God as best seller: Deepak Chopra, Neal Walsch and New Age theology

by Lois Malcolm in the September 20, 2003 issue

A walk down the aisle of any major bookstore reveals that spirituality sells, and that spirituality is not confined to the "religion" or "Christian inspiration" sections. Diverse though the literature on spirituality is, a body of popular teachings about God—and how we might experience God—is emerging within it. If the civil religion and public theologies of mainline Protestantism no longer capture the imagination of the average American, perhaps this new teaching is taking its place. Not identified with any traditional or established belief or practice, it is influenced by a range of sources, including westernized forms of Hinduism and Buddhism, the "metaphysical" beliefs of post-Christian churches (e.g., Unity churches) and 12-step appeals to God "as you perceive him."

Two authors in particular—Deepak Chopra and Neal Donald Walsch—have captured people's imagination. Whether or not one finally agrees with their views—and Christians of all stripes will have much to argue with in both cases—they give important insights into the nature of God-talk in our time.

In the 1980s, Deepak Chopra left his endocrinology practice in order to incorporate insights from traditional healing traditions into Western medical practice. He has created a highly successful—and lucrative—series of books, videotapes and workshops, among other things. After writing books on health, the "ageless body," creating affluence, overcoming addictions, "healing the heart" and spiritual practices, he turned his attention to God. Though not his latest book, *How to Know God* is his most explicitly theological work and serves as an exemplar of how a version of Vedanta Hinduism (introduced to the West by such exponents as Swami Vivekananda and Paramahansa Yogananda) has been made popular and accessible.

Drawing on neuroscience, quantum physics and a westernized Hinduism, Chopra states that the brain is hardwired to know God. The book's fittingly titled first chapter, "A Real and Useful God," explains how all people have direct access to God.

The human nervous system has seven biological responses that correspond to seven levels of divine experience (which correlate with popular Hindu teaching about “chakras”—seven energy centers in the body that contain universal spiritual lessons—although Chopra does not mention “chakras” in his book).

Chopra conceives of the universe as a three-part construct shaped like a sandwich. God and the material world form the outside layers, and a “transition zone” lies in between. With reference to Einstein, “who made time and space into fluid things that merge into each other,” Chopra suggests that the “material world” is made up of objects and events we can identify; the “transition zone” is a quantum reality or domain where energy turns into matter; and the place beyond time and space—the origin of the universe, the place where God is—is like a “virtual reality or domain.” At this third level God creates and organizes energy and information, turning the “chaos of quantum soup” into “stars, galaxies, rain forests, human beings, and our own thoughts, emotions, memories and desires.”

The seven responses to our environment represent seven ways of responding to God—or making decisions within the quantum realm—and thus organize our experience of reality. Chopra describes these responses with precision, in ascending order of spiritual development. The “fight-or-flight response” enables us to survive in the face of danger. In this phase, we choose “fear” (along with family, community, a sense of belonging and material comforts). The idea of “God as Protector” fits this image of the world—a hidden God who is vengeful, capricious, jealous and judgmental, meting out reward and punishment, but who is also sometimes merciful.

The “reactive response” enables the brain to create a personal identity by defining the needs of “I, me and mine.” Here we choose “power” (along with success, influence, status and other ego satisfactions). “God the Almighty” rules here, a God who is sovereign, omnipotent, just, rational, rule-bound and the answerer of prayers.

In the “restful awareness response,” we choose to “know ourselves” (this goes with insight, centeredness, self-acceptance and inner silence). At this level God is the “God of peace,” a God who is detached, calm, consoling, conciliatory and meditative.

In the “intuitive response” we choose “inner reflection” (along with empathy, tolerance and forgiveness). “God the Redeemer” fits this world—a God who understands, is tolerant, forgiving, nonjudgmental, inclusive and accepting.

In the “creative response” we choose to create (this entails inspiration, expanded creativity in art, science and unlimited discovery). This is the realm of “God the Creator,” a God who is unlimited creative potential, has control over space and time, and is abundant, open, willing to be known and inspired.

In the “visionary response” we choose to love, in order to heal ourselves and others (along with emphasizing reverence, compassion, devotion and service). Here the “God of miracles” reigns—a God of prophets and seers who transforms, enlightens, and exists beyond all causes.

Seventh and final is the “sacred response.” Here, we choose simply “to be” (having wholeness and unity with God). The “God of pure being”—the “I am”—belongs to this world, a God who is unborn, undying, unchanging, unmoving, incomprehensible and infinite. This is the highest level human beings can achieve.

In addition to describing each of these levels, Chopra devotes a whole chapter to “strange powers”—which include such things as inspiration and insight, genius, prodigious powers in children, memories of former lifetimes, telepathy and ESP, alter egos (multiple personality syndrome), synchronicity, clairvoyance and prophecy. But he is most interested in helping people reach the final, transcendent state of an ultimate experience of union with God.

Neal Donald Walsch’s three volumes of *Conversations with God* and his other books, including, most recently, *The New Revelations*, emerged out of a very different personal situation. Raised a Roman Catholic, Walsch was strongly interested in spiritual questions, though he had deep reservations about “religious” people, who seemed to him to be less joyful and more judgmental and angry than others. After a series of difficult relationships with women (including four divorces), a number of children and a range of careers—from being a radio station program director to a newspaper reporter to owning his own public relations and marketing firm—Walsch became sick, jobless and homeless. In a period of deep despair he wrote an anguished letter to God. To his surprise, he received answers from God, he said, and was soon writing down notes that would later become his best-selling *Conversations with God* books.

While Chopra’s books are meticulously organized, Walsch’s ramble. They read like transcripts of late-night college bull sessions or very, very rough drafts of a first-year seminarian’s essay on God. Nonetheless, one can piece together a fairly coherent

picture of God and the world from this rambling. According to Walsch, we can discern God's voice amidst the cacophony of voices that bombard us both within and without because God's voice is linked with our highest feelings, thoughts and experiences. But God does not force Godself on us. In fact, God doesn't care about our specific choices—God has given us free choice to do as we will and is committed to that freedom—although God cares passionately about the final outcome of our lives.

This dichotomy is at the heart of God's relationship to us. It is linked to our two most basic emotions, fear and love. We fear because we doubt the ultimate outcome of our lives, doubt that God's acceptance of us is unconditional. In fact, our very notion of a devil—that there is a power that can compete with God—is rooted in such fear, as is our notion of a God who rewards, punishes and judges based on what we have done.

In describing this dichotomy, Walsch says that he is drawing on an "eastern" mystical definition of God as the "No-thing" and a "western" practical definition of God as ultimate reality. God is both "All that Is" and "All that Is Not." "That which Is"—pure energy, unseen, unheard and unknown—can only experience what it is by creating "What is Not." Thus, God creates a reference point within itself in order to create a space for that "Which is Not." God, then, divides itself into a "this" and a "that" and a "here" and a "there"—and that which is "not" entailed by either dichotomy. The part of God that finds itself in the second half of the "Am/Am not" equation explodes into an infinite number of units smaller than the whole—what Walsh calls "spirits"—and these spirits (what human beings are) have the same power to create that God has. This is what it means for human beings to be created in the image and likeness of God.

Why would a God who is all-perfect and all-loving allow natural disasters, war, injustice, disease and personal suffering and pain? God could not demonstrate what love is without creating its opposite. We may experience things as distinct in our daily lives, conceptualizing them as opposites. But ultimately—that is, in God—they are not separated. Further, God does not will that bad things happen even though God allows us to make choices, individually or collectively, that may lead to them. God simply observes the choices we make even as God endows each of us with the capacity to create circumstances that best enact our highest life purpose.

Though we cannot change the course of external events, since these are collectively created, we can change our inner experience of them. By doing so, we take greater responsibility for ourselves, recognizing that nothing happens by accident and that life is not a product of chance. Events and people are drawn to us for our own purposes, whether on an individual or planetary level. We can reduce the pain of this world by changing our consciousness, the way we view life. Choices made at a collective level are as important as choices made on an individual level.

Walsch covers a wide range of themes. He addresses not only topics like personhood, self-creation, loving relationships and awareness and wakefulness, but also themes such as power, conflict resolution, fairness and tolerance, diversities and similarities, ethical economics, and the relationship between science and spirituality.

These books seem to indicate that ours is an age very much like the “religious” age addressed in Paul’s famous speech at the Areopagus (Acts 17). Not only Jews, Christians and Muslims recognize the God who made the world and everything in it. As these authors maintain, all people “seek him”and yearn to “feel after him and find him,” this God who is “not far from each of us” but is the one in whom “we live and move and have our being” (17:24-28). Indeed, Chopra and Walsch speak about God and our capacity to experience God with the realism and confidence of the ancient philosophers and poets that Luke quotes as he forms this Pauline speech in Acts.

Like many ancients, these modern authors presuppose God’s existence and seek to show people how to overcome their primitive responses to life—responses that, in Chopra’s words, lead to the “tyranny” or “addiction” that occurs at the two lowest levels of response to the world. Unlike much modern theology, neither offers a theodicy—a justification for how a good God can allow evil. Indeed, both hold the rather traditional view that suffering and pain are here to help us grow spiritually. Neither links the spiritual life with suffering or traditional notions of asceticism (e.g., poverty, chastity or obedience to authority). Both authors stress abundance and all that goes along with it: wealth, health, sexual fulfillment and, perhaps most important for modern persons, personal autonomy and self-determination. Creativity (Walsch) and one’s capacity for attention (Chopra) are the central points of contact with God. The individual is the locus for experiencing God.

One cannot but think about the French social philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville, who during a 19th-century visit to America observed that individuals in America can so abstract themselves from familial and institutional communities that their lives become undifferentiated, focused solely on fulfilling their own wishes. A kind of pantheism tends to accompany this individualism. The individual generalizes her experience onto the universe as a whole.

There is much in Chopra's and Walsch's teaching that directly counters Christian belief and practice. Christians draw a much more radical distinction between Creator and creatures. For Christians, dealing with the gravity of sin and evil, both corporate and individual, requires much more than a shift in consciousness. Jesus, therefore, is not a mere teacher but the Son of God whose incarnation, death and resurrection usher in a new eschatological age of redemption.

And the Christian life is not merely an individual affair. Like the Jewish prophets, Jesus preached a reign of God that entails a strong communal sense of justice and mercy. Since his death, Christians have been baptized into his "body," which means being related not only to the universal community of those crucified and raised in the "body of Christ" but to the larger enactment of God's reign in the world.

Still, Christians have much to learn from these books. They offer a powerful diagnosis of the "tyrannies" and "addictions" many have experienced in Christian communities where a vengeful and capricious God is preached, and where that preaching is reinforced by powerful personalities or conceptions of biblical, theological or hierarchical authority. In a time when religious rhetoric accompanies not only much political conflict throughout the world but terrorist acts and calls for military action, this literature offers an image of God's profound commitment to peace among all people. It easily fills the vacuum left by a tepid and secularized Christianity that has lost a palpable sense of God's presence and power.

As Paul finally challenged the idolatry of his hearers, so Christians must challenge the idolatry of any attempt to reduce God's power and presence to our will for self-determination. Yet these books also indict Christian pretensions, either to a vindictive and judgmental God or to a vague, secularized deity that has lost its vitality and power. They remind us of the rich inheritance we have as those "created" in God's image (Gen. 1:28) and "adopted" as God's children, having access through the Spirit to all Jesus shared with his Father (Rom. 8:16-17; cf. Gal. 4:6). If we follow Paul's bold logic, such adoption means being endowed with the "mind of Christ," a mind capable of spiritually discerning even the very "depths of

God” (1 Cor. 2:10-16; cf. Rom. 8:26-27).