

Review: DN266

A SUMMARY CRITIQUE

CAROLINE MYSS AND THE NEW AGE CONTRACT

a book review of
Sacred Contracts: Awakening Your Divine Potential
by Caroline Myss
(Henry Holt, 2001)

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Genesis 15 describes one of the earliest sacred contracts, a familiar story to both Christians and Jews: Abram asked for a sign that God would lead him into the Promised Land. God provided the sign by making, or literally “cutting,” a covenant with him. He directed Abram to sacrifice a bull, cut it in half, and lay the pieces side by side. Through the dark night, as Abram fell into a deep sleep, a firepot, representing the Almighty God, Creator of the universe, passed between the parts of the bull. The act signified that the God of the universe would put His own “life” on the line should He fail to keep His covenant with Abram.¹

This is, without a doubt, one of the most pivotal, profound events recorded in the Bible. It reveals the depth of everlasting love God has for His people. It is, ironically, a part of the covenant story that New Age guru Caroline Myss (pronounced “Mace”) leaves out of her book, *Sacred Contracts*. The God of the Bible is revealed a bit too clearly for New Age tastes, and the path to spiritual transformation He sanctions is, perhaps, a bit too narrow for the Aquarian set.

Some four thousand years after God’s covenant with Abram (Abraham), Myss thinks the Old Testament concept of covenant could use some tinkering. She takes the concept of covenant — or “sacred contract,” to use her term — on a syncretistic romp through world religions. Using Abraham as an example (but not the particular covenant with God previously noted), she weaves a complex case for her own version of covenant, which has much more to do with divination than devotion. She pastes not only Abraham, but also Jesus, Muhammad, and Buddha onto a landscape of Jungian archetypes, Hindu-inspired chakras, and astrological wheels. The result is a divination game that one could easily imagine preteen girls playing in the wee hours of a slumber party, were it not quite so complicated. Despite (or perhaps because of) its complexity, the New Age faithful are snapping up this latest work from bookstore shelves.

One might wonder at Myss’s qualifications to write on such a broad array of topics. Myss has a master’s degree in theology from Mundelein College — a Roman Catholic school north of Chicago. She has a doctorate in philosophy from the College of Energy Medicine at Greenwich University, a “distance learning” facility with no legitimate accreditation, located on a remote island in the Australian territories.² A self-described “medical intuitive,” she attempts to heal the ills of her followers on her Oxygen network television show, *The Journey with Caroline Myss*. Her seminars have also been broadcast during PBS affiliate pledge drives.

With typical New Age vagueness, Myss describes a sacred contract in several ways: “A Sacred Contract is an agreement your soul makes before you are born. You promise to do certain things for yourself, for others, and for divine purposes. Part of the Contract requires that you discover what it is that you are

meant to do. The divine, in turn, promises to give you the guidance you need through your intuition, dreams, hunches, coincidences, and other indicators” (p. 47). Any reference to a biblical understanding of the concept of covenant is notably absent from Myss’s book. Myss continues, “A Contract is your overall relationship to your personal power and your spiritual power. It is how you work with your energy and whom you give it to. It is also how much you are willing to surrender to divine guidance” (4–5).

According to Myss, this vague “divine” confers with the soul about its sacred contract before birth. At birth, the soul forgets its contract. The principal reason the contract is forgotten is that Myss’s system doesn’t work if it is remembered. She includes a cautionary tale about a man who reports that he vaguely remembers his contract. On account of this, he leads a horrible life of woe. Myss’s naïve system, however, stumbles here, for if I remember my contract, I already know what I’m supposed to learn, in which case I have no reason to make wrong choices. If I am born understanding my contract, I could easily fulfill it.

The stated goal of the book is to help the reader figure out what is his or her sacred contract, or mission in life. Once readers come to terms with their contracts, they will use their energy much more wisely, and they will be spiritually transformed, living up to their fullest potential. Her method for achieving this is hardly straightforward. She creates shallow connections between religious leaders and teachings with dizzying rapidity. The result is a cheapening not just of Christianity, but many faith traditions, all for the price of yet another New Age self-improvement scheme.

Jesus: One of the Guys. The spiritual masters, of course, also had their sacred contracts to fulfill. In the lives of Jesus, Muhammad, and the Buddha, Myss notes a five-step process, which, naturally, fits her description of how we come to fulfill our contracts.

First, the spiritual masters experienced connection with the divine. In the gospel according to Myss, this occurred during Jesus’ baptism. Rather than being the moment that God opened the heavens and gave His blessing to His Son for the original Abrahamic covenant to be fulfilled, this was the moment when Jesus became a mystic. The divine connection for Muhammad was the moment he was visited by Jibril (the angel Gabriel). Myss’s theory of divine enlightenment gets a bit trickier when it comes to the Buddha, since Buddhism does not hold to a divine being. Buddha simply sat under a tree until he was enlightened. In order to maintain her theory about divine connection, Myss points out that Buddha did believe in lesser Hindu gods. The second step was the decision to “heed the call.” Jesus heeded the call, Myss thinks, by spending time in the wilderness. Muhammad did so by accepting his role as messenger. Buddha did so by telling the world about the Eightfold Path to enlightenment. Third, the enlightened ones took on a new name or role. Next, they completed an assignment. Finally, the enlightened ones surrendered. Jesus’ surrender, according to Myss’s scheme, is certainly evident. Muhammad’s surrender is not so well defined, nor is Buddha’s, unless you consider his death by food poisoning as surrender.

Myss’s scheme does not fit all three of these masters at every point; nevertheless, ignoring the glaring differences between the content of teachings and the life paths these men recommended, she insists that they deliver a “unified message of ongoing guidance.” In this unified message, however, each of these masters, as well as their teachings, lose their distinctives: Jesus is no longer the Son of God, and Muhammad’s message — “There is no God but Allah” — is lost. Myss displays a shallow understanding, not just of Christian thought, but also of Islam and Buddhism. She puts together her spiritual machinery with parts stolen from other faiths, while dismantling their messages and twisting their doctrines to fit her theory.

C. G. Jung: A Mile Wide, an Inch Deep. Carl Gustav Jung, the founder of analytical psychology, worked with the stuff of which the New Age is made: the zodiac, kundalini, and the psychic power of symbols. Myss takes her cues for her sacred contracts theory from Jung. As he analyzed his patients, Jung noticed that their dreams and thoughts often carried content from myths and fairy tales. This led him to the concept of the archetype — “an innate potential pattern of imagination, thought or behavior that can be found among human being [sic] at all times and places.”³ Jung was not so much searching for answers to life’s ultimate questions as he was trying to understand the workings of the unconscious.⁴ While many Christians criticize Jung’s theories as potentially idolatrous — making the human psyche into a sort of god — there can be no doubt that hundreds of serious scholars have invested their lives studying his work.

Disregarding the Jungian community, however, C. Norman Shealy, Myss's colleague on the swami circuit, has the naïveté and downright hubris to suggest that "until now, there has not been a cohesive overview and in-depth use of archetypal psychology." He crows, "The work of Caroline Myss in *Sacred Contracts* brings our understanding and use of archetypes to a remarkable new level."⁵ Myss has no Jungian credentials, and no advanced degree in psychology. She brings us not only Abraham Lite, Jesus Lite, Muhammad Lite, and Buddha Lite, but Jung Lite as well.

Myss forges her own definition of "archetype": it is "a universal form of cosmic intelligence that [is] directly involved in the day-to-day organizing of our lives." Archetypes are "dynamic living forms of energy that are shared in many people's thoughts and emotions, across cultures and countries."⁶ She ignores the rest of Jung's psychology, especially his caution that the archetype be balanced with other more reality-based concepts.

Chakras: Improving the Energy Pipeline. Having redefined the archetype, Myss turns to another favorite topic — the chakra. Chakras have their origin in Tantrism — a stream of thought found in both Hindu and Buddhist practice. There are, traditionally, between five and seven major chakras (or rotating points of energy) represented as lotuses, located along the spine of the "metaphysical body." The goal of the yogis is to get energy, or kundalini, represented by a snake coiled at the first chakra, to "rise," flowing smoothly from the base chakra, located roughly at the base of one's "metaphysical spine," through to the crown chakra, located several inches above the "metaphysical head." In traditional Tantra, this feat takes years of disciplined effort to achieve.

According to Myss, however, chakras serve less grueling purposes as vehicles for Jungian archetypes. Myss, moreover, makes the grand announcement that she has discovered an *eighth* major chakra — the archetypal chakra — located even farther above the head than the old seat of enlightenment, the crown chakra. Jung studied the Hindu kundalini, and even lectured on it, but he never mentioned an archetypal chakra.

Myss writes at length about the contents of each chakra. The first chakra, for instance, contains the lesson, "All is One." The eighth chakra (the one Myss invented) has the power of "symbolic sight." The sixth has, as its negative shadow, "defining the truth in self-serving ways," and so forth. She makes no connection between the actual chakras of the tantra and the contents that she comes up with for each, nor does she mention yoga or any other means to get that kundalini rising.

The Myss System: Spinning Her Wheels. Myss invites readers to plot their own "archetypal wheels," which will give them the direction necessary to find their sacred contracts. As to the number of archetypes that would be appropriate in helping one recognize a sacred contract, Myss decided that 12 is a good round mystical figure. In what she now considers a brilliant insight, she also realized that there are 12 "houses" in the zodiac, and the marriage with the sacred contract was decreed. Each house of the zodiac has certain "responsibilities" to oversee. The fourth house, Cancer, for example, rules the home. Each house, similarly, has its corresponding resident archetype. To complicate matters even further, each house also has corresponding chakra energies. For reasons unknown, Myss is not particularly clear on exactly how the archetypes themselves are linked with the chakra energies in the houses of her zodiac-archetypal wheel.

Everyone, according to Myss, is stuck with four archetypes: Child, Victim, Saboteur, and Prostitute. (Before taking offense at the suggestion of having an "inner prostitute," keep in mind that all archetypes have both positive and negative aspects.) The other eight can be chosen to suit each individual's personality. For the vast majority of readers who are not Jung adepts, Myss provides descriptions of several archetypes from which to choose.

Once a reader picks out 12 archetypes, he or she is instructed to write the name of each one on 12 slips of paper and then write the numbers 1 through 12 on 12 additional slips. Each stack of paper is then scrambled, and the reader draws one slip from each stack. The "Alchemist" archetype, for example, might be matched with the number 12, which corresponds with the house of Pisces, or matters of the "unconscious." This procedure is repeated until all of the houses in one's archetypal wheel are filled. The

reader then reflects on the relationship between his or her personal history and the archetype as it relates to the house in which it resides. This is to be done until one's intuitions point to one's sacred contract. This seems like an extraordinarily complicated, random way to arrive at one's purpose in life.

God: A Metaphysical Convenience. One's mission, according to Myss, comes from the divine, which is God, Buddha nature, higher self, or even a metaphor. This is the lie of New Age "detachment." Myss recalls, "to convey...the great power of detachment in perceiving reality, [our professor] had us imagine we were each sitting in the center of a clock. Each of the twelve hours of the clock represented...Buddhism; another... Hindu traditions; the others, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Taoism, Confucianism, Shinto, Wicca, Zoroastrianism, shamanism, and atheism. This image shows that there is no such thing as one reality, that truth presents itself in many forms."⁷

This image doesn't "show" anything. Imagine, for example, being on a game show where the host shows us 12 boxes and tells us that the prize is in only one of the boxes. It's up to us to choose the right box. In this scenario or "image" there is, indeed, only one reality — the prize really is in only one box. Active investigation, not detachment, however, is the only way to find out whether it is true that the prize really is in only one box.

A true covenant or contract is about involvement and not detachment — not only our involvement to fulfill divine requirements for our lives, but God's involvement with us as a loving Father. A metaphor, such as an archetype or house, cannot hear my cry, or lead me out of captivity into a Promised Land, or give me a future and a hope.

Myss's sacred contract may be an entertaining parlor game, but it is disrespectful of the individual essences of all religious traditions, too casual about the identity of the Divine, too self-focused, and antithetical to the truth of the Christian Gospel.

— reviewed by Kate Maver

NOTES

1. Leander Keck, ed., *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 446.
2. While the school's Web site boasts accreditation by "Act of Parliament," the Australian Qualifications Framework, which is officially authorized to grant such status, has denied Greenwich accreditation. <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/printpage/0,5942,4983490,00.html>, <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/bd/2002-03/03bd064.html>, <http://university.edu.nf/ssc/new%20EnMed%20Home.html>.
3. Murray Stein, *Jung's Map of the Soul* (Chicago: Open Court Press, 1998), 233.
4. *Ibid.*, 86.
5. Myss, xi–xii.
6. *Ibid.*, 5.
7. *Ibid.*, 205.