

The Influence Of Eastern And “New Age” Beliefs

When Americans sit in their different worship services, the chances are that one in five of the people there find “spiritual energy” in mountains or trees, one in four believe in astrology, one in four believe yoga is a “spiritual practice,” and one in six believe in the “evil eye,” that certain people can cast curses with a look. In Catholic churches, chances are that one in five members believe in reincarnation -- something they were never taught in catechism class.

Elements of Eastern faiths and New Age thinking have been widely adopted by 65% of U.S. adults, including many who call themselves Protestants and Catholics, according to a survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life released in December. And, according to the survey's other major finding, devotion to one clear faith is fading. In the Old Testament, the Israelites at first did not completely leave God. They first combined the worship of God with the worship of pagan idols. This practice was called “syncretism” (cp. Joshua 24:2), and it appears to be happening again. One example would be pop star Madonna's mixing of the contradictory belief systems of Catholicism and Jewish Kabbalah. Scott Thumma, a professor at the Hartford Institute for Religion Research in Hartford, Connecticut, said, “Today, the individual rarely finds all their spiritual needs met in one congregation or one religion.” These kinds of trends need to be watched by Christians, for they may represent the next direction our children may follow if we do not boldly and consistently preach what is and is not compatible with the scriptures.

According to Pew's 2008 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, 70% said “many religions can lead to eternal life,” and 68% said “there's more than one true way to interpret the teachings of my religion.” In short, we believe our own experiences are authentic, and no “authority” can say otherwise.

Jim Todhunter, a retired leader of United Church of Christ congregations, said, “That's a very ‘Eastern’ notion.” He has studied in a Hindu ashram in India and practices Zen meditation and Christian contemplative prayer. “In the Western religions — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — the focus is: ‘What do you believe?’ There is always a tremendous focus on doctrine and teachings,” he says. “In the East, Buddhism and Hinduism in particular, the leading question is, ‘Do you know God?’ It's much more experience-based.” Either way, he adds, “however you meet God is wonderful.”

The Bible plainly says that man does not get to decide what he believes is true. Psalm 119:160 says, “The entirety of Your word is truth ...” God wants us to follow all of the scriptures, not just what part we want or just what we want to do. Jeremiah 10:23-24 says, “O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps. O Lord, correct me, but with judgment; not in thine anger, lest thou bring me to nothing.” John the Baptist said, “A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven” (John 3:27). No matter how our society changes and how people alter their beliefs toward Eastern and “New Age” philosophies, the Bible is true and it is never going to change. John 12:48 says, “He that rejecteth me, and receiveth

not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day.” The Proverb writer added, “There are many devices in a man’s heart; nevertheless the counsel of the Lord, that shall stand” (Proverbs 19:21).

I fear that some brethren’s reticence to hear good, strong doctrinal lessons on topics such as the nature of God and Christ, why the Bible was written, apologetics, etc., will pay terrible dividends in the form of our children leaving the faith for these false, Eastern “notions.” It is my opinion that we have to get away from thinking that young people only need lessons on moral issues and peer pressure. If you look at gospel meeting announcements and youth lectureship announcements, you will see an abundance of those types of topics (living godly, building good character, picking good friends, overcoming temptation, facing peer pressure, dressing modestly), but virtually none on authority, the church, or how to defend the faith of the scriptures in a skeptical world. It’s not that those aforementioned topics are not important, they are! But we are leaving an enormous hole in their knowledge and subsequently their faith that many of them will walk through, chasing these mystical ideas.

The one bright spot in this report is that people are religiously open. That will provide us an opportunity to show our neighbors why they ought to believe in the Bible, and how it can fully answer all of the great questions of life. We just need to be sure we are adequately prepared (1 Peter 3:15)!

Kyle Campbell