Buddhism: A Christian Perspective

Dr. Patrick Zukeran gives a brief overview of the basic beliefs of Buddhism, covering the doctrine of salvation, eternal state, the founder, and a comparison to Christianity.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

For centuries, Buddhism has been the dominant religion of the Eastern world. With the rise of the Asian population in the United States, Buddhism has had a tremendous impact on this country as well. Presently, there are an estimated 300 million Buddhists in the world and 500 thousand in the United States.{1} It remains the dominant religion in the state of Hawaii, and many prominent Americans have accepted this religion, including the former governor of California, Jerry Brown,{2} Tina Turner, Phil Jackson (coach of the Los Angeles Lakers), Richard Gere, and Steven Seagal. The Dalai Lama has become a prominent spiritual figure for many throughout the world.

The Origin of Buddhism

Buddhism began as an offspring of Hinduism in the country of India. The founder was Siddhartha Gautama. It is not easy to give an accurate historical account of the life of Gautama since no biography was recorded until five hundred years after his death. Today, much of his life story is clouded in myths and legends which arose after his death. Even the best historians of our day have several different—and even contradictory—accounts of Gautama's life.

Siddhartha Gautama was born in approximately 560 B.C. in northern India. His father, Suddhodana, was the ruler over a district near the Himalayas which is today the country of

Nepal. Suddhodana sheltered his son from the outside world and confined him to the palace where he surrounded Gautama with pleasures and wealth.

Despite his father's efforts, however, Gautama one day saw the darker side of life on a trip he took outside the palace walls. He saw four things that forever changed his life: an old man, a sick man, a dead man, and an ascetic. Deeply distressed by the suffering he saw, he decided to leave the luxury of palace life and begin a quest to find the answer to the problem of pain and human suffering.

Gautama left his family and traveled the country seeking wisdom. He studied the Hindu scriptures under Brahmin priests, but became disillusioned with the teachings of Hinduism. He then devoted himself to a life of extreme asceticism in the jungle. He soon concluded, however, that asceticism did not lead to peace and self-realization but merely weakened the mind and body.

Gautama eventually turned to a life of meditation. While deep in meditation under a fig tree known as the *Bohdi* tree (meaning, "tree of wisdom"), Gautama experienced the highest degree of God-consciousness called *nirvana*. Gautama then became known as *Buddha*, the "enlightened one." He believed he had found the answers to the questions of pain and suffering. His message now needed to be proclaimed to the whole world.

As he began his teaching ministry, he gained a quick audience with the people of India since many had become disillusioned with Hinduism. By the time of his death at age 80, Buddhism had become a major force in India.

Expansion and Development of Buddhism

Buddhism remained mostly in India for three centuries until King Ashoka, who ruled India from 274-232 B.C., converted to Buddhism. Ashoka sent missionaries throughout the world, and

Buddhism spread to all of Asia.

Even before its expansion, two distinct branches developed, a conservative and a liberal school of thought. The conservative school is labeled Theravada, and it became the dominant form of Buddhism in Southeast Asia. Thus, it is also called Southern Buddhism. Southern Buddhism has remained closer to the original form of Buddhism. This school follows the Pali Canon of scripture, which, although written centuries after Gautamas death, contains the most accurate recording of his teachings.

The liberal school is Mahayana Buddhism, which traveled to the north into China, Japan, Korea, and Tibet, and is also called Northern Buddhism. As it spread north, it adopted and incorporated beliefs and practices from the local religions of the land. The two branches of Buddhism are so different they appear to be two different religions rather than two branches of the same tree. Here are a few differences.

Theravada Buddhism sees Buddha as a man. Gautama never claimed to be deity, but rather a “way shower.” Mahayana Buddhism, however, worships Buddha as a manifestation of the divine Buddha essence. Since Gautama, many other manifestations or *bodhisattvas* have appeared. An example is Tibetan Buddhism, which worships the spiritual leader the Dalai Lama as a bodhisattva.

Theravada adheres to the Pali Canon and Buddhas earliest teachings. Since Mahayana believes there have been many manifestations, this branch incorporates many other texts written by the bodhisattvas as part of their canon.

Theravada teaches that each person must attain salvation through their own effort, and this requires one to relinquish earthly desires and live a monastic life. Therefore, only those few who have chosen this lifestyle will attain nirvana. Mahayana teaches that salvation comes through the grace of the

bodhisattvas and so many may attain salvation.

Divine beings do not have a place in Theravada. The primary focus is on the individual attaining enlightenment, and a divine being, or speculations of such, only hinders the process. Therefore, several sects of this branch are atheistic. Mahayana, on the other hand, has many diverse views of God since this branch is inclusive, and has adopted the beliefs and practices of various religions. Many schools are pantheistic in their worldview while others are animistic. Buddha is worshipped as a divine being. Some schools pay homage to a particular bodhisattva sent to their people. Other schools have a mixture of gods whom they worship. For example, Japanese Buddhism blended with Shintoism and includes worship of the Shinto gods with the teachings and worship of Buddha.

When speaking with a Buddhist, it is important to understand what branch of Buddhism they are talking about. The two branches are dramatically different. Even within Mahayana Buddhism, the sects can be as different as Theravada is to Mahayana.

The Way of Salvation

The main question Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, sought to answer was, “Why is there pain and suffering?” His belief in reincarnation (the belief that after death one returns to earthly life in a higher or lower form of life according to his good or bad deeds) prompted a second question that also needed to be answered: “How does one break this rebirth cycle?” The basic teachings of Buddhism, therefore, focus on what Gautama believed to be the answer to these questions. These basic tenets are found in the Four Noble Truths and in the Eight-fold Path. Let us begin with the Four Noble Truths.

The First Noble Truth is that there is pain and suffering in the world. Gautama realized that pain and suffering are omnipresent in all of nature and human life. To exist means to

encounter suffering. Birth is painful and so is death. Sickness and old age are painful. Throughout life, all living things encounter suffering.

The Second Noble Truth relates to the cause of suffering. Gautama believed the root cause of suffering is desire. It is the craving for wealth, happiness, and other forms of selfish enjoyment which cause suffering. These cravings can never be satisfied for they are rooted in ignorance.

The Third Noble Truth is the end of all suffering. Suffering will cease when a person can rid himself of all desires.

The Fourth Noble Truth is the extinguishing of all desire by following the Eight-fold path. “The Eight-fold path is a system of therapy designed to develop habits which will release people from the restrictions caused by ignorance and craving.”{3}

Here are the eight steps in following the Eight-fold path. The first is the Right View. One must accept the Four Noble Truths. Step two is the Right Resolve. One must renounce all desires and any thoughts like lust, bitterness, and cruelty, and must harm no living creature. Step three is the Right Speech. One must speak only truth. There can be no lying, slander, or vain talk. Step four is the Right Behavior. One must abstain from sexual immorality, stealing, and all killing.

Step five is the Right Occupation. One must work in an occupation that benefits others and harms no one. Step six is the Right Effort. One must seek to eliminate any evil qualities within and prevent any new ones from arising. One should seek to attain good and moral qualities and develop those already possessed. Seek to grow in maturity and perfection until universal love is attained. Step seven is the Right Contemplation. One must be observant, contemplative, and free of desire and sorrow. The eighth is the Right Meditation.

After freeing oneself of all desires and evil, a person must concentrate his efforts in meditation so that he can overcome any sensation of pleasure or pain and enter a state of transcending consciousness and attain a state of perfection. Buddhists believe that through self-effort one can attain the eternal state of nirvana.

In Buddhism, ones path to nirvana relies on the effort and discipline of the individual. By contrast, Jesus taught our goal is not a state of non-conscious being, but an eternal relationship with God. There is nothing one can do to earn a right relationship with God. Instead, we must receive His gift of grace, the sacrificial death of His Son, Jesus Christ and this restores our relationship with our creator.

Karma, *Samsara*, and *Nirvana*

Three important concepts in understanding Buddhism are *karma*, *samsara*, and *nirvana*.

Karma refers to the law of cause and effect in a person's life, reaping what one has sown. Buddhists believe that every person must go through a process of birth and rebirth until he reaches the state of *nirvana* in which he breaks this cycle. According to the law of karma, "You are what you are and do what you do, as a result of what you were and did in a previous incarnation, which in turn was the inevitable outcome of what you were and did in still earlier incarnations."{4} For a Buddhist, what one will be in the next life depends on one's actions in this present life. Unlike Hindus, Buddha believed that a person can break the rebirth cycle no matter what class he is born into.

The second key concept is the law of *samsara* or *transmigration*. This is one of the most perplexing and difficult concepts in Buddhism to understand. The law of

Samsara holds that everything is in a birth and rebirth cycle. Buddha taught that people do not have individual souls. The existence of an individual self or ego is an illusion. There is no eternal substance of a person, which goes through the rebirth cycle. What is it then that goes through the cycle if not the individual soul? What goes through the rebirth cycle is only a set of feelings, impressions, present moments, and the karma that is passed on. "In other words, as one process leads to another, … so one's human personality in one existence is the direct cause of the type of individuality which appears in the next."{5} The new individual in the next life will not be exactly the same person, but there will be several similarities. Just how close in identity they will be is not known.

The third key concept is *nirvana*. The term means "the blowing out" of existence. Nirvana is very different from the Christian concept of heaven. Nirvana is not a place like heaven, but rather an eternal state of being. It is the state in which the law of karma and the rebirth cycle come to an end. It is the end of suffering; a state where there are no desires and the individual consciousness comes to an end. Although to our Western minds this may sound like annihilation, Buddhists would object to such a notion. Gautama never gave an exact description of nirvana, but his closest reply was this. "There is disciples, a condition, where there is neither earth nor water, neither air nor light, neither limitless space, nor limitless time, neither any kind of being, neither ideation nor non-ideation, neither this world nor that world. There is neither arising nor passing-away, nor dying, neither cause nor effect, neither change nor standstill."{6}

In contrast to the idea of reincarnation, the Bible teaches in Hebrews 9:27 that "man is destined to die once and after that to face judgment." A major diverging point between Buddhism and Christianity is that the Bible refutes the idea of

reincarnation. The Bible also teaches that in the eternal state, we are fully conscious and glorified individuals whose relationship with God comes to its perfect maturity.

Jesus and Gautama

There is much I admire in the life and teachings of Gautama. Being raised in the Japanese Buddhist culture, I appreciate the ethical teachings, the arts, and architecture influenced by Buddhism. As I studied the life and teachings of Gautama and of Jesus, I discovered some dramatic differences.

First, Buddha did not claim to be divine. Theravada remains true to his teaching that he was just a man. The idea that he was divine was developed in Mahayana Buddhism 700 years after his death. Furthermore, Northern Buddhism teaches that there have been other manifestations of the Buddha or bodhisattvas and some believe Jesus to be one as well. However, Jesus did not claim to be one of many manifestations of God; He claimed to be the one and only Son of God. This teaching was not the creation of his followers but a principle He taught from the beginning of His ministry. In fact, the salvation He preached was dependent on understanding His divine nature.

Second, Buddha claimed to be a way shower. He showed the way to nirvana, but it was up to each follower to find his or her own path. Christ did not come to show the way; He claimed to *be* the way. While Buddhism teaches that salvation comes through Buddhas teachings, Christ taught salvation is found in *Him*. When Jesus said, “I am the way the truth and the life” (John 14:6), He was saying He alone is the one who can give eternal life, for He is the source of truth and life. Not only did He make the way possible, He promises to forever be with and empower all who follow Him to live the life that pleases God.

Third, Buddha taught that the way to eliminate suffering and attain enlightenment was to eliminate all desire. Christ

taught that one should not eliminate all desire but that one must have the right desire. He stated, “Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be satisfied.” Christ taught that we should desire to know Him above all other wants.

Fourth, Buddha performed no miracles in his lifetime. Christ affirmed His claims to be divine through the miracles He performed. He demonstrated authority over every realm of creation: the spiritual realm, nature, sickness, and death. These miracles confirmed the claims that He was more than a good teacher, but God incarnate.

Finally, Buddha is buried in a grave in Kusinara at the foot of the Himalaya Mountains. Christ, however, is alive. He alone conquered sin and the grave. His death paid the price for sin, and His resurrection makes it possible for all people to enter into a personal and eternal relationship with God.

After a comparative study, I came to realize Buddha was a great teacher who lived a noble life, but Christ is the unique revelation of God who is to be worshipped as our eternal Lord and Savior.

Notes

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4. Davis Taylor and Clark Offner, *The World’s Religions,* Norman Anderson, ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1975), p. 174.
5. John Noss, *Man’s Religions* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1968), p. 182.

6. Taylor and Offner, *The World's Religions, p. 177.*

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Martial Arts

The Origins and Popularity of the Martial Arts

Gliding across the Pacific, the Asian martial arts have become part of the mainstream of American culture. Today there are an estimated two to three million practitioners in the United States, 40 percent of which are children between the ages of 7 and 14.{1} The martial arts industry generates annual revenue topping the $1 billion mark.

Why this rise in popularity? For one thing, people today are interested in and more willing to accept Eastern ideas. What was once considered "foreign" is now embraced as old, and thus "tried and true." Advocates extol the physical benefits and self- discipline that result from its practices. Movies further popularize martial arts with films such as *Enter the Dragon*, *Rush Hour,* and the Oscar winning *Crouching Tiger-Hidden Dragon*. The rise in crime also has people seeking to learn ways to protect themselves and their loved ones.

There are few written records regarding the origin of martial arts. These are interwoven with myths or verbal traditions that make it difficult to accurately trace the record. Archaeological evidence indicates that the martial arts may have begun as early as 2000 BC in the Fertile Crescent.{2} From there it traveled eastward to India and China.

The father of the Asian martial arts according to the most popular tradition is an Indian Buddhist Monk named Bodhidharma who arrived in China in the late fifth century A.D. Settling in a monastery in the Songshan Mountains located in the Kingdom of Wei, he developed a series of mind-body exercises designed to improve the health of the monks and assist them in meditation. Based on the movements of different real and mythological animals and incorporating concepts from Taoism and Zen Buddhism, Bodhidharma taught a style of combat known as Shao-lin gung fu. Gradually, Shao-lin gung fu migrated from the temples to the Chinese populace. It was adapted and refined as it spread across the country and eventually, to the world.

Martial arts have been very popular among Christians. Scot Conway, founder of the Christian Martial Arts Foundation, estimates between 50 and 70 percent of American martial artists – and roughly 20 percent of all instructors – consider themselves Christians.{3} But other Christians argue that the philosophy of Asian martial arts is wholly incompatible with biblical teaching. They point to the origin of Eastern mysticism as reason for Christians to avoid any level of participation. Still others say Jesus' exhortation to "turn the other cheek" shows that using force is wrong.

How should a discerning Christian respond? Can we participate in the martial arts and be consistent with our biblical convictions?

Differences in the Martial Arts

Should Christians participate in the martial arts? In order to make an informed decision, it is helpful to recognize that there are two basic categories for martial arts. It is important to note that the division is not rigid; in some cases, values from one type may be blended or subtly integrated into the other. But for simplicity and clarity, we will use the two main groups.

One type, called “internal” or “soft” martial art, focuses on inner spiritual development, balance, form, and mental awareness. This soft art emphasizes two principles – that the mind dictates action and that the opponent’s own force is used to defeat him or her.{4} Students are taught Taoist and Buddhist philosophical principles such as the “chi” force and the “yin and yang” concept. Through breath control, soft art practitioners seek to “collect, cultivate, and store” this chi force which is located in the body. Some believe they can use the chi force to strike down opponents from a distance. Examples of internal or soft martial arts include the Chinese Tai-chi Chuan and the Japanese Aikido.

The second category of martial arts is called the “external” or “hard” art. This type teaches that physical reactions precede mental reaction. It also promotes the idea that an opponent’s force should be met with an equal but opposite force. While the hard martial art system also uses breath control like the soft arts, the emphasis is on developing strength and quickness through the use of straight and linear body motions.{5} The hard arts include certain forms of Chinese kung fu, and Shao Lin boxing. The Japanese arts were adapted from Chinese kung fu. The hard arts include Ju-jitsu, Judo, Karate, Ninjitsu, and Kendo. The Korean martial arts include Tae Kwon Do and Tang Soo Do.

While there are religious concepts in the martial arts, few schools would qualify as religious movements, and few seek to meet the religious needs of the student. However, a little exposure to Eastern mysticism may lead to greater involvement in the future. So as a general rule, Christians should avoid the internal or soft martial arts because of the concentration on the teachings of Eastern religions and philosophies. Several schools even utilize the occult techniques of meditation and altering consciousness. External or hard martial arts, on the other hand, concentrate primarily on physical training. These physical lessons usually do not

conflict with our biblical convictions.

Before joining a dojo or martial arts gym, one needs to know the worldview of the instructor. Even some hard martial arts teachers incorporate Eastern ideas and occult practices into their styles. Look for instructors who teach the physical movements but exclude the Eastern ideas.

Eastern Concepts in the Martial Arts

Since martial arts are traditionally based on the Eastern philosophies of Taoism and Zen Buddhism, several key concepts can be prominent in the classes. Let’s look at three of them.

The concept of “chi” or “ki” is central in some martial arts. Chi is believed to be the impersonal life energy that flows throughout the universe and pulses through the human body. By harnessing the chi in individuals, martial artists believe they can perform at higher levels of ability or can release chi power resulting in devastating effects. Chi is controlled through specialized breathing techniques, gymnastics, and meditation.

Another common martial arts teaching is the Taoist (pronounced “dow-ist”) concept of yin and yang, that nature consists of conflicting elements which function in perfect balance to one another. As mankind should live in harmony with the Tao, so the martial artist must strike hard with firmness at times, but at other times accept the energy of the opponent, then reroute the energy, causing the opponent to defeat himself. This redirection allows a relatively gentle resolution, and brings one into harmony with the opponent and the flow of nature.

A Christian must also avoid the practice of Eastern meditation. The goal of this type of meditation is to empty one’s mind, alter one’s consciousness, or unite with the impersonal divine. Scott Shaw writes, “Meditation is a sacred

process. It is the method used by the spiritual warrior to calm the mind and to connect the body and mind with the infinite."{6} This greater awareness supposedly enables the martial artist to increase his or her performance. In many schools, the combined use of Eastern meditation and the chi are essential to mastering the art. (Not all martial arts use meditation for this purpose. Some use it to focus on the lesson or task at hand such as picturing the action in your mind before physically carrying it out.)

But the mysticism of Taoism and Buddhism is not compatible with Christianity; neither is Eastern meditation the same as biblical meditation. The Bible does not teach altering our consciousness or emptying our minds. Instead, the goal of Scriptural meditation is to *fill* our minds with God's Word. (Psalm 1:2) Another danger of Eastern meditation is that it can open our minds to the occult, a practice the Bible prohibits. The Bible does not teach the Eastern idea of chi, that there is an impersonal life energy of the universe within us. Rather, the Bible says that each individual has an eternal soul that will either go to heaven or to hell based on whether or not they have a relationship with Christ.

Self Defense or Turn the Other Cheek?

Besides concerns about the role of Eastern religion in the martial arts, some people think martial arts encourages violence. Martial arts teach fighting, and so are contrary to the Bible's instructions about pacifism. Is there ever a time when Christians can use force?

Christian pacifists believe it is always wrong to injure another person. Many interpret Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:38-48, where he states, "Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also . . .", to mean never use violence. This is exemplified in the life of Christ who suffered silently and did not retaliate while enduring torture even unto death.

Despite these arguments, the proper interpretation of the Matthew 5 passage does not teach pacifism. In Jewish culture, to be struck or slapped on the cheek was an insult (2 Corinthians 11:20). Jesus was teaching that when a disciple is insulted for being a follower of Christ, the disciple should not retaliate with force. However, being insulted is a very different situation from being attacked by a mugger or your wife being attacked by a rapist.

In the Gospels, Christ did not resist violent attacks because of His unique mission to be the sacrifice for our sins. However, in the Old Testament, the preincarnate Christ judged wicked nations with the sword. (Judges 6:11-16). Not only did He smite His enemies, He aided Israel in being an instrument of judgment as well. Revelation predicts the glorified Christ coming to judge the nations with a sword. Also in the New Testament, Jesus and His disciples did not teach military leaders to withdraw from the military (e.g., Matthew 8:8-13, Luke 3:14). In Romans 13, Paul writes that the government has the right to "bear the sword." In other words, a righteous government can use capital punishment when an offender is worthy of death.

Therefore, complete pacifism is not the spirit of Christian teaching. In fact, the most loving thing to do when a friend or family member is attacked by a harmful foe is to risk one's life and use force to restrain the enemy. If a man is attacking a child, or a woman is being raped, it would be morally wrong not to sacrifice your life and restrain the assailant even with deadly force if necessary.

The Bible allows a Christian to use self-defense and force when confronted with a criminal act. Force may not be used for revenge or out of unjust anger. Christians who engage in the martial arts should have a clear understanding of this. The use of martial arts must be for self-defense and protecting loved ones from acts of evil. One should never use their fighting system to instigate combat or seek revenge.

Should Christians Participate in the Martial Arts?

To summarize what I have covered so far, I believe that the physical aspect of martial arts can be separated from the Eastern religious and philosophical teachings. Also, I believe the Bible teaches us that there is a time when we are called to use force, even deadly force to halt acts of evil.

Here are some practical guidelines if one is deciding to participate in the martial arts or if one is selecting a school. First, a person should check his or her motives. One should not engage in martial arts if one's motives include becoming a tough guy, showing off, or gaining revenge. Parents should make it clear to their children that the martial arts are never to be used for affectation or for instigating conflicts. Unworthy motives are detrimental to one's walk with the Lord and witness to others. Positive reasons include physical conditioning, discipline, and self-defense. Develop parameters for limiting the use of force. One of the fruits of the Spirit is self-control. Force is used in defensive purposes only.

Generally speaking, Christians should avoid the soft or internal form of martial arts because they tend to emphasize Eastern philosophical and religious ideas. External or hard martial arts emphasize the physical training. However, it would be wise to be on guard because many instructors of external martial arts may incorporate Eastern mysticism in to their system. Also, one should be careful to avoid the possibility of being enticed to learn about Eastern spirituality as they advance.

Find out the worldview of the instructor. The role of religion in the martial arts depends mostly on the instructor, so choosing a proper instructor is the most important factor. Some instructors claim to teach the physical aspect only.

However, as students advance, instructors begin to incorporate Eastern religious ideas to help students attain a higher level of performance. Observe advanced classes to see if they incorporate Eastern practices. There is also helpful information through Christian organizations such as Karate for Christ and the Christian Martial Arts Foundation.

The Christian life involves caring for the nurture and growth of our mind, spirit, and our body which is the temple of the Holy Spirit. I have benefited greatly from my time in the martial arts. It has provided me great exercise, discipline, and opportunities to witness for Christ. There were times in my life when I had to use force to restrain hostile persons or protect loved ones. I believe that the martial arts can be beneficial to Christians who are informed and mature.

Notes

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2. Howard Reid and Michael Croucher, *The Way of the Warrior,* (Woodstock, NY.: Overlook Press, 1983), 16-17.

3. Erwin Castro, B.J. Oropeza, and Ron Rhodes, "Enter the Dragon? Wrestling with the Martial Arts Phenomenon Part I," Christian Research Institute, http://www.equip.org/free/dm066.htm, 2.

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5. Ibid., 61 & 227.

6. Scott Shaw, *The Warrior is Silent* (Rochester, VT.: Inner Traditions International, 1998), 53.

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See Also:

"Martial Arts and Just War Theory"

“The Story of a Couple Who Left an Abusive Church”

Dear Patrick Zukeran,

My wife and I are going through a bad experience in Church at the moment and your Abusive Churches: Leaving Them Behind article has/is really helping us. Thank you.

We are from a city in England called _____.

Three years ago we planted a church with another family, for about two years everything was going well and the church grew in numbers.

My wife and I were elders and my wife was also praise and worship leader. We gave our all to promoting the church even to the point of exhaustion, we were out at least four to five nights per week and as our Pastor taught we were sacrificing everything for the Church.

We met in a community centre and every Sunday we would be the first in setting up all the relevant equipment up, sound equipment etc. We would also be the last out after tidying up etc.

Our Pastor would at times bring us a teaching which was often a rebuke for not doing things according to what he thought was right. We would voice our concerns and opinions and be labelled unteachable and told everything he was saying was in the word of God and we should use it as the final authority in our lives. If we did not then we were rebelling against God.

We would often feel a heaviness in the atmosphere when in his presense. My wife would be told that it was up to her and her worship team to usher in the presence of God and would often be told that there was no anointing on her voice. She would

often come home and end up in tears because she could not give anymore.

She led the service once with a broken elbow, another time with a collar around her neck she had pulled her muscles, we were always told we had to sacricfice family time for the church as this was honourable to God and we would be rewarded for our works.

Anyway after almost three years we decided to step down from our positions as elders, we just could not give anymore!!

We were told that we were breaking a spiritual covenant with the pastor and the first lady of the house (his wife) and this had to be done in a way that would cause the least amount of pain and disruption to the church.

I addressed the church and said that we were stepping down from Eldership because God had blessed our business and we did not have the time to serve them any longer, we told them that we did not want to hinder what God was doing and wanted to step aside so that God could raise up new elders to help carry the vision forward, it was very tearful and emotional because we had planted this church and were about to step down from our position. It was also emotional because we were hurting for everything that we had been through, the constant rebukes etc. The Church applauded us for our service and on the outside everything looked ok, one the inside we felt/feel for the rest of the church and for the well being of the Pastor because he will not take any counsel and the church are absorbed by his character.

On one occasion in a meeting with my wife and me, he walked out because my wife and I said that we felt that the church as a body was not growing because everyone in our church, apart from two people were already Christians and we should concentrate on the lost. We were told that we were so insensitive and how could we hurt his feelings so much.

Anyway enough of our problems and experiences I expect you have heard all this before, again we would like to thank you for helping us through your writings.

See Also: "Probe Answers Our E-Mail":

- "What Advice Would You Give Someone Leaving an Abusive Church?"
- Another Story of a Couple's Heartbreaking Experience with an Abusive Church
- "Does 'Touch Not the Lord's Anointed' Mean that Abusive Pastors Can't be Challenged?"

The Origin of Man's Religions: Evolutionary Artifact or Remnants of Knowing Our Creator

Dr. Zukeran examines different theories on the origin of different religions. Are they made up from different experiences and dominant myths in a region or are they remnants of memories from a common Creator and a common fall from grace? He presents examples of how beginning from the remnant in a culture has been an effective way of introducing the gospel in a culture.



This article is also available in Spanish.

Is It Psychological?

What is the origin of man's religion? Why does every culture in the world worship some divine being? Anthropologists and historians have studied this question, and presently there are three primary theories: the subjective theory, the evolutionary theory, and the theory of original monotheism.

The subjective theory teaches that religion originates with man. Humans have a psychological need for a transcendent being that provides meaning and hope to their existence in this vast impersonal universe. Adherents of this view believe that this religious makeup exists below our conscious awareness. Cultures have various views of reality according to their experience, but the awareness and desire for religion is a universal phenomenon. They therefore conclude that this disposition lies in our subconscious. In other words, our beliefs about a transcendent being are not the result of external realities or interactions with such a being. Rather, these beliefs derive from our psyches.

These feelings are expressed in more concrete terms through symbols and attitudes, not through a set of defined belief systems. As a culture progresses, these symbols and attitudes are developed into a set of beliefs and practices.

Several proponents were important in promoting this theory. Friedrich Schleiermacher believed that religion began with a feeling of dependence. This led to a need for an object to depend on which resulted in the idea of God. Ludwig Feuerbach taught that the concept of God is really a picture of an idealized person. Sigmund Freud believed that God derived from the basic human need for a father image. The idealized father figure becomes our image of God. {1}

The subjective theory may teach us about human nature, but it does not adequately explain the origin of religion or where this universal desire to know and understand God comes from.

Dr. Winfried Corduan writes, “I may carry in my subconscious mind an abstract representation of God, but I cannot on that basis conclude that there is no independently existing, objective being that is God. God may have created me with that idea so that I can relate to God.” {2} Every effect has a cause. What is the cause of this powerful desire for a relationship with God? If we are the products of a divine creator, that would explain this universal drive in all mankind to know Him because He placed this desire within us.

The Bible provides answers to the questions the subjective theory cannot answer. Genesis 1 states that we are created in the image of God. Therefore, we were created in the image of God with the intent to have a relationship with Him. Romans 1:20 states that all men have ingrained in their hearts a knowledge of God. Chapter 2 states that our conscience testifies that a moral law giver exists. The desire for God is a basic part of human nature.

Darwinian Theory of Religion

The second theory regarding the origin of religion is the evolutionary approach. This is the most popular view that is taught or implied in the study of religion. Proponents of this theory believe, as in the subjective theory, that religion originates with man. Religion is the result of an evolutionary process in human culture.

In the most primitive period of a culture, the most basic form of religion begins with an innate feeling that a spiritual force exists. This force is impersonal and pervades all of creation. It is called *mana,* derived from the name given to it by the inhabitants of Melanesia. Mana may be concentrated more intensely in some areas and objects more than others. A magnificent tree, or unique rock, or a certain animal may contain a higher concentration of mana.

The goal is to manipulate this force so that one may attain a

desired outcome. Objects such as sticks or dolls, called *fetishes*, may contain the force and be used or worshipped.

The next stage is animism. At this stage, the force is visualized as personal spirits. Animism teaches that a spirit or spiritual force lies behind every event, and many objects of the physical world carry some spiritual significance.

There are two categories of spirits: nature spirits and ancestor spirits. Nature spirits have a human form and inhabit natural objects such as plants, rocks, or lakes. Ancestral spirits are the spirits of the ancestors. Both categories of spirits are limited in knowledge, power, and presence. One must maintain a favorable relationship with the spirits or else suffer their wrath.

The next stage is polytheism. Cultures progress from belief in finite spirits to the worship of gods. From polytheism a culture evolves to henotheism, which is belief in many gods but worship directed to only one of them. The final stage is monotheism, the worship of one God.

There are several problems with this theory. The first is that these stages of development have never actually been observed. There is no record of a culture moving in sequence from the *mana* stage to the monotheistic stage as described in the evolutionary model. With *mana* and animism, evolutionary proponents expect that cultures in these stages would be free of the notion of any gods. However, this is not the case. Animistic cultures have gods, and most have a belief in a supreme being. Finally, there is evidence that indicates religions actually develop in the opposite direction from the evolutionary model.

For these reasons the evolutionary and subjective theories do not provide an adequate explanation for the origin of religion. Does history or even the Bible provide us with a better answer?

Original Monotheism

The third model for the origin of religion is original monotheism. This theory teaches that religion originates with God disclosing Himself to man. The first form religion takes is monotheism, and it deviates from there. Dr. Winfried Corduan identifies nine characteristics of man's first form of religion.

- *God is a personal God.*
- *He is referred to with masculine grammar and qualities.*
- *God is believed to live in the sky.*
- *He has great knowledge and power.*
- *He created the world.*
- *God is the author of standards of good and evil.*
- *Human beings are God's creatures and are expected to live by his standards.*
- *Human beings have become alienated from God by disobeying his standards.*
- *Lastly, God has provided a method of overcoming the alienation. Originally this involved sacrificing animals on an altar of uncut stone.* {3}

Studies of world cultures have revealed that each one has a vestige of monotheistic beliefs which are described by Dr. Corduan's nine qualifications. Cultures that are very primitive provide some of the strongest proof of original monotheism.

Anthropologists Dr. Wilhelm Schmidt, author of the 4000 page treatise, *The Origin and Growth of Religion,* and, more recently, Don Richardson , author of *Eternity in Their Hearts,* documented this fact in the hundreds of cultures they studied. They discovered that the religion of some of the most ancient cultures were monotheistic and practiced little or no form of animism or magic. In almost every culture around the world, the religion of a particular culture began with a concept of a

masculine, creator God who lives in the heavens. He provided a moral law by which the people would enter into a relationship with him. This relationship was broken when the people were disobedient, and as the relationship deteriorated, the people distanced themselves from the creator and their knowledge of him faded. As the civilization moved further away, they began to worship other lesser gods. In their search to survive in a world filled with spiritual forces, they desired power to manipulate the forces, and thus there was an increase in the use of magic.

This theory fits very well with what is revealed in Scripture. Genesis teaches us that God created man and that man lived according to his knowledge of God and His laws. However, from Adam's first act of disobedience, mankind continued his sinful path away from God. Paul summarizes this history in Romans 1. The theory of original monotheism is the most consistent with Scripture and appears to have strong historical support.

Examples of Original Monotheism

Here are just a few examples. The *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* states that the Chinese culture before Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, 2600 years before Christ, worshipped Shang Ti. They understood Him to be the creator and law-giver. They believed that He was never to be represented by an idol. When the Zhou Dynasty controlled China during the years 1066-770 B.C., the worship of Shang Ti was replaced by the worship of heaven itself, and eventually three other religions were spawned in China.

In a region north of Calcutta, India, there lived the Santal people. They were found worshipping elements of nature. However, before these practices developed, they worshipped Thakur Jiu, the genuine God who created all things. Although they knew Thakur Jiu was the true God, the tribe forsook worshipping Him and began entering into spiritism and the worship of lesser gods who ruled over some aspect of creation.

In Ethiopia, the Gedeo people number in the millions and live in different tribes. These people sacrifice to evil spirits out of fear. However, behind this practice is an older belief in Magano, the one omnipotent creator.

The Incas in South America also have this same belief. Alfred Metraux, author of *History of the Incas,* discovered the Inca's originally worshipped Viracocha, the Lord, the omnipotent creator of all things. Worship of Inti, the Sun God, and other gods are only recent departures from this monotheistic belief.

These examples follow Paul's description in Romans 1 where he states that men departed from worship of the creator to the worship of the creation.

Original Monotheism and the Missionary Revolution

If original monotheism is true, it should impact our strategy for missions. {4} In fact, this theory has had a tremendous impact on evangelistic strategies throughout the world.

Don Richardson's book, *Eternity in Their Hearts*, illustrates how this theory shaped the missionary effort in China and Korea. In ancient China, the Lord of the Heavens was referred to as Shang Ti. In Korea, he was referred to as Hananim.

Over the centuries, the Chinese departed from the worship of Shang Ti and adopted the beliefs of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism that taught the worship of ancestors and the Buddha. However, even after two thousand years, the Chinese still mentioned the name of Shang Ti.

The first Christian missionaries to China arrived in the eighth century A.D. In the years that followed, instead of capitalizing on the residual monotheistic witness already in the land, missionaries imposed a completely foreign name to the God of the heavens. They emphasized that the God of the

Bible is foreign and completely distinct from any God the Chinese had ever heard of before. As Don Richardson writes, “Those who took this position completely misunderstood the real situation.” {5} Roman Catholic missionaries adopted new terms like Tien Ju, Master of Heaven or Tien Laoye for God in the Chinese language.

When Protestant missionaries arrived, they debated as to whether they should use Shang Ti or another term for the Almighty. Some argued that there should be a new name for a new thing. Those who chose to use Shang Ti did not take advantage of the full meaning behind the term. As a result, Protestant missionaries did not have as great an impact in China as they were to have in Korea.

In 1884, Protestant missionaries entered Korea. After studying the culture, they believed that Hananim was the residual witness of God. As these missionaries began to preach utilizing this remnant witness, their message was enthusiastically received. Instead of introducing a foreign God from the west, they were reintroducing the natives to the Lord of their ancestors whom they were interested to know. The Catholic missionaries who had been in Korea for decades were still employing designations for God from Chinese phrases like Tien Ju. As a result, the Korean people responded to the message from the Protestant missionaries and Christianity spread throughout the country at an explosive rate.

Paul writes in Acts 14, “In the past he (God) let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony.” (vv. 16-17) The fact that all cultures have this remnant witness has had—and should continue to have—an impact on the missionary movement all over the world.

Notes

1. See Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths,* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 22-23.

2. Ibid., 24.

3. Ibid., 33.

4. Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts* (Ventura: Calif.: Regal Books, 1984), 33-71.

5. Ibid., 67.

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“Why Don’t You Appreciate Herbal Medicine?”

I read an article written by Mr. Zukeran on alternative medicine and was wondering just how much time he really put into researching herbs and ancient medicine before he began to write. It sounds like the typical raised eyebrow “suspicious of anything that doesn’t come out of the AMA or Good Housekeeping Magazine” approach.

There is a tremendous amount of research that has been done and is being done with herbs, and Mr. Zukeran’s dismissal of herbal therapy implies a lack of scholarship, not a good apologetic. I’m a Christian and have a great appreciation for herbal medicine as well as other alternative approaches. I owe my life today to a diet change that included a vegetarian way of life for nearly a year, along with herbal therapy. I also have in my library The Yellow Emporers Book on Internal Medicine, along with Hyppocrates works, and simply because one came from Greece and one came from China I do not necessarily reject the ancient Chinese approach any more than I would reject Pythagorus or Archimedes mathematical axioms and theorems simply because Pythagorus and Archimedes belonged to “Mystery Schools” and were pagans. Their mathematical formulas and proofs form much of the basis for modern science and engineering.

You seem to be throwing the baby out with the bathwater in your blanket condemnation of a vast area of human research in the area of medicine that spans many thousands of years in an attempt to stay orthodox in your religious views.

I notice that Mr. Zukeran has a degree in theology. That does not necessarily qualify him as an expert in alternative medicine. You would do better in defending the gospel to carefully research your topics, and have someone who is well

qualified in an area to write on that topic, instead of someone who demonstrates a manifest lack of expertise on the subject.

Thanks for reading the article and your comments. I stated in my article, "… complementary therapies provide important insights into maintaining good health." I also stated in my section on Herbal Medicines this: "Some herbal treatments are costly and provide no enhancement. However, some herbal supplements have shown some promising benefits. Herbal treatments may prove to be helpful additions to conventional treatments. Herbs like ginseng have shown to be beneficial for Type 2 diabetes, for example. Herbal preparations are sometimes less potent in dosage than prescription drugs and may be less toxic." So I do not dismiss herbal therapies, I state there are some that have shown to be beneficial while there are others that are costly and have not proven to fulfill the promises they make. I think you would agree with that.

In 1998 Representative Tim Harkin passed a bill to enlarge the National Institute for Health Office to include a department to study alternative medicines. Dr. Steven Straus was placed in charge of the department. Dr. Eisenberg at Harvard Medical School also has created a department to study alternative Medicine as well. So the AMA, American Medical Association and other government research groups are doing research on Alternative Medicines. I think a person would be wise to look at their conclusions when deciding on an alternative treatment. Much research has been done and as I stated in my article, some herbs were shown to be beneficial while others were found not to be. There is very little proof that life energy therapies are beneficial.

It is true, my degree is in theology and I focus on the theological and worldview aspects of alternative medicine. I rely on medical experts for the medical studies. I have interviewed one of the leading authorities on my radio show on

this subject, Dr. Donal O'Mathuna, whose conclusions I repeat. Let's not throw out the good, let's just be discerning. I am sure you would agree with my conclusion, that there are some benefits to alternative medicine but there are also alternative therapies that are not beneficial and should be avoided. A Christian should be discerning when looking at alternative Medicine.

Patrick Zukeran
Probe Ministries

"How Do I Show Jehovah's Witnesses That Hell is Real?"

I'm having problems dealing with some questions given to me by Jehovah's Witnesses. Can you please help me?

The J.W. asked me the following: "Paul had a vision of Christ, right? So if Christ is God, then why does Paul say no one has seen God when he himself saw Christ and fell off the horse?"

How do I show Jehovah's Witnesses that hell is a real place of torment and fire? They insist that the soul dies and that everyone goes to the grave, known as Sheol or hell.

How do I show to Jehovah's Witnesses that more people go to heaven than the 144,000 people of the book of Revelation?

JW's are probably referring to John 1:18 which states, "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only…" What this means is that no one has ever seen God in His full glory and splendor. Throughout the Bible, God has revealed himself in temporary, physical and veiled form which we can withstand. These are called theophanies. Such examples are Isaiah 6,

Exodus 3, and Genesis 15. Jesus is God the Son clothed in flesh which Philippians 2:5-11 makes clear. So although we have not seen God in the fulness of His glory, we have seen temporary theophanies of God. Paul saw the glorifed Christ and what happened? He was blinded. To see God in the fulness of glory would destroy us. Paul saw, although not in his total glory, the glorifed Christ. That is why he was blinded.

> *How do I show Jehovah's Witnesses that hell is a real place of torment and fire? They insist that the soul dies and that everyone goes to the grave, known as Sheol or hell.*

First of all, when one dies, his soul exists after the body dies. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:6 that we prefer to be absent from the body and at home with the Lord. In Matthew 10:28 Jesus states, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell." So there is such thing as a soul that survives the body. Hell is a real place. In Luke 16:19-31 Jesus tells the story of Lazarus and the rich man. JW's will say this is a parable. Even if it is a parable, it still tells a story about what is true. What does the story symbolize? Their explanation is not consistent with the text at all.

> *How do I show to Jehovah's Witnesses that more people go to heaven than the 144,000 people of the book of Revelation?*

Concerning the idea that 144,000 go to heaven, ask this question. The 144,000 come from the "Sons of Israel" or the "Tribes of Israel." A word study shows that when that term is used, it is referring to literal Jews. This would eliminate a vast majority of JW's. Also Revelation 7:9 shows a multitude from every tribe and tongue. So heaven includes more than 144,000.

Hope this helps.

Patrick Zukeran
Probe Ministries

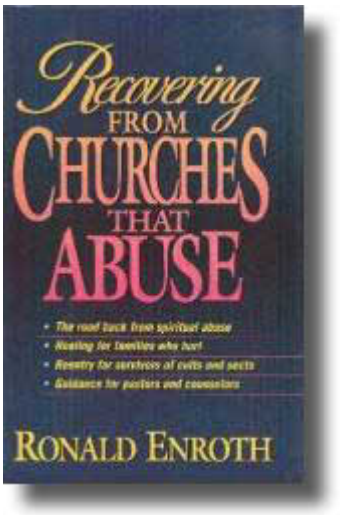
Abusive Churches: Leaving Them Behind – A Biblical Perspective

Dr. Pat Zukeran looks at positive steps one can take to recover from an abusive church situation. Looking at the problem from a biblical perspective, he considers recovery from abusive churches and abusive leaders. He also looks at how abusive churches can begin the process of changing into an affirming, positive congregation.

This article is also available in Spanish. 

Painful Exit Process

In a previous article Abusive Churches, I discussed the characteristics of abusive churches.{1} As a result of the questions and feedback I have received, I felt it might be helpful to share some positive steps to recovery from an abusive church experience.



Leaving an unhealthy church situation can leave some very deep scars. One example of the collateral damage is a very painful exit process. Those who leave an unhealthy church situation suffer isolation, bitterness, embarrassment, grief, and anger. This is coupled with confusion and wondering how God could let this happen. They also chide themselves for getting into such a group and staying in the organization as long as they did.

One man who left an unhealthy situation stated, "I am confused over the emotions I feel. At times, I am glad to have left the organization. I enjoy the new freedoms I have in Christ and relief from the burdens I was carrying for many years. At other times I suffer the pain over the lost years and lost friendships. It's like experiencing a death in the family." The Ryans, who left an abusive situation, state, "Spiritual abuse is a kind of abuse which damages the central core of who you are. It leaves us spiritually disorganized and emotionally cut off from the healing love of God."{2}

Since so much of their identity was based on their status and relationships in the church, many exiting members have difficulty readjusting to daily life in society. Many suffer from what sociologists label "role exit." Their purpose was so connected to the church that many suffer from the anxiety of not knowing where they fit in or what their future will be. They are in a "vacuum." In severe cases, former members were so dependent on the church that they even had to relearn daily tasks like opening and managing their own bank accounts.

Many end up forsaking the church or religion. One ex-member wrote, "I know that when people finally decide on their own to leave, they are so beaten down and confused that they don't know what is true to hold on to versus what is false to discard. Many quit seeking God and give up on the church all

together."{3}

In his book, *Recovering from Churches that Abuse*, Dr. Ronald Enroth states that victims of church abuse suffer post-traumatic stress disorder.{4} Many are unable to trust anyone—including God—which complicates the process, since developing healthy relationships is essential to the recovery process.

Although exiting is difficult, recovery is not impossible. There is hope! Keep in mind the healing process is not the same for each person. For some, healing may take years; for others it may happen in a few months. Some will be able to recover through the help of a mature Christian community while others may need professional Christian counseling.

Discerning Good from Abusive

How do we discern a healthy church from an abusive church? Unfortunately, abusive churches can exist in evangelical and mainline denominations. They are not just fringe churches on the outer circle of evangelicalism. Churches that can be labeled "spiritually abusive" range from mildly abusive—churches with sporadic abusive practices—to the severe cases of being manipulative and controlling. Here are some questions that can help show if you are in an unhealthy situation.

First, does the leadership invite dialogue, advice, evaluation, and questions from outside its immediate circle? Authoritarian pastors are threatened by any diverse opinions whether from inside or outside the group. Group members are discouraged from asking hard questions. The rule is, don't ask questions and don't make waves. A healthy pastor welcomes even tough questions, whereas in an unhealthy church disagreement with the pastor is considered disloyalty and is virtually equal to disobeying God. Spiritual language is used to

disguise the manipulation that is going on. Questioners are labeled rebellious, insubordinate, and disruptive to the harmony of the body. Attempts are made to shut them down. The only way to succeed is to go along with the agenda, support the leaders, scorn those who disagree.

Second, is there a system of accountability or does the pastor keep full control? Authoritarian pastors do not desire a system of accountability. They may have a board but it consists of yes-men whom he ultimately selects.

Third, does a member's personality generally become stronger, happier, and more confident as a result of being with the group? The use of guilt, fear, and intimidation is likely to produce members with low self-esteem. Many are beaten down by legalism, while assertiveness is a sign that one is not teachable and therefore not spiritual.

Fourth, are family commitments strengthened? Church obligations are valued more than family ones. Although many may verbally acknowledge the family as a priority, in practice they do not act like it. My colleagues at Probe, Don and Deanne, know of a mother who needed to gain special permission from her church to attend her son's wedding because it conflicted with a church event. The church made her feel guilty because she was choosing family over God. In another case, I know of women who missed their son and daughter's prom night to attend a church meeting which was held twenty minutes from their homes. The mindset is loyalty to God means loyalty to his church. One's spiritual quality is determined by one's allegiance to the church.

Fifth, does the group encourage independent thinking, developing discernment skills, and creation of new ideas? Abusive churches resort to using pressure to have followers conform, and there is a low tolerance for any kind of difference in belief (of a non-essential nature) and behavior. There is a legalistic emphasis on keeping the rules, and a

need to stay within set boundaries. Unity is defined as conformity. These leaders evaluate all forms of Christian spirituality according to their own prescribed system.

Sixth, is the group preoccupied with maintaining a good public image that does not match the inner circle experience?

Seventh, does the leadership encourage members to foster relations and connections with the larger society that are more than self-serving? Abusive churches thrive on tactics that create total dependence on the church while protecting and isolating themselves from the "sinful" world.

Finally, is there a high rate of burnout among the members? In order to gain approval or prove you are a "true disciple," abusive churches require levels of service that are very taxing.

If these are character traits of the group you are attending, you may be in an abusive church and should consider leaving the organization.

Profile of an Abusive Leader

Philip Keller gave us a stern warning in his book, *Predators in Our Pulpits*: "The greatest threat to the church today is not from without but from our own leadership within."{5} Often an abusive church is built around the leader who practices some unhealthy forms of shepherding. Many such leaders come from churches that were abusive or have an unmet need for significance. Many may have begun with noble intentions, but their unresolved personal issues cause them to become dependent on their ministry to meet their needs. In his book, *Healing Spiritual Abuse*, Ken Blue does an outstanding job identifying unhealthy leadership. Here are a few characteristics of an abusive leader.

Abusive leaders use their position to demand loyalty and submission. Ken Blue states, "I have heard many pastors say to

their congregations, 'Because I am the pastor, you must follow me.' Their demand was not based on truth or the God-directedness of their leadership but on their title. That is a false basis of authority . . . any appeal to authority based on position, title, degree or office is false. The only authority God recognizes and to which we should submit to is truth." {6} Other leaders use titles such as "God's man" or "the Lord's anointed" so that others will treat them with special reverence and keep themselves above accountability that others in the congregation are held to. "If by appealing to position, unique claims or special anointings, leaders succeed in creating a hierarchy in the church, they can more easily control those beneath them. They can also defend themselves against any who might challenge them."{7}

One of the lessons from the Bible is that all men and women are fallible. Therefore, all people, especially leaders, need some form of accountability. Although pastors are called to lead their congregations, they are under the authority of God's Word. When they act in a manner contrary to Scripture they need to be confronted, and improper behavior needs to be corrected. In 2 Samuel 22, the prophet Nathan confronted King David about his sin. In Galatians 2, Paul confronted Peter, the leader of the Apostles, for not acting in line with the truth. "Paul declared by this action that the truth always outranks position or title in the church. Truth and its authority are not rooted in personality or office. It is derived from the word of God and the truth it proclaims."{8} Blue continues: "Paul taught that the body of Christ is a nonhierarchical living organism."{9}

Instead of feeding and caring for the flock, these pastors feed off the flock and use them to meet their needs for significance. Ken Blue gives an example of a "pastor whose church has not grown numerically in twelve years. Frustrated by his manifest lack of success, he turned to the congregation to meet his need. He has laid on them a building program in

hopes that a new, larger, more attractive facility will draw more people. The congregation has split over this issue. Many have left the church, and those who remain are saddled with the debt."{10}

I know of other pastors who have chastised their staff and congregation when they did not show up at a church function. Many members were busy with family commitments, work, and needed personal time for rest, but were pressured to attend the numerous church events. These leaders saw their success in the numbers that attended their functions and needed their turnout to satisfy their sense of worth.

True spiritual leaders are defined by Christ's example. "Whoever wants to be great among you must become the servant of all" (Matt. 20:26). Christ-like leadership is servanthood.

True leaders gain the loyalty of the sheep because of the quality of their character and their attitude of servanthood. The members freely submit to Christ-like leadership and do not have to be coerced to follow. Good shepherds lighten the load of the sheep while false leaders add to the load on the sheep.

Should you find yourself in such a situation, the first thing to do is pray for the leader. Second, in a loving and graceful way confront the leader, addressing what you see as unhealthy practices in his leadership. It may take a while for your words to sink in, so be patient. However, as in many cases, the leader may get defensive and reject your advice and in turn make accusations against you. In such cases realize you were obedient to God, and now you must let the Lord work on the leader's heart. James 3:1, Ezekiel 34, and other passages bring stern warnings that God will judge shepherds who use the sheep to fulfill their needs and not shepherd God's flock as a steward. It is best to leave the situation and let God deal in His way with the leader and his organization.

The Road to Recovery

As we discussed earlier, exiting an abusive or unhealthy church situation is a very painful process, but recovery and healing is possible. Dr. Ronald Enroth in his book, *Recovering from Churches that Abuse,* and Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton in their book, *Toxic Faith,* provide some very helpful steps to recovery.

When you realize you are in an authoritarian church, it is best to leave and make a complete break. Many members remain, thinking their presence will help change the situation, but this is highly unlikely. In fact, remaining may perpetuate the existence of the organization.

Acknowledge that abuse has taken place. Denying this will only stall the recovery.

Next, develop relationships with mature Christians who will listen to your story and support you in the healing process. In a safe and supporting environment you will be able to share your feelings, experiences, hopes, and struggles. Although it may be difficult, understand that recovery rarely happens in isolation. You must learn to trust again, even if it is in small, tentative stages.

Expect to wrestle with some difficult emotions. Recognize that you will go through a grieving process-grief for lost years, lost friends, and the loss of innocence. You may also feel guilt, shame, and fear. It is natural to feel foolish and experience self-doubt. These are actually healthy emotions that should not be bottled up inside. Regret over poor decisions is a sign of growth, and you will eventually leave those emotions behind. Therefore, it is crucial to find people who will be supportive and help you address hard feelings. For some people, professional Christian counseling is necessary. Seek out a counselor who understands the dynamics of abusive systems and can provide the care and warmth needed.

Renew your walk with God again. Admit that you acquired a distorted picture of Him, and focus on regaining the proper biblical understanding of His attributes and character. Don't give up on the true church despite its imperfections. In fact, I encourage you to visit numerous healthy churches. It is refreshing to see how diverse the body of Christ is, and that there are many different ways to express our love and commitment to Christ.

Then, relax! Enjoy your new-found freedoms. Take time for physical recreation, art, music, and just plain fun. After leaving, ex-members may feel guilty for not serving God in a church but this is incorrect. The Lord knows that we need time to grieve, reflect, and heal from our loss.

Finally, remember forgiveness is crucial to recovery. Forgiveness is often more for the benefit of the one giving it than for the one receiving it. Healing takes time, so be patient with the process you are going through.

Becoming Stronger Through the Experience

Although exiting an abusive church can leave us scarred mentally and emotionally, there is hope for recovery and wholeness. In fact, this fiery process can strengthen our faith and understanding of God and what it means to walk with Him. Here is some counsel that may help you overcome the past experience of spiritual abuse.

One of the ways we can grow from this experience has to do with a proper understanding of God's character. While in an authoritarian organization, our view of God becomes distorted. God becomes viewed as one who loves us because of what we are doing for Him. Anytime we miss a Bible study or fail to win converts, God somehow becomes displeased and we must work harder to regain His approval.

In contrast to this false image, 1 John 4:8 states that "God

is love.” In other words, God accepts us unconditionally. He only asks that we receive the gift of grace He has provided for us, His Son Jesus Christ. Once we receive His Son, our acceptance is never based on our works but on our position as His sons and daughters. For many who have lived under a false image of God, coming to grips with God’s grace and love can be a renewing experience.

Related to this is the addiction to church activities. Many equate business at church with spiritual maturity. However, this business actually keeps us from dealing with the pain and real issues in our lives. Our addiction to religious activity becomes a barrier to an authentic relationship with God.

Another valuable lesson to learn is that our identity is in Christ, not the organization or relationships in the group. Many of us find our significance in our ministry, our church status, the dependence others have on us, or the respect we gain from others we minister to. Once these are taken away, we feel empty, even without purpose. This is an opportune time to realize that our value and self-worth is secure because of our relationship with Christ. This helps us become more dependent on Christ and less on others.

Finally, the Bible teaches that God can bring good out of a bad situation. Romans 8:28 states that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” This promise applies even for those who have been spiritually abused. Through the pain and healing process, God can mold us to become more like Him. In Genesis 50, despite all the evil that Joseph’s brothers did to him, he is able to say in the end, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good.” If we draw closer to God in our time of need, we can be healed and overcome our painful past.

Can Abusive Churches Change?

Those who find themselves in authoritarian churches often remain despite the difficulties because there is an underlying hope that the church can change. Even after they leave they often remain keenly interested in the affairs of the former church because they hope restoration will still occur.

Can abusive churches change? Although with God all things are possible, it is my opinion that it is highly unlikely that this will happen. Although a few have, they are the exceptions.

Why is change in these organizations so difficult? One reason is that change usually begins in the leadership. However, the leadership structure is designed so that the leader has control over the personnel. Although there may be a board, the individuals on the board are ultimately selected by the authoritarian leader. He selects men and women loyal to him, who do not question him, or hold him accountable. Therefore, he insulates himself from dealing with difficult issues or addressing his unhealthy practices.

Dysfunctional leaders also resist change because it is an admission of failure. In order for a genuine change of heart, leaders must first acknowledge a problem and repent. However, a leader who considers himself "God's man" or the spokesman for God will rarely humble himself to confess his shortcomings. Spiritual wholeness and renewal cannot be achieved until unhealthy behavior is recognized and dealt with. Unless this behavior is confronted, the likelihood of real change is diminished.{11}

In most cases, the leadership focuses the blame on others. Those who left the church were not committed, were church hoppers, etc. Stephen Arterburn writes, "Anyone who rebels against the system must be personally attacked so people will think the problem is with the person, not the system."{12} It

is often useless to point out flaws because an abusive church lives in a world of denial. Many of the leaders are themselves deceived. Although sincere in their efforts, they may have no idea their leadership style is unhealthy and harmful. They are usually so narcissistic or so focused on some great thing they are doing for God that they don't notice the wounds they are inflicting on their followers.{13} These leaders often twist Scripture to justify their unhealthy behavior. Most members will go along with this because they assume their pastors know the Bible better than they do.

Lastly, authoritarian churches make every effort to ensure that a good name and image is preserved. Therefore, the leadership often functions in secrecy. Disagreeing members are threatened and told to remain silent or are quietly dismissed.

For these reasons, it is my opinion that it is best to leave an abusive or unhealthy church. Learn to let go and let God deal with that group. Only He can bring people to repentance. Although painful, leaving an unhealthy church and joining a healthy body of believers will begin the healing process and open new doors of fellowship, worship, and service for you.

Notes

1. Pat Zukeran, "Abusive Churches," 1993, Probe Ministries.
2. Ken Blue, *Healing Spiritual Abuse,* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 15..
3. Ronald Enroth, *Recovering From Churches that Abuse,* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing, 1994), 26.
4. Ibid., 39.
5. Philip Keller, *Predators in our Pulpits,* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House, 1988), 12..
6. Blue, 27-28.
7. Ibid., 29.
8. Ibid., 30.
9. Ibid., 34.
10. Ibid., 65.

11. Enroth, 152.
12. Arteburn, Stephen. *Toxic Faith* (Nashville, Tenn.: Oliver Nelson Publishing, 1991), 260.
13. Blue, 13-14.

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"Is it Wrong to Speak of God as Jehovah?"

Is it wrong to speak of God as Jehovah? I stumbled across a teaching regarding the Jehovah Witnesses and discovered that the word Jehovah is a wrong pronunciation of the Hebrew word YAHWEH. It could be that I misunderstood the statement. I am talking about your article, Witnessing to the Witnesses.

Secondly, I would like to compliment you on the wonderful information that is available on your site. Your teachings are outstanding.

Thank you for your letter and your encouragement. It is good to see Christians studying the Word of God and learning to share their faith. Although Jehovah is not a word, it is not wrong to use it for God. Although mistaken, it was an attempt to address the God of Israel. Remember, the God of Israel has many titles, not just one. He is also called King of Kings, Lord of Lords, the First and the Last, the Rock, The Shepherd, Father, I Am, Lord of Glory, etc… Jehovah was another one of the titles. Keep on studying the word and witnessing for Jesus.

Patrick Zukeran
Probe Ministries

Please refer to related articles below.

“Is There Salvation After Death?”

I have a question that I hope you can help me with. I have a friend that believes that salvation can happen after physical death. He says that he believes that Christ is the way to the Father but that can happen after death. Is there any scripture that says that salvation, through believing in Jesus Christ, must happen before physical death?

Thanks for your question. Hebrews 9:27 states that it is appointed to man to die once and then the judgment. This indicates that after death, there is the judgment, and there is no mention of a second chance. In Jesus’ parables of the kingdom, judgment follows after death. One example is Luke 16, Lazarus and the rich man. Immediately after they died, Lazarus was taken to Abraham’s bosom and the rich man to hell. Even in hell the rich man saw that he was wrong and sorry for his sin but could not change his outcome. I am sure if he had a second chance, he would not have been there. Parables like these indicate there is no second chance. Finally, we are saved by faith. Faith is defined in Hebrews 11:1 as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Saving faith is exercised while on earth. When we are face to face with the Lord, we will no longer be exercising any kind of faith; we will see as 1 Corinthians states, “face to face.” So all scripture indicates judgment after death. The burden is on those who say there is a second chance after death. Where are the verses to uphold that view?

Thanks for your question. I hope this helps.

Patrick Zukeran
Probe Ministries

The World of the Occult : A Christian Worldview Perspective

Dr. Pat Zukeran explains why Christians need to be wise and discerning concerning the occult, both recognizing its power and danger, and not going overboard either.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

Occult Overview

In a popular TV show, the heroine calls upon spirits, spells, and magic to defeat demonic beings. In another show, teen-age witches use their white magic to defeat evil warlocks and spirits. Such popular shows deal with the world of the occult. The occult has thrived since the beginning of civilization. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, the prophets of God confronted the problem of the occult.

The term *occult* is derived from the Latin word "occultus," which means to cover up, hide, or those things which are hidden or secret. A brief definition of the occult is the practice of attaining supernatural knowledge or powers apart from the God of the Bible. Through these practices occultists seek to influence the present or future circumstances, of their lives or the lives of others.

Why is there such an interest in the occult? Experts point to

several factors. The first is disillusionment with the church and organized religion. The second factor is curiosity. There is an attraction to the occult that appeals to our interest in the unseen. Many begin with “harmless” dabbling, but this can often lead to more. Third, there is the quest for power. People want control over the future, spirits, or over other individuals.

There are three primary categories of the occult world: divination, magick, and spiritism. Divination is the attempt to foretell the future and thereby shape our lives accordingly. The divination arts include astrology, zodiac charts, crystal balls, tarot cards, palm reading, psychics, numerology, and horoscopes.

The second category is magick or paganism. Those in magick attempt to control the present by ceremonies, charms, and spells. The magick arts include witchcraft, white magic, black magic, sorcery, Satanism, black mass, and witch doctors.

Then there is spiritism. Those involved in spiritism attempt to communicate with the dead and receive information or help from them. Spiritism involves ouija boards, sances, necromancy, and ghosts.

The world of the occult not only brings a false message, but a dangerous one as well. Experiences with the occult drive us away from God and bring us into contact with the demonic realm. Jesus said the Devil is “a liar and the father of lies.” (John 8:44) In dealing with the demonic, you cannot expect them to deal in truth. The Devil and his legion only seek to “steal, kill, and destroy.” (John 10:10) For this reason, Deuteronomy 18 labels the practices of witchcraft, sorcery, divination, and necromancy as detestable to the Lord. It was these practices that brought judgment on the Canaanites and expelled them from the land. God did not want such teachings to infiltrate any culture. The church must not only present the danger of the occult, but the message of life and

victory found in Jesus Christ over the principalities of darkness.

Dangers of the Occult

“What’s wrong with joining the Vampire Club or attending a sance?” your child may ask. For some, exposure to the occult via fantasy games, the media, or music may lead to greater involvement in a dangerous world.

The primary danger of the occult is that it is a path away from God that can bring us into contact with the demonic realm. The demonic forces seek to deceive and destroy individuals. Therefore, contact with the demonic breeds numerous problems.

First, cult experts and psychologists have documented the connection between occult involvement and psychological and emotional disorders. Participants spend numerous hours studying, practicing, and playing games that involve conjuring demons, sacrificing creatures in cruel rituals, controlling sinister forces, and casting spells to disable and kill their enemies. This can affect a person’s spiritual, mental, and emotional state.

Second, there is the danger of spirit possession. The occult arts often require one to empty one’s mind and invite foreign spirits to control his or her intellect and body. For example, in operating a ouija board, participants are asked to empty their minds to allow other forces to guide them as they attempt to attain messages. In other games, participants are encouraged to call upon a spirit being to help guide them. These techniques open the door for spirit possession.

Third, there is the danger of violence to oneself and others. Many cases of violence and suicides are connected to the occult. Dr. Thomas Redecki, a psychiatrist and chairman of the National Coalition on Television Violence, has given expert

testimony at a number of murder trials that were connected to fantasy role-playing games. He states, “I’ve found multiple instances of attitudes, values and perceptions of reality that were strongly influenced by an immersion in these games. When someone spends 15 to 30 hours a week dreaming of how to go out and kill your opponents and steal treasure, it’s not surprising that the desire to act it out in real life occurs.”{1}

Real cases include the famous black occultist Aleister Crowley. He ended up in an insane asylum for six months after attempting to conjure up the Devil. Not only that, his children died and his wives went insane or drank themselves to death.{2} In Florida, a group of three teenagers were charged with bludgeoning to death the parents of a fourth girl in their group. These teenagers were involved in the fantasy role-playing game *Vampire*.{3}

There is no benefit that comes from dabbling in the occult. God’s Word tells us to avoid the occult because it can be addicting and harmful. Instead, Philippians 4 says to spend our time dwelling on what is true, noble, right, pure, admirable, and praiseworthy. What we focus on affects our actions and outlook on life. Therefore, we should dwell on what builds the mind, body, and spirit.

Investigating Occult Phenomena

Can seers foretell future events? Can mediums really talk to the dead? How do you explain psychic phenomenon? Dealing with the occult calls for a balanced approach. The biblical worldview acknowledges both the physical and spiritual realms. There are physical beings but also spiritual beings of good and evil. We cannot ignore the supernatural, but we should not be obsessed with it either. C.S. Lewis commented, “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an unhealthy interest in

them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight."{4} Lewis' call, as well as ours, is for a balanced approach.

There are numerous claims of supernatural occurrences in the occult world. However, not all occult phenomena should be attributed to the supernatural. There have been cases where people have quickly attributed unexplained events to the demonic, only to later discover other natural explanations. This often causes embarrassment and hurts the individual or group's credibility. We must be careful to investigate all possible explanations.

Most occult phenomena are mere trickery. Techniques such as sleight of hand, physical or mechanical deception, luck or mathematical probability, and body reading can explain many accounts. For example, Jewish psychic Uri Geller was believed to have supernatural powers such as the ability to move or bend objects from a distance with his mind. He even managed to fool scientists with his feats. However, his alleged powers were eventually shown to be false when magician James Randi performed the same feats, exposing the charlatan's tricks.

Other phenomena can be attributed to psychological factors. For example, someone demonstrating many personalities and speaking in different voices may have a multiple personality disorder that should be treated with medication. Unusual changes in personality or the fear of objects or names may be due to some kind of chemical imbalance. One should be careful and investigate these possibilities before concluding occult powers at work or demon possession.

The fourth explanation can be attributed to our sin nature. James 1:14 states, "but each one is tempted when, by his own desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full-grown, gives birth to death." Too often Christians are quick to attribute bad habits and conflicts to the demonic and fail

to take responsibility for their actions. For example, addiction to pornography is the result of yielding to our sin nature, not necessarily satanic activity.

Before ascribing events and difficulties to the demonic realm, we must first determine if it is consistent with demonic activity as described in the Bible and cannot be explained naturally. Then we can consider the possibility that it is demonic.

Witnessing to Those in the Occult

What should you do if you discover a friend or child involved in the occult? In witnessing to occultists, we must understand that they view Christians as intolerant and mean-spirited. They feel misunderstood, and quick condemnation often causes the person to retreat and delve further into the occult. Many people enter occult organizations because the church and their peers have rejected them. So, in witnessing, we must remember to be firm, but loving and sensitive as well.

I remember one situation at a Six Flags amusement park. While waiting in line, two Christian men noticed a student wearing a shirt promoting a band with clear connections to the occult. In a very condescending manner they questioned the young boy as to why he would wear such a shirt. “I like their music,” was the response. To which the men rebuked him harshly. Soon a short and heated argument ensued. The boy was left feeling angry and condemned while the two Christian men congratulated one another on a fine job of “witnessing.” Such incidents unfortunately are too common. The first step in witnessing is demonstrating gentleness and respect.

Second, do some research in the area so that you know what you are talking about. People in the occult do not view their activity as dangerous and consider others’ warnings as nave and misinformed. Therefore, being able to point to specific examples of concern goes a lot further than generalized

accusations. If you are not able to find information, sit down and patiently listen to the person explain why and how he got involved. As you listen, ask questions that would cause the person to examine his beliefs. Listening always goes a long way in any kind of witnessing.

Third, point out the danger of addiction that can be the result of spending numerous amounts of time and money on occult activities. 1 Corinthians 6:12 warns us not to “be mastered by anything.” Addiction to the occult leads to bondage, but God’s truth sets us free.

Fourth, know what the Bible says about the occult. Point out that the nature of the Adversary is to deceive and destroy. God’s nature is truth and love. Dwelling on the false teachings of the occult can distort one’s view of reality. This message ultimately leads to ruin, while God’s truth leads to life. Share God’s message of love and demonstrate it in your actions.

Finally, present the message of life, truth, and hope found in Christ. The occult only offers a false message that brings destruction because the force behind it is the father of lies. The deception of the occult leads to bondage, but truth sets you free. In engaging the world of the occult, Christians need not be afraid for we have authority over the demonic through Christ who triumphed over all powers and authorities by the cross. (Colossians 1:15)

Deliverance from the Occult

If you have been dabbling in the occult or know someone who wants to come out of it, what should you do? First, permanent deliverance and restoration begins with a relationship with Jesus Christ. If you have not trusted Christ, receiving Him as your Lord and Savior is the first step. When this happens, you are set free from the Kingdom of Darkness and are now under the authority of the Kingdom of Light. 1 Peter 2:9 states that

it is Christ who “called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”

Second, recognize and confess your sin of involvement in the occult. Then accept God’s forgiveness by faith. 1 John 1:9 states, ‘If we confess our sin, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Third, remove all occult objects. This example was set for us in Acts 19:19-20. Those who had come to Christ burned their objects publicly. Having occult items around such as game boards, cards, and statues may provide a source of temptation to return. Removing all such objects helps avoid facing that temptation and dealing with memories.

Fourth, break off all medium contacts and occult associations. Spirit guides and friends in the occult will encourage you to abandon your trust in Christ and return to participating in the occult. One must courageously trust that Christ will protect you from demonic retaliation and provide new friends who will encourage you in the Lord.

Fifth, if you are finding the transition difficult, seek a Christian counselor with knowledge in this area. Only a Christian counselor understands that healing comes when we deal with not only the physical, mental, and emotional aspect, but the spiritual as well.

Sixth, join a fellowship of Christians who will pray and care for you. Also, strive to grow in your new walk with Jesus Christ. You have been filling your mind with the teachings of the occult and now you must, as Paul says in Romans 12, “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” This comes by filling your mind with God’s truth and fellowshipping with Him.

In seeking deliverance from the occult, we cannot stop halfway. We must be committed to turning from our sin and following Christ with all our heart. Believers must heed

Paul’s exhortation to put on the spiritual armor of God. In Ephesians 6, Paul reminds us that, “Our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” Only Christians who come in the authority of Christ can engage the world of the occult and those protected by His armor can resist the Adversary and be delivered from the occult.

Notes

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2. John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Cult Watch*, (Eugene, OR.: Harvest House Publishers, 1991), 283-4.

3. Deborah Sharp, “Vampire Game is Bizzare Twist to Florida Slayings,” *USA Today*, 9 December 1996, 3A.

4. C.S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, (New York: MacMillan Co. 1961), preface.

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1. Branch, Craig. "Games: Fantasy or Reality?" at www.watchman.org/occult/frpgames2.htm.

2. Cowherd, Jill. "Downloading Danger." at www.watchman.org/cults/games.htm

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