

Chapter 12

I'm Not Religious; I'm Spiritual!

New Spirituality

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“Ommmmmmmmmmmmmm.” I walked into my living room one night to discover my seven-year-old daughter sitting criss-cross applesauce with her eyes closed, arms slightly bent, and thumbs and index fingers pinched together.

“Um. Honey, what are you doing?” I asked in the most nonchalant tone I could muster. For an instant I imagined my sweet, Jesus-loving daughter going off to college one day, converting to Buddhism, and running off with the first angsty hipster to quote Deepak Chopra. Back to earth. She’s seven. We have time.

“I learned it in school!” she replied innocently as if she had no idea what she was doing. Because she didn’t. She had been taught Transcendental Meditation in a PE class at her private Christian school. Let that sink in for a moment. This may seem shocking to some, but to others, it may seem like a typical Tuesday—even for a Christian school. What’s the big deal? (Turns out it was a rogue PE teacher who hadn’t cleared the idea with the administration, but still...)

This is because our culture has been inundated with New Age mysticism over the past few decades, and most people, including Christians, aren’t aware of how it permeates everything from the way we eat to the

way we talk to the way we think about the world—and in some cases, the way we do church and worship God.

For some of us, the mere mention of the phrase *New Age* conjures images of drug-induced hippies meditating in flower fields, or some wacky crystal-toting holistic healer handing out vitamin samples at a local health-food store. As out of touch as these images may seem, New Age beliefs are incredibly popular in our culture—and they are almost always promoted as being Christian in some way or other.

To understand this new spirituality, we must understand New Age mysticism (NAM).

A Brief History of New Age Mysticism

Finding its roots in ancient occult practices, Eastern religions, and the transcendentalism of the early 1800s, NAM began to blossom in America during the tumultuous sixties. In the midst of war, nuclear threats, the sexual revolution, second-wave feminism, and the civil-rights movement, tensions were high, and people were looking for spiritual answers.

In 1987, *Time* magazine published a story on the growing trend of NAM, featuring Shirley MacLaine on the cover. The issue reported that the movement was growing steadily in the United States, with New Age titles at Bantam Books increasing tenfold in the eighties alone.¹

But almost no one can claim more responsibility for catapulting NAM into the mainstream of American consciousness than daytime talk show queen Oprah Winfrey. In the early nineties, she started discussing New Age books such as *Return to Love* on her number one daytime talk show, establishing its author, Marianne Williamson, as a prominent voice in the New Age movement and propelling her book to the *New York Times* best-seller list. If Oprah endorses a book, it will most likely become a best-seller—a phenomenon known as “the Oprah effect.”

This is just one example, but Oprah’s influence in bringing New Age thought (often delivered in Christian language) into the hearts and homes of millions of Americans is incalculable. Through her many media outlets, she has peddled and promoted New Age thought leaders such as

Deepak Chopra, Eckhart Tolle, Rhonda Byrne, Gary Zukav, Elizabeth Lesser, Michael A. Singer, Mark Nepo, and Rob Bell. (Yes, that's *pastor* Rob Bell, and we'll get to him in a moment.)

By 2012, Pew Research Center reported that one-third of millennials don't ascribe to any particular religion, with 37% of that group describing themselves as "spiritual but not religious," and 58% feeling "a deep connection with nature and the earth."² Combine that with major celebrities telling them to "live their truth," and you've got fertile soil for New Age doctrines to take root under the guise of what's now called the new spirituality.

This new spirituality is just good ol' New Age with a modern makeover. It has shed the image of a fortune teller wielding a crystal ball and has now been refashioned in the image of a hipster wearing skinny jeans...wielding a latte...and often wearing a cross. Same message, different branding.

In this chapter, we will focus on four of the most common and culturally popular lies of the new spirituality, which have to do with meditation, pantheism, the divinity of all mankind, and relativism.

ROAR Like a Mother!

RECOGNIZE the Message

NAM is typically a hodgepodge of Eastern religious ideas, psychology, modern philosophy, pseudoscience, and Christianity. Let's zoom in to see a practical example of NAM teachings in action.

In January 2008, the "Oprah & Friends" satellite radio channel launched a year-long class with daily lessons and affirmations from the book *A Course in Miracles*. The teacher of the class, Marianne Williamson, described it as a "self-study program of spiritual psychotherapy"³ that seeks to take certain "principles" and apply them in practical ways.

The book upon which the class is based, *A Course in Miracles*, was published in 1975, and is a collection of spiritual revelations recorded by Columbia University professor Helen Schucman. Schucman received these messages from an entity she called "the Voice," which she later

identified as “Jesus Christ.”⁴ If you are wondering what kind of “dictations” she received from this supposed “Jesus,” here are a few examples. They sum up the ideas of the new spirituality perfectly:

- “Do not make the pathetic error of ‘clinging to the old rugged cross.’ The only message of the crucifixion is that you can overcome the cross.”⁵
- “The name of Jesus Christ as such is but a symbol. But it stands for love that is not of this world. It is a symbol that is safely used as a replacement for the many names of all the gods to which you pray.”⁶
- “The Atonement is the final lesson he need learn, for it teaches him that, never having sinned, he has no need of salvation.”⁷
- Lesson 61 asks the reader to affirm “I am the light of the world.”⁸
- Lesson 259 asks the reader to affirm “there is no sin.”⁹
- Lesson 70 asks the reader to affirm “my salvation comes from me.”¹⁰

Schucman effectively declared humans to be their own gods and sources of truth by removing all the parts of Christianity that are perceived as unsavory, such as sin, the blood atonement, and separation from God; cobbling together “wisdom” from different religions; and turning Jesus into a generic symbol of love.

Lie #1—God Is All, and All Are One

One of the core principles of the new spirituality is that everything in the universe (including you and me) is made up of the same substance and reality. In other words, there is no separation between you, your dog, and the tree outside that your dog just peed on. This worldview is called *pantheism* and believes that “God” is a type of divine consciousness or energy that is one and the same with the universe, something we can tap into as we become more “enlightened.”

Remember James Cameron's blockbuster movie *Avatar*? This is a prime example of works that promote a pantheistic worldview. But nothing illustrates pantheism better than the much-beloved Star Wars movies.

Star Wars fans will remember the famous scene in *The Empire Strikes Back* in which Buddha... I mean Yoda (did I say Buddha?! Ahem...) is in a swamp training the young Jedi Luke Skywalker. He is teaching Luke to move inanimate objects by accessing "the force" with the power of his mind. Yoda explained the force like this: "Life creates it, makes it grow. Its energy surrounds us and binds us. Luminous beings are we, not this crude matter. You must feel the Force around you; here, between you, me, the tree, the rock, everywhere, yes. Even between the land and the ship."¹¹

Interestingly, the creator of the Star Wars movie franchise, George Lucas, confirmed in a *Time* magazine interview in 1999 that he indeed intended to present the force as a religious symbol: "I put the force into the movies in order to try to awaken a certain kind of spirituality in young people... more a belief in God than any religious system." (Sounds a lot like the "spiritual but not religious" motto that 37% of young people now identify with, doesn't it?) When the interviewer pointed out that the force strongly echoes notions of God that are found in Eastern systems like Buddhism, Lucas replied, "I guess it's more specific in Buddhism... I wanted to try to explain in a different way the religions that have already existed. I wanted to express it all."¹²

You might be surprised to learn how many supposedly Christian thinkers teach something very similar to what Yoda taught Luke. For example, many Christians are aware of the firestorm of controversy that was lit when a pastor from Michigan, Rob Bell, released his book *Love Wins*. Bell's insinuation that there *might* not be a literal hell was received by some Christians as a revolutionary fresh look at an archaic doctrine, while provoking others to cry "Heresy!" In response, conservative theologian John Piper famously tweeted, "Farewell, Rob Bell."

But Bell's treatise on hell was just the beginning. He went on to write a book titled *What We Talk About When We Talk About God*, in which he described God in New Age terms such as a "life force," and "creative

energy,” and an “unending divine vitality.”¹³ Although Rob did make a passing comment about God’s transcendence, he went on to echo many a New Age guru as he described how this “energy” connects everything in the universe: “When we talk about God, we’re talking about the straightforward affirmation that everything has a singular, common source and is infinitely, endlessly, deeply connected.”¹⁴

This isn’t some hippie guru sitting on a mountaintop in India meditating himself into nirvana. This is a well-known and beloved Christian pastor marketing these ideas as Christianity and tying them up in a slick, modern bow. Interestingly, Bell ended up going on tour with Oprah and Deepak Chopra. Full circle achieved.

If you think these ideas would never find their way into otherwise solid biblical churches, consider this: I was so excited last summer when I found an evening vacation Bible school for my kids (five whole evenings to myself in the middle of summer? Sign me up!) and the theme was Star Wars. I picked my children up at the end of the first session just in time to catch the closing skit, in which the children were being taught to understand the work of the Holy Spirit—by comparing Him with the Force in Star Wars. “It’s a feeling that starts in your belly and moves its way up into your heart. That’s how you know you are called.” What? My husband turned to me and said, “Well, there went your free nights this week.” Losing my evenings was a small price to pay for truth.

Lie #2—Congratulations, You Are God!

If we are all truly one, a natural progression in thought will take place. Let’s follow that down the rabbit hole, shall we? If we are all made up of the same substance or reality, then there is no separation between us and God. Therefore, we and God are one—we are all divine. We just need to achieve “higher consciousness” or a higher state of being to fully realize it—just like Jesus did! In fact, there’s a term used in New Age circles called “Christ consciousness,” which is described as the “awakening” Jesus had when He finally realized His own divinity, His connectedness with the universe.

This is incredibly deceptive because of its obvious appeal. If we can just

recognize the divinity in ourselves, we can rid ourselves of old-fashioned and pesky little things like sin and human depravity. In other words, stop seeing yourself as something negative, like a sinner. You are awesome just as you are! Sounds great doesn't it?

These messages aren't always marketed to our kids in obvious ways. Your children aren't going to turn on the latest Netflix show and hear their favorite character say, "Hey kids...guess what? You are god!" But there are incredibly subtle and persuasive forms in which this message permeates children's media and entertainment.

For example, the 2018 Disney movie based on the popular novel by Madeleine L'Engle, *A Wrinkle in Time* (ironically starring Oprah Winfrey), depicts a young girl, Meg, who travels across the universe to save her father. She meets three beings who recruit her for this mission and endow her with wisdom and encouragement. After being told that her father has been trapped by an evil "energy" that is too strong for their "light," Meg is advised by Mrs. Which (Oprah), "You're going to be tested every step of the way. Have faith in who *you* are." In the theatrical trailer, the message "The only way to defeat the darkness is to *become* the light" appears on the screen in bold letters as powerful music is played.

Notice that the emphasis is put on the self. *You* become the light. Have faith in *yourself*. There is no need to reach out to anything outside yourself for help or salvation. *You* are enough. It's all inside of *you* already. This echoes the affirmations listed above from the Oprah master class: "There is no sin. My salvation comes from me." (And if you are god, that makes perfect sense!)

Lie #3—It's All Relative

Today's new spirituality embraces the "freedom" of letting go of the ideas of absolute truth and objective morality. In fact, it teaches that you can create your own reality. If you feel that something is real, it is. If you believe something is right, it is. If you think something is true, it is! Of course, it doesn't take a brain surgeon to see that this way of thinking is a hot mess—riddled with contradictions. In an interesting twist, the new

spirituality teaches that contradictions are a good thing, and that logic is less reliable than the "truth" gained through meditation and personal intuition. Deepak Chopra, quoting a famous Indian spiritual teacher, wrote, "The measurement of enlightenment is how comfortable you feel with your own contradictions."¹⁵ (For more on this, see chapter 9, on moral relativism.)

Lie #4—Meditation Is the Answer to All Your Problems

Aside from the various *beliefs* that make up new spirituality, different *practices* such as meditation have become popular ways to de-stress and connect with the divine. Proponents tout scientific studies to back up its benefits, and usually market meditation as nonreligious—merely psychological in nature.

A few years ago, Oprah was a guest on *The Dr. Oz Show* to talk about her discovery of Transcendental Meditation (TM). She enthusiastically sang the praises of the practice and was so impressed with its results that she paid for hundreds of her staff members to be trained in TM. She explained that stopping twice a day as a staff to meditate at the same time helped improve people's relationships, sleep patterns, and overall job performances.

TM has become very popular in the West with celebrities like Katy Perry, Jerry Seinfeld, Russell Brand, David Lynch, and Clint Eastwood crediting it with improving their lives.

Some types of meditation involve clearing the mind completely of thoughts, but TM involves focusing intently on a mostly meaningless word (a mantra) and then letting that word morph and change into whatever it wants. As practitioners follow the sound wherever it leads, they can sometimes achieve no thought at all. TM expert Bob Roth explained, "TM allows the active thinking mind, all of it, to just settle down and experience quieter levels of thought, and then experience what has been called the source of thought, the unified field of consciousness or transcendent level of the mind."¹⁶ Notice the focus on the self—that is, connecting with what's already inside of you.

Another popular form of meditation in the West is “mindfulness.” Former New Age enthusiast and mindfulness devotee turned Christian educator Marcia Montenegro defines it as “a technique of sitting still (though there is also a walking meditation), observing the breath, being aware solely of the present moment, and learning to let thoughts pass by without entertaining them.”¹⁷ Although often presented as a secular method founded on science, mindfulness is deeply rooted in the Buddhist teaching of detachment—disconnecting from desire, which keeps people from achieving nirvana.

OFFER Discernment

Proponents of the new spirituality are often sincere seekers who are looking for spiritual answers. They comprehend the emptiness of atheism and the bankruptcy of naturalism. As commendable as these traits are, they fall into an age-old trap that the apostle Paul laid out in Romans 1.

1. Pantheism

Christianity is unique among most other religions in that it teaches that God is personal and entirely distinct from His creation. He is not the rocks, the trees, or the ocean; He created those things and is separated from them. This is referred to as God’s *transcendence*. God is also not a force or an energy field or some type of cosmic glue—He is a Person.

In Romans 1, Paul explained where pantheism came from. He started off by saying that all people can know certain things about God just by observing nature. (Isn’t that cool?) In other words, we can look at the trees, the sky, and the world around us and know that God exists and that He is powerful. Paul went on to describe certain people’s minds becoming dark and confused to the point that they began to think they were smart when, instead, they were utter fools.

Paul said it this way: “They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised” (verse 25). That’s pantheism in a nutshell—instead of worshipping an all-powerful Creator, people worshipped the *things* He created.

2. *Divinity of All Mankind*

The Bible clearly states that human beings are flawed (that's putting it lightly). It teaches that our hearts are wicked, and that we have all sinned to the point that we cannot approach God on our own. In the Old Testament, the prophet Jeremiah described the human heart as "desperately sick" (Jeremiah 17:9), and in the New Testament, the apostle Paul described us as being "dead in our sin" (Ephesians 2:1). In fact, Mark 7:21-23 lists all the evil things that flow out of our hearts (evil thoughts, deceit, and murder, oh my!). That's a far cry from being divine. That actually puts us in the position of needing a Savior.

What about that "Christ consciousness"? The Bible describes Jesus as the resurrected Christ—the anointed One, *not* as some type of symbol of divine love or a representative of any other god you might choose to pray to. Jesus wasn't just a regular guy who achieved some type of enlightenment or divine status. Rather, He claimed to exist eternally with God before He took on human flesh and came to earth (John 8:58; 17:5). In fact, a careful reading of the Gospels shows that He displayed all the same attributes as God Himself. He didn't just come to invite us all to have some sort of epiphany and realize that we are all united as humankind. He came to save us from our sin.

3. *Relativism*

Before we get into what the Bible says, can we talk some common sense? Put on your thinking cap and come on a journey with me.

Let's start by talking about truth. Truth is when you believe or say something that lines up with reality. We all want what we believe about the world to line up with reality, right? (You're likely to be diagnosed with some kind of disorder otherwise.)

Instinctually, we all know that two contradictory statements can't both be true at the same time and in the same sense. For example, if I hold up an apple and say, "This is an apple," and then say, "This is not an apple," one of those statements is incorrect. Clearly, the apple can't both *be* an apple and *not be* an apple at the same time and in the same sense. So if I

say it's an apple, and *you* say it's not an apple, one of us is wrong—one of us has a belief that doesn't reflect reality. This makes that belief, by definition, *not true*.

There is no such thing as *your* truth or *my* truth. "My truth" is a myth. There is only *the* truth. Imagine you are helping your daughter with her math homework, and she solves a problem by coming up with a random number. When she turns in her homework the next day, what do you think her teacher will say when she explains that she was just "living her truth"?

Or imagine your teenager sneaking into your purse and stealing a \$20 bill. When you confront him about it, he says, "I'm just living my truth, mom." It wouldn't fly—not for a second.

Or imagine you sincerely believe you are capable of flying. What would it mean to "live your truth" when you decide to test your theory for the first time by jumping off a skyscraper? Yikes. (If this is you, please do NOT follow your heart. If you've been told to never give up on your dreams, please—give up on this dream immediately.)

I could go on, but you get the point. It's a nice enough idea to *say* that contradictions are a good thing, but when played out in reality, it just doesn't work.

The Bible has a lot to say about the nature of truth. In fact, it teaches that Truth is a *Person*. Jesus said, "I am the way, the *truth*, and the life" (John 14:6). At His trial before Pilate, He said, "Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." That is the opposite of "live your truth." We are supposed to live *His* truth—the truth.

4. Meditation

Some Christians might say, "Meditation is biblical, right?" They are correct, but it depends on what type of meditation they're talking about. There are many Bible verses that speak positively of meditation—as long as the focus is God's Word. In fact, the word *meditation*, when used in the Old Testament, means to think deeply, ponder, or reflect on something. Psalm 119:15 says, "I will meditate on your precepts." and verse 148 says,

“My eyes stay open through the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promises.” We are commanded in Scripture to meditate on what God has to say. Simply put, this is an intense focus and study on the meaning and application of Scripture.

Are there some studies that show supposed health “benefits” of meditation? Sure, but we are not just aiming at physical health. Spiritual health is just as important, and most types of meditation being taught are based on blatantly New Age and antibiblical principles, opening your mind to who knows what.

Bottom line: Biblical meditation leads you to focus on something outside of yourself, to focus on God’s truth. Thus it *engages* the logic/thinking part of your brain. New Age meditation, on the other hand, forces you inward and *disengages* the logic/thinking part of your brain—supposedly connecting you with the “oneness” of everything.

ARGUE for a Healthier Approach

The main thrust of this chapter is to help you recognize that the key teachings of the new spirituality culminate in a total dependence upon and worship of yourself. Have you ever heard the mantra “You are enough”? Actually, Scripture tells us the opposite. You are absolutely, most definitely *not* enough. You are so desperately not enough that it would be impossible to even calculate your not-enoughness.

This is actually good news! In fact, it’s the whole point of Christianity: We are all sinners in desperate need of a Savior. We can strive all we want, try all we want, meditate all we want, center ourselves all we want, but doing these things will never make us good. Apart from Christ, there is nothing that can save us, redeem us, cleanse us, or make us worthy. That’s why the new spirituality is a sham. It seeks to convince you that you are already good—but a quick skim through the history of human behavior will paint quite a different picture.¹⁹

This realization is what prompted New Age enthusiast Mary Poplin to surrender her life to Christ. She wrote,

I remembered a popular New Age teacher I had once seen holding court in a California restaurant, aglow with light and love. Afterward, this woman had gotten into an altercation with the owner of a car she had backed into accidentally. Amid her angry shrieking, the man kept telling her, calmly but firmly, "This is who you really are." When I heard this, I knew I was just like her: pretending to be good, yet filled with bile.²⁰

Mary came to realize what Christianity has taught all along. No matter how hard we try, how often we meditate, and how much we practice certain principles, we can never make ourselves good. Our hearts are desperately sick, and only the blood of Jesus can make them clean and whole.

REINFORCE Through Discussion, Discipleship, and Prayer

One of the main strategies of the enemy is to normalize and desensitize our kids to the new spirituality. Watching their favorite cartoon character "live her truth" or "follow her heart," can seem so positive and beneficial. Take, for example, the popular Disney Junior television show *Mickey and the Roadster Racers*, and an episode entitled "Guru Goofy." According to the episode's description, "Goofy tries to teach Donald mindfulness in order to calm down for the Roadster Games." Hey, if Goofy is practicing mindfulness, it must be harmless and even helpful for anxiety, right?

It's fairly easy to spot doctrines of the new spirituality in "Guru Goofy," but how can we learn to recognize these ideas when they are more carefully camouflaged? Three words: practice, practice, practice. Be on the lookout for the message espoused by the new spirituality on TV, in commercials, movies, apps, online games, social media, and billboards. Make a game out of this, make it a fun activity with your kids. Teach them to be like detectives looking for clues.

When they hear a phrase like "follow your heart," ask them practical questions like, "What if someone's heart is telling them to do something bad?" and "What does the Bible say about our hearts?" Injecting humor

can help as well. Simply lean over and whisper, "What if my heart tells me to take a nap in the middle of a busy street?" Or, "What if I get mad at your dad and my heart tells me to kick him in the shins?"

If a commercial on TV communicates, "You are enough," you might say, "Hey, can you go pick up that car with your bare hands? No? You mean you actually *aren't* enough?" Or in response to "The answers you seek are inside yourself," you might say, "Really? Even the answer to how to fix the broken dishwasher?" Your kids may roll their eyes, but these kinds of questions will train them to think critically as they engage with their culture.

When our kids witness us interacting with new spirituality calmly, without fear, and even with a bit of humor, it will show them that we are a safe place to help them process what they are hearing and will open the lines of communication for years to come.

PAWS for Prayer

Praise

God, I praise You as the Rock of Ages, the Ancient of Days. You are the voice of truth that projects across all time and eternity. You alone are the light of the world. You are transcendent, the creator who is distinct from His creation. You show us Yourself through Your creation and its "magnificence enlightens us" to Your nature (Romans 1:20 THE VOICE).

Admit

Lord, forgive Your church, whether in ignorance or with awareness, when we have tread in areas contrary to Your truth. Forgive all who have traded "the splendor and beauty of the immortal God to worship images of the common man or woman, bird or reptile, or the next beast that tromps along" (Romans 1:23 THE VOICE), and who "gave their lives and devotion to the creature rather than to the Creator Himself" (Romans 1:25 THE VOICE).