

Animism, the Prosperity Gospel, and the American Dream

Introduction

The first time I ever stepped foot into the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, Turkey, I noticed the layers of history that were quite literally etched into these ancient walls. The newer Islamic art –whether geometric, calligraphic, and vegetal – was on the surface of the walls. However, in some places around this grand edifice, you could see ancient Christian iconography peeking out from behind some of the crumbling plaster. I have not been in that building in over fifteen years, but the images of a thin veneer covering something more foundational have stuck with me.

Similarly, mainstream religions such as Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity are often a thin veneer over folk religions that shape the day-to-day lives of religious practitioners. Whether it is folk Islam, folk Buddhism, or even folk Christianity, much has been written about how folk religions dominate the lives of everyday people all around the world. In fact, conversations around folk religions are often concerned with eliminating the idea that religion can or should be compartmentalized like Western cultures attempt to do.¹ Robin Hadaway, Senior Professor of Missions at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, has helpfully shown that folk Islam *is* the “real” Islam

¹ For example, see Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999).

for the vast majority of self-professed Muslims around the world.² In fact, folk religion in Muslim contexts is the driving force behind how people think, the way they feel, and the actions they take in their day-to-day lives. Just as Islam thinly covers animistic worldviews dominated by fear and power across much of Africa and Asia, the language of Christian theology and even ethics often just barely covers the underlying worldview of the so-called American Dream that characterizes many citizens of the United States.

For instance, in African contexts where African Traditional Religion (ATR) is the dominant worldview, the Prosperity Gospel (PG) only barely covers an underlying worldview of fear, power, spirit, and animism.³ Meanwhile, in the USA, what sometimes passes for Christianity is a thin covering over a worldview of a culture often referred to as the American Dream. This type of folk religion, like the PG in Africa, is not the gospel and has no power to save individuals nor to transform cultures. Instead of being a message of hope and deliverance, the PG, whether it is found in African villages or the American suburbs, is a message of moral rot and damning and destructive lies donning gospel garments over demonic deception.

The American Dream in the USA

As referenced above, former IMB missionary and current SBC pastor Nick Moore has shown that the PG is a thin veil over animism in many places in Sub-Saharan Africa. Meanwhile in North America, the PG is a thin veil over Moral Therapeutic Deism (MTD), which Al Mohler calls “the New American

² Robin Dale Haddaway, *The Muslim Majority: Folk Islam and the Seventy Percent* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2021).

³ Nick Moore, “Africa, Animism, and the Dangers of the Prosperity Gospel,” International Mission Board [online]; 26 October 2018; accessed 19 May 2025; available from <https://www.imb.org/2018/10/26/africa-animism-prosperity-gospel>.

Religion.”⁴ Three points of connection between the American Dream and MTD are an emphasis on personal achievement, a prioritization of individualized happiness, and a push for self-fulfillment. These three values stand in contrast to biblical Christianity which calls Christians to service of others (Gal 5:13), sacrifice of one’s own rights (1 Cor 9:22), and loving one’s neighbor (Mark 12:31).

First coined by Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton in their book *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*,⁵ MTD describes a set of beliefs commonly held by American teenagers but increasingly connected to American culture. Some of the core beliefs of MTD are centered around virtue-laden words like “good,” “nice,” and “fair.” Interestingly, MTD has no basis on which to define, demarcate, or delimit any of these virtues, values, and ideals. Instead, they simply borrow Christian capital and assume that society as a whole knows what they mean when they use these words.

The Prosperity Gospel and the American Dream

Words like religion, culture, and worldview are notoriously difficult to define precisely. All definitions of these core concepts are inevitably colored by the culture from which the definitions arose. This same difficulty in providing a sharp and succinct definition to a key idea applies to defining the PG. Sean DeMars and Mike McKinley have written that it is easier to list the key elements of the PG than it is to provide a clear, concise, and comprehensive definition of it. DeMars and McKinley list several key elements, and at the core of these various principles is the notion that Christian believers should prosper materially in *this* life by claiming and using the power and authority

⁴ Albert Mohler, “Moral Therapeutic Deism – the New American Religion,” Albert Mohler [online]; accessed 11 July 2025; available from <https://albertmohler.com/2005/04/11/moralistic-therapeutic-deism-the-new-american-religion-2/>

⁵ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2005).

of God to which they have access.⁶ With the elements listed by McKinley and DeMars as a foundation, I believe that Malawian pastor Maxwell B. Chiwoko has provided us with a clear and concise description, if not a comprehensive definition, of the PG when he writes that the PG is “the presentation of the message of the Bible that emphasizes . . . the material well-being of believers as *normal* Christian living.”⁷ Chiwoko emphasizes that the PG teaches that *all* Christian believers can and should prosper financially, emotionally, and physically as a result of believing in the power of finished work of Jesus.

To justify these kinds of mistaken assertions, PG peddlers twist Scripture. The twisting of Scripture for one’s own purpose has been a hallmark of false teachers from the beginning of time – all the way back to the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Jude 13 says that false teachers “are wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shameful deeds; wandering stars for whom the blackness of darkness is reserved forever” (CSB). As Costi Hinn has written, the twisting of Scripture is not a small thing to be taken lightly or dismissed as a mere interpretive difference. In fact, writes Hinn, “You could even go as far as saying that the hottest part of hell is reserved for those who twist the name of Jesus Christ and lead people there. Not one will get away with it.”⁸

While the Lord calls, sustains, and loves all His people in all places throughout all time, the books of the Bible were written to different audiences for different purposes. The Bible was not originally written to white middle-class Americans who are “seeking wisdom” about whether to build a bigger house, buy a nicer car, or take a European or Caribbean cruise. The Bible was written to God’s people who lived at various stages of God’s unfolding revelation in salvation history. We find the meaning of a given Scriptural text

⁶ Sean DeMars and Mike McKinley, *Health, Wealth, and the (Real) Gospel: The Prosperity Gospel Meets the Truths of Scripture* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Ltd, 2022), 18.

⁷ Maxwell B. Chiwoko, *On the Problems of Prosperity Gospel Teaching* (Lilongwe, Malawi: Pan African Publisher Ltd, 2018), 21, emphasis mine.

⁸ Costi Hinn, *God, Greed, and the (Prosperity) Gospel: How Truth Overwhelms a Life Built on Lies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 178-9. Costi is the nephew of the infamous Benny Hinn. He formerly worked for his uncle but now rejects his uncle’s message and methods.

by seeking to understand that original context and not by waiting for a “new word” for today. Christians can and should seek to find valid implications for their own cultural contexts, and individual Christians should seek to apply those implications to their personal lives by seeking to understand its significance. However, none of these hermeneutical moves should be leveraged in such a way as to twist the original meaning into an implication or application that does violence to the overall message of Scripture, which is centered on Jesus as both the foundation and the ultimate purpose of the Bible.

The more obviously identifiable versions of the PG are easy to spot. When a Rolex-wearing, hair-sprayed, toothy, leathery charlatan stands up and declares that “sowing a seed” of faith – that is just a financial donation to his “ministry” – will result in a “blessing” for your life, most American Evangelicals can call that spade a spade. However, American Evangelicals live in the richest and most prosperous society in the history of the world. As a result, they have come to expect a certain amount of comfort in their daily lives. Comforts like indoor plumbing, reliable electricity, and the ability to heat and cool one’s home are not viewed as comforts by most in American. These technologies instead are simply given realities and even claimed as rights. This same expectation for comfort extends to access to not just medical care but top-notch medical care. In general, American Evangelicals have come to see physical and mental well-being as not a blessing but an expectation – or at least something that their wealth can manage and control. Many Americans have forgotten the fundamental reality that as created and fallen beings, humans are “dependent, frail, and fragile.”⁹

As a result of having these non-biblical expectations, less obvious versions of the PG have also slithered their way into Evangelical churches in North America. Following Kate Bowler’s categories of “soft” and “hard” PGs in her helpful book *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, David

⁹ Bob Cutillo, *Pursuing Health in an Anxious Age* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2016), 55.

Schrock has warned against the “softer” form of the PG that is found in some American Evangelical churches. This softer version of the PG short-circuits the biblical idea of true blessing as knowing God as He truly is. Instead, the softer version of the PG delivers a message that is satisfied with the gifts that God gives instead of knowing God as He is.¹⁰ Various versions of the PG can make their way into our churches through books, music, and/or online sermons. However, this softer version of the PG is already present in the minds and hearts of many American Evangelicals. Whenever a churchgoer is more concerned about the gifts he or she receives from God rather than the glory of God being made manifest in his or her daily life, the PG is making its way into that person’s heart and mind. In fact, whenever we quote Bible verses out of their textual, canonical, and salvation historical context and attempts to make the message of the Bible all about us, we have bought more into the PG than we want to admit.

The Lord, in his kindness, strips away the idols that prop up the PG in the eyes of those who have eyes to see. When a young American couple raised in church by parents who have been discipled by the American Dream and MTD instead of the Bible buy their first house in their twenties with the money they are making from their lucrative careers and then face a tragic miscarriage, all that they believed about God comes crashing down around them. They may say, “Doesn’t God want us to be happy? Is God good if He doesn’t give us a healthy child? This is not the Christianity that I signed up for.” Now, they have a decision to make. Are they going to embrace this Jesus who walked through suffering and told them to take up the cross daily and follow him (Mat 16:24)? Or are they going to abandon the One whom they feel like abandoned them? This reality comes to light when one sees how the façade of “faith and blessing” is burned up and the raw truth of the gospel of God’s sustaining love is all that those whom the Lord loves can

¹⁰ David Schrock, “A Softer Prosperity Gospel: More Common Than You Think” 9 Marks [online]; 14 January 2014; accessed 14 May 2025; available from <https://www.9marks.org/article/journalsofter-prosperity-gospel-more-common-you-think/>.

cling to.

Picture a young family who instead of buying their dream home in the comfortable suburbs joyfully volunteers to join a church plant in a community marked by hopelessness and despair. Soon, they discover that rather than hearing prayer requests about which cruise to take, they are hearing a woman ask for prayer to live faithfully with her emotionally abusive husband. Another family's baby comes out of the nursery with bite marks from the special needs child in the nursery. Yet another family is challenged by one of their pastors to consider uprooting their comfortable lives to move to a place they cannot pronounce where no one has ever heard the name of Jesus or seen a Bible. "Aren't I supposed to leave church feeling loved, cared for, and blessed? This is not comfortable anymore." In God's kindness and grace, rather than being frustrated by the vanity of life under the Sun that Solomon wrote about in Ecclesiastes, families like these find a deep and abiding joy in sacrificial living. As Luther taught us, a life that honors Christ comes through living out a theology of the cross rather than a theology of glory.

The American Dream and "Christianity" are often so intertwined in the minds, hearts, and lives of some American Evangelicals that pulling them apart can be quite painful for everyone involved, but the Lord is more concerned with our holiness than our comfort. This agonizing and arduous work can and should be done by God's people in the power of His Spirit.

Conclusion

God has created us as thinking beings, and He is honored when we think deep thoughts and pursue intricate lines of thinking. However, the reason that we study world religions, cultures, and worldviews is not primarily because it is intellectually stimulating to do so. The reason that we study other worldviews – including animism – is so that we can understand the ways of life and patterns of thinking that individuals and groups are hiding behind. Animism *qua* animism is not the enemy. The PG is not the enemy.

The American Dream and MTD are not the enemy. The individuals who, at various levels, have adopted various aspects of these worldviews are not the enemy. According to the New Testament, the true enemies are sin (1 Pet 2:11), Satan (Luke 10:19), and death (1 Cor 15:26), and Christ has conquered these things. May we be found faithful to put on the full armor of God and run with the gospel of peace into places and to people who are in desperate need of it (Eph 6:12-20).

As Moore said about the problem of the PG and Animism in Africa, the solution to the PG and the American Dream is not theological innovation or even a new way of doing missions. Instead, the solution to the problem of the soft PG in North America is “the way of the cross and the empty tomb.”¹¹

¹¹ Moore, “Africa, Animism.”