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THE SECRET REVEALED: ASSESSING THE LATEST SELF-HELP PHENOMENON

by Robert Velarde

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SYNOPSIS

Promoted on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and other media venues, *The Secret* has become the latest self-help phenomenon. It was initially available for viewing online and later became a bestselling DVD and book by Rhonda Byrne. Featuring two-dozen contributors, *The Secret* claims to solve all of life's challenges through the power of thought.

The foundation of *The Secret* is the law of attraction, which states that our thoughts transmit like radio waves, throughout the universe, drawing either positive or negative experiences into our lives, allowing us to create our own reality. Thinking positively results in our drawing joy, financial prosperity, and good health, for example, into our lives.

The worldview of *The Secret* is monistic pantheism—all is one, all is divine. Everything is interconnected energy. Our positive thoughts tap into this energy and produce positive results in our lives. Our negative thoughts, conversely, bring negativity into our lives. As a result, *The Secret* is in the precarious position of stating that experiences such as rape and child molestation are the result of the thoughts of those who have suffered such horrors.

The Secret claims compatibility with Christianity, but it is anything but Christian. Jesus taught belief in a transcendent, personal, holy God who is distinct from His creation. Human beings are fallen and in need of radical redemption that involves real repentance before God for sins committed against His perfect law, and through belief in the death and resurrection of Christ, His Son, who was a sinless sacrifice on their behalf. We are not perfect divine beings with unlimited potential.

I feel it—that so many people are hungry for guidance and meaning in their lives, and *The Secret* offers some of that. It is the law of attraction. It says that the energy, that the thoughts and the feelings that you put out into the world, both good and bad, are exactly what is always coming back to you, so you have the life that you have created. I've been talking about this for years on my show, I just never called it *The Secret*.¹

So said Oprah Winfrey about the latest self-help phenomenon, *The Secret*. Initially released via the Internet (March 2006) as a pay-per-view video stream, and making its way to DVD as an "extended edition" (October 2006), *The Secret*² has since captured the attention of millions of people the world over. Followed by a bestselling book of the same title, *The Secret* is the result of the efforts of Rhonda Byrne, an Australian television writer and producer.

Perhaps the most pertinent questions for Christians are: What is *The Secret*? How does it claim to work? Is it compatible with Christianity?

WHAT IS THE SECRET?

The Secret is a self-help technique founded on a principle called the law of attraction that is rooted in pantheism and designed to be applied to finances, relationships, health, spirituality—virtually every aspect of life. Featuring two-dozen contributors,³ The Secret claims to offer the means to a fulfilled life.

The Law of Attraction

The foundation of The Secret is the law of attraction—an impersonal force that individuals can manipulate with their thoughts in order to achieve what they want in their lives. “It is,” writes Byrne, “the law that determines the complete order in the Universe, every moment of your life, and every single thing you experience in your life...the law of attraction is forming your entire life experience, and this all-powerful law is doing that through your thoughts.”⁴

The Secret of the law of attraction has supposedly been known throughout the centuries by numerous individuals—such as Socrates, Plato, Newton, Beethoven, and Einstein—and religions—such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hermetic traditions.⁵

Several advocates of The Secret define the law of attraction similarly. “Thoughts become things,”⁶ explains author Mike Dooley. Entrepreneur John Assaraf says, “Thought has a frequency.”⁷ Michael Beckwith, cofounder of the Association for Global New Thought, elaborates on how thoughts create reality: “Every time an individual has a thought...they’re in the creation process. Something is going to manifest out of those thoughts.”⁸ Prentice Mulford (1834-1891), a pioneer of New Thought (see explanation below), is quoted in support of the law of attraction: “Every thought of yours is a real thing—a force.”⁹ Those who accumulate wealth are said to know The Secret, whether “consciously or unconsciously. They think thoughts of abundance and wealth....It is the law of attraction in action.”¹⁰

The Secret repeats the theme, “Thoughts are magnetic, and thoughts have a frequency....You are a *human* transmission tower”¹¹ throughout. Mastering life, then, is a matter of mastering thoughts. Once one understands the law of attraction, putting it into action will result in health, wealth, love, joy—anything positive one may desire. All of this is built on a worldview foundation that is clearly at odds with theism.

Everything is Energy

Like many of the Mind Science religions, as well as forms of Hinduism, The Secret is based on pantheism, which sees everything as divine. In opposition to Christianity, which distinguishes between a transcendent God and created beings, The Secret is monistic, viewing all reality as one. The interconnectedness of all reality is also an aspect of the underlying worldview of The Secret.

Byrne writes, “We are all connected, and we are all part of the One Energy Field, or the One Supreme Mind, or the One Consciousness, or the One Creative Source...we are all One.”¹² Later she adds, “You are God in a physical body. You are Spirit in the flesh. You are Eternal Life expressing itself as You. You are a cosmic being. You are all power. You are all wisdom. You are all intelligence. You are perfection. You are magnificence. You are the creator, and you are creating the creation of You on this planet.”¹³ James Arthur Ray comments, “That means you have God potential and power to create your world.”¹⁴

Other contributors to The Secret agree. “Everything is energy,”¹⁵ explains Ben Johnson, a practitioner of energy-based medicine. “You’re not a finite body,” adds Ray, “you’re an energy field.”¹⁶ Assaraf concurs, noting, “We’re all connected...everything in the universe is connected, it’s just one energy field.”¹⁷ Author Lisa Nichols draws the typical New Age conclusion: “You’re source energy. You are God manifested in human form, made to perfection.”¹⁸

Ask and It Will Be Given

Byrne explains how one implements the law of attraction: “The Creative Process used in The Secret, which was taken from the New Testament in the Bible, is an easy guideline for you to create what you want in three simple steps.”¹⁹ What are the steps? Ask, believe, receive.

The “ask” step is really a command to the impersonal universe, which Ray likens to the story of Aladdin and the lamp.²⁰ Simply ask the genie for what you want and you’ve placed an order to the universe. The second step involves belief, which, according to Nichols, involves “unwavering faith,”²¹ although faith in *what* is never clarified. Byrne claims, “You must believe that you have received.”²² Continuing with the “genie” illustration, Byrne adds, “The Genie [i.e., the universe] is responding to your predominant thoughts all the time....That’s why after you’ve asked, you must continue to *believe* and *know*. Have faith. Your belief that you have it...is your greatest power.”²³ Finally, sit back, feel good, and receive what the law of attraction delivers.

THE ROOTS OF THE SECRET

If much of The Secret appears familiar, that’s because it is not new (or secret). The Secret is actually an amalgam of past teachings. The Secret lends itself to comparison to recent Word of Faith/Positive Confession teachings. Its techniques are reminiscent of those of Napoleon Hill (1883–1970), author of *Think and Grow Rich* (1937), and Norman Vincent Peale (1898-1993), author of *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952).

Mind Science

The Secret, most notably, however, is based on the Mind Science groups of the nineteenth century, which have much in common with each other. Significantly influenced by Phineas Parkhurst Quimby (1802-1866), the Mind Science religions of the nineteenth century and beyond included the New Thought movement, which emphasized positive thinking (new thought) rather than negative thinking (old thought). Two prominent groups today that originated in that movement are Religious Science (founded by Ernest Holmes) and Unity School of Christianity (founded by Charles Fillmore). Another major Mind Science group is Christian Science (Mary Baker Eddy). Mind Science teachings contributed to what commonly was termed the New Age Movement in the 1970s and ‘80s and currently is referred to as the “new spirituality” or simply “spirituality.”

Byrne notes Charles Fillmore, the cofounder of Unity School, multiple times as an authority on the law of attraction.²⁴ Fillmore believed that the teachings of Unity School would provide health, wealth, and happiness to its adherents. Byrne’s “secret” makes similar claims based on similar beliefs.

The law of attraction, as promoted by The Secret, is derived from the teachings of New Thought. New Thought, not surprisingly, also adhered to pantheism, referring to the universe with such phrases as Universal Life Force. Since everything is divine, New Thought proponents believed in the divinity of every human being. Sin, however, being negative, is dismissed as illusory. Salvation or, more accurately, enlightenment, is the result of correcting our thinking.

This perspective, shared by The Secret, rips the heart out of the biblical view of Jesus Christ. It negates His Incarnation, His atoning sacrifice for human sins, and His provision of redemption, which is available only through Him. After all, if the concepts found in Mind Science religions, including New Thought and The Secret, are correct, then there really is no such thing as sin in a biblical sense, which is an affront to a holy, transcendent, personal God. New Thought reinterprets every aspect of Christian theology, particularly the nature of Christ. Jesus, consequently, is now separate from “the Christ,” or Christ consciousness, which everyone can attain by right thinking (using the law of attraction).

These Mind Science roots directly influenced advocates of The Secret. Byrne, for example, came to adopt this worldview when she was given a copy of the book *The Science of Getting Rich* (1910) by Wallace Wattles (1860-1911), whose ideas were influenced by New Thought.

ASSESSING THE SECRET: PROSECUTING THE LAW OF ATTRACTION

Some may argue that the law of attraction is based on biblical principles. After all, we are told in 2 Corinthians 10:5 to “take captive every thought” and Philippians 4:8 calls us to “think about” things that are “true,” “noble,” “right,” “pure,” “lovely,” and “admirable.” These passages, however, must be

interpreted in the context of the Christian worldview. Second Corinthians 10:5, for instance, reads, “Take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ,” while the Philippians passage, in context, is addressing God’s peace as found in a Christian framework, with the Christian view of God: a personal being, not an impersonal force.

The Secret aims to utilize thoughts in order to gain fulfillment and is used as a technique. Christianity, on the other hand, recognizes the reality of a holy God to whom we must answer and, as a result, pursues a relationship with God through Christ not as a technique, but because we are fallen beings in need of redemption and a restored relationship with our Creator.

Like any worldview founded on monistic pantheism, The Secret falls short of adequately accounting for personality, moral standards, and the reality of evil. The god of pantheism is an impersonal force or energy, incapable of expressing feelings such as love that Byrne and contributors to The Secret are so fond of noting.²⁵ If all is one, moreover, there is no basis for distinguishing right from wrong, good from evil, or moral from immoral.

Despite the impersonal underpinnings of the worldview of The Secret, Byrne wants it both ways—an impersonal universe that is somehow also personal. If our thoughts really do transmit on certain frequencies, as The Secret repeatedly claims, and through those frequencies they directly can communicate with the universe, then, for them to be recognized or understood, something in the universe at large must be personal. The worldview of The Secret, however, cannot support personality, much less personal interactions, without inherently contradicting its view that all is energy and that the law of attraction is impersonal and invariable.

The Secret and Science

Is The Secret scientific? According to the contributors, it is. As Ray puts it, “It’s a time where spiritual traditions and science are now in total agreement.”²⁶ Beckwith adds, “It’s scientific. It’s real.”²⁷ Author Bob Doyle claims, “the Law of Attraction...is a scientific principle.”²⁸ Physicist Fred Alan Wolf continues, commenting on the law of attraction, “Quantum physics really begins to point to this discovery.”²⁹ Jack Canfield, popular as cocreator of the Chicken Soup for the Soul books, also calls on quantum physics to support The Secret: “If you go to quantum physics, we realize everything is energy, and what controls the flow of energy is thought and feeling.”³⁰

Does quantum physics really support the teachings of The Secret? Hardly. Quantum physics routinely is hijacked by those in the new spirituality in order to support their concept that everything is interconnected energy in a pantheistic, religious sense. As professor of physics and astronomy Victor Stenger³¹ puts it,

Quantum mechanics, the centerpiece of modern physics, is misinterpreted as implying that the human mind controls reality and that the universe is one connected whole that cannot be understood by the usual reduction to parts. However, no compelling argument or evidence requires that quantum mechanics plays a central role in human consciousness or provides instantaneous, holistic connections across the universe. Modern physics, including quantum mechanics, remains completely materialistic and reductionistic while being consistent with all scientific observations.³²

The Secret and Christianity

The Secret claims compatibility with the Bible, but, as we’ve seen, the underpinnings of its philosophy are anything but Christian. In a section extolling the virtues of “praise” and “blessing,” Byrne remarks, “Praise and bless everything in your life! When you are praising or blessing you are on the highest frequency of love.”³³ She then misinterprets a biblical view of praise and blessing, which is rooted in the reality of a transcendent and loving God, and writes, “In the Bible the Hebrews used the act of blessing to bring forth health, wealth, and happiness. They knew the power of blessing.”³⁴ Given the arduous trials that the Jews faced, as documented in the Old Testament, such as persecution and enslavement, it is difficult to see how they supposedly had mastered The Secret’s law of attraction.

Byrne also misappropriates the New Testament, implying that Jesus also knew The Secret: “The Creative Process used in The Secret, which was taken from the New Testament in the Bible, is an easy guideline for you to create what you want in three simple steps [ask, believe, receive].”³⁵ By implying that Jesus and, in turn, His followers, knew The Secret, Byrne again commits the error she made with her claim that the Hebrews knew The Secret. Jesus hardly could have used The Secret if He was persecuted, beaten, and ultimately executed for His beliefs. His followers fared no better, meeting untimely deaths as martyrs. These, moreover, were not wealthy individuals, despite the claims of The Secret for creating wealth (e.g., in 1 Tim. 6:8, Paul wrote, “But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that” (NIV).

Byrne’s biblical blunders continue when she later quotes the words of Jesus as found in Mark 11:24 and alleges that they are teaching how to use the law of attraction:³⁶ “Therefore I say unto you, What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them” (KJV). Much like Word of Faith proponents, Byrne makes a mistake in the interpretation of this passage. It does not teach the law of attraction, which Byrne herself admits is impersonal;³⁷ instead it speaks of personal communion and interaction with the transcendent God of the universe—the loving, holy, and just Creator. Properly interpreted in light of other relevant passages (e.g., 1 John 5:14), Mark 11:24 does not teach us to manipulate the law of attraction to gain health, wealth, and happiness.

Byrne’s greatest error of interpretation in referencing the Bible involves what Christian apologist James Sire calls “world-view confusion,” which occurs “*whenever a reader of Scripture fails to interpret the Bible within the intellectual and broadly cultural framework of the Bible itself and uses instead a foreign frame of reference*. In other words, rather than seeing a statement of Scripture as part of the whole biblical scheme of things, the reader or interpreter views it from a different standpoint and thus distorts the Bible, perhaps seriously, sometimes even reversing the meaning”³⁸ (emphasis in original). Byrne reads Mark 11:24 through the lens of the law of attraction, rather than through the proper first-century lens of theistic Judaism.

The Secret On Evil and Suffering

Perhaps the greatest flaw in The Secret is its inability to adequately solve the problem of evil and suffering. If everything that comes into our lives is the result of our creating our own reality with our thoughts, then what is the explanation for those who have been raped, tortured, or worse? It is logical, according to the principles of The Secret, to conclude that even children who have been sexually abused or brutally murdered have brought these things on themselves. Such a view is, frankly, both monstrous and absurd; yet, The Secret affirms that suffering in our lives is our fault.

Metaphysician and hypnotherapist Joe Vitale explains:

Everything that’s around you right now in your life, including the things you’re complaining about, you’ve attracted. Now I know at first blush that’s gonna be something that you hate to hear. You’re gonna immediately say I didn’t attract the car accident, I didn’t attract this particular client....I’m here to be a little bit in your face and to say yes, you did attract it. And this is one of the hardest concepts to get, but once you’ve accepted it, it’s life transforming. This is part of the overall giant Secret here.³⁹

DOES THE SECRET WORK?

Despite the many flaws in The Secret, there are those who will remain committed to it because, in their view, it works. This pragmatic approach to The Secret is troubling because it speaks to the lack of discernment in our culture. The fact that someone claims that something “works” is supposedly a substitute for evidence, a substitute for testing everything and holding on to the good (1 Thess. 5:21). The question of truth is entirely avoided. It is this question of truth, however—whether or not The Secret corresponds to reality—that is paramount.

Does The Secret work? Some who have practiced its principles may have had success, but countless others have not and will not. For these people, The Secret will result in spiritual bondage because they will think the problem is with them when in reality the problem is with the system of The Secret and its many flaws.

Does It Matter whether The Secret Works?

It is true that, as Oprah Winfrey said on her program about The Secret, “so many people are hungry for guidance and meaning in their lives.” The Secret, however, is not the answer. Knowledge of the law of attraction is supposed to equip individuals to gain an abundance of health, wealth, and happiness. As Christ emphasized, however, our eternal destiny is far more important than the accumulation of worldly possessions: “What good will it be for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul?” (Matt. 16:26 TNIV).

The true secret to a meaningful life is no secret at all, but is revealed openly in the pages of the Bible: God came to us in human form, died for our sins, and was bodily resurrected so that we would humble ourselves before Him, repent, and receive His gift of salvation. That gift is not mere temporal health and wealth, but eternal life in a relationship with the one true God.

NOTES

1. Oprah Winfrey, “One Week Later: The Huge Reaction to The Secret,” February 16, 2007, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.
2. In this article, The Secret (neither italicized nor in quotations) refers to the general teachings while *The Secret* refers to the book and DVD, the latter being specified to avoid confusion.
3. A table has been prepared to supplement this article that lists the contributors to The Secret and provides relevant background information about them. It can be accessed at <http://www.equip.org/atf/cf/{9c4ee03a-f988-4091-84bd-f8e70a3b0215}/FATHESECRETCHART.PDF>.
4. Rhonda Byrne, *The Secret* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 5.
5. *Ibid.*, 4.
6. Mike Dooley, *The Secret* DVD.
7. John Assaraf, *The Secret* DVD.
8. Michael Beckwith, *The Secret* DVD.
9. Prentice Mulford, quoted in Byrne, *The Secret* DVD, 4.
10. Byrne, *The Secret*, 6.
11. *Ibid.*, 10; see also, e.g., ix, x, 7, 10, 11, 25.
12. *Ibid.*, 162.
13. *Ibid.*, 164.
14. James Arthur Ray, in *The Secret*, 164.
15. Ben Johnson, *The Secret* DVD.
16. Ray, *The Secret* DVD.
17. Assaraf, *The Secret* DVD.
18. Lisa Nichols, *The Secret* DVD.
19. Byrne, *The Secret*, 47.
20. Ray, *The Secret* DVD.
21. Nichols, in *The Secret*, 48.
22. Byrne, *The Secret*, 49.
23. *Ibid.*, 50.
24. *Ibid.* See, e.g., xiv, 103, and 161.
25. *Ibid.*, 30–33.
26. James Ray, “The Secret, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, 8 February 2007.
27. Michael Beckwith, “The Secret, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, 8 February 2007..
28. Bob Doyle, <http://www.wealthbeyondreason.com>.
29. Fred Alan Wolf, *The Secret* DVD.
30. Jack Canfield, “The Secret,” 8 February 2007, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.
31. Although Stenger is an atheist, his insights into the misappropriation of quantum physics by those in the new spirituality are dead on.
32. Victor Stenger, “Quantum Quackery,” *Skeptical Inquirer*, January–February 1997, www.csicop.org/si/9701/quantum-quackery.html; accessed October 3, 2007. See also, Paul Reisser, Dale Mabe, and Robert Velarde, *Examining Alternative Medicine* (InterVarsity Press, 2001), 182–87.
33. Byrne, *The Secret*, 151.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*, 47.
36. *Ibid.*, 47ff., 54.
37. *Ibid.*, 13, 27.
38. James Sire, *Scripture Twisting* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 26.
39. Joe Vitale, *The Secret* DVD.

Self-help or self-improvement is a self-guided improvement—economically, intellectually, or emotionally—often with a substantial psychological basis. Many different self-help group programs exist, each with its own focus, techniques, associated beliefs, proponents and in some cases, leaders. Concepts and terms originating in self-help culture and Twelve-Step culture, such as recovery, dysfunctional families, and codependency have become firmly integrated in mainstream language.