* focus are often packaged like consumer products, complete with seminars, conferences, books, and just-add-water forms of religious experience. The ideological secularism of the elites may not be shared by grassroots Americans, but increasing numbers of our neighbors are dabbling in the occult, leaning into mysticism, and inventing their own forms of spirituality.

All this serves to remind evangelicals that our missiological task is more complex than ever before. Our commission remains the same—to bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In order to do that faithfully, we have to run against the grain of the contemporary bent toward “spirituality.” After all, Jesus did not set His Gospel alongside other truth claims as one spirituality among others. Instead, he described Himself as the way, the truth, and the life, and insisted that no man comes to the Father, “except by Me.” [John 14:6]

For Christians, *Newsweek’s* cover story should motivate us to greater faithfulness in Gospel witness — knowing that most of the people we will meet consider themselves “spiritual.” Spiritual, but lost.

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