



STATEMENT DC-675

BOOK REVIEW

A SUMMARY CRITIQUE: *Conversations with God: An Uncommon Dialogue*

by Neale Donald Walsch

Back in 1831, Alexander Campbell observed that Joseph Smith had gathered in the Book of Mormon "every error and almost every truth discussed in New York for the last ten years."¹ If we substitute America for the state of New York and emphasize the error over truth, his remark applies 165 years later to the first two volumes of Neale Donald Walsch's trilogy *Conversations with God*. The books would make an apt contribution to any time capsule showing the condition of America's spiritual life in the 1990s.

Walsch: I decided to write a letter to God.

God: Do you really want an answer....? (Book 1: p.1).

Book 1 was a small press best seller in 1995, before being taken up by a major publisher. By late 1997, more than 800,000 copies were in print.² Book 2 was published in 1997 by the original small press publisher. Both books have appeared high on *The New York Times* best-seller list for nonfiction. They are representative of the growing catalog of materials "channeled" from the beyond. More than that, they are part of an avalanche of Eastern, New Age, and occult literature.

While Walsch, like Joseph Smith, is at the forefront of a religious movement, he is not starting a new church. In the spirit of our times, Walsch is opposed to organized religion. Rather, he and his wife have started a group called ReCreation, whose "purpose is to give people back to themselves — and so, to change the world" (2:260). Smith professed to have unearthed a long-lost revelation from God; Walsch simply says he has recorded direct talks between God and himself.

The 54-year-old Walsch almost seems more interesting than the God with whom he converses. A former radio talk show host, newspaper reporter, managing editor, and public information officer for one of the nation's largest school systems, an erstwhile Roman Catholic and altar boy, veteran of five marriages, and father of nine children — one can see why "God" might single out this individual. Walsch explains how the *Conversations* got started:

In the spring of 1992...an extraordinary phenomenon occurred in my life. God began talking with you. Through me.

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Let me explain.

I was very unhappy during that period, personally, professionally, and emotionally, and my life was feeling like a failure on all levels. As I'd been in the habit for years of writing my thoughts down in letters...I picked up my trusty yellow legal pad and began pouring out my feelings.

This time...I decided to write a letter to God.

It was a spiteful, passionate letter, full of confusions, contortions, and condemnation. And a *pile* of angry questions....

To my surprise, as I scribbled out the last of my bitter, unanswerable questions and prepared to toss my pen aside, my hand remained poised over the paper, as if held there by some invisible force. Abruptly, the pen began moving on its own. I had no idea what I was about to write....Out came....

Do you really want an answer to all these questions, or are you just venting? (1:1; here and in subsequent quotations, the italics are his).

So began the *Conversations*. As published, Walsch's questions and comments are followed by God's remarks, indented and in a different type style to set them apart.

The books cover a wide range of topics, and each book has a different emphasis. "God" explains, "There will be three books, I said. The first would deal with individual life truths and challenges. The second would discuss truths of life as a family on this planet. And the third, I said, would cover the largest truths, having to do with the eternal questions. In this will be revealed the secrets of the universe" (2:245-46). Then he immediately adds, "Unless they are not" (i.e., unless, in keeping with the "Divine Dichotomy" of self-contradiction, "God" decides not to follow through with the third revelation).

Walsch: How does God talk, and to whom?

God: My most common form of communication is through *feeling* (1:2-3).

Underlying the *Conversations* is the predication, "Feeling is the language of the soul" (1:3). Though they "can be tricky" (2:17), they are fundamental. To a lesser degree, God also communicates through thoughts, experiences, and, finally, words, "the least effective communicator" (1:3).

Given their alleged insignificance, it is ironic that Walsch's God should devote so much space to words — almost 500 pages in two books, with more to come. Nevertheless, in his downplaying of words, we see the unbridgeable gap between this religion and biblical truth, in which the Word *is* God's revelation. Walsch's God — a. k. a. "That Which Is All Things" — chides those who would "accept the interpretation of others (even others who lived 2,000 years ago)" rather than listen to their own feelings (1:7). He places the Bible among sources that are "not authoritative" (1:8).

Although Walsch frequently quotes the Bible (including, for instance, the entire Twenty-third Psalm [2:154]), he generally handles the Bible with a superficiality and disregard for context that reflect today's flippant attitude toward Scripture. One of the most obvious examples of this is his use of Jesus' words in Matthew 25. Walsch quotes (with several variations) this beautiful text from verses 31 to 40: "Come you blessed of My children [the Bible has Father] inherit the kingdom.... inasmuch as you have done it to the least of these, My brethren [another change], so you have done it to me" (2:179). Walsch says nothing of the second half of the passage, in which Jesus tells those who are condemned, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels...." That would not fit with Walsch's denial of hell, nor with his false picture of Christ.

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Walsch can handle Scripture so cavalierly because society has absorbed the faith-destroying assumptions of higher biblical criticism to an alarming degree. Walsch's God is clearly a higher critic himself: "Most of the New Testament writers never saw Jesus in their lives. They lived many years after Jesus left the earth" (1:67). Walsch is wrong here. Modern scholarship has confirmed an early dating of the New Testament Scriptures.³ Though based on unsubstantiated presuppositions, higher criticism continues offering its controvertible conclusions in the guise of cutting-edge scholarship.

Walsch: Are you saying I shouldn't feel bad about the starving children....?

God: There are no "shoulds" or "shouldn'ts" in God's world. (1:38)

The Bible warns that those who distort the Scriptures do so "to their own destruction" (2 Pet. 3:16). Yet Walsch's God has twisted almost everything, including the Genesis account of the Fall: "You are saying that I, God, made inherently imperfect beings, then have demanded of them to be perfect, or face damnation....You are saying that My Son — who you call the One Perfect One — has saved you from your own imperfection — the imperfection *I gave you*. In other words, God's Son has saved you from *what His Father did*" (1:137). Rather than admitting this is an attack on the Bible, Walsch's God says, "I am simply engaging the issue" (1:137).

The God of the Bible created a world that was "very good" (Gen. 1:31). Man's sin made it imperfect. Having no concept of the transcendence of the true God, Walsch cannot separate the Creator from responsibility for the Fall. Yet the Scriptures make it clear that God is in no way responsible for human sinfulness: "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me'....but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed" (James 1:13–14). Adam and Eve sinned when, of their own free will, they gave in to the devil's temptation.

Like others before him, including the Mormons, Walsch ends up making the Fall into an "upliftment...for in being the first to make a 'wrong' choice, Adam and Eve [whose historicity Walsch denies] *produced the possibility* of making *any choice at all*" (1:55–56). In Walsch's world, there are no wrong choices: "I have never set down a 'right' or 'wrong,' a 'do' or a 'don't.' To do so would be to strip you completely of your greatest gift — the opportunity to do as you please, and experience the results of that; the chance to create yourself anew in the image and likeness of Who You Really Are" (1:39).

While asserting humanity's freedom of choice, *Conversations* denies the freedom to choose evil. The Bible teaches that Adam and Eve made just that choice, and so sin and death — the results of separation from the source of goodness and life — have entered the world. Walsch and his God deny the doctrine of original sin, or any sin. His God declares, "You've even created religions that tell you that you are born in sin" (1:85). Consequently, he denies virtually every doctrine of Scripture, including the reality of Satan. Although *Conversations* pays frequent homage to Jesus, often placing Him alongside the Buddha as a great spiritual leader, Christ's work is discounted. There is no need to get to heaven, because "you are already there" (1:98). Salvation lies in choice:

The function of the soul is to *indicate* its desire, not *impose* it.

The function of the mind is to *choose* from its alternatives.

The function of the body is to *act out* that choice.

When body, mind, and soul create together, in harmony and in unity, God is made flesh (1:175).

In Walsch's scheme, we become God incarnate: "You can be, and have whatever you imagine" (1:54). Indeed, each human being is a triune God: "That which you are, I am. I am manifested as Three-In-One. Some of your theologians have called this Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Your psychiatrists have recognized this triumvirate and called it conscious, subconscious, and superconscious. Your philosophers have called it the id, the ego, and the super ego" (1:73). "Think, speak, and act as the *God You Are*" (1:76). Walsch appeals to the Bible passage, "Ye are gods" (1:202). In its scriptural context (Ps. 82:6; John 10:35), this statement refers to God-appointed judges, leaders, or rulers who represented God; to act against them was to go against God.

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Walsch — along with a host of other New Agers — wrongly sees this affirmation as pantheism: everything is God. And everything is acceptable: "So stop making value judgments" (1:79). Having posited a pantheistic, valueless universe, "God" tells Walsch that the typical human attitude is to attack, reject, or label as wrong that with which we do not agree. Then he says, "In this you err, for you create only half a universe. And you cannot even understand *your* half when you have *rejected out of hand* the other" (1:84). Yet Walsch's God does the very same thing! In rejecting any value judgment, he has rejected just about everything. By his own standard, this God errs in saying, "You err."

The fact remains that the Bible is God's revealed truth, miraculously unified though written over a millennium and a half, and with a host of prophecies and their fulfillment that no human ingenuity could ever "create." The Christ whom it portrays is the Savior who died for the sins of the world and on the third day rose again from the dead (Rom. 4:25). This is God's plan of salvation. These are historical facts that have never been overturned. Wishing it away doesn't change it. Nor does inventing one's own feel-good religion. Salvation lies at the foot of the cross of Jesus, not in denying the reality of sin.

Walsch: I love You, You know that?

God: I know you do. And I love you (1:158; 2:180).

Conversations is clearly not Christian. While it claims to be neither Eastern nor Western, it is saturated with Hinduism and Buddhism. A sampling of topics affirms this and also reveals the enterprise to be in tune with the age:

Life and history are cyclical (2:70–71), rather than linear as the Bible presents them.

When asked if there is reincarnation, the reply is, "It is difficult to believe there is still a question about this....There have been so many reports from thoroughly reliable sources of past life experiences" (1:204). Yet a far more reliable source declares, "Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment" (Heb. 9:27).

There is life on other planets, and, yes, it has visited earth and is observing us (1:208). Extraterrestrials are responsible for the technological advances of the past 75 years (2:237). The Buddha, Krishna, and Jesus were spacemen (2:244).

Money is OK (1:161).

So is sex. Book 2 contains a hypothetical description of two people, "Tom and Mary," meeting across a crowded room, joining energies, becoming one in the flesh, TOMARY, and creating a new life (2:84–86).

Drinking is not OK. "But Jesus took alcohol!" says Walsch. To which "God" replies, "So who said Jesus was perfect?" (1:192). To which Scripture responds, "Hebrews 4:15."

"God" spoofs Walsch's Roman Catholic upbringing: "Wait a minute! This God of yours sent you to Purgatory if you ate meat on Friday?" (2:44).

Meanwhile, Adolf Hitler did the best he could with the knowledge he had. "The mistakes Hitler made did no harm or damage to those whose deaths he caused. Those souls were released from their earthly bondage" (2:42).

In Book 2, the Walsch-God spells out an extended plan for a unified world government with a unified economy (2:141–234 and elsewhere).

Jimmy Carter, George Bush, and Mikhail Gorbachev are commended for their contribution toward "a new world order" (2:199). Because Bill Clinton "believes in basic workers' rights....there are going to be tremendous powers attempting to remove him from office" (2:226).

We learn that God has a sense of humor (1:88). Repetitions and wordiness aside, Walsch's *Conversations* makes for entertaining reading, and the author's experience in radio and journalism come through. The many discussions of

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relationships seem to be Walsch's forté. The advice to be one's own person rather than simply going along with others is good psychology: "Ultimately, the person trying to 'do what is right' by the other....becomes resentful, angry, and mistrusting even of God" (1:131). Walsch has God quoting Shakespeare:

*To thine own Self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man (2:97).*

As with the need to be more in touch with our feelings, this is good advice. It finds its most satisfying fulfillment in the application of biblical truths. In following Scripture, we are free to evaluate our feelings, develop ourselves, and deal honestly with others. But to identify feelings with the voice of God and to elevate selfhood to deity is nothing short of idolatry.

Walsch: Why do people doubt you?

God: Because they doubt themselves (2:241).

It's been said that cults are "the unpaid bills of the church."⁴ Has twentieth-century Christianity so failed that people are ready to throw out all of divine revelation and the saving gospel for a mess of pantheistic pottage? Jesus still delivers on His promise, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). If people are wondering about subjects such as the use of worldly riches or sex, the Bible speaks to them.

From what Walsch says, apparently he has worked through his personal problems and come to some sort of peace with life. It is tragic that he has done so at the expense of the truth and his own soul.

Like Joseph Smith, Walsch claims to have introduced to the world a revelation from the divine realm. But the American consciousness has undergone a huge shift from the beginning of the nineteenth to the end of the twentieth century. In the past, there was still respect for the idea of God's revelation to man; today the highest source of revelation is one's own feelings. Walsch's *Conversations with God* are nothing more than conversations with himself. Neale Donald Walsch's God is Neale Donald Walsch. If that other voice is anyone else, it is, as we have seen, a distorting voice — the devil himself.

Halfway between the time of Joseph Smith and our own, the Irish poet William Butler Yeats became involved in channeled writing. Like other modern writers, Yeats was intensely interested in the occult. He saw the changing times as the ushering in of a new age of paganism, as expressed in his poem *The Second Coming*:

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?⁵

Neale Donald Walsch's offering is but another voice in the growing crescendo of neopaganism in the West. Like all the others, without Christ *Conversations with God* is doomed to fail — both as a solution to this world's problems and as a real hope for the world to come.

—Reviewed by Roland Cap Ehlke

Roland Cap Ehlke is a freelance writer, college professor, and contributing editor to Christian Research Journal.
Email: rce@csd.uwm.edu

NOTES

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¹As quoted in Dan Vogel, *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 3.

²Doreen Carvajal, "In Books, It's Boom Time for Spirits," *The New York Times*, 11 November 1997, B1.

³See, for example, Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, revised and expanded (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 440-44.

⁴Jan Karel Van Baalen, *The Chaos of the Cults* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 390.

⁵William Butler Yeats, *Selected Poems and Three Plays*, ed. M. L. Rosenthal (New York: Collier Books, 1986), 90.