

STATEMENT DN010

**A Summary Critique:
It's All in the Playing
Shirley MacLaine
(Bantam Books, 1987)**

It's All in the Playing is the story of playing God, in which the self — Shirley MacLaine's, that is — acts as the playwright, producer, star, and audience in the New Age theatre of the absurd. Following on the best-selling heels of *Out on a Limb* (3 million sold) and *Dancing in the Light* (2.2 million sold), her latest metaphysical musings take autobiographical excess to new heights of self-indulgence. *It's All in the Playing* is a book about the filming of the television miniseries of her autobiography *Out on a Limb* in which she played herself. Self looms large and dominant throughout.

MacLaine's last three books (not counting her two pre-New Age autobiographies) and her countless media appearances have amounted to a massive endorsement for trance-channeling (mediumship), yoga, reincarnation, past-life regression, psychic abilities, UFO contacts, occult literature, and more. And people are buying the message. The nationwide B. Dalton book chain reported that sales of the books on occult topics increased by 95 percent the week the *Out on a Limb* miniseries aired on ABC. In early 1987 MacLaine toured the country conducting ten well-attended two-day seminars called "Connecting with the Higher Self." The price of connection was \$300, but the demand was so great that she added seven more seminars over the summer, all adding up to an estimated income of \$3.8 million.

What sells so well is no new metaphysical message, but rather the ancient and perennial temptation of the serpent: "You can be as gods. You do not need to submit to your Creator; rather, do your own thing, create your own reality. You will not die." (See Genesis 3 for the whole story.) MacLaine's theology states that she is the creator of all that happens to her. There are no accidents. She has written the script of her life and is playing it out as she sees fit. The book is littered with ruinous ruminations on this theme. Just about anything becomes an occasion to rhapsodize over her limitless self. When facing a swimsuit scene for *Out on a Limb*, she wonders why she gains weight in her stomach so easily. What did she do in a previous life to bring this on? She doesn't solve the riddle, but remains assured that her Higher Self has it all under control.

To remain in total control, MacLaine twists the doctrine of Karma. As classically understood in Hinduism and Buddhism, one's good or bad deeds add up to rewards or punishments in repeated lifetimes. This is all recorded and administered (somehow) by the objective and impersonal law of Karma. The goal of liberation is somehow to escape the grip of Karma by dissolving the ego. But MacLaine's version of Karma is subjective and relative. We directly choose whatever happens to us. We are not under any objective or absolute moral law; there is no good or evil. We "create our own reality."

So when MacLaine's daughter's acting teacher is burned beyond recognition in a head-on collision, she wonders, "Why did she choose to die that way?" The better question is, "Why would anyone think in such terms about death?" Such thinking traps MacLaine in a prison of absurdity which she jealously guards, thinking it to be paradise.

The pages of the book are thoroughly punctured with the holes in her thinking. When the marginally Catholic John Heard (who played Shirley's New Age teacher) challenges her view that nothing is absolutely wrong (because we all choose what happens to us), she backtracks by saying that she advocates South African integration and helping the poor to help themselves. But why bother? The poor have brought their poverty on themselves; the exploited blacks desired exploitation. Why not let it sit? Any desire to change the situation is reduced to personal preference. Any objective ethical stance is impossible if there are no real wrongs in the world. Yet we find Shirley sobbing in front of her television set when she sees the effects of a Chilean volcano that killed 25,000 people. Why cry? They chose that death, didn't they? And what of the Jews killed by Hitler? Did they choose that as well? If so, they certainly would have had to be stupendously stupid.

Having lost any clear notion of objective reality, MacLaine asserts that everything that happens to her is really a reflection of herself. This is called solipsism. It reduces the universe, as G.K. Chesterton put it, to "one enormously selfish person." Shirley speaks much of love, but interpersonal love requires a real other person to be loved. If reality is merely a creation of myself,

myself is all there is to love. All altruism then reduces to egoism! The idea of self-sacrifice goes up in solipsistic flames. Can anyone consistently live with this conclusion?

Despite her self-deification, MacLaine is at times less than delighted with her divinity. She reports being quite irritable on several occasions on the set of *Out on a Limb*, and expresses regret over some of her actions, such as when she flew into a rage because of a loss of sleep. She comments that she “didn’t pass that test very well.” At one point she even speaks disparagingly of being “too self-centered”! Another time she is disappointed in herself for not apologizing to someone. Walking down a Hollywood street she reflects that “I created everything I saw, heard, touched, smelled, tasted; everything I loved, hated, revered . . . I created everything I knew.” She then comments that “a chilling wave of loneliness rippled through” her which she thought could be the “numbing aloneness that preceded the recognition of one’s totally awesome power.” Could it rather indicate the bankruptcy of playing a role one can never adequately occupy? As a young woman who came out of the New Age movement recently told me, “I tried being God, and decided to give the job back to Him.”

In his classic work, *Pensees*, the Christian philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) exposed the heart of New Age folly: “It is in vain, O men, that you seek within yourselves the remedy for your ills. All your light can only reach the knowledge that not in yourselves will you find truth or good.” Bertrand Russell made a similar point when he said, “Every man would like to be God if it were possible; some few find it difficult to admit the impossibility.” Shirley is one of them.

Yet despite MacLaine’s selfism, she sits at the feet of a variety of channelers who supposedly serve as vehicles for other selves to speak. Shirley describes how the entities channeled by Kevin Ryerson and a Swiss channeler learned their lines and recited them on a camera for *Out on a Limb*. She claims the scenes were actual examples of channeling. We also find that she is now quite interested in Jach Pursel, channel for the entity “Lazaris,” who is billed as “the consummate friend.” (The entity Ramtha, channeled by J.Z. Knight, who figured prominently in *Dancing in the Light*, is not mentioned in this book, and no longer seems to be the entity of choice for MacLaine, possibly because his “macho” manner conflicts with Shirley’s newfound desire to be more feminine.)

This desire for higher knowledge and direction through channeling is a recipe for deception. Channelers such as Kevin Ryerson, Jach Pursel, and J.Z. Knight all repeat the same old lie: you are God, you are unlimited; you create your own reality. Whether each channeler is directly demonized (many claim to have been contacted while meditating), merely acting, or suffering from mental delusions, the teaching itself is unbiblical and poisonous.

Scripture is quite clear that anything connected with the occult is forbidden: “Let no one be found among you who... practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord” (Deut. 18:10-12). Any purported spiritual teacher must be judged by doctrinal content. The Bible also warns that even if a prophet “announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder which he has spoken takes place, and he says, ‘Let us follow other gods’ . . . you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer” (Deut. 13:2-3). The apostle John cautions us to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God” by their teaching on Jesus Christ (1 John 4:1-2). The teaching from channelers and the New Age in general reduces Jesus to simply one of many mystical masters who is not uniquely God incarnate.

Yet although MacLaine ignores the real Jesus, she does mention the Bible. She claims that her “Higher Self” told her that most of the references to reincarnation were taken out of the Bible, but a few remain, such as Matthew 16:13-15 and chapter 17. In Matthew 16 Jesus asks the disciples to tell him who people say he is. They answer that some say he is John the Baptist, some Elijah, and some Jeremiah. Jesus then asks what the disciples think of him, to which Peter responds, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” This passage does not teach reincarnation, only that some had *mistaken* views of Jesus which Jesus himself does not accept.

Neither does Matthew chapter 17 teach reincarnation. After Moses and Elijah appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus, Jesus said that Elijah had already come, but was not recognized. MacLaine thinks that this teaches that John the Baptist was the reincarnation of Elijah. But the very verse to which she refers contradicts her. John the Baptist was already beheaded at the time of the appearance of Elijah with Jesus. If Elijah had been reincarnated as John, Elijah would not be the one to appear, because he no longer existed as Elijah, but as John! Further, Elijah never died but went bodily into heaven (2 Kings 2:11), and so had no soul available for reincarnation. This makes it impossible for John to be Elijah. Rather, John was a prophet like Elijah in manner of ministry, coming “in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17). This is what Jesus meant when he *metaphorically* referred to John as Elijah. (For a thorough treatment of Scriptures misused to support reincarnation see Norman Geisler and J. Yutaka Amano, *The Reincarnation Sensation* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1986] and Mark Albrecht, *Reincarnation: A Christian Critique of a New Age Doctrine* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987].)

The idea that other references to reincarnation were edited from the Bible is patently false, although it is taken for granted in New Age circles. First, if there was a plot to take out reincarnation, why did the church not delete the passages that appear at first glance to teach it? The idea doesn't make sense. Second, there is no good historical evidence to support such a plot to begin with; resurrection, not reincarnation, has always been the position of the church. (See Joseph P. Gudel, Robert M. Bowman, Jr., and Dan R. Schlesinger, "Reincarnation — Did the Church Suppress It?", CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, Summer 1987, pp. 8-12, and Albrecht, *Reincarnation*.)

Our apologetic criticisms of MacLaine's New Age errors should be as sharp as our compassion for her and other New Agers is sincere. The New Age quest for fulfillment and power is doomed to futility. The revenge of reality cannot forever be pushed back. We stand guilty before our creator, and no amount of yoga, visualization, trance-channeling, supposed UFO contacts, or psychic experimentation can atone for our sin against a holy God. It is only through abandoning our impersonations of God and admitting our moral failings that we can be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. To assume otherwise is tragically to play the fool.

— Doug Groothuis

The Reincarnation Sensation **Norman L. Geisler and J. Yutaka Amano** **(Tyndale House Publishers, 1986)**

What do producer George Lucas, actress Shirley MacLaine, actor Sylvester Stallone, singer Loretta Lynn, industrialist Henry Ford, philosopher John Hick, and "prophet" Edgar Cayce have in common? They — along with about 25 percent of all Americans — believe in some form of reincarnation. According to Norman Geisler and J. Yutaka Amano, there are ten versions of this afterlife doctrine available in the world's marketplace of ideas. These evangelical authors explain and evaluate those versions in their recent book *The Reincarnation Sensation*.

Simply put, reincarnation is "the belief that the soul after death passes on to another body" (p. 183) — a process that could repeat thousands of times through numerous worlds.

This teaching has been around for centuries in both the East and the West, but it wasn't popular in Europe or the United States until well into the 1900s. Geisler and Amano point out that our society's interest in reincarnation has grown largely for three reasons: (1) our fascination with Eastern thought; (2) our preoccupation with death; and (3) our increasing acceptance of the validity of past-life therapy.

Geisler and Amano have done the Christian community a great service. They have delved into the morass of reincarnationist literature, music, and movies and provided us with the most comprehensive, concise, and clearheaded treatment currently in print. They have given us an appendix that illustrates the ten reincarnation models, a glossary that defines key terms simply, and a bibliography of both pro and con reincarnation materials.

Perhaps the greatest help we receive is from their reasoned critique of reincarnationists' teachings. With the precision of skilled surgeons, they cut through the rhetoric and lay bare reincarnation's essential tenets. Then they slice deeper with the instruments of logic and Scripture, thereby causing the doctrinal pus of reincarnation to ooze into the light where we can see it for what it is. Finally, they complete their task by telling us how we can operate gently, lovingly, and effectively on reincarnationists who cross our path.

Aside from some minor disagreements with a few of the authors' conclusions, I find their book insightful and trustworthy. I'm disappointed, however, with some of the editorial decisions Tyndale House made. Rather than permitting the authors to retain their extensive documentation, Tyndale House stripped the book of about 600 footnotes while leaving much of its quoted matter alone. Consequently, numerous quotes occur without adequate notations regarding their source or location (pp. 38, 39, 52, 53, 79, 92, 106, 108, 109, 118, 124). As any critical reader knows, Tyndale House's deletions make this book less valuable than it otherwise would have been, for they have made it extremely difficult to check out some of the book's most important references. Despite this drawback, *The Reincarnation Sensation* provides Christians with a surgical tool of information and evaluation sorely needed in a society infected with Eastern beliefs.

—William D. Watkins

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The Health and Wealth Gospel

Bruce Barron

(InterVarsity Press, 1987)

For quite some time the mainstream evangelical community has existed side-by-side with the proponents of the “word-faith” or “positive confession” movement. But, although its teachings have been addressed in several books, booklets, and articles, until now no major publisher has released a book-length assessment of the word-faith movement. In *The Health and Wealth Gospel*, Bruce Barron attempts to answer such questions as: Where did the “faith” teachers come from? What are they saying? Is their message biblical? Is it dangerous?

Appropriately, Barron begins his analysis of the health-wealth movement by tracing its roots historically. He then turns to a discussion of what he sees as the three main controversies surrounding the faith movement: divine healing, prosperity, and positive confession. Barron articulates and documents these teachings with care and insight, and offers a critical evaluation of them from a biblical perspective.

Unfortunately, though, Barron stops short of addressing the “meat” of the controversy generated by the word-faith movement. Specifically, he fails to analyze the teaching that Jesus died spiritually, went to hell, and then was “born again,” and the doctrine that believers become “little gods.” One would expect a book of such length (200 pages) which represents a major analysis of the word-faith movement not to overlook that movement’s two most controversial teachings.

Moreover, Barron’s assessment that the critics of the word-faith movement “do not reflect an accurate grasp of their teachings” could be more appropriately applied to his *own* failure to grasp the heretical significance of word-faith teaching. For example, the author suggests that the movement is getting better, not worse (p. 170). However, the so-called signs of improvement (e.g., that the movement is paying more attention to intercession, love, and care for the poor) have nothing to do with their doctrinal error, which indeed *has* grown worse over the past decade.

Ironically, the same magazine Barron cites (*Believer’s Voice of Victory* since 1985) as proof of these positive signs, also records Kenneth Copeland’s recent prophecy in Dallas, Texas, in which Copeland alleges that Jesus Christ never claimed to be God! (“Take Time to Pray,” February 1987, p. 9. The reader is welcome to write CRI for a copy of this prophecy if he doubts that this was ever said.) Barron’s contention that this movement is moving into the main stream of Christianity, then, is certainly not true at least with reference to Copeland, who is at the forefront of this movement and has had a great deal of influence on those who follow the word-faith teachings. Although it is true that Copeland’s “prophecy” was uttered too late for Barron to take it into account in his book, the signs of heresy were already all too evident, as articles in previous issues of this journal have shown.

In spite of these flaws, *The Health and Wealth Gospel* is not without use. For those who are unfamiliar with the movement as a whole and would like information about it, the book will prove to be valuable. As stated earlier, Barron’s critique of divine healing, prosperity, and “positive confession” offers some insight as well. The book also offers a fine bibliography appearing throughout the endnotes which will help the researcher pursuing materials related to the movement.

In the final analysis, though, by not treating the most controversial issues surrounding the word-faith movement, *The Health and Wealth Gospel* missed its opportunity to be the definitive work on the subject. Such a book still needs to be written.

— Dan R. Schlesinger