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Selling God in a Digital Age

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Peter Popoff: Trying to Play Devil’s Advocate for an Obvious Scam

Many people are willing to do/believe many things if it means they will appease God, and this isn’t more apparent anywhere else than with Peter Popoff and his ministries. Time and time again, Popoff has been proven to be an outright scam and a liar, yet people are still willing to believe him because it could put them in the favor of God. In spite of all this, is there any amount of credit that can be given to this man for his “brand” of religion? Can you even say he has one with it being such an apparent scam? I would like to argue for what that brand may be, and if it really isn’t a scam, what the intention could be.

First and foremost, would be what exactly is his brand. Peter Popoff sells himself as a more modern day faith healer and televangelist on late night broadcasting, with a focus on material goods, both in what he sells and the message he promotes. Popoff’s acclaim to fame is his “Miracle Spring Water,” which, according to his website, he claims, “there is nothing magical or mystical about it,” but rather that is a, “powerful Biblical point of contact.” By having it in your life and/or consuming it in some manner (there is no clear indication of how you consume it from what I could find, though most people seem to drink it), it is supposed to free you of financial problems, clear you of debt, and in some miraculous way, bring money to you (ironic given he’s trying to scam you out of your money). The miracle spring water is mailed free of charge, but that doesn’t necessarily mean you get out of any obligations. The Popoff Ministries will start mailing you and ask for donations, or as they word it, “seed money,” to their cause so you can be in God’s favor, or to be protected from being, “attacked by wave after wave of Satan’s assaults.” Through his late night broadcasting, along with promoting his miracle spring water with his wife, Elizabeth, he is also shown to host large gatherings where he will “heal” people that are troubled by varying ailments and receive testimonies from people saying how they have been blessed with miraculous wealth because of the miracle spring water. With all of this, Peter Popoff has built his questionable brand as a modern faith healer for both physical and financial ailments.

With his brand recognized, now we must look at how Peter Popoff reformulates older traditional religious practices, as most modern day religious figure typically do. For starters, Popoff changes the traditional way in which people typically take in their religious content, attending church, by the way of televising his services as well as exchanging letters with potential converts as well as those who already share the same faith. Not everyone can take the time to attend church, so being able to have some of that religious experience from the comfort of your own home can help more people get involved with religious ongoings. Another reformulation is in how he tackles faith healing. Popoff’s big focus is on being free of debt by the way of miraculous and holy intervention. While not one of the more conventional, physical issues that are typically in need of healing, he treats debt as a sickness to be treated with help from God. Through Popoff’s work, he tries to “heal” people of their debt in the way someone would try to pray physical illness away. Finally, Popoff uses his miracle spring water as a form of holy artifact, in the same vein as a bible or a cross. By keeping this artifact close, your life will improve, though in the case of the miracle spring water, you are to consume it, so as to feel even closer to it. With these changes, Peter Popoff aims to reinvent faith healing, and the religious practices surrounding it.

So making these changes and using his brand the way he does, what is the audience that Peter Popoff is aiming for? Given his big focus on being debt free, it is clear that he is aiming towards the less fortunate, and those needing of God’s help to have wealth find its way to them. As much as I would like to say this, the very real answer is gullible people, as he explicitly asks for money in his letters, despite looking for people that are in debt. He wants people that are desperate enough to believe him and willing to give them what little they have in hopes that they can find wealth in return. Even when playing devil’s advocate for him, this is not something I can overlook.

Finally, we look at the why of Peter Popoff’s brand. Why does he rebrand faith healing into a way to deal with debt? Debt is a more modern problem that many people face, and in trying to tackle this, he can reach people that would otherwise be unable to reach as perhaps they wouldn’t find time to bring religion into their lives as they are focused on their debts. Again, as much as we would like to believe this more wholesome answer, the reality is more likely that this is what he believes is the most likely way for him to be able to get money out of desperate people, as people would be less wary if he’s saying he’s trying to clear their debts.

Peter Popoff is a scam artist first, and a religious figure second. While there is an argument to be made that he has a recognizable brand and approaches it that way, it is undeniable that he is doing so with the malicious intent to get money out of people under the guise of doing God’s work.

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