

Fatal Attraction

Celebrities and business leaders are praising self-help guru Rhonda Byrne's book *The Secret*. Don't be deceived—her message about "the law of attraction" is full of New Age deception.

Have you heard "the secret"? Thanks to Rhonda Byrne, a former Australian television producer, you should have. She is the mastermind behind the runaway best-seller *The Secret*.

The title was released in DVD format in March 2006 and then published in a book version in November of the same year. Demand was so great for the book last winter that Simon & Schuster ordered the largest second-printing run in company history. Byrne and other *Secret* teachers have appeared on *Larry King Live*, *Oprah*, *Nightline*, *ABC World News*, *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* and *The Today Show*.

What is the *Secret*? According to Byrne, it is what is called the Law of Attraction (referred to in *Secret* circles as LOA)—the idea that all humans attract everything into their lives through the power of thought. The film pictures the universe as one giant cosmic genie who says to each person: "Your wish is my command."

Byrne states in her book: "There isn't a single thing that you cannot do with this knowledge. It doesn't matter who you are or where you are, the *Secret* can give you whatever you want."

Jack Canfield, creator of the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series, says the *Secret* is the basis for all his wealth and success. Joe Vitale, a famous marketing expert, pictures the LOA this way: "This is really fun. It's like having the Universe as your catalog. It is you placing your order with

the Universe. It's really that easy."

The DVD shows a woman wishing for a necklace, and she suddenly receives it. A boy wishes for a new bike, and it shows up like magic. A man gets the car of his dreams by visualizing it. The book states that getting a million dollars and getting one dollar amounts to the same thing.

But this is not magic, according to Secret teachers. The Secret is a law, like the law of gravity, created at the beginning of time. Bob Proctor, one of the most famous proponents of the Secret, writes: "Wherever you are—India, Australia, New Zealand, Stockholm, London, Toronto, Montréal, or New York—we're all working with one power. One Law. It's attraction!"

Byrne says she discovered the Secret in late 2004 in the midst of a dark time in her life. "I began tracing the Secret back through history. I couldn't believe all the people who knew this. They were the greatest people in history: Plato, Shakespeare, Newton, Hugo, Beethoven, Lincoln, Emerson, Edison, Einstein."

Critics Speak Out

Who could complain about positive thinking backed by such pedigrees? Actually, The Secret has received enormous criticism from both secular and Christian circles.

There are already four anti-Secret books on the marketplace. In one of them, The Secret Revealed, James L. Garlow and Rick Marschall suggest that adoption of the philosophy of The Secret will lead to the death of American culture. Byrne has

also been lampooned on several shows, including Saturday Night Live and Boston Legal.

On the Web site , Peter Birkenhead wrote a savage attack about Oprah Winfrey's endorsement. "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."

Maureen Dowd satirized The Secret in her column for The New York Times, as did Lynn Yaeger in The Village Voice. Yaeger wrote: "I am standing half naked in the fitting room at Barneys with a \$3,300 Lanvin gold lamé evening dress and a \$5,650 pleated Prada frock puddled at my feet and I am smiling for one full minute—harder than it sounds—in an attempt to feel my feelings, which will in turn send out a powerful signal to the universe."

She continues: "I am a human transmission tower, according to Rhonda Byrne, the author of the Oprah-endorsed runaway best-seller The Secret, and in that capacity I can miraculously transform myself from a woman who buys everything on triple markdown to a happy, high roller whose shopping addiction is funded by the universe itself."

In spite of these criticisms, The Secret remains a best-seller, and there is no end to testimonials about its transforming powers. More than 1,500 reviewers gave it five of five stars on the Web site.

One delighted reviewer wrote: "I simply cannot say enough about how much this film has affected my life for the better. I bought 100 copies of it and have been sending it to all of

my favorite people on the planet. When I watched it, I was jumping up and down and laughing and clapping with joy. It's so simple to understand, and it's presented in such a fun way—it will be the best money you've ever spent."

On The Secret forum a significant number of Christians have argued that there is no contradiction between the gospel and The Secret.

Is it possible that critics are overstating their case? they wonder. After all, would Rhonda Byrne really be advocating the kind of materialism mocked by Yaeger?

She seems like a wonderful, sincere and caring person. And doesn't The Secret have a tremendous section on gratitude? The Bible promises material rewards to the faithful, doesn't it? Do we not reap what we sow? Did Jesus not tell us to ask and receive? Further, isn't the phenomenal success of The Secret proof that it is true?

The last question is the easiest to answer. The Secret is no more proved true by its best-seller status than cigarettes are proved healthful by worldwide sales.

There is actually no big secret behind Byrne's success. Combine adequate capital with a savvy producer (Byrne once did a show titled The World's Best Commercials), top marketers (Vitale and Proctor), famous author (Canfield) and influential spiritual leaders (Esther Hicks and Michael Beckwith); produce a great-looking product (the book is beautiful and the DVD has some amazing cinematography), and the result is sales, sales and more sales.

Ultimately, how should The Secret be viewed? A proper response, Christian and otherwise, must involve legitimate appreciation for everything that is true and beautiful. The Secret recognizes the importance of gratitude, something that Winfrey noted on one of her shows.

Further, The Secret can be praised for its emphasis on being positive and optimistic. This surely matches to some degree the wisdom in Proverbs and the principles in Paul's epistle to the Philippians. Likewise, The Secret does capture in part the ways in which we shape our own destinies and program our futures through our thoughts and desires.

Dangerous Teachings

I wish that one could stop with these good points. However, the weaknesses in The Secret virtually annihilate its merits.

There is no need here to question the intentions of Byrne. She comes across in her publications and interviews as a sincere, warm and caring person. But her product is largely bogus unless all you want in life is what Steve Salerno, a critic of the self-help movement, calls "a quick jolt of formless inspiration that fades as fast as the winter sun."

Why such a harsh verdict? Beyond the glossy veneer of The Secret there are very serious spiritual, physical and moral dangers, especially from the perspective of the Christian message.

First, various teachings in The Secret defy reason and common sense. For example, The Secret states that asking the universe for something not to happen actually causes it to happen.

"The law of attraction doesn't compute don't or not or no, or any other words of negation," Byrne states. The book argues that not wanting a bad haircut is translated as "I want bad haircuts," and not wanting to catch the flu is the same as saying, "I want the flu, and I want to catch more things."

If this were true, there would be plane crashes every day because of all the passengers who are hoping and praying that the flight they're on doesn't crash.

And what about people who pray not to get cancer? Is God (another name for the universe, according to *The Secret*) obligated by the Law of Attraction to give them cancer? If we pray, "Lead us not into temptation," are we really asking for temptation to come our way?

The Secret also has outlandish views on health issues. Here's one: "Food cannot cause you to put on weight unless you think it can." How many medical doctors would agree with that statement? And how many would tell their overweight patients to simply "think thin thoughts" to get their weight down?

Regarding age, the book advises: "Aging is limited thinking, so release those thoughts from your consciousness and know that your body is only months old." *The Secret* even states that one can think one's way to "the perfect state of health, the perfect body, the perfect weight, and eternal youth."

Even more dangerous, it argues that you cannot catch a disease "unless you think you can." Several doctors have warned that *The Secret* can be fatal if you follow its medical advice.

Second, no amount of rationalization can hide the overt hedonism and materialism, especially in the DVD version of The Secret. It is too much about cars, houses and money, even with the occasional comment about giving to others. Critics have had a field day with the money angles.

Blair Warren notes that The Secret DVD supposedly provides all the resources needed to understand the Law of Attraction. But wait—there are additional courses you should take with at least one Secret teacher for \$3,500.

And Canfield and Proctor offer The Science of Getting Rich seminars for \$1,995. And Vitale (known as “Mr. Fire” in the marketing world) has a new DVD out for \$ that supposedly helps a person “truly transcend the Secret.”

Virtually all 24 official Secret teachers offer new products to buy. One Secret teacher will even do private consultations for \$700 per hour. It looks as if The Secret is not really giving students all the resources they need.

Third, The Secret moves out of the realm of Christian truth in its adoption of a New Age view of humanity. As one might expect, there is no mention of sin in either the book or the DVD. The word “evil” appears only once in the book.

And humans are granted divinity in the most hyped verbiage. “You are eternal life. You are God manifested in human form, made to perfection. You are God in a physical body. You are all power. You are all wisdom. You are all intelligence. You are perfection. You are magnificence. You are the creator. You are the Supreme Mind.”

The nature and uniqueness of God is obliterated in The Secret, at great cost to the truth about God and His fallen creatures.

Fourth, what The Secret says about life's tragedies is profoundly disturbing. It states that our thoughts, either conscious or unconscious, are the cause for all pain and negativity in our lives. Byrne writes: "You cannot be harmed unless you call harm into existence by emitting those negative thoughts and feelings."

Though some Secret teachers such as John Assaraf and Lee Brower are retreating from this fatalistic view, Byrne has reaffirmed her earlier position. Here is what she said in response to a recent question about the Holocaust: "First, there is no one to blame. Secondly, the law of attraction is absolute; it is impersonal and it is precise and exact."

Bob Beverley, a Christian pastor and psychotherapist, has written about the unrealistic view of The Secret. "You can hear the cries of people in the Bible. There is no crying in The Secret."

He continues: "If anything like The Secret were true, Shakespeare need not have taken the immense trouble to teach us about family strife as in Hamlet or jealousy as in Othello; he could merely have felt the need for peace in his soul and emitted it to 17th century England. Likewise there would be no need for Churchill's speeches and British sons dying on the shores of Normandy—they all could have magnetically begun to attract peace."

Fifth, Jesus is not pictured by Byrne as the true Secret, the real source for joyful and abundant living. Jesus is not even

listed as one of the past teachers of the Secret.

The book mentions Jesus just once by name, and what it states about Him is mistaken. We are told He was a millionaire who lived a more affluent lifestyle than many present-day millionaires.

Certainly, no one expects a book on car mechanics to focus on Jesus. However, any work or philosophy that deals with human joy and fulfillment, true wealth and life's tragedies that does not have Jesus at its center has missed the boat.

The apostle Paul makes this clear in the second chapter of his letter to the Colossians. He tells us: "I want you woven into a tapestry of love, in touch with everything there is to know of God. Then you will have minds confident and at rest, focused on Christ, God's great mystery.

"All the richest treasures of wisdom and knowledge are embedded in that mystery and nowhere else. And we've been shown the mystery! I'm telling you this because I don't want anyone leading you off on some wild-goose chase, after other so-called mysteries, or 'the Secret'" (vv. 2-4, The Message, emphasis added). It seems the Holy Spirit was warning us about Rhonda Byrne's philosophy long before the idea for her book ever entered her mind.

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