

**FURTHER COMMENTS ON THE DRAFT SUPPLEMENTARY GUIDANCE
“PUBLIC BENEFIT AND THE ADVANCEMENT OF RELIGION”
INCLUDING THE PROPOSED DEFINITION OF RELIGION**

p13 Supreme Being The stipulation that a religion requires adherents who believe in “a personal creator god or gods; a supreme being; or a divine or transcendental being, entity or principle” means that the minimum requirement is belief in a “transcendental principle”. “Principle” of course has a very wide range of meanings but the main modern meaning in the Shorter Oxford Dictionary is “a fundamental truth or proposition on which others depend”. The definition of “transcendental”, apart from obsolete meanings and technical meanings within specific systems of philosophy, includes “surpassing or excelling others of its kind; supreme”. There is nothing here to suggest anything like the traditional idea of a religion. But this gets lost in the rest of the guidance because of the shorthand term adopted by the Commission: “supreme being or entity” - even though the guidance explicitly acknowledges that this shorthand is inappropriate for one of the six major world religions, Buddhism.

Answer to Q1: There is no appropriate terminology for the object or focus of a religion that does not either exclude recognised religions or include certain non-religious lifestyles.

p14 Cogency, coherence It is suggested that a religion must be “of substance or significance . . . having a certain level of cogency, coherence, seriousness and importance”. The phrase “a certain level of cogency, seriousness, cohesion and importance” is a quotation from the European Court of Human Rights in *Campbell and Cosans v. UK*: (1982), 4 EHRR 293 where it is characterised as a requirement for a “belief” under Article 9 of the ECHR. There is no case we are aware of that applies the same requirement to religion, but it would be welcome if the Commission decided to do so in future.

Answer to Q2: We comment in our main text that this formulation was our own proposed definition of a “religion or belief” - see Appendix 2. It is, however, certainly not a definition of a “coherent belief system”, although it may be an example of one.

pp14-15 Worship The term “worship” joins “supreme being” on the legal scrapheap and the alternative offered is even less coherent than “transcendental principle”. The relationship of the believer to the god or alternative focus of his religion (including “transcendental principle”) must be one at least of “hav[ing] reverence or respect for” or “hav[ing] a connection with” it. The Commission suggest that the object of this

relationship may merely “serve[...] as an inspiration to followers or adherents to live better lives”. This last appears to be included in order to cater for Jains, for whom we are told, their (alleged¹) “supreme being or entity” “serves as an inspiration . . . to live better lives”. So, serving as an inspiration to live a better life is by implication a sufficient substitute for the traditionally required relationship of worship.

The draft guidance proceeds to mention “feelings of connectedness or unity with a force or power that is greater than the self . . .” Doubtless this applies to many religions, but it does not apply in those terms to Jainism or indeed to Buddhism, which are entirely concerned with the struggle of the individual soul towards nirvana - a state some interpret almost as annihilation or “nothingness” although others disagree.

The Commission’s definition would suggest that devotion to a “deep green” version of James Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis could be counted as a religion. The hypothesis would certainly count as a transcendental principle (how not?) and it can certainly “serve as an inspiration . . . to live better lives” that are more conducive to the survival of the planet and of mankind. A community preaching a Gaia-inspired way of life would have a transcendental principle - even an entity, if the Gaia-based zoosphere were so conceived - that would in their eyes call for reverence, deep respect, submission, meditation and wonder at the miraculously self-balancing workings of nature. Yet Gaia is actually a scientific hypothesis, open to correction or even refutation, and so scarcely an adequate basis for a religion in the eyes of many. What distinguishes such a community as we have described from one with a less new-age approach to the same beliefs? Or from one devoted to wonder at the “miracles” of life brought forth totally according to scientifically proven principles by way of evolution? Or would these too

¹In fact Jains have no supreme being or entity although they may have a “transcendental principle”: they believe in repeated reincarnation from which a few exemplary individuals (Jinas) have escaped into nirvana where the soul is free from all the material karma . . . as well as all internal thought process (<http://www.jainology.org/images/downloads/part2.pdf>) and therefore are certainly supremely indifferent to any earthly addresses: The ultimate aim of life is to emancipate the soul from the cycle of birth and death. This is done by exhausting all bound karmas and preventing further accumulation. According to Jainism, one must be human [rather than any other life-form] to achieve this and must lead an ascetic life following the Jain principles. When the soul has progressed from its state of limited perception obscured by karma to its pure state of omniscient knowledge free of all karma, it rises to the summit of the universe where it exists forever. Such a soul is a Siddha, Perfected Being.® -

http://www.jainology.org/viewindex.asp?article_id=Proj_Leaflets

fall within the definition of 'religion' now proposed? (And if not, why not?)

We note in passing that the further observation that this relationship "may . . . instil in . . . adherents feelings of self-worth" is only part of the story: many versions of Christianity instil in their adherents a sense of their fallen state, sinful worthlessness, and the impossibility of redemption without divine aid.

Answer to Q3 & Q4 We therefore repeat that while it is possible to spin a web of suggestive words that may convey a satisfactory feeling to religious believers, these do not amount to a definition such as a court could interpret. The only solution to this problem is to ignore the content of religions (which is often cast in terms that could not anyway be justiciable) and to look instead at their function - which they share with many non-religious outlooks or lifestyles – such as providing a collective belief relating to the nature of life and the world, morality, values and/or the way its believers should live.

pp15-16 List of religions It is odd to have at this point in the guidance a list of religions that not only meet the Commission's "definition" but are also "capable of meeting the public benefit requirement" which at this stage has not been considered at all. Further, the list is extraordinarily short, and "historic" is a questionable term to apply to the Baha'i faith which was founded only in 1862. Further, "historic" is also questionable because of the implication that longstanding religions are inherently 'superior' to newer religions, or provide more and/or greater benefits and/or fewer disbenefits. There is no evidence for this, and it would be particularly difficult to justify in light of the requirement to take account of changing circumstances and the general consensus of objective and informed opinion. For reference, see the very long lists of religions at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_religions_and_spiritual_traditions and at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_new_religious_movements.

C3 Advancement The definition (or rather, description and exemplification) of advancement of religion is so wide as to include many activities of very dubious public benefit - and the definition of public benefit is so wide (see our comments in the main text) as to admit all these activities under the banner of "contribution to spiritual well-being" or "the inspiration religion can provide to others". Saying of masses open to the public (even if no-one attends?), prayers for the dead (why only for a year?), leaving buildings open in case anyone wishes to say a prayer, sitting with a corpse - if these are enough to count as advancement of religion, it is difficult to think what would not. In addition, and as we discuss further on pages 5-7, there are a number of ways in which proselytising is of disbenefit to the public, such as the

use of threats, manipulation and pressure to advance religion through conversion. In any case, the final version of the guidance must make it clear that inclusion in this list of examples of advancement does *not* mean that these activities are necessarily of public benefit.

p17 Promoting opinions The examples in the box at the top of page 17 are ambiguously expressed and their meaning as a result is unclear. In the first example, promoting a tax boycott is probably illegal and in any case not a necessary part of promoting pacifism. If a religious body devoted itself to legal means of promoting pacifism, giving prominence to religious arguments, would that body be eligible or not for charitable status? In the second example, it is not clear whether the disqualification of the hypothetical male-supremacist Christian organisation is based on its calls for abolition of certain Acts of Parliament (if so, why so when political activities designed for the furtherance of charitable objects are generally permissible? but if not, why mention this political work at all?) Supposing that calling for the abolition of the Sex Discrimination Act is not in itself a bar on charity status, the suggestion that “putting forward a particular personal viewpoint” based on religious beliefs may not be charitable is very welcome. It would seem to call in question the registration of, for example, the Creation Research Trust (charity no 1103449), which is indeed “set up with objects for the advancement of the Christian religion” but “carries out those aims by putting forward the trustees’ views on” evolution and creationism.

p17 Miracles The passage on miracles (which we note is much shortened from that in the draft we were privileged to see though its meaning appears unchanged) is also ambiguous. It appears clear that it is acceptable to promote belief in miracles if that is done in the context of advancing a religion in more general ways. It seems equally clear that promoting belief in a miracle that is not acknowledged by a recognised religion - a “standalone” miracle - is not acceptable. It is quite unclear whether an organisation totally devoted to promoting belief in a miracle that is acknowledged by a recognised religion is acceptable. We suggest that it should not be acceptable - indeed, that promoting belief in miracles should be at best irrelevant to the question of public benefit and acceptable in a charity only if it forms a minor part of the organisation’s work. If this is the Commission’s view, we welcome it.

However, if promoting belief in a miracle that is acknowledged by a recognised religion is seen by the Commission as acceptable, then the paragraph represents a total acceptance of miracle-mongering, since (a) standalone miracles are a hypothetical rather than a real category, and (b) the proviso about being capable of promoting moral or spiritual welfare is meaningless, given the general complaisant

approach of the Commission and in particular its suggestion (see the legal analysis at 3.9) that merely living in the community while practising one's religion in private can confer a public benefit. In this case promoting belief in statues weeping blood or oozing milk is with the Commission's sanction to be subsidised at public expense. The credulous are to be exploited - intellectually if not financially - with official approval. All that is necessary is to claim that the alleged miracle should show sinners the way to Christ or to link it with some other such homily and it can be done partially at taxpayers' expense. We hardly think this was what Parliament had in mind when it sought a tightening up of the rules.

In addition, there are clear disbenefits in a promotion of a belief in miracles, for example, where the supposed miracles are related to health and healing. Faith healers 'cures' are purported to be miracles, yet a belief in this practice can deter or prevent people from accessing medical advice and assistance – a belief and promotion of a belief in miracles can clearly put people's health at serious risk.

p17 Facilitating religious practice We have commented above on some of these examples. We think it essential that the final version of the guidance makes it clear that inclusion in this list as an example of "advancement" in no way suggests that such activities are necessarily for the public benefit.

p19 Some at least of the examples under the heading "Advancing religion generally" are incompatible with the statement lower down the page that "Whatever way trustees choose to advance religion, the activity must in a clearly demonstrable way be an expression of the advancement of the particular religion . . ."

Answer to Q7 We regard the thinking behind this question and the preceding remarks as pernicious. The alternative - which the Commission has apparently rejected without consideration - is to suggest that religious charities undertaking care of the sick or housing of the homeless etc should add to their trust deeds an additional object (if one does not already exist) related to these undoubtedly charitable activities in their own right. Instead, the Commission is interfering in the way charities conduct their business to suggest that religious charities need to make their work more explicitly religious. We made this point to the Commission in our paper of 15 February:

[The] consultation question . . . ("How can the advancement of a religion by 'good works' be more clearly distinguished from social work of a similar kind but which has no connection with a religion?") is pernicious and unnecessary. It is unnecessary because there is no

need to distinguish such work as religious: it will qualify as charitable in any case, as would the same work undertaken by a humanist or any other secular charity. It is pernicious because it will encourage agencies with a religious background to become more markedly religious, making use of the law's exemptions for religion from equality and non-discrimination laws on employment and on treatment of clients, with highly damaging results as set out in this Association's recent report *Quality and Equality: Human Rights, Public Services and Religious Organisations*².

Why should the tail of charity law wag the dog of employment insecurity for people working for religious charities? Already the idea that qualification for plainly sensible exceptions from (for example) the Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations requires a thorough-going religious character throughout the organisation is leading some charities to extend bans on recruitment or promotion of the non-religious (or other-religious) to posts where such bans have never previously applied. The Commission will by this guidance encourage this divisive approach, suggesting - again unnecessarily - that nothing short of being through-and-through religious is acceptable if charity status is to be retained.

If the final guidance issued by the Commission persists in this misleading and damaging mode, it will be morally culpable of undermining equality, good relations and social cohesion.

p19/20 Advancing religion as such The idea that a body - founded perhaps on the old legal supposition that any religion is better than no religion - with the object of "advancing religion" cannot be charitable under the third head "the advancement of religion" is extraordinary - especially as "charities set up to advance more than one religion" have already been cited on the previous page as an example of advancing religion. This seems to be yet another example of confused thinking on the Commission's part.

p20: C4 Proselytising The draft guidance refers forward to section E4 as if that dealt completely with the problems with proselytising identified by the ECHR. Not so: section E4 makes no direct reference to:

- "offering material or social advantages with a view to gaining new members for a Church" (Kokkinakis v Greece (1993), 17 EHRR 397)

² BHA (2007) *Quality and Equality: Human Rights, Public Services and Religious Organisations*. <http://tinyurl.com/25w2hb>

which is the habit of many Christian churches with an Afro-Caribbean background, principally Pentecostalist. They explicitly promise wealth in return for faith and worship - and financial contributions to the church. This style of evangelism started in the USA but has found a secure foothold in the UK: the megachurch Kingsway International Christian Center states on its website: "It is our vision to open a KICC Bank to empower God's people economically, and promote the Kingdom of God" - see <http://www.kicc.org.uk/home.asp> (accessed 9 May 2008). (KICC has of course already been investigated and found wanting by the Commission but is still run by the same pastor in whom the Commission found fault.)

- "exerting improper pressure on people in distress or in need" (Kokkinakis v Greece (1993), 17 EHRR 397)
which is one interpretation of promises to heal or solve problems for those who 'repent' or are 'born again', sometimes with fake cures to encourage belief in 'miracle' cures; and likewise religious threats against those troubled by their sexual orientation, etc.
- "not compatible with respect for the freedom of thought, conscience and religion of others"
which would certainly apply to any organisation making threats in order to discourage members from leaving - in particular, threats by Muslim organisations of death for apostates. The Commission should note that in investigations for a recent Radio 4 programme³ found it almost impossible to find any Muslim religious authority, however liberal, who would deny that death was the appropriate penalty for apostasy: the liberals were marked by a greater adeptness at finding reasons why the penalty should not be carried out.

In our view, proselytising by any method designed to overcome people's rational judgement should be counted as a disbenefit, and if the methods used are grossly manipulative that should make them illegitimate for a charity - though not of course unlawful.

³ BBC Radio 4 'Could I stop being a Muslim?', 22nd April 2008

It would therefore be good practice for the Commission to take into account the possible disbenefits from proselytising in terms of its damaging effect on mutual respect and thus on good relations and social cohesion. As is clear from the above discussion, whether proselytising is for the public benefit cannot be decided in isolation – wider social conditions and the real, negative, effects that it can have on the wider aims of greater cohesion between people of different beliefs and backgrounds cannot be ignored.

In addition, we would wish the Commission to recognise that proselytising to the non-religious must be treated in the same way as proselytising to other religions. This is a straight equal treatment issue – to reiterate, under national and international human rights law, non-religious and atheistic beliefs are understood to be of equal importance to people as those who hold religious ones. Therefore proselytising directed at the non-religious carries the same disbenefits and potential infringement of human rights as proselytising directed at those of another religion.

Answer to Q8 We think a far fuller explanation of the implications of human rights and non-discrimination legislation for religious charities would be helpful. It might be worked up in cooperation with the Equality and Human Rights Commission. It might usefully distinguish between practices that are not permissible in a charity (e.g., illegality), those that count as disbenefits to be weighed against benefits, and those that are neutral as regards charitable status.

D1 Current social conditions We comment in Appendix 4 that the legal summary is at odds with the Commission's general summary of the law underpinning charities and public benefit. The guidance in this brief paragraph is skimpy to the extent of being misleading. Social conditions of (for example) distrust between religious or ethnic communities are highly relevant to assessing the public benefit of strident evangelism or of preaching of distrust or the wickedness of un- or other-belief.

Answer to Q9 The guidance needs substantial expansion into areas the Commission has apparently barely considered.

D2 Enlightened opinion Similar considerations apply to this paragraph. The Commission should certainly consider whether, for example, “the common understanding of enlightened opinion for the time being” is not that saying prayers for the dead is a “habit” that has “become obsolete and . . . fallen into disuse”; or whether the “general consensus of objective and informed opinion” does not suggest that watching by a dead body is of dubious charitable value. It is, after all,

the duty of the Commission, as of the courts, to “have proper regard to public opinion in so far as is appropriate” and “to keep the law’s view of what is charitable reasonably in line with modern social needs and conditions” and take note of “social values” so as to “reflect ordinary life, taking into account generally accepted views on the nature and usefulness of what an organisation aims to achieve and its benefit to the public”. The guidance instead suggests that religious charities are exempt from any such considerations: there is no breath of a hint of them being relevant to an assessment of public benefit.

E2 Moral codes We should warmly welcome a development of the law in the direction of religious charities being required to have a moral and ethical code as suggested here, but we find it doubtful whether this is (as claimed) established law. It seems to us that a body concerned only with spiritual duties, pursued perhaps with the New Testament’s authority to the extent of abandoning father and mother etc, would in many circumstances be charitable. It might offer comfort and solace; it might provide stained glass windows; it might preach a religion concerned with the soul’s search for nirvana, abandoning all worldly concerns. None of this requires it to have a moral code.

Evidence cognisable by the courts The draft states that “a public benefit assessment” would not limit itself to looking at “tangible, practical benefits”. This is no doubt correct - but this is the point at which any adequate guidance should mention that intangible benefits still need to be proven “by means of evidence cognisable by the courts”. To fail to include this consideration here is seriously misleading - unless it is a deliberate omission to pave the way for indulgent decisions by a Commission lacking the courage to make legal decisions unfavourable to religious charities.

pp24/5 We welcome and endorse the final paragraph of E2 - see above on page 17 under “Promoting Opinions”.

Answer to Q11 We think the answer to this question as stated must be No: we should prefer the functional definition of religion or belief as set out in our main text and in Appendix 2. However, we imagine that the question is meant to be about the public benefit of religion, not religion itself.

E4

Benefits must be balanced. . .

Intentional misrepresentation of aims is covered here but misrepresentation of practices is not: sham miracles or healings should equally be grounds for disqualification as a charity.

Later on the same page we note that “misinterpretation, misapplication or perversion” of religious teachings is exactly the way that many new religions arise. It has no particular connection with detriment or harm, and indeed the new religion may bring more or greater benefits and fewer disbenefits than the one from which it arose. To suggest otherwise is contrary to the spirit of freedom of religion or belief under Article 9 of the European Convention of Human Rights.

Later again, in relation to cases where “detriment or harm might arise as a result of the way” a religion is practised, we object strongly to the suggestion that the need to weigh detriment against benefits can be avoided by producing “evidence of the public benefit of promoting the particular practice or doctrine”, and we cannot understand the point being made by the Commission in offering this alternative.

In our view the policy on detriment should be that, in serious cases (e.g., where the human rights of others are denied) the detriment should be an absolute bar to charity status, while only in less serious cases should a balance be struck between benefit and detriment.

“Dangerous or damaging to . . . health”

We find this section appallingly complacent, based probably on the containable problem of Christian Scientists but ignoring the principles and possible implications of the guidance. It suggests that a religion that, in the face of an epidemic, refused preventative measures or medication on religious grounds, propagated the idea that it should be refused, and took such action as lay within its power to ensure that no-one had access to such measures or treatment, should still be eligible for charity status despite the harm it would do not only to its own members but also to their relatives (through grief at their probable deaths) and to others who might as a result be more likely to become infected. The Commission should state the distinction between freedom to practise religion and eligibility for charity status and should then set down a clear statement that action such as is described above is *prima facie* grounds for refusal of charity status.

The paragraph continues by describing withholding treatment from children or other vulnerable people merely as ‘contentious’. This is a clear abuse of human rights and should not only be incompatible with charity status but be condemned. Children are individual human beings with human rights: they are not the property of their parents.

Encouraging violence or hatred

We find the section on encouragement of violence or hatred weak: we believe that such encouragement should be an absolute bar to charity status and the public subsidy it brings (though it should not of

course in itself affect the lawfulness of the activity). Not only should a body doing "good works" for the white poor while preaching race hatred not be a charity; it should not even be able to argue the case that its good works offset its preaching.

As mentioned earlier, any organisation encouraging violence against, making threats against, or promoting a belief that violence should be used against apostates, should be rendered ineligible for charity status - and should prompt drastic action by the Commission to put control of any such organisation that is already registered into other hands.

Unlawfully restricting a person's freedom

The second sentence in this section is muddled - more evidence of the Commission's distaste for plain speech where religions are concerned. It should state plainly "Provided that members . . . are free to exercise personal choice and are at liberty to leave the community . . .".

Similarly, we take it that the following paragraph is intended to say that freedom to exercise personal choice applies not just to living in religious communities but also to continuing in or leaving the religion. We think this also should be plainly stated.

Illegality

We think the bar on charity status should be extended from illegal aims to encompass also illegal activities of organisations. Accidental illegality can be indulged by the Commission but deliberate unlawful acts should debar an organisation from charity status. (We refer to acts in this country that are illegal in this country.)

F1 The insufficiency of a benefit limited to adherents of the religion is important but calls in question charities seeking to advance religion by (for example) "the provision and maintenance of religious or devotional artefacts and items used in religious services, rituals or practices" previously cited in C3. (Incidentally, such provision as described includes commercial operations, which we assume is not intended.)

F2 The second sentence of the fifth paragraph is confusingly expressed: we assume that the intended meaning is that absence of public benefit would require both that people cannot join the religion (as with Sikhism) and that they cannot interact with members of the religion and so derive some putative benefit.

On access to places of worship, application to a key holder is a common and generally adequate safeguard and should be "expected" in preference to a notice of limited times of public access.

F3 Given that it is possible (though rare) to convert to Judaism, why is it acceptable for a charity advancing Judaism to refuse to deal with non-Jews? This would, we suggest, be contrary to the Race Relations Act. Further, surely "women [refused admission to men's classes on the Torah etc] who wish to study these" must at least be provided with comparable but separate facilities to do so?

In the following paragraph there appears to be a suppressed comparison in the final sentence - "rather than by their [potential beneficiaries'] religion" - if so, we suggest it be stated openly.

The example at the top of page 33 does not appear to relate to what has gone before. As to the example itself, it would appear to risk infringing the principle at F1 that a benefit limited to adherents of the religion is inadequate. Suppose that a religious body maintained such a chapel as is cited in the example and year by year only two or three members of the church ever attended and no-one else ever came. Questions must surely then arise of the proper and proportionate use of charitable resources. The case must be comparable to a wealthy charity to run refuges for sick drayhorses. The aim is undoubtedly (other things being equal) charitable - but the complete absence of demand for such a service would certainly call in question the maintenance of premises and employment of staff in readiness for some putative equine casualty. What is the difference - other than an indulgent attitude to religion - between this and the chapel?

F4 It should be made clear that inclusion in the list of chargeable services on page 34 does not imply that these services are themselves charitable.

F5 We should have expected a much stronger line on the huge benefits some preachers derive from their ministries. Some of these are increasingly run like businesses, which in return for the experience (lavish entertainment?) of their services and for promises of health, wealth and happiness in this world rather than the next (see Annex to this Appendix), milk their congregations of millions of pounds that find their way in part into the private pockets of the ministers or founders of the ministry - owners, in effect, of the business. Wildly different ideas of what is "reasonable" will predictably be found among the trustee beneficiaries of such enterprises and the general public. This is the time for the Commission to offer clear and restrictive guidance: where the founder of a religion is often still its leader, it is far from clear guidance, for example, to suggest that "enhancement of the leader's personal reputation" is legitimate whereas "elevation of the status of the founder of a religion . . . including self-promotion and power" is not.

In particular we are very surprised to see no mention here of the stringent conditions the Commission applies elsewhere to employment by charities of their own trustees. Given the record of abuse in some religious charities, we should have expected to find here reference to the cautions listed in CC11, the requirements of CSD 1381B, etc. The indulgent attitude expressed in paragraph 3.29 of the legal summary suggests no clear intention on the part of the Commission to deal even-handedly with religious and secular charities.

**EXTRACTS FROM
"DOES GOD WANT YOU TO BE RICH?"**

by David Van Biema and Jeff Chu: Time Sep. 10, 2006

See

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1533448,00.html>
- accessed 9 May 2008

. . . For several decades, a philosophy has been percolating in the 10 million strong Pentecostal wing of Christianity that seems to turn the Gospels' passage on its head: certainly, it allows, Christians should keep one eye on heaven. But the new good news is that God doesn't want us to wait. Known (or vilified) under a variety of names Word of Faith, Health and Wealth, Name It and Claim It, Prosperity Theology its emphasis is on God's promised generosity in this life and the ability of believers to claim it for themselves. In a nutshell, it suggests that a God who loves you does not want you to be broke. Its signature verse could be John 10: 10: "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly." In a TIME poll, 17% of Christians surveyed said they considered themselves part of such a movement, while a full 61% believed that God wants people to be prosperous. And 31% a far higher percentage than there are Pentecostals in America agreed that if you give your money to God, God will bless you with more money.

"Prosperity" first blazed to public attention as the driveshaft in the moneymaking machine that was 1980s televangelism and faded from mainstream view with the Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart scandals. But now, after some key modifications (which have inspired some to redub it Prosperity Lite), it has not only recovered but is booming. Of the four biggest megachurches in the country, three Osteen's Lakewood in Houston; T.D. Jakes' Potter's House in south Dallas; and Creflo Dollar's World Changers near Atlanta are Prosperity or Prosperity Lite pulpits . . .

While they don't exclusively teach that God's riches want to be in believers' wallets, it is a key part of their doctrine. And propelled by Osteen's 4 million selling book, *Your Best Life Now*, the belief has swept beyond its Pentecostal base into more buttoned down evangelical churches, and even into congregations in the more liberal Mainline. It is taught in hundreds of non Pentecostal Bible studies. One Pennsylvania Lutheran pastor even made it the basis for a sermon series for Lent, when Christians usually meditate on why Jesus was having His Worst Life Then . . .

Deuteronomy commands believers to “remember the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth”, and the rest of the Old Testament is dotted with celebrations of God’s bestowal of the good life. On at least one occasion the so called parable of the talents (a type of coin) Jesus holds up savvy business practice (investing rather than saving) as a metaphor for spiritual practice. . .

A favorite verse is from Malachi: “‘Bring all the tithes into the storehouse ... and try Me now in this,’ says the Lord of hosts. ‘If I will not for you open the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it.’”

It is a peculiarly American theology but turbocharged. If Puritanism valued wealth and Benjamin Franklin wrote about doing well by doing good, hard core Prosperity doctrine, still extremely popular in the hands of pastors like Atlanta megachurch minister Creflo Dollar, reads those Bible verses as a spiritual contract. God will pay back a multiple (often a hundredfold) on offerings by the congregation. “Poor people like Prosperity,” says Stephen Prothero, chairman of the religion department at Boston University. “They hear it as aspirant. They hear, ‘You can make it to buy a car, get a job, get wealthy.’ It can function as a form of liberation.” It can also be exploitative. Outsiders, observes Milmon Harrison of the University of California at Davis, author of the book *Righteous Riches*, often see it as “another form of the church abusing people so ministers could make money.” . . .

. . . *Your Best Life Now*, an extraordinarily accessible exhortation to this world empowerment through God. “To live your best life now,” it opens, to see “your business taking off. See your marriage restored. See your family prospering. See your dreams come to pass ...” you must “start looking at life through eyes of faith.” Jesus is front and center but not his Crucifixion, Resurrection or Atonement. There are chapters on overcoming trauma and a late chapter on emulating God’s generosity. (And indeed, Osteen’s church gave more than \$1 million in relief money after Hurricane Katrina.) But there are many more illustrations of how the Prosperity doctrine has produced personal gain, most memorably, perhaps, for the Osteen family: how Victoria’s “speaking words of faith and victory” eventually brought the couple their dream house; how Joel discerned God’s favor in being bumped from economy to business class. . .