

SPIDERMAN OVER SCIENCE? THE WESTERN EMBRACE OF MAGIC

In the third of his 10-part lecture series “Must the Sun Set on the West?”, Indian thinker Vishal Mangalwadi suggested that the West’s remarkable commitment to science—a commitment deeply shaped by a Christian view of knowledge—is being replaced by a commitment to magic, or psychic power over matter. Spiderman flying through the air and climbing walls is an example of utilizing psychic power to fly, said Mangalwadi. This kind of sorcery, involving personal power to defy the laws of nature, stands in dramatic contrast to a much earlier (and biblically-shaped) view of science which understood human responsibility to exercise dominion over nature by studying nature’s laws and structure in order to create useful technologies.

This large cultural shift in Western views of the human relationship to nature has led to large multinational and Fortune 500 companies utilizing transcendental meditation in their staff development. It is also leading to video games which feature this psychic power as standard fare. More tragically, said Mangalwadi, the focus on magic will not truly provide the technology needed to liberate women and the poor outside of the West who suffer for lack of technologies that liberate.

How did the West move toward sorcery and magic? If you rule out God, said Mangalwadi, one must either embrace a rigid materialism that denies self, or, more popularly, embrace the idea that consciousness is part of a larger cosmic consciousness. In this latter view, epitomized by the New Age movement, one must discover one’s divinity through meditation. The result is God-like power over nature.

Later, during the question-and-answer session, Mangalwadi also explained that the Enlightenment commitment to rationalism had, in effect, consumed rationality and confidence in knowledge of nature based upon experimental observation. This, too, slowly weakened an earlier confidence in science where the Bible was understood as “the soul of science.”

Mangalwadi closed the lecture by telling the story of 18th century Baptist missionary to India, William Carey. Carey was, in fact, one of India’s earliest great scientists, teaching both astronomy and botany in the Calcutta college he founded (Serampore). Carey understood that science is to be done for God’s glory and to emancipate humans through the wise development of science-based technologies.

Can the West continue to truly thrive if its science-centered culture is replaced by a cultural obsession with personal power and magic? According to Mangalwadi, to find the answer to that question one should look to the depressing consequences in cultures where magic and meditation have reigned supreme.