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Sharp, witty and sometimes brutal in his assessment of the gurus of pop mysticism Robert Price’s book Top Secret is nevertheless a balanced and well-informed and contains the fruits of much good research.

The book explores the world of the contemporary American, spiritual life-style gurus, whose best-selling books have a wide following. While he criticises their teachings by implication, his real purpose is to question their claims to originality and deep scholarship. It is hoped that his publishers had a good libel-attorney advising them.

He savages the work of Rhonda Byrne, whose popular book The Secret was lauded by the highly influential Oprah Winfrey. He rips Deepak Chopra apart for his intellectual sloppiness. He dubs James Redfield, author of The Celestine Prophecy, “the cellophane prophet.” In addition he takes well-aimed swipes at the proponents of modern versions of Gnosticism and the Kabbalah—the latter practice made famous by the pop-diva Madonna.

Here is a flavour of what he has to say about Helen Schucman’s much-read A Course in Miracles.

Utterly without redeeming value … the only conceivable importance of the work is as a testimony to the pathetic state of spiritual hunger and confusion on the part of late twentieth century American “seekers.” Leaden and tedious in style, the work is easily a hundred times longer than it needs to have been to convey its point.

His chapter on Schucman is titled “A Course in Malarkey.” He concludes, in some despair at having found not a single definition of a miracle in her work, what does she mean? Some course in miracles! (Is the tuition refundable?)

Price lambasts the much-revered Dr Deepak Chopra, for his “casual treatment of the Bible, based apparently on loosely memorized quotations that it did not occur to him to check.” For instance, Price claims Chopra attributes quotes to Jesus, which were in fact the words of St Paul, and deeds to Jesus which were those of St Peter. “Chopra’s opportunistic and selective use of biblical data is a clue to how he also uses the data of physics
and nutrition.” Damning criticism of someone whose claim to authenticity and insight is his understanding of both traditional spirituality and the physical sciences.
Chopra, concludes Price,

...is just a Transcendental Meditation salesman who decided to break away and hang out his own shingle .... Chopra is essentially stooping to the standard TM ruse for evangelizing worldly westerners, trying to convince them of Hindu doctrine by means of a misleading (pseudo) scientific idiom.

Robert Price is professor of scriptural studies at the Johnnie Coleman Theological Seminary, ironically, an institution named in honour of a Christian best-selling life-style author. He is not himself a man of standard Christian belief and does not approach the subject as a born-again zealot. He is willing to admit that some of the gurus he targets have useful things to say, even though often, he suggests, these things are little more than rehashed versions of more ancient cultures and wisdom schools. Of Eckhart Tolle he concludes,

... if one finds, as I do, much genuine wisdom in Tolle’s pages, one must not commit the ad hominem fallacy and discount those insights, just because the messenger turns out to be something of an eccentric.

Given some of the barbs he aims at the gurus, Price is surprisingly sympathetic towards Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy. Their work is based around what they claim is an exposé of Christianity. They believe they have the evidence to show the Jesus character was, to quote Price, “based on a sectarian Jewish adaptation of pagan god-men such as Dionysius, Osiris and Attis, a view I happen to share.”

The title of the book is a reference to The Secret, the bestseller by Rhonda Byrne. What secret, Price wonders, lies behind the success of this and other books in this sub-genre of New Age literature that he dubs “pop mysticism?” It cannot just be exposure on the Oprah Winfrey Show, surely?

On the European side of the Atlantic, religion, by and large, remains rooted in history. In America, it seems, religion is about novelty. Spirituality comes almost as a fashion item and new movements spring up on a regular basis. Frequently these movements can be traced to a best-selling author with a plausible manner on the chat shows.

Arguably, Americans fall more readily for the messages of the New Age gurus because their culture lacks the depth of history found in Europe. In Europe, people live in a culture in which religion can be found in the heritage and the landscape. Religion is implied in national identity, it is part of
the cultural baggage. In the western states of the USA, especially California where the gurus find their most willing followers, finding a religious identity is a consumer choice. Followers buy into a philosophy and a brand. Price talks of Americans as being “like sheep without a shepherd.”

“Everywhere one looks, there are the spiritually hungry, lining up at the doors of mega-churches, yoga classes and workshops like the Depression poor waiting to get into the soup kitchen,” says Price. They buy into the latest fashionable spiritual practice, but, Price observes, “if you look closely, you will notice many of them leaving one church, class, workshop and going to try another. You have to wonder if they are being served anything very nourishing.”

The book concludes with three essays, included as appendices, rather than being integrated into the text. They deal with issues concerning cults—the danger perhaps of the spiritually undernourished deciding to gorge themselves on junk food. The last of the three essays deals with doomsday cults and the violence associated with some of the most infamous, such as the Waco conflagration and the People’s Temple mass suicide. He points at how understanding them might help understand the motives and methods of modern terrorist groups.