The New Age Peale Factor: (Part 1) Norman Vincent Peale and the Occult

By Warren B. Smith
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Whatever may be the embarrassment caused by these striking similarities [between Norman Vincent Peale and New Age author Florence Scovel Shinn], it pales against the discomfiture that millions of mainline Christians, purporting to stand on orthodoxy and Scripture alone, have thus unwittingly embraced the Occult. So strong is its tacit foothold that it now may well be the primary working faith of many in the churches.

—Lutheran Quarterly, Summer 1995

In March 2005, I received a letter and two accompanying articles from an Indiana pastor. One of the articles was clipped from the August 3, 1995 Indianapolis Star newspaper. It featured a big picture of Norman Vincent Peale with a headline and subtitle that read:

Norman Vincent Peale accused of plagiarism: ‘Power of Positive Thinking’ author’s work similar to that of a little-known teacher of occult science.

The Indianapolis Star article asked the question: “Was the Rev. Norman Vincent Peale, father of the ‘believe and succeed’ theology sweeping American Protestantism, a plagiarist inspired by the occult?” In attempting to answer this question, the newspaper referred to an article from a Lutheran Quarterly journal that contended that Peale drew much of his inspiration from the writings and teachings of occult/New Age author Florence Scovel Shinn. Presenting information from the Lutheran Quarterly article, the Indianapolis Star reported:

After comparing his book to hers, the authors cite scores of specific instances in which Peale and Shinn not only think alike, but use similar or identical phrases. 

Shinn, who died in 1940, drew on mystical sources dating to the ancient Egyptian philosopher Hermes Trismegistus ["as above, so below"] and the secrets of Freemasonry.

Such sources are progenitors of New Age, a movement considered ungodly hocus-pocus by conservative and fundamentalist Christians.

Shinn’s privately published metaphysical works, reissued by both Simon & Schuster and the Church of Religious Science, are available in New Age bookstores. Peale penned the introduction to the Simon & Schuster edition, indicating he had “long used” Shinn’s teachings.
The Lutheran Quarterly article that the Indianapolis Star had referenced regarding Peale’s unattributed use of Shinn’s occult/New Age teachings, with Peale/Shinn side-by-side quotes, clearly demonstrated the likeness of their writings. The Lutheran Quarterly article stated:

The striking similarity between these passages discloses an unsettling theological secret. Along with many other parallel concepts, affirmations, metaphors, and stories, they provide testimony that the writing that made Norman Vincent Peale “minister to millions” and a millionaire many times over, shows a startling similarity to the writings of an obscure teacher of Occult science named Florence Scovel Shinn. Whatever may be the embarrassment caused by these striking similarities, it pales against the discomfiture that millions of mainline Christians, purporting to stand on orthodoxy and Scripture alone, have thus unwittingly embraced the Occult. So strong is its tacit foothold that it now may well be the primary working faith of many in the churches.

In the 1986 reissue of Shinn’s 1925 book, The Game of Life and How to Play It, Norman Vincent Peale’s front and back cover endorsements of her occult/New Age book respectively read:

The Game of Life is filled with wisdom and creative insights. That its teachings will work I know to be fact, for I’ve long used them myself.

By studying and practicing the principles laid down in this book one may find prosperity, solve problems, have better health, achieve good personal relations—in a word, win the game of life.

Peale’s New Age Endorsements

In his letter to me, the Indiana pastor wrote how he remembered the Lutheran Quarterly article after reading my book Deceived on Purpose. My observation that Rick Warren emulated so many of Robert Schuller’s ideologies reminded him of Norman Vincent Peale’s alleged unattributed use of Florence Scovel Shinn’s writings. The Indiana pastor was surprised I had not mentioned the New Age link between Peale and Schuller. He said that the New Age implications of Warren’s teachings did not stop with Schuller or even with Schuller’s mentor, Peale. It stretched back through all of them to the occult itself.

With this new information concerning Norman Vincent Peale, I looked a little more deeply into his background. I discovered that Peale had been a 33rd degree Mason and that he had endorsed other New Age books through the years. One of these books was written by Bernie Siegel—the man Robert Schuller and Rick Warren had both positively referenced in regard to “hope” and “purpose.” Although I had been aware of the Schuller/Warren link to Siegel, I had not been aware of the Peale link. The Bernie Siegel book that Peale endorsed was Love, Medicine & Miracles—the book where Siegel described how he contacted his personal spirit guide “George” in a guided meditation. Peale’s endorsement on the back cover read:

In these pages is found a precious secret, that of health and well-being.
Siegel’s continued New Age activity includes his teaching in New Age leader Neale Donald Walsch’s School of the New Spirituality.8 As previously mentioned, Walsch has described Robert Schuller as an “extraordinary minister”—someone who could spark a “New Reformation” that could help bring the world together as “One.” Walsch also praised the “extraordinary insight” of Norman Vincent Peale in Walsch’s 2005 book, What God Wants. In discussing occult/New Age manifestation (how individuals attempt to use their feelings and imagination to create events outside themselves), Walsch commends Peale and two New Age authors, Esther and Jerry Hicks. It is Esther Hicks and a group of spirit guides named “Abraham” that helped inspire Rhonda Byrne’s Oprah Winfrey endorsed, best-selling 2006 book The Secret.9 In What God Wants, Walsch writes the following about Peale:

This phenomenon [occult manifestation] is discussed with extraordinary insight in the classic book The Power of Positive Thinking, written over fifty years ago by the Reverend Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, a Christian minister who understood that feelings are a gift from God, giving us the power of creation. That book has sold millions of copies and is still easy to find today, in libraries, in bookstores, and from any online bookseller.

A more updated and non-Christian-oriented look at this amazing process is offered in the contemporary book Ask and It Is Given, by Esther and Jerry Hicks . . . .

The fact that you can create something by picturing it in your mind, by seeing it as already accomplished, and by allowing yourself to experience the feeling associated with that is evidence of the greatest news humanity has ever heard.10

This creative visualization technique that Neale Donald Walsch is commending is at the heart of the New Age movement’s attempt to create a “positive future” by universally affirming and envisioning that we are all “One” because God is “in” everyone and everything. This attempt by the New Age to create a positive future by affirming “oneness” is deceptively appealing but very unbiblical. The Bible states that we are only “one” through our personal commitment to Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior (Romans 3:23-25; Galatians 3:26-28). The Bible makes it clear that God is not “in” everyone and everything (Ezekiel 28:2; Hosea 11:9; John 2:24-25; Romans 1:21-23).

I discovered that another occult/New Age book Norman Vincent Peale had endorsed was Ernest Holmes’ The Science of Mind. In Deceived on Purpose, I recounted an incident that a minister of Religious Science shared with me.11 She said that she and her husband—both New Age ministers—had attended Robert Schuller’s Institute for Successful Church Leadership in the early 1970s. When she talked to Schuller in his office and explained that she was a Religious Science minister, Schuller pulled Ernest Holmes’ book The Science of Mind from his bottom desk drawer as an obvious gesture of fellowship. The late Holmes (1887-1960) was the founder of the Church of Religious Science and his book The Science of Mind is regarded by many in the occult as a New Age “bible.”

Echoing the foundational teaching of the New Age/New World Religion that God is “in” everyone, Peale applauded Holmes saying, “I believe God was in this man, Ernest Holmes. He was in tune with the infinite.”12

I also discovered that Peale had endorsed Unity minister Eric Butterworth’s book Discover the Power Within You. This occult/New Age book has nearly one hundred references to the “Divinity of Man” and was cited by Oprah Winfrey in 1987 and again in 2008, as the book that changed her Christian worldview to a New Age worldview. In a 1987 Oprah Winfrey Show titled “The New Age Movement,” Oprah said:
One of the most important books, I think I’ve read in my life was a book by Eric Butterworth. . . . called Discover the Power Within You. And what Eric Butterworth said in that book is that Jesus did not come to teach how divine he was, but came to teach us that there is divinity within us.13

Norman Vincent Peale’s endorsement on the back cover of Butterworth’s book leaves no question as to his spiritual propensities:

A wonderful book . . . truly a life-changer, as many readers know. This book really does release the power within us all.14

Yet another New Age book Peale endorsed and wrote the foreword to is the late John Marks Templeton’s book Discovering the Laws of Life. Templeton was a wealthy business leader, philanthropist, and New Age sympathizer that Robert Schuller interviewed and put on the cover of his 1986 Possibilities magazine.15 In Deceived on Purpose, I describe how Rick Warren was one of the judges for Templeton’s 2004 Power of Purpose Essay Contest. Just as Bernie Siegel had a connection with Robert Schuller, Rick Warren, and Norman Vincent Peale, so New Age proponent John Marks Templeton had a connection with these same three men.

As Above, So Below and the Saddleback Apologists

The information sent to me by the Indiana pastor about Norman Vincent Peale is astounding. It reveals that Florence Scovel Shinn—the occult author Peale had endorsed and was accused of plagiarizing—had drawn upon the ancient teachings of Hermes Trismegistus. As previously cited, Hermes Trismegistus is said to be the author of the ancient, mystical saying “as above, so below” that signifies God is “in” everything. The Indianapolis Star newspaper article sent to me stated:

Shinn, who died in 1940, drew on mystical sources dating to the ancient Egyptian philosopher Hermes Trismegistus and the secrets of Freemasonry.

Such sources are progenitors of New Age.16

In their attempt to nullify the New Age implications of Eugene Peterson’s The Message and Rick Warren’s predominant use of this “paraphrase,” Saddleback apologists expressed no concern about Peterson’s insertion of the occult phrase “as above, so below” into the middle of the Lord’s Prayer. In their rush to defend Warren’s use of The Message paraphrase, they tried to make me the issue rather than the occult/New Age phrase.

Saddleback apologists may have hoped the whole issue of “as above, so below” would quietly go away—but it did not. The term “as above, so below,” with its mystical God “in” everything meaning, was prominently featured on the front page of author Rhonda Byrne’s best-selling book, The Secret. As already mentioned, The Secret was largely inspired by the teachings of a group of spirit guides named “Abraham” channeled by New Age medium Esther Hicks—the same Esther Hicks that Neale Donald Walsch had praised (along with Peale) in regard to occult manifestation. Hicks had simply updated Peale’s teachings on how to create your own reality through the practice of occult/New Age techniques—the same techniques Peale had gleaned from Florence Scovel Shinn and other New Age teachers.
The main “secret” of The Secret was contained in the book’s full front-page display of the phrase “as above, so below”—God “in” everything. The New Age/New Spirituality “secret” is that we are all God because God is “in” everyone and everything—the foundational teaching of the proposed coming New World Religion. This Hermes Trismegistus “as above, so below” secret was revealed and underscored by author Rhonda Byrne when she wrote in her book: “You are God in a physical body.”

**Peale—“God is in you”**

In his famous 1952 book The Power of Positive Thinking, Norman Vincent Peale presented the foundational teaching of the coming New World Religion—the “as above, so below” teaching that God is “in” everyone. Peale told the millions of readers of that book: “God is in you.” 18 Fifty years later, Robert Schuller echoed his mentor’s words when he told his worldwide television audience the very same thing—“Yes, God is alive and He is in every single human being!” 19 Rick Warren similarly tells readers of The Purpose Driven Life that the Bible says God “is in everything.”

I found it remarkable that the pastor from Indiana had encouraged me to look more fully at the occult roots of Norman Vincent Peale’s ministry and to see the New Age implications this had for both Robert Schuller and Rick Warren. Given Peale’s influence on Schuller and Schuller’s influence on Warren, the last thing Warren needed was for someone to bring Norman Vincent Peale’s obvious occultism into the light.

To be continued: The New Age Peale Factor: (Part 2) George Mair’s Book

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**Endnotes:**

3. Ibid.
13. The Oprah Winfrey Show, #W205, Air Date September 18, 1987, official transcript, brought to my attention by Johanna Michaelson.
15. Dave Hunt, Occult Invasion: The Subtle Seduction of the World and Church (Eugene, OR:...

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Norman Vincent Peale, was a 33-degree Mason, Robert Schuller credits Peale's influence to mentor Church Growth gurus Rick Warren & Bill Hybels New Age Thought. This is what the human potential movement (part of the new age counterfeit) teaches. It also has ties with the positive confession movement in the church. In the book the Power of Positive Thinking, the advertisement reads “There is a deep tendency in human nature ultimately to become precisely what you visualize yourself as being. Peale first became suspect when he consistently began endorsing New Age/Occultic writers. The following are several examples. When asked in a recent letter about some of Dr. Peale's endorsements of specific New Age writers, and the Mormon prophet, the response was written by Peale's secretary, Mrs. Evelyn Yegella. She stated that she could find no reference nor endorsement to The Game of Life and The Jesus Letters. She also stated that “Perhaps he (Peale) is too generous with his praise” and that he “does not endorse the New Age Movement” (letter from the Foundation For Christian Living, October 31, 1988). Yet in a recent interview with Beth Ann Krier of the Los Angeles Times, Peale said,