Sunday, January 10, 1988
COUNTERFEIT OR THE REAL THING?
Mark 1:4-11; Acts 19:1-7

There's a lot of counterfeit religion around these days, yet probably not more than in any other period of time. However, counterfeit religion makes the news, so it may seem like there is more available with an ever-increasing number of followers.

For example, the December 7, 1987 issue of TIME Magazine carried a cover story on this subject of so-called spirituality, titled "New Age Harmonies." Fortunately, and to TIME's credit, the editors placed the story in the "Living" section of the magazine rather than in the "Religion" section. I think the editors should've added a new category called "Counterfeit Religion."

This particular cover story on New Age Harmonies featured actress, dancer, and author Shirley Maclaine, but the story was about the strange mix of spirituality and superstition that is, once again, making headlines in this country.

Actually, the term "New Age" is misleading because there's nothing new about most of the beliefs and practices which make up this movement.

TIME Magazine said, "So here we are in the New Age, a combination of spirituality and superstition, fad and farce, about which the only thing certain is that it is not new. Nobody seems to know exactly where the term came from, but it has been around for several decades or more, and many elements of the New Age, like faith-healing, fortune-telling, and transmigration of souls, go back for centuries."

TIME could've added that the idea of reincarnation is thousands of years old, as are meditation, spiritualism, and mystical reverence for nature. Even UFOs are the modern version of an ancient fascination with extra-terrestrial life. In this country, in the 1890s, there were sightings of spaceships at a time when no American had ever seen an airplane, much less an Apollo rocket.

Though it is difficult to discover how many Americans take part in one or more of the many varieties of "New Age" spirituality, there is some evidence that the movement is profitable. Bantam Books says its New Age titles have increased ten-fold in the past decade. The number of New Age bookstores has doubled in the past five years to about 2,500, and I have noticed that many local bookstores now have a section dedicated to New Age books.

Then there is New Age radio, with such stations as WBMW in Washington and KTWV-FM in Los Angeles offering dreamy light jazz that one listener described as "like I tapped into a radio station on Mars." There are new magazines with names like New Age or Body Mind Spirit. Articles and ads in these publications tell how to heal yourself with crystals or how to use a green candle to gain money, or the power of the pendulum can be in your hands, or how to use numerology to win the lottery, or gain new health through colon rejuvenation.

For $300 you could've attended a seminar in the New York Hilton recently where 1,200 people paid that amount per person to get the word directly from Shirley Maclaine.

The session was part of a 15-city national tour with estimated earnings of $1.5 million to spread the New Age gospel. Next year, Maclaine plans to open Uriel Village, a 300-acre

retreat in Baca, Colorado, where customers will be able to get week-long sessions of meditation, past-life regression therapy, and sound and color healing, among other things.

“I want this to be all mine, my energy, my control,” says Shirley Maclaine. “I want a big dome-covered meditation center and a series of dome-covered meeting rooms because spiritual energy goes in spirals. I want to turn a profit with this so I can build another center and another. I want to prove spirituality is profitable.”

What is it that attracts people to these kinds of counterfeit religious movements and others like them?

First of all, there is within many people a desire to find a simple answer or a mysterious short-cut that will solve all of life’s problems, preferably without any sacrifice on their part or without having to be of service to others. They want health and happiness all to themselves.

Secondly, there is within each one of us a spiritual hunger, and we seek to satisfy it in one way or another, whether it be with a counterfeit faith or the real thing.

Some astute observers of our time suggest that there is, in many people today, an almost desperate spiritual hunger. This is due in large part to the overall greed in our society, the emphasis on material things in our culture, and also because of the rapid changes we’ve all been living through. People want something to hold on to.

Now, you might say, “So what? If people find some comfort in counterfeit religious movements, that’s fine. It doesn’t matter what kind of religion you have as long as you are sincere.”

Not true! Not all religion is good, and some religion is very bad. One’s religious faith can be lyrical, lovely, and humane. However, another kind of religious faith can also be wicked and damaging to the human spirit and to the society in which it exists.

Part of the problem, for example, with much of the so-called “New Age” movement is the extreme emphasis on the self. It’s self-centered. The self is made into God. This then becomes a recipe for ethical anarchy. People come to believe that as long as it feels all right for me, then there’s nothing wrong with it. The self becomes the measurement of all things.

As people seeking to follow the way of Jesus, how can we distinguish between counterfeit religion and genuine religion?

In the scripture lesson this morning from the Gospel of Mark, we heard again the story of Jesus being baptized and of God’s Spirit dwelling within him. Then from the Book of Acts, we read the story of the Apostle Paul coming to the city of Ephesus and finding some Christians there. He asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you were baptized?” And they replied, “No, we have never even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.”

Why the emphasis on God’s Spirit, or what we call the Holy Spirit? Because when the Holy Spirit is operating in an individual or group, then some good and positive things begin to occur. Not only to that individual or group, but society as a whole benefits.

In another place in the New Testament, followers of Jesus are told to “Test the Spirits.” The writer of 1 John puts it this way, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God.”

According to the life and teachings of Jesus, there are at least three ways by which we can test the spirits or distinguish counterfeit religion from the genuine.

First, genuine Christian faith enlarges the human spirit, whereas counterfeit faith shrinks the human spirit. A friend of mine told me about going to his minister when he was in his late adolescence. As is the case with many young people, my friend was inquisitive and had lots of questions and also many doubts. When he began to tell his minister about his questions and doubts, his minister replied, “You think too much. You need to suppress your doubts. Forget your questions and simply have faith.”
The young man was shaken by this advice. He wondered to himself, “For what did God give us our minds if not to ask questions and to seek new knowledge?”

Genuine religion is not afraid of questions or of doubt. It knows that it does not have all the answers. Genuine religion does not seek to suppress human curiosity and is often suspicious of quick, simple answers.

Secondly, genuine religion always points beyond itself. In other words, it is a means to an end, not an end in itself. The purpose of the church is the increase among people of the love of God and neighbor. Counterfeit religion tends only to increase the love of self. Genuine religion glorifies God! It pulls us out of ourselves.

Thirdly, genuine religion is inclusive, while counterfeit religion tends to be exclusive. Genuine religious faith leads its followers to become humble, forgiving, accepting, loving individuals. Counterfeit religion, on the other hand, leads its followers to become self-righteous, judgmental, dogmatic, know-it-all people. Adherents of counterfeit religious movements are convinced they have all the answers, and unless you become like them, you are doomed.

In speaking about testing the spirits, the Apostle Paul wrote that the effects of possessing God’s Spirit or the Holy Spirit are: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. “By their fruits you will know them,” said Jesus.

To put it another way, genuine religious faith connects us with other people and with God’s creation, while counterfeit religion tends to separate us from others.

Genuine religion knows that God has created us as interdependent creatures, and we are meant to live in peace and harmony with one another.

Genuine religion connects us especially with those who are poor or oppressed in any way.

In this matter of being inclusive and connected, there is a simple basic test that can be applied to any religious group or movement to help determine whether it is counterfeit or genuine. See how that religion or that church or movement treats the outcasts of society — those in trouble, those in need, the losers, the down and out, the persecuted, the minorities, the poor, the rejected, those who are different from the majority.

Jesus said, “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.” Those who have genuine religion will ask, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?” And

God answers, “As you did it to one of the least of these my sisters and brothers, you did it unto me.” One of the best summaries of this parable is, “The way you treat people is the way you treat God!”

Genuine religion will meet all three of these criteria — it enlarges the human spirit, that is, it is not afraid of questions and doubts and new knowledge. Secondly, genuine religion always points beyond itself, it reaches out to the neighbor and to God, and thirdly, genuine religion is inclusive, it connects us with others, especially the down and out — it reaches out to serve.

There is a lot of counterfeit religion that is very close to being genuine — that is, it may meet one or two of these three tests — but to be genuine, it has to meet all three.

Now, lest we become self-righteous, we need to apply these three criteria to our own religious faith and to this church congregation as well. Amen.