

SERIOUS TIMES

MAKING YOUR LIFE MATTER IN AN URGENT DAY

Vol, 1, No. 8

Ghosts Skew Better

U.S. television networks are turning to the occult for next season in order to capitalize on the success of ABC's "Lost" and NBC's "Medium" and reach the coveted young male demographic. ABC, NBC, and CBS previewed five shows, or a third of their new September programs, all featuring the supernatural. CBS canceled Emmy-nominated and critically acclaimed "Joan of Arcadia," where a young woman speaks to God, in favor of "The Ghost Whisperer," a supernatural drama about a woman (Jennifer Love Hewitt) who communicates with the spirit world. When announcing the schedule change, CBS head Leslie Moonves declared, "I think talking to ghosts may skew younger than talking to God."

In *Serious Times* I wrote of Pitirim Sorokin, the founder of Harvard University's department of sociology, who argued that the pendulum of civilization generally swings in one of two directions: the "ideational" and the "sensate." The ideational civilization is more theological and spiritual, and the sensate world is more rational or scientific. Sorokin contended that the classic ideational period was the medieval. From the Enlightenment forward, we have lived in a sensate world. Now, in our struggle with what the modern world has given to us – or more accurately, taken away - there seems to be a swing back toward the ideational.

So we live in a day that is more open to spiritual things than ever. Yet in light of the ongoing process of pluralization, along with the increasing skepticism toward a single story which encompasses all of reality (and reality itself considered a matter of personal perspective), it is less spirituality that people are pursuing as the supernatural. There is a keenly felt emptiness resulting from a secularized, materialistic world that has led to a hunger for something more, but many are unable to go further than the search for an *experience*. Postmoderns have found that the soul cannot be denied, but all they know to do is search for something "soul-ish." An extraterrestrial will serve as well as an angel; a spiritualist as well as a minister. Borrowing from the late historian Christopher Dawson, we have a new form of secularism that offers "religious emotion divorced from religious belief." Belief doesn't matter; in our context, it *can't*. Instead, we search for, and

embrace, symbol, feeling, and image. So while pollsters contend that high percentages of the U.S. population claims to believe in God, James Herrick notes that the nature of that divinity is defined in widely divergent ways. Instead there is a "new religious synthesis" that holds to an unsettling combination of Christian orthodoxy, eastern mysticism, New Age belief, and the occult.

So yes, in such a context, ghosts *will* skew better than God – and will continue to do so as long as a robust and compelling, raw and unfiltered presentation of God is absent. Until then, as T.S. Eliot once quipped, "paganism holds all the most valuable advertising space."

James Emery White

Sources

"CBS cancels '60 Minutes' Wed., 'Amy' – Jennifer Love Hewitt in new series," CNN.com, Wednesday, May 18, 2005.

"Networks hoping viewers feel lure of supernatural" (ABC, NBC, CBS preview 5 new shows based on paranormal), Aimee Picchi/ Bloomberg News, *Charlotte Observer*, Tuesday, May 14, 2005, p. 4E.

"CBS Moonves: 'Ghosts Skew Better Than God,'" *Drudge Report*, May 19, 2005.

James Emery White, *Serious Times* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

Pitirim Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics*, Revised One-Volume Ed. (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1991).

Christopher Dawson, *Dynamics of World History*, ed. by John J. Mulloy (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2002).

James A. Herrick, *The Making of the New Spirituality: The Eclipse of the Western Religious Tradition* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

T.S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1976).

About Serious Times

Launched in conjunction with the release of the book, *Serious Times* (InterVarsity Press, 2004), the aim of this site is to serve the vision of the book in an ongoing manner. At serioustim.es.com you will find reading lists and book reviews, "whitepapers" on critical issues and strategic links to other sites, small group resources and homeschooling curriculum, tapes/cd's and study guides. You can even sign-up for this bi-weekly "Serious Times Update."