

Review: JAB160

AGE-OLD LIE—NEW AGE BLEEP

a film review of

What the Bleep Do We Know?

directed by Mark Vicente, Betsy Chasse, and William Arntz

(Lord of the Wind Films, LLC, 2004)

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What the Bleep Do We Know? extrapolates from quantum physics to answer life's big questions. That's its claim anyway. In reality, science is completely incidental to the film's conclusions. Viewers instead are fed a nauseating stream of nonsense that traces back to the teaching of a woman who claims to channel a 35,000-year-old deity.

What any reviewer fears when reviewing an outlandish book or film is unintentionally lending credibility to a work that would be better served by silence. Perhaps this dynamic was at work in *Christianity Today's* refusal to print a full review of the "docudrama." Instead the magazine opted to publish a collection of dismissive snippets from Christian critics, which in large part were echoed by their secular counterparts who also balked at the production's pseudoscience and New Age vacuity.

Reaction from the general public, however, has been quite different. Nearly a year after debuting in theaters, the film is boasting healthy DVD sales and spawning multiple conferences, chat rooms, and study groups. The work even has found its way into college syllabi, where it is touted as a link between science and spirituality. The *Miami Herald* ran a story on *What the Bleep* enthusiasts ("Bleepers") who have made promoting the film a personal mission. Endorsements from celebrities such as Drew Barrymore and Ellen DeGeneres have also added to its momentum. The film's growing popularity despite its lack of credibility necessitates a response from the Christian community.

So what the bleep is going on? Well, the film is more entertaining than your average documentary. Though it delves into science and philosophy—subjects traditionally expressed in academic prose—*What the Bleep* gives its heady material a new spin, interweaving "expert" interviews with the story of a frustrated, deaf photographer, named Amanda. Amanda (played by Marlee Matlin) is beset by personal and professional woes: she's haunted by a painful divorce, unhappy at work, and dissatisfied with her appearance. Through a series of events and encounters (illustrated with mind-bending graphics, animation, and inspiring musical scores), however, she glimpses a new dimension: the dizzying reality of the subatomic universe. As Amanda's story unfolds, the talking heads mine quantum physics for nuggets of spiritual wisdom, and the new branch of science turns out to be a goldmine. Apparently the molecular world tells us that reality exists only when we perceive it, that "we are all gods in the making," and that a theistic understanding of God is "ugly, superstitious backwater." As the film's experts spout nebulous, New Age phrases, however, we can't help wondering if the wisdom is coming from subatomic quarks or disingenuous quacks.

Credibility Issues and Pseudoscience. One of the film's featured experts is New Age guru J. Z. Knight. According to Knight, Ramtha (the aforementioned ancient deity) has chosen to indwell her body to spread his philosophy. "The totality of his message," she says, "could be expressed in the statement, 'You are God.'"

Although Knight is presented in the video as merely one of the experts, she is actually much more involved. The writers and producers of the film are all students of the school of “ancient wisdom” that she founded, named Ramtha’s School of Enlightenment.

Other experts interviewed have legitimate credentials, but almost all are heavily involved with New Age institutes such as the Institute of Noetic Sciences and Maharishi University of Management, and the interviewees willingly stray from their fields of study. The scientists make bold religious and philosophical statements, while the new age specialists freely share their “scientific” insights.

Perhaps these credibility issues could be overlooked if the film supported its claims with solid science, but it does not. To prove that our thoughts can create an alternative physical reality, for example, the film turns to the water experiments of Masaru Emoto. Emoto takes water samples and attaches different messages to each one, some negative (“I hate you,” or “You make me sick”) and some positive (“I love you,” or “Thank you”). He then snaps magnified photographs of the water to view the impact of the messages on the molecular level. He also crystallizes the water and takes samples from different sources—details not mentioned in the film. Samples with positive messages attached turn out beautiful and symmetrical, like snowflakes. The ones subjected to negative messages resemble pond scum.

Emoto’s books reveal even more fantastical claims about water’s supposed consciousness. In one experiment, a sample of water demonstrated empathy, splitting in two after “listening” to Elvis’s rock dirge “Heartbreak Hotel.”

One would think a discovery of this magnitude would cause a stir in the scientific community, yet searches of scientific databases yield not a trace of Emoto or his discoveries. In fact the only readily available information seems to come from the *What the Bleep* Web site or Emoto’s own site, where he sells self-published books and bottles of blessed water. This segment of the film ends with the haunting words: “If our thoughts can do that to water, just imagine what our thoughts can do to us.”

The film touts another experiment: a 1993 meditation conference conducted in Washington, D.C., that allegedly lowered violent crime in the area by nearly 25 percent. When asked about the study, however, a Washington, D.C., area government crime analyst stated: “We’ve heard of this experiment repeatedly. We have no idea how [the conference leaders] could arrive at their conclusions.” In fact, government statistics show that 1993 was the most violent year in the Washington, D.C., area in the past 20 years.

Philosophical and Theological Problems. The introductory prescript “In the beginning was the void...” opens the film on a skeptical note. What follows is an all-out assault on the human mind. One after another, the experts express their disbelief that the mind can accurately apprehend reality. They describe perception as the mere byproduct of an illusory interplay between the senses and the brain. With such disadvantages plaguing us, one expert asks, “How can we continue to see the world as real?”

Just when the film seems certain of uncertainty, however, it changes positions on the power of the mind, which suddenly morphs from hapless pawn to divine juggernaut. We could walk on water, one commentator assures us, if we only “believed with every fiber of our being.” Another insists that “We have this habit of thinking of things around us as already things, existing without [our] input, without [our] choice. [We] need to banish that type of thinking” and believe instead that the material world is brought into existence when the mind chooses between different possibilities of consciousness.

The mind, they say, is utterly incapable of discerning reality, but supposedly has no problem creating it. The film never bothers to address the obvious questions raised by its conflicting assertions regarding knowledge: if the mind is utterly susceptible to deception, how can we be sure of any of its conclusions, including the claim that it can create any desired reality? Even if the mind succeeded in achieving a divine mastery over the physical world, how could we verify the achievement, since a hopelessly deluded mind is our only tool of appraisal?

The film’s self-centered model also carries disturbing ethical implications. Recently John Olmsted, a professor of psychology at Oberlin College, invited the film’s makers to Portland, Oregon, to take part in a conference. To test the film’s theories, Olmsted displayed a photo of a child who has Down Syndrome

and then asked: “Is this child free to create any reality he wants? Is this child responsible for his condition?” Producer William Arntz responded by stating that the child was paying for transgressions in a previous life. Arntz was consistent in this case, acknowledging the ugly and unavoidable conclusions that follow from the production’s assertions.

Even glaring philosophical incoherence does not prevent the experts from making very specific theological statements. One expert, for example, states that it is impossible to know exactly who or what God is, given the limitations of our knowledge, but then claims to know absolutely that a God who demands, or to whom we must render worship, cannot exist.

As Amanda paces through an old church, the voiceovers opine on the subjugation of humanity at the hands of religion. The film cuts to Knight, announcing that the concept that we could sin against God would be the height of arrogance. Besides, she says, “everyone’s gods [sic].”

This type of self-deification may sound novel and promising to the secular mind, but not to Christians. We are all too familiar with such deception from the garden account in Genesis. We can be thankful that *What the Bleep* packages the old lie with the seams clearly showing.

The film ends with a flourish from Knight: “Welcome to the kingdom of heaven without judgment, without hate, without testing, without anything.” Including, I might add, credibility or coherence.

— reviewed by Drew Dyck