

MUDDIED WATERS

**OPRAH
IN PERSPECTIVE**

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FORWARD

This article initially was an addendum to *The Scourge of our Time: The Demise of Critical Thinking in the Age of "The Secret"*, but, because of the length of the manuscript, I decided to post it separately.

For about a year it was available as a rough draft with no formatting and no elaboration on its greater context as there was no expectation that there would be a demand for it. However to my surprise there were a significant number of downloads, particularly since the Sedona incident in October 2009, when three people died and 18 were seriously injured at a James Arthur Ray "Spiritual Warrior" event. James Ray is a master of "The Secret" and a new age self-help guru that received significant coverage on Oprah.

As part of his "Harmonic Wealth" program, Ray led 59 people in a sweat lodge ceremony at a cost of ten thousand dollars per person (that's more than a half a million dollars for the five days which excluded airfare and other miscellaneous costs). To get a sense of the gross exploitation involved, these rituals are usually held at no cost by Indian traditional healers with no more than handful of people at a time. To make matters worse no basic care was given to the construction of the facility. It also wasn't licensed, and that Ray appeared to have had little regard for the ill and dying around him, even coercing them into not taking any medical attention, and then disappeared out of the state of Arizona to continue his business, that of attracting more people to his events.

Since then Ray was the prime focus of a homicide investigation into the deaths. Additionally civil actions were brought against him, with many calls from various members of the public, including family members of the victims, for Oprah to apologise for having promoted and endorsed Ray.

This I think is reasonable, for after hosting a "The Secret" panel on her show, Oprah had to make a public announcement after receiving numerous letters of people who had stopped their cancer and other medication because they now believed "The Secret" and "The Law of Attraction" would cure them. I am of the view that many people had in fact indirectly died because of this endorsement, and that Oprah should immediately have distanced herself from the book/DVD and the makers of the film once she became aware of

this very apparent danger. Instead she mentioned that the law of attraction is not the only law that governs the universe, but that there are many other spiritual laws as well that impact our lives. Thus by giving her roundabout explanation, she in effect was defending the viewpoint of “The Secret”.

Finally, for ease of reference two articles central to the thesis of this text are included as addendums. They are *Oprah’s Ugly Secret* and *The Crowd: The study of the Popular Mind. The Crowd* written by Gustave le Bon theorized propaganda as an adequate rational technique to control the seemingly irrational behaviour of the masses, and greatly informed Hitler *modus operandi*.

Note that by this I in no way wish to equate Hitler to Oprah as there cannot be a rational comparison, except that one should be aware of the methods Le Bon proposed to influence the behavior of the masses towards achieving one’s personal ends. This though applies to Hitler as well as Oprah, but to anyone who significantly influences public opinion.

Crucially, *I’m not arguing that quacks and lunatics be barred from airing their views, or even that politicians, business people, or anyone else who influences public opinion and feeling not do so, but rather, that one be more discerning of their methods that we cease to be mindless followers.*¹

¹ An extract of *The Scourge of our Time: The Demise of Critical Thinking in the Age of “The Secret”* can be downloaded at <http://www.newfort.co.za/scourge.pdf>.

MUDDIED WATERS

Fame has also this great drawback, that if we pursue it, we must direct our lives so as to please the fancy of men.

—
[Baruch Spinoza]

This is an assessment of Oprah, particularly in the light of her promotion of *The Secret*. In fact my analysis of *The Secret* started when I first saw her promotion of the DVD and book upon which I decided to write a letter airing my concerns. This initial letter led to *The Scourge of our Time*, a critique of the general philosophy behind the movie.

Aside from the strong assertions that will be made in this section, I must declare that I notwithstanding them find Oprah's achievements inspirational and her shows for the greatest part very uplifting and insightful, in fact more so than any other similar show. As a rule however, I prefer not to lose my objectivity over her or any other apparently generous and benevolent public figure.

Aside from her overwhelmingly positive public façade, another reason for concluding with her is that she also is a prime example of one who *at times* has shown an incredible lack of capacity to think critically. Hence she is a great public example of the danger when one does not fully engage this capacity.

This is reflected by the many questionable guests and products she has promoted over the years. But mostly because of her grandiose promotion of *The Secret*.

In fact if it was not for her endorsing it, *I would not even remotely have contemplated this assessment as I otherwise would not have had a single compelling reason to do so.*

While Oprah's fortitude must be admired, it is vital one consciously separates the issues discussed on her show from the carefully crafted persona projected onto our television screens.

Why it is imperative to mentally do so, is for one not to become immersed in the mass hysteria associated with her public persona. What must be borne in mind despite her apparently genuine benevolence and goodwill, is that it ultimately is also great PR to be perceived as compassionate and

philanthropic. That is regardless of the object of that adulation's apparent genuineness as we are not truly privy to that person's true motivations and feelings.

I nevertheless want to stress that I'm reasonably convinced that Oprah is genuine in her strong concerns for others and that her compassion is not merely an act. I say this even though it is impossible to know what her actual thoughts in this regard may be and thus am oblivious of how she rationalises her generosity. That is visa-vie The Law of Attraction or any other doctrine, or whether they merely are motivated by ratings, or that they are genuinely magnanimous gestures.

What I also do have to bring into my deliberations is that she is a savvy businesswoman who purposefully caters for a very diverse audience, and that this in large part also motivates her actions. And since her primary market is the general American populous, her shows (I suppose) must have a significant consumerist as well as benevolent component for it to remain vibrant and entertaining.

I also suppose one can make an argument that the consumerist orientation is a necessary "evil" that allows her to make her at times very positive contributions.

A particular example of how the waters have become muddied is Oprah's crusade to promote weight loss. Besides that this is a worthy issue to focus on as it has reached epidemic proportions in America, the greater issue is that this promotion has also become a great money spinner. Specifically her weight loss initiative is the brainchild of her close friend Bob Greene. Specifically he created *The Best Life Diet* concept whereby he endorses meritorious food products by giving them the Best Life seal of approval.

The greater issue therefore is not that Oprah is passionate about American obesity as this she most likely is. It is also not that the Best Life concept does not offer value to consumers or that one should not use it. Indeed I'm sure it likely will help you a great deal if you also become more disciplined about exercise and eating well in general. Rather, it is that this good deed is also a great money spinner for Oprah and Greene.

As such Oprah should not be admired for her crusade as doing so ultimately

is also good business. Who should rather be admired are the coaches who volunteer their free time to take kids off the streets and in so doing provide them with healthy lifestyle alternatives. This is because their good deed is not motivated by gain, but that they are acting out of a calling which is deeper rooted than mere acquisitiveness. Unlike Oprah, their bona fides in this regard is beyond dispute, yet their tireless contributions very often are all but ignored.

By this am I suggesting Oprah and Greene should stop promoting their products? Or that we should stop using them out of protest because they are also making money out of it?

I think not as they certainly are providing a valuable contribution—albeit at a cost.

This nevertheless does not diminish that a very fine line between goodwill and opportunism is evident. As such the division between apparent good deeds and ratings similarly are significantly blurred and that a meaningful distinction is near impossible to discern.

Oprah therefore may not necessarily be more benevolent than you or I. In fact based on the percentage of her total income she actually gives to good causes compared to what she otherwise spends on her shoes and other acquisitions, may very well be far less giving.

The deeper issue with regard to branding something as “the best life”, is not apparent in the idea itself. On the surface Greene simply stumbled on an apparent need and gave it a name, it being that a great many Americans are not nearly living their best lives. Ironically, that this is so is primarily because of the pressures to commercially conform, this largely at the expense of one’s intrinsic sense of worth.

Nevertheless that we all aspire to “live our best life” I fully agree with, though rather that we should strive to fully live our unique god-given potential for our life as opposed to it being packaged for sale.

The American version of this aspiration has furthermore become very confused that it very well nowadays is about “living the best life money can buy.” That there is a product promising one can do so at a premium is symptomatic of a much greater malaise. Its manifestation in particular being Morbid Obesity, but also Depression, Anorexia, Bipolar Disorder, Addiction,

and many other psychological ills indicative of a spiritual disease that another product certainly cannot cure, no matter what it promises.

Thus while American's today can ill afford it, living one's best life is increasingly being hawked for sale, whether packaged as The Secret, or as Greene's hermetically packaged low fat pizza.

As it now stands this insatiable need for a purchasable "better life" will become a burden a future generation would have bear. And since America is increasingly compromising its influence in the world as a payoff for its current indebtedness, it may very well prove to be a price their children will be paying in perpetuity.

What exacerbates the inflated perception of Oprah even further is that our celebrity obsessed culture literally makes gods of worship of those who regularly appear in the glossy pages and the little black box. The television having become the most significant forming ground of our morals, values and beliefs in modern times with these idols being the most prodigious shapers of our consciousness today.

In fact the television has become the most significant shaper of a greater mob conformity unprecedented to any other social creation that has gone before. While the internet – being a far more directed mechanism of information propagation – in all likelihood would become far more ominous in its mass hypnotising effect.

Thus as a rule it is important to look beyond any famous individual's apparently positive public persona. In Oprah's case this is imperative particularly because the behaviour of the uncritical mass who watch her shows clearly are exhibiting the hallmarks of what Le Bon referred to as having a religious sentiment.

The problem is that many of her following have difficulty separating Oprah the accomplished business woman from her personal belief orientation. This though is because she has greatly promoted her own life philosophy using her show as a medium to do so. A power Hitler also had, having at his fingertips the power of the media to promote his particular racist ideology.

Recalling the words of Le Bon in The Unconscious religion.

“To-day the majority of the great men who have swayed men's minds no

longer have altars, but they have statues, or their portraits are in the hands of their admirers, and the cult of which they are the object is not notably different from that accorded to their predecessors...

“Crowds will hear no more of the words divinity and religion, in whose name they were so long enslaved; *but they have never possessed so many fetishes as in the last hundred years*, and the old divinities have never had so many statues and altars raised in their honour.”

Thus the very few amongst us capable of wielding such power, of necessity must use it wisely for it not to become an organ of human decay. Still I admit it is grossly unfair to even mention Oprah in the same breath as a Hitler. The important distinction being that Hitler certainly used this power with clear conscious evil intent, something we cannot even remotely ascribe to her.

On the other hand Oprah literally has become the god of what can otherwise be considered as “The Cult of Oprah”. To support this assertion she most definitely has a fanatical following which surely borders on the religious.

However when considering this issue within the context of the power of imagery and belief discussed in *The God of Mammon*, it is noteworthy that Oprah’s is the only magazine (a borderline new age magazine) I’m aware of that portrays only her likeness on every single cover (though on the odd occasion her dogs as well). To exacerbate this, Oprah concertedly promotes a particular religious view, specifically the spiritual/religious ideology of Gary Zhukov, though she also maintains that she is a Christian.

When one views the above from the perspective of the popular mind, it is no less psychologically invasive than statues and public banners of a Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Sadam, or a Mao, as a means of eliciting the worship of their following.

The associated fanaticism became patently obvious in a recent show when she announced an unscheduled *My Favourite Things* program, where she provides her audience with trinkets which she purports to be her most cherished possessions. I personally have no objection to this, even the fact that she receives a substantial payoff for her endorsement. What was astounding was the response of the woman, a great many literally breaking down in tears in disbelieving hysteria, others praising the lord in a manner not

dissimilar to the fanatic outbursts observed when members are in a religious trance. To this Oprah commented that even she was dumbfounded at what she was witnessing.

While it may not be a personal need for Oprah to be worshiped in this way, instilling such worship nevertheless has to do with power. More specifically, the power to effectively wield the propaganda machine to one's advantage. The modern day equivalent being the ability to obtain and maintain high ratings. And with it the power to sway the mighty commercial beast to one's own dictates.

Nevertheless the frenetic attitude of the women discussed before is merely as a result of her being particularly good at what she does, none of which is socially unacceptable at this time. It simply is that she uses whatever means she has at her disposal to maintain her continued status as the queen of influence. But in muddying the water between religion, consumerism, and herself, Oprah has largely been responsible for the creation of a consumerist religious monster with its own peculiar belief orientation. Its nirvana being the attainment of a mere semblance of the fabulous life of Oprah.

As I intimated earlier, until her wholesale promotion of *The Secret*, I had no particular criticism of her. In fact like most people I was also mostly taken by her public generosity and goodwill.

I nevertheless at times did have some niggling concerns about her motivations which until then I chose to shrug off. One of these was that I sensed she relished the recognition for her good deeds a bit too much, at least for someone acting out of genuine concern. A particular instance was when she announced a fund for Hurricane Katrina victims. This of course was a good deed, but what bothered me at the time was the obvious self-adulation with which she announced her ten million dollar contribution.

However despite Oprah's determined efforts over the decades to maintain her significant influence at the apex of American media, in the end the issue is an incredibly simple one. As always it comes down to personal responsibility. It is that the commercially minded will always do whatever is in their power to induce loyalty for their offerings. Though to add fuel to an already raging inferno, the subliminal effect of this modern bombardment has made it so much more compelling than it ever was before.

As such one's personal difficulty in doing so is very much understood. Nevertheless the ultimate responsibility to be a voyeur (and even an admirer), and whether one becomes a mindless worshiper of Oprah or anyone else, is entirely in one's own hands. ²

While Oprah's story indeed is the classic rags to riches tale which can only be admired (although this is disputed in an unofficial biography by Kitty Kelly which suggests Oprah's early life story had been greatly embellished), one must notwithstanding this not be infatuated by this now largely irrelevant fact. After an undoubtedly rough start she all the same was blessed by fortune very early in life. Without question her entire adult life was as a significantly financially privileged individual.

By this I'm not suggesting that she didn't work hard to get there or that she wasn't particularly gifted. This undoubtedly was the case.

The reality on the other hand is that most people with exceptional talents and who also work extremely hard, usually end up living fairly ordinary lives irrespective. Thus when assessing Oprah's life one must also be mindful that it must be near impossible for her to have a rational grounded sense about the greater reality outside her extraordinarily privileged existence.

Simply put, *hers had been a fairytale that in no way mirrors everyday reality.*

Though to add insult to injury, despite her good fortune she openly declares she does not believe in luck. Moreover, when a The Secret panel was on her show she even declared she does not believe in coincidence either.

The issues in this regard are subtle but have profound implications on how one, because of this belief, view the nature of one's reality.

For in her utterances she is either implying one of two things. The first being that she worked hard for what she had acquired and that it was not a

² Hardly a month after the deaths at the James Arthur Ray Spiritual Warrior camp in October 2009, Oprah announced that she was going to end her show. Interestingly, there were mounting calls, even on her own forum, for her to take some responsibility in the deaths as she had promoted James Arthur Ray on her show.

In May 2010, a few months after announcing that she was going to end her show, Oprah decided to close her charity network as well. The cynical view would be that she has no need for it now as its primary purpose would have been the promotion of her show. The other question also is, given her considerable wealth, why she needed a network in the first place, and that much of her good deeds were not necessarily as a result of her own direct contribution. The timing of this action, however, does put a question mark on her true motives. Conceivably, if she indeed was sincere about this, she would dedicate her life to charity as many who have retired tends to do, and thus she could have continued her network into the future.

matter of luck. Or the other is that some master manipulator of the universe bestowed greater heavenly gifts on her by some preordained design, and thus that she is specially blessed by this divine force.

In the context of the discussion, *she obviously meant the latter.*

This then excludes that: she was genetically gifted (this being equivalent to winning the ultimate lottery of chance); she was blessed with the right set of circumstances that allowed her to develop the confidence and belief in herself; and she was blessed by providence allowing her to meet the right people at the right time, in this way to have been aided by the generosity of spirit of those who helped pave the way to her current level of success.

The generosity of others certainly must've been all important in her earlier years considering individuals in authority must've had the power to make or break her if they so wished. And the prevailing sentiment at the time must've been to put as many obstacles in any ambitious black woman's way wanting climb through the ranks of an overwhelmingly white world as she had done. That is aside from the fact that any such accomplishment would've been impossible to even contemplate a few years earlier.

Albeit that she certainly had been very fortunate in her career, her views on luck once were a cause of some on air contention between her and Sydney Pointier. He openly acknowledging he was incredibly lucky in the circumstances that had led to his phenomenal success. And because of this total acceptance, says he fully embraces every precious moment with abundant gratitude as the hour glass of his time on earth is nearing its end.

To put the above in perspective. The reality of it all is that, Pointier would not have stood a chance to become the icon he did if he was not blessed by the particular physical characteristics he had—even with all the effect he did make. For without it, Hollywood, as shallow as it indeed is, would not even have given him a second glance—albeit that Oprah's success was significantly different.

The important realisation her is to view an acknowledgement that one had had some incredibly lucky break as being equivalent to the Christian notion of “counting one's blessings”. While the Hindu worldview says “You have a right to work, but not to the results thereof. *Never consider yourself to be the cause of the results of your activities,* and never be attached to not doing your duty.”

Indeed, by making her numerous utterances (particularly to her famous guest such as Simon Cowell, Charlize Theron, amongst others, whenever they express a humbled view of their success) she in fact is saying the she definitely was *the cause of the results of your activities*.³

For this reason acknowledging that one was blessed by circumstance (or that one was lucky) when one has reached such phenomenal success (particularly when one has achieved Hollywood type fame and fortune), is the most compassionate response one can give. And not having this view, the most self entitled arrogant mentality one possibly can possess.

While the above may seem petty, it is in fact of great philosophic importance—that is irrespective of whether there indeed are other factors and forces involved in the unfolding of our lives. It is so, for in her failing to acknowledge that she was dealt an exceedingly good deck of cards by life by unequivocally embracing that she was lucky, Oprah risks becoming Theomanical. In other words, having the belief that the universe somehow revolves around her.

I suppose the understandable dilemma for her is that, in having been as blessed as she had been, and having acquired the means she now has at her disposal, it truly must appear from her perspective that the universe is like a virtual catalogue in which she merely can flip through to have her every earthly desire met.

However despite her good fortune until now, a recent happening at her \$40million girls' school in South Africa suggests she had experienced some considerable bad luck of late. What transpired was that a teacher at her school sexually molested some of the girls. This being a deeply personal matter for her because of her own bitter experiences.

To this she commented that it had been the worst experience of her entire life. It is noteworthy – and indeed ironic – that this bad turn of fate happened only a few months after airing The Secret panel on her show.

Based on her belief in The Law of Attraction, she now is obliged to ask.

What did I send into the universe to have brought this ill fate upon me and my precious girls?

³ Bhagavad-Gita, Chapter 2, verse 47.

While she should ask this regardless, what this event should unequivocally dispel, is that there indeed is such a law. Particularly since these events resulted from an obviously good and generous deed on her part.

Or as Birkenhead suggests in his article, are her intentions not as wholesome as she would want us to believe?

I prefer giving Oprah the benefit of the doubt on this one, though it is apparent that since endorsing *The Secret* she has had health problems and the ratings of her show had dramatically plummeted. Thus despite whether her intentions were pure or not and that she therefore may have attracted some considerable bad luck because of it, what she should ask irrespective is.

Does its timing have anything to do with the fact that I shamelessly endorsed a wholesale pack of lies as I did? And that perversely, the universe is dishing it back at me notwithstanding the fact that it does not operate in this way.

Perhaps “The Universe” is calling upon her to pay attention to her current state of mind that she may take a more enlightened philosophical path—*who knows*.

The decline in ratings of her show in recent months is interesting to consider within the context of this discussion as it provides a pertinent example of how we fail to think critically because of our subconscious beliefs.

The question to first ponder is: *did her airing of *The Secret* cause the decline of her show?*

To some extent it must’ve as many are increasingly offended by her new age views, though as many are becoming ardent fanatics because of it as well.

However based on the statistical timelines, it appears not to have had any significant impact at the time. The decline only becoming obvious after her open campaigning for the candidacy of Barack Obama as Democratic Party presidential nominee. Consequently this decision appears to have been the direct cause of the decline. This most likely being that many of her mostly female viewership had taken exception to her supporting a male candidate instead of Hilary Clinton, the potentially first ever female hopeful.

But also, one of her strengths until then was that she was able to avoid aligning herself overtly to any political view, even taking a neutral stance on the war in Iraq. Because of this balancing act, she was able to cater to a very

large demographic. However by openly supporting Obama on his campaign, she also clearly aligned herself with the Democrats. This exacerbating the decline even further.

My personal view is that she had made the correct decision by looking past the thorny issue of gender to the greater issue of America's racial past—that's aside from the very conspicuous fact that the US has not even had a female runner while most Western nations, as well as other nations such as Pakistan, Liberia, India and the Philippines already had female presidents. Notwithstanding this the greater gender issue is still very relevant today and that it was an ironic twist of fate that an African American male and the first woman had to be in contention for the same seat at the same time. Hopefully there would be a time in the very near future where race and gender would be non-issues. And for that matter, this should also ideally preclude whether the person we choose to elect is a Democrat or Republican and indeed anything else other than that they are the most suited *human* for the job.

This hopefully is a soon to be realized reality. The greater issue in this discussion however is: *what was Oprah's thinking that motivated the decisions to support Obama?*

If her thinking was informed by the conviction that: Barrack Obama was the best candidate for the job; that the fact that he happens to be an African American also would be a positive for her greater community and her country in that it would aid in putting a final nail in the American racist coffin; and that losing viewership was the price she was prepared to pay as a consequence; her thinking would have been a deep and conscious one.

But far more important is that her accumulated influence and power would in so doing have served a much higher purpose than merely serving her acquisitiveness and vanity. Indeed her true destiny may very well have been that she was able to give such an unprecedented level of support as she did.

Though if she thought her viewership was not going to be affected, because as an aside, her support would've advanced a good cause which the universe would reward, it certainly would've been motivated by her new age religious filter.

What this comes down to is this, *was she prepared to accept the existential consequences of her actions?*

Again, I most certainly cannot answer this for Oprah as only she knows what her true motivators were. If it is not mere media sensationalism, I can conclude that she did not see it coming and therefore that her actions may very well have been by as a result of ignorance. This is because the loss of her popular esteem appears not to have been a willing sacrifice she was prepared to make as payoff for contributing towards the upliftment of her country and the greater human race.

In other words, she may indeed not have been prepared to suffer the existential consequences of her actions as these actions were informed by a delusive worldview.

If anything Oprah's rapid reversal of fortune is a very public example of how this type of spiritual folly eventually catches up with one. And in Oprah's case, irrespective of one's standing, wealth and power.

Whether these events may end up changing her outlook or not, if you agreed with the premise of this work – that 'The Secret' is a deliberate confidence scam – then you should agree with the following.

That unless she publicly announces she had made a monumental error in judgement by flaunting this trash, she would personally have been responsible for being the single-greatest sower of a destructive seed, whether it was done innocently or not.

The above concerns aside, when one assesses Oprah's collective contribution to humanity until now, it had been overwhelmingly for the good—albeit she may at times have planted many a seed of confusion as well.

Though once again, this I think was not deliberate but rather is reflective of a greater scourge which has become entrenched in the American psyche. It being the acceptance of obvious spin-doctoring as convenient truth. The creation of which the White House (and particularly the Bush administration) are the absolute masters of.

This she highlighted when she featured Frank Rich, the author of *The Greatest Story Ever Sold*, in which he discussed the denial of truth in America today and how easily Americans are manipulated for wilful gain. In this show he cited numerous incidences of how such convenient “truths” are sold to a gullible American public, the most notable of these being the Iraq war.

Though the irony of this show is that, because of her promotion of The

Secret and its sacrilegious ideology at its core, she can be accused of the same. As alluded to before in the main discussion, is that the most important point to grasp about the current status quo is this.

That the White House could sell the American public an illegitimate war; and that scamsters could convince of the merits of The Secret as if it was a bona fide new religion; amounts to one and the same thing.

That a war is waged on the premise that there are weapons of mass destruction while in fact those behind it were hungry for oil; and that an author could hint she was inspired by Wattles, but instead hawks the views of a devious marketer; in the final analysis amounts to the same.

This is because the same uncritical mentality equally gullibly fell hook line and sinker for both.

Thus despite the good she apparently does, when we are to one day make a collective value judgement of Oprah and the contribution she made to humanity, our decision must also be informed by this.

When one wields as much individual power as she does, merely being good at heart or having good intentions, should not be good enough.

As somebody once put it: “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” The fact of the matter is, when looking beyond her individual good deeds, Oprah’s greater consumerist agenda is part of the greater problem of what is wrong with America today.

For this reason the following is perhaps the most crucial to draw from Birkenhead’s article.

“If you reach more people than Bill O’Reilly, if you have better name recognition than Nelson Mandela, if the books you endorse sell more than Stephen King’s, you should take some responsibility for your effect on the culture. The most powerful woman in the world is taking advantage of people who are desperate for meaning, by passionately championing a product that mocks the very idea of a meaningful life.”

For this reason, because life has bestowed on her the power to singly affect the world in a way that no other ordinary person can, the responsibility not to be used as a pawn in human decay, must be significantly greater if you happen to be Oprah.

ADDENDUM

OPRAH'S UGLY SECRET

*Wisdom is a shelter as money is a shelter, but the advantage of wisdom is this:
that wisdom preserves the life of its possessor.*

—
[Ecclesiastes 7:12]

By continuing to hawk "The Secret," a mishmash of offensive self-help clichés, Oprah Winfrey is squandering her goodwill and influence, and preaching to the world that mammon is queen.

Steve Martin used to do a routine that went like this: "You too can be a millionaire! It's easy: First, get a million dollars. Now..."

If you put that routine between hard covers, you'd have "The Secret," the self-help manifesto and bottle of minty-fresh snake oil currently topping the bestseller lists. "The Secret" espouses a "philosophy" patched together by an Australian talk-show producer named Rhonda Byrne. Though "The Secret" unabashedly appropriates and mishmashes familiar self-help clichés, it was still the subject of two recent episodes of "The Oprah Winfrey Show" featuring a dream team of self-help gurus, all of whom contributed to the project.

The main idea of "The Secret" is that people need only visualize what they want in order to get it -- and the book certainly has created instant wealth, at least for Rhonda Byrne and her partners-in-con. And the marketing idea behind it -- the enlisting of that dream team, in what is essentially a massive, cross-promotional pyramid scheme -- is brilliant. But what really makes "The Secret" more than a variation on an old theme is the involvement of Oprah Winfrey, who lends the whole enterprise more prestige, and, because of that prestige, more venality, than any previous self-help scam. Oprah hasn't just endorsed "The Secret"; she's championed it, put herself at the apex of its pyramid, and helped create a symbiotic economy of New Age quacks that almost puts OPEC to shame.

Why "venality"? Because, with survivors of Auschwitz still alive, Oprah writes this about "The Secret" on her Web site, "the energy you put into the world -- both good and bad -- is exactly what comes back to you. This means you create the circumstances of your life with the choices you make every day." "Venality," because Oprah, in the age of AIDS, is advertising a book

that says, "You cannot 'catch' anything unless you think you can, and thinking you can is inviting it to you with your thought." "Venality," because Oprah, from a studio within walking distance of Chicago's notorious Cabrini Green Projects, pitches a book that says, "The only reason any person does not have enough money is because they are blocking money from coming to them with their thoughts."

Worse than "The Secret's" blame-the-victim idiocy is its baldfaced bullshitting. The titular "secret" of the book is something the authors call the Law of Attraction. They maintain that the universe is governed by the principle that "like attracts like" and that our thoughts are like magnets: Positive thoughts attract positive events and negative thoughts attract negative events. Of course, magnets do exactly the opposite -- positively charged magnets attract negatively charged particles -- and the rest of "The Secret" has a similar relationship to the truth. Here it is on biblical history: "Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and Jesus were not only prosperity teachers, but also millionaires themselves, with more affluent lifestyles than many present-day millionaires could conceive of." And worse than the idiocy and the bullshitting is its anti-intellectualism, because that's at the root of the other two. Here's "The Secret" on reading and, um, electricity: "When I discovered 'The Secret' I made a decision that I would not watch the news or read newspapers anymore, because it did not make me feel good," and, "How does it work? Nobody knows. Just like nobody knows how electricity works. I don't, do you?" And worst of all is the craven consumerist worldview at the heart of "The Secret," because it's why the book exists: "[The Secret] is like having the Universe as your catalogue. You flip through it and say, 'I'd like to have this experience and I'd like to have that product and I'd like to have a person like that.' It is you placing your order with the Universe. It's really that easy." That's from Dr. Joe Vitale, former Amway executive and contributor to "The Secret," on Oprah.com.

Oprah Winfrey is one of the richest women in the world, and one of the most influential. Her imprimatur has helped the authors of "The Secret" sell 2 million books (and 1 million DVDs), putting it ahead of the new Harry Potter book on the Amazon bestseller list. In the time Oprah spent advertising the lies in "The Secret," she could have been exposing them to an audience that otherwise might have believed them. So why didn't she? If James Frey

deserved to be raked over the coals for lying about how drunk he was, doesn't Oprah deserve some scrutiny for pitching the meretricious nonsense in "The Secret"?

Oprah has a reputation for doing good -- she probably has more perceived moral authority than anyone in this country -- and she has done a lot of good. But in light of her zealous support of a book that says, in this time of entrenched, systemic, institutionalized poverty, this time of no-bid contracts for war profiteers and heckuva-job governance, that "you can have, be, or do anything," isn't it reasonable to ask about why she does what she does, and the way she does it?

Oprah recently opened, with much fanfare, the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy in South Africa, and as I watched the network news stories about it, I couldn't get "The Secret" out of my mind. I kept wondering what would happen if professor Sam Mhlongo, South Africa's chief family practitioner who famously said that HIV doesn't cause AIDS, read about Oprah's connection to "The Secret" and found support there for his claim. I wondered if the students of the academy would read "The Secret" and start to believe that their parents deserved to be poor, or that the people of Darfur summoned the Janjaweed with "bad thoughts." Will the heavier girls be told, as readers of "The Secret" are, that food doesn't cause weight gain -- thinking about weight gain does? Will they be told to not even look at fat people, as "The Secret" advises? Oprah is already promoting these ideas to her television audience. Why wouldn't she espouse them to her students?

In many ways the Leadership Academy is a wonderful project, a school that will provide impoverished girls an education they otherwise might not have gotten. But it also seems to be the product, unavoidably, of the faux-spiritual, anti-intellectual, hyper-materialistic worldview expressed in "The Secret," the book that the school's founder has called "life changing."

The academy is a controversial enough project in South Africa that the government withdrew its support, because of the amount of money that's been spent on its well-reported, lavish design -- money that could have gone instead to creating perfectly fine schools that served many, many more students than the 350 who will be making use of spa facilities at the academy. But, when I watched Oprah's prime-time special about interviewing

candidates for the school, it seemed to me that she wasn't nearly as excited about providing an education to the girls as she was about providing a "Secret"-like "transformative experience." (And not just for the girls, for herself; the first thing she said to the family members at the opening ceremony wasn't, "Welcome to a great moment in your daughters' lives," it was, "Welcome to the proudest moment of my life.")

On the special, Oprah talked far more about what the school would do for the girls' self-esteem and material lives than what it would do for their intellects -- sometimes sounding as if she was reading directly from "The Secret." And in discussing what she was looking for in prospective students, she didn't talk about finding the next Eleanor Roosevelt or Sally Ride or Jane Smiley. Instead she used "Entertainment Tonight" language like "It Girl" to describe her ideal candidate. She praised the girls for their spirit, for how much they "shined" and "glowed," but never for their ideas or insights. Oprah puts a lot of energy and money into aesthetics -- on her show, in her magazine, at her school. The publishers of "The Secret" have learned well from their sponsor and are just as visually savvy. They have created a look for their books, DVDs, CDs and marketing materials that conjures a "Da Vinci Code" aesthetic, full of pretty faux parchment, quill-and-ink fonts and wax seals.

Oprah's TV special about the Leadership Academy, essentially an hourlong infomercial, was just as well-coiffed and "visuals"-heavy. In fact, when Oprah was choosing her students, her important criteria must have included their television interview skills. On-camera interviews with the girls were the centerpiece of the special, but as one spunky, telegenic candidate after another beamed her smile at the camera, I couldn't help wondering how Joyce Carol Oates or Gertrude Stein or Madame Curie would have fared -- would they have "shined" and "glowed," or more likely talked in non-sound-bite-friendly paragraphs and maybe even, God forbid, the sometimes "dark" tones of authentic people, and been rejected. Sadly, the girls themselves (and who can blame them, desperate 12-year-olds trying to flatter their potential benefactor) parroted banal Oprah-isms, like "I want to be the best me I can be," and "Be a leader not a follower" and "Don't blend in, blend out," with smiley gusto.

When the special was over, I found myself equally impressed and queasy,

one part hopeful, one part worried. I was happy the school was there, but disturbed by the way it created an instant upper class out of the students, in a country that doesn't exactly need any more segregation into haves and have-nots. I was hopeful for the students but nervous about what, exactly, they will be taught in a place called the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy. Will it be more "best me I can be" bromides? Will "The Secret" be on the syllabus? Oprah herself is going to teach "leadership classes" at the school, after all.

Has Oprah ever done anything that didn't leave people with mixed feelings?

And at what point do we stop feeling like we have to take the good with the craven when it comes to Oprah, and the culture she's helped to create? I get nauseated when I think of people in South Africa being taught they don't have enough money because they're "blocking it with their thoughts." I'm already sickened by an American culture that teaches people, as "The Secret" does, that they "create the circumstances of their lives with the choices they make every day," a culture that elected a president who cried tears of self-congratulation at his inauguration, rejects intellectualism, and believes he can intuit the trustworthiness of world leaders by looking into their eyes. I'm sickened by a culture in which the tenets of the Oprah philosophy have become conventional wisdom, in which genuine self-actualization has been confused with self-aggrandizement, reality is whatever you want it to be, and mammon is queen.

One of Oprah's signature gimmicks has been giving stuff away to her audience ("giving" here means announcing the passing of stuff from corporate sponsors to audience members), most notably in a popular segment called "My Favorite Things." These bits have revealed an Oprah who truly revels in consumer culture, and who can seem astonishingly oblivious to the way most people live and what they can afford. She seems to celebrate every event and milestone with extravagant stuff, indeed to not know how to celebrate without it. Oprah has explained the expensive appointments of her Leadership Academy by saying, "Beauty inspires." True enough. But hasn't the lack of beauty inspired some pretty great work? And aren't there all kinds of beauty?

You might expect a powerful person who thinks of herself as "deeply spiritual" to have a less worldly conception of it, and you might hope that she

would encourage her followers to do the same, instead of urging them to buy books that call Jesus a "prosperity teacher."

But, far more than "spiritual growth" or "empowerment," Oprah and the authors of "The Secret" focus on imparting the message of getting rich. Even the biographies of the authors of "The Secret" on Oprah's Web site are revealingly fixated on their rags-to-riches stories. James Arthur Ray is described as someone who was "almost going bankrupt, [which] forced him to focus on the life he truly wanted. Now he runs a multimillion-dollar corporation dedicated to teaching people how to create wealth in all areas of their lives." The bio for Lisa Nichols says, "After hitting rock bottom at age 19, Lisa prayed for a better life. Now, she has made her fortune by motivating more than 60,000 teenagers to make better choices in their own lives." And the one for "Chicken Soup for the Soul" creator Jack Canfield reads, he "was deep in debt before he made it big. Now his best-selling books have sold more than 100 million copies worldwide, and Jack travels the country teaching 'The Secret' of his success."

There's no doubt that Oprah's doing a lot of good with her South African project, and with many other charitable works. And yeah, I know, her book club "gets people to read," and yadda yadda yadda. But there's also no doubt that a lot of us have been making forgiving disclaimers like that about Oprah for years. And that maybe they amount to trains-running-on-time arguments. Maybe it's time to stop. After reading "The Secret," it seemed to me that there were basically three possibilities: 1) Oprah really believes this stuff, and we should be very worried about her opening a school for anyone. 2) Oprah doesn't believe this stuff and we should be very, very worried about her opening a school for anyone. 3) Oprah doesn't know that any of this stuff is in the book or on her Web site and in a perfect world she wouldn't be allowed to open a school for anyone.

The things that Oprah does, like promoting "The Secret," can seem deceptively trivial, but it's precisely because they're silly that we should be concerned about their promotion by someone who is deadly earnest and deeply trusted by millions of people. It's important to start taking a look at Oprah because her philosophy has in many ways become the dominant one in our culture, even for people who would never consider themselves disciples.

Somebody is buying enough copies of "The Secret" to make it No. 1 on the Amazon bestseller list. Those somebodies may be religious zealots or atheists, Republicans or Democrats, but they are all believers, to one degree or another, and, perhaps unwittingly, in aspects of the Oprah/"Secret" culture. And yes, sure, a lot of the believing they do is harmless fun -- everybody's got some kind of rabbit's foot in his pocket -- but we're not talking about rabbits' feet here, we're talking about whole, live rabbits pulled out of hats, and an audience that doesn't think it's being tricked.

"Secret"-style belief is a perfect product. Like Coca-Cola, it goes down easy and makes the consumer thirsty for more. It's unthreateningly simple, and a lot more facile, sentimental and, perhaps paradoxically, intractable than the old-fashioned kind of belief. Like Amway, it enlists its consumers as unofficial salespeople, and the people who constitute its market feel like they're part of a fold. It's indistinguishable from, and inextricably bound up in, the Oprah idea of self-esteem, the kind of confidence you get not from testing yourself, but from "believing" in yourself. This modern idea of faith isn't arrived at the old-fashioned way, by asking questions, but by getting answers. Instead of inquiry we have born-again epiphanies and cheesy self-help books -- we have excuses for not engaging in inquiry at all. Let other people schlep down the road to Damascus; we'll have Amazon send Damascus to us.

That "Secret"-style faith, whether it's in God, or in one's own preordained destiny to be an "American Idol," which takes all of a moment to achieve, is perhaps its most important selling point. Here's "The Secret" on arriving at faith: "Ask once, believe you have received, and all you have to do to receive is feel good." The kind of faith that couldn't be reached by shortcut, the confidence of the great doubters and worriers, of Moses and Abraham Lincoln and Jesus Christ, has been replaced by the insta-certainty and inflated "self-esteem" of "The Secret's" believers.

Books like "The Secret" have created, and are feeding, an enormously diverse market of disciples, and they're thriving in every corner of the culture, in megachurches and movies, politics and pop music, in sports arenas and state boards of education. Oprah has far more in common with George Bush than either would like to admit, and so do the psychics of Marin County, Calif., and the creationists of Kansas. The believers come from all walks of

life, but they work the same way -- mostly by bastardizing and warping source materials, from the Bible to the Bhagavad Gita, to make them fit their worldview. On Page 23 of "The Secret" you'll find this revealing doozy: "Meditation quiets the mind, helps you control your thoughts." Of course, the goal of meditation is precisely the opposite -- it is to be conscious, to observe your thoughts honestly and clearly. But that's the last thing the believers want to encourage. The authors of "The Secret" sell "control" in the form of "empowerment" and "quiet" in the form of belief, not consciousness.

The promises of Oprah culture can seem irresistible, and its hallmarks are becoming ubiquitous. Believers may be separated into tribes according to what they believe, but they do it in pretty much the same way, relying on a "Secret"-style conception of "intuition" --- which seems to amount to the sneaking suspicion that they're always right -- to arrive at their tenets. Instead of the world as it is, constantly changing and full of contradiction, they see a fixed and fantastical place, where good things come to those who believe, whether it's belief in a diet, a God, or a Habit of Successful People. These believers may believe in the healing power of homeopathy, or Scripture or organizational skills -- in intelligent design, astrology or privatization. They all trust that their devotion will be rewarded with money and boyfriends and job promotions, with hockey championships and apartments. And most of all they believe -- they really, really believe -- in themselves.

For these believers, self-knowledge is much less important than self-"love." But the question they never seem to ask themselves is: If you wouldn't tell another person you loved her before you got to know her, why would you do that to yourself? Skipping the getting-to-know-you part has given us what we deserve: the Oprah culture. It's a culture where superstition is "spirituality," illiteracy is "authenticity," and schoolmarm moralism is "character." It's a culture where people apologize by saying, "I'm sorry you took offense at what I said," and forgive by saying, "I'm not angry at you anymore, I'm grateful to you for teaching me not to trust shithheads like you." And that's the part that should bother us most: the diminishing, even implicit mocking, of genuine goodness, and of authentic spiritual concerns and practices. Engagement, curiosity and active awe are in short supply these days, and it's sickening to see them devalued and misrepresented.

Not that any of this is new. Aimee Semple McPherson, "The Power of Positive Thinking," Father Coughlin, est, James Van Praagh -- pick your influential snake-oil salesman or snake oil. They were all cut from the same cloth as Oprah and "The Secret." The big, big difference is, well, the bigness. The infinitely bigger reach of the Oprah empire and its emissaries. They make their predecessors look like kids with lemonade stands. It would be stupidly dangerous to dismiss Oprah and "The Secret" as silly, or ultimately meaningless. They're reaching more people than Harry Potter, for God-force's sake. That's why what Oprah does matters, and stinks. If you reach more people than Bill O'Reilly, if you have better name recognition than Nelson Mandela, if the books you endorse sell more than Stephen King's, you should take some responsibility for your effect on the culture. The most powerful woman in the world is taking advantage of people who are desperate for meaning, by passionately championing a product that mocks the very idea of a meaningful life.

That means something.

By Peter Birkinhead, Salon.Mar. 05, 2007

THINK NEGATIVE!

OPRAH, IT'S TIME TO COME CLEAN ABOUT *THE SECRET*

Dear Oprah,

Not too long ago, one of your viewers—a woman named Kim—wrote you to announce that she had decided to halt her breast-cancer treatments and heal herself with her mind. Kim had just seen your two shows dedicated to *The Secret*, the self-help phenomenon that says we shape the world with our thoughts, and she was inspired to bet her life on it.

You're an optimistic lady, Oprah, but this gave even you the willies. So you went on the air to "clarify your thoughts" about the Law of Attraction, *The Secret's* underlying theory that mind conjures matter. You implored Kim to go back to her treatments. And you told your audience that the Law of Attraction "is not the answer to everything. It is not the answer to atrocities or every tragedy."

You saw the craziness in that logic, and good for you. But frankly, Oprah, I don't think you've done quite enough to make up for turning the Law of Attraction into the biggest thing since TomKat. Since you gave it your endorsement, *The Secret* has become one of the fastest-selling books and probably the most successful infomercial in history. The gaggle of gurus who peddle *The Secret's* message all over the world are still out there, arguing that it is the answer to every atrocity and tragedy. One went so far as to blame the suffering in Darfur on stinkin' thinkin'.

That's a lot to answer for. But don't worry, Oprah. You still have the power to turn this entire misguided craze into a "teachable moment." And I know how you can do it. Just have your people pick up the phone right now and invite Karen Cerulo on to your show.

Cerulo, a professor at Rutgers University, wrote a book last year called *Never Saw It Coming*. In it, she argues that we are individually, institutionally, and societally hellbent on wishful thinking. *The Secret* tells us to visualize best-case scenarios and banish negative ones from our minds. *Never Saw It Coming* says that's what we've been doing all along—and we get blindsided

by even the most foreseeable disasters because of it.

In her research, Cerulo found that when most of us look out at the world and plan for our future, we fuzz out our vision of any failure, fluke, disease, or disaster on the horizon. Instead, we focus on an ideal future, we burnish our best memories, and, well, we watch a lot of your show. Meanwhile, we're inarticulate about worst-case scenarios. Just thinking about them makes us nervous and uncomfortable.

A glance at a few statistics shows that most of us see just what we want. In a national survey of parents by the Public Agenda organization, a hefty majority said their child never stays out too late, never uses bad language, never wears sloppy or revealing clothes, and never does poorly in school. Only a third of American sunbathers use sunscreen, and Californians are almost twice as likely to play the lottery as they are to buy earthquake insurance. When the American Association of Retired Persons asked a sample of adults what they expected from old age, most said they figured they would always have enough money and good health to do what they wanted. And only 30 percent of Americans have written their wills.

How is this working out for us? Think of all the times you've heard the refrain, "I never thought it would happen to me." The American Academy of Dermatology projects that one in five Americans will contract skin cancer sometime in their lives. According to the author of the AARP study, elderly Americans have a "high probability" of eventually falling into poverty, and the surveyed adults had "unrealistic expectations about their physical abilities as they grow older." (Most said they did not have a plan for old age.) And death—the event that really knocks the wind out of *The Secret*—still has a 100 percent chance of happening to all of us, no matter what we think.

Your viewers ate up *The Secret's* advice about their personal lives. But I wonder whether they would be as enthusiastic if someone proposed running the government according to the Law of Attraction. As it happens, Cerulo spends a lot of time in her book documenting how even the public agencies designed to prevent disasters often fall victim to blindly positive thinking.

Take NASA, for example, which ignored repeated warnings from its engineers in advance of the Challenger explosion because it was so busy envisioning a perfect blastoff. Or the FBI, which turned a blind eye to a

memo from its Phoenix office in the summer of 2001—a memo suggesting that al-Qaida was using local flight schools to infiltrate the civil aviation system. Or the Bush administration, which has been roundly condemned for planning the Iraq war around a set of best-case scenarios. (What do you think The Secret folks would say about Iraq? "We will be greeted as liberators" was good, but "Mission Accomplished" was even better. Visualize, guys, visualize!) A little negative thinking might have gone a long way in all those situations.

But unfortunately, we go to great lengths to make people who think negatively feel unwelcome—something Cerulo would probably point out if you invited her on to your show.

Just think of all the pejorative and even pathological terms we have for doomsayers. Like, for instance, doomsayer. Also alarmist, naysayer, paranoid, complainer, defeatist, downer, and killjoy. Rack your brain: It is hard to think of a laudatory term for contemplating the worst-case scenario. So maybe The Secret appeals because its batty metaphysics help to keep us in the positive-thinking fold. In a culture that stigmatizes negative thinking and imbues it with fear and loathing, a rationalized escape from worry is its own reward.

But that's not the liberation we should be after. Instead, Cerulo argues we have a lot to learn from two groups of people who have emancipated themselves from the pressure to think positively. She points out that medical workers and computer technicians—the professional troubleshooters of the world—keep our bodies and mainframes running by being paragons of pessimism. When doctors and IT workers take up a case, they begin by dispassionately assuming the worst and then move up from there. Their protocols demand precise and evolving definitions of the most severe maladies and malfunctions, while they tend to have fuzzy and almost absentminded definitions of health, well-being, and normal function. That's the opposite of The Secret. While this may sometimes make doctors and techies a drag, it also helped them avert worldwide disasters like the SARS outbreak and the Y2K bug.

Everybody respects a good attitude, but no amount of magical thinking will make the universe obey our wishes. Your audience has gotten extremely good at visualizing what it wants. But now it needs your help envisioning the risks, goof-ups, and unintended consequences that accompany life on earth.

We're addicted to positive thinking, Oprah. And The Secret has sent the whole world on a bender. You, and maybe you alone, can rein it in. After all, the Law of Attraction isn't a force of nature—but you are. So how about it: Why not invite Cerulo on to your show? What's the worst that could happen?

Yours truly,
John

We want to persuade Oprah to invite sociologist Karen Cerulo on her show, but it's not going to be easy. People are always writing to Oprah with their pet causes, angling for her attention. And pro-Secret Web sites are popping up everywhere with testimonials from devoted practitioners.

That's why we need to your help. To make our case stronger, we need to assemble our own list of testimonials—to the power of negative thinking. Has a healthy dose of pessimism improved your life? Has envisioning the worst ever helped you to avoid a disaster? Or has an overly rosy outlook left you blindsided by calamity? We'll append your anecdotes to this letter, and send the whole package to Oprah. Write us at slate.to.oprah@gmail.com.

By John Gravois, May 16, 2007

Selected extracts from
**THE CROWD: A STUDY OF THE POPULAR
MIND**

It's been demonstrated that well within two minutes of watching television, most people enter a hypnotic alpha state bordering on theta. Viewers in this state are no longer able to critically evaluate, discern, or pass judgement from their own moral database on the material being viewed. The information just flows, unimpeded, into their subconscious year in and year out.

—
[Jeff Rense]

Nothing is more fatal to people than the mania of great reforms, however excellent these reforms may appear theoretically. They would only be useful were it possible to change instantaneously the genius of nations. This power however is only possessed by time.

While all our ancient beliefs are tottering and disappearing, while the old pillars of society are giving way one by one, the power of the crowd is the only force that nothing menaces, and of which the prestige is continually on the increase. The age we are about to enter will in truth be the Era of Crowds.

In its ordinary sense the word “crowd” means a gathering of individuals of whatever nationality, profession, or sex, and whatever be the chances that have brought them together. From the psychological point of view the expression “crowd” assumes quite a different signification.

The disappearance of conscious personality and the turning of feelings and thoughts in a definite direction, which is the primary characteristics of a crowd about to become organised, do not always involve the simultaneous presence of a number of individuals in one spot.

The most striking peculiarity presented by a psychological crowd is the following: Whoever be the individual that compose it, however like or unlike be their mode of life, their occupations, their character, or their intelligence, the fact that they have been transformed into a crowd puts them in possession of a sort of collective mind which makes them feel, think, and act in a manner quite different from that in which each individual of them would feel, think, and act were he in a state of isolation.

It is only by obtaining some sort of insight into the psychology of crowds

that it can be understood how slight is the action upon them of laws and institutions, how powerless they are to hold opinions other than those which are imposed upon them, and that it is not with rules based on theories of pure equity that they are to be led, but by seeking what produces an impression on them and what seduces them.

In practice the most unjust may be the best for the masses. Should it at the same time be the least obvious, and apparently the least burdensome, it will be the most tolerated.

We see, then, that the disappearance of the conscious personality, the predominance of the unconscious personality, the turning by means of suggestion and contagion of feelings and ideas in an identical direction, the tendency to immediately transform the suggested ideas into acts; these, we see, are the principal characteristics of the individuals forming part of a crowd.

He is no longer himself but has become an automation who has ceased to be guided by his will.

In consequence, a crowd perpetually hovering on the borderland of unconsciousness, readily yielding to all suggestions, having all the violence of feeling peculiar to beings who cannot appeal to the influence of reason, deprived of all critical faculty, cannot be otherwise than excessively credulous. The improbable does not exist for a crowd, and it is necessary to bear this circumstance well in mind to understand the facility with which are created and propagated the most improbable legends and stories.

The propagation of legends which so easily obtain circulation in crowds is not solely the consequence of their extreme credulity. It is also the result of the prodigious perversion that events undergo in the imagination of the throng. The simplest event that comes under the observation of a crowd is soon totally transformed. A crowd thinks in images (visualisation as suggested by *The Secret*), and the image itself immediately calls up a series of other images, having no logical connection with the rest (this explains Hitler's observation: "The great masses of the people will more easily fall victims to a big lie than to a small one").

We can easily conceive this state by thinking of the fantastic succession of ideas to which we are sometimes led by calling up in our minds any fact. Our

reason shows us the incoherence there is in these images, but a crowd is almost blind to this truth, and confuses with the real event what the deforming action of its imagination has superimposed thereon. A crowd scarcely distinguishes between the subjective and the objective. It accepts as real the images evoked in its mind, though they most often have only a very distant relation with the observed fact.

The ways in which the crowd perverts any event of which it is a witness ought, it would seem, to be innumerable and unlike each other, since the individuals composing the gathering are of very different temperaments. But this is not the case. As the result of contagion the perversions are of the same kind, and take the same shape in the case of all the assembled individuals.

Such is always the case with the collective hallucination so frequent in history—hallucinations which seem to have all the recognised characteristics of authenticity, since they are phenomena observed by thousands of persons.

To combat what precedes (that is to brainwash the individual), the mental quality of the individuals composing a crowd must not be brought into consideration. This quality is without importance. From that moment they form part of a crowd the learned man and the ignoramus are equally incapable of observation.

When these convictions are closely examined, whether at epochs marked by fervent religious faith, or by great political upheavals such as those of the last century, it is apparent that they always assume a peculiar form which I cannot better define than by giving it the name of a religious sentiment.

This sentiment has very simple characteristics, such as worship of a being supposed superior, fear of the power with which the being is credited, blind submission to its commands, inability to discuss its dogmas, the desire to spread them, and a tendency to consider as enemies all by whom they are not accepted. Whether such a sentiment apply to an invisible God, to a wooden or stone idol, to a hero or to a political conception, provided that it presents the preceding characteristics, its essence always remains religious. The supernatural and the miraculous are found to be present to the same extent. Crowds unconsciously accord a mysterious power to the political formula or the victorious leader that for the moment arouses their enthusiasm.

A person is not religious solely when he worships a divinity, but when he

puts all the resources of his mind, the complete submission of his will, and the whole-souled ardour of fanaticism at the service of a cause or an individual who becomes the goal and guide of his thoughts and actions.

Intolerance and fanaticism are the necessary accompaniments of the religious sentiment. They are inevitably displayed by those who believe themselves in the possession of The Secret of earthly or eternal happiness. These two characteristics are to be found in all men grouped together when they are inspired by a conviction of any kind.

To-day the majority of the great men who have swayed men's minds no longer have altars, but they have statues, or their portraits are in the hands of their admirers, and the cult of which they are the object is not notably different from that accorded to their predecessors. An understanding of the philosophy of history is only to be got by a thorough appreciation of this fundamental point of the psychology of crowds. The crowd demands a god before everything else.

It must not be supposed that these are the superstitions of a bygone age which reason has definitely banished. Sentiment has never been vanquished in its eternal conflict with reason. Crowds will hear no more of the words divinity and religion, in whose name they were so long enslaved; but they have never possessed so many fetishes as in the last hundred years (even more so in the following century), and the old divinities have never had so many statues and altars raised in their honour.

It is thus a very useless commonplace to assert that a religion is necessary for the masses, because all political, divine, and social creeds only take root among them on the condition of always assuming the religious shape—a shape which obviates the danger of discussion. Were it possible to induce the masses to adopt atheism, this belief would exhibit all the intolerant ardour of a religious sentiment, and in its exterior forms would soon become a cult.

The unreal has almost as much influence on them (The Crowd) as the real. They have an evident tendency not to distinguish between the two. The power of conquerors and the strength of States is based on the popular imagination. It is more particularly by working upon this imagination that crowds are led.

The propagation of legends which so easily obtain circulation in crowds is

not solely the consequence of their extreme credulity. It is also the result of the prodigious perversion that events undergo in the imagination of the throng. The simplest event that comes under the observation of a crowd is soon totally transformed. A crowd thinks in images, and the image itself immediately calls up a series of other images, having no logical connection with the rest.

We can easily conceive this state by thinking of the fantastic succession of ideas to which we are sometimes led by calling up in our minds any fact. Our reason shows us the incoherence there is in these images, but a crowd is almost blind to this truth, and confuses with the real event what the deforming action of its imagination has superimposed thereon. A crowd scarcely distinguishes between the subjective and the objective. It accepts as real the images evoked in its mind, though they most often have only a very distant relation with the observed fact.

All the great statesmen of every age and every country, including the most absolute despots, have regarded the popular imagination as the basis of their power, and they have never attempted to govern in opposition to it. "It was by becoming a Catholic," said Napoleon to the Council of State, "that I terminated the Vendéen war. By becoming a Mussulman that I obtained a footing in Egypt. By becoming an Ultramontane that I won over the Italian priests, and had I to govern a nation of Jews I would rebuild Solomon's temple." Never perhaps since Alexander and Caesar has any great man better understood how the imagination of the crowd should be impressed. His constant preoccupation was to strike it. He bore it in mind in his victories, in his harangues, in his speeches, in all his acts. On his deathbed it was still in his thoughts.

How is the imagination of crowds to be impressed? Let us confine ourselves for the moment to saying that the feat is never to be achieved by attempting to work upon the intelligence or reasoning faculty, that is to say, by way of demonstration.

By Gustave le Bon, 1896