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Seminary starts doctorate program in spirituality

By Dylan T. Lovan, Associated Press

LOUISVILLE — A new doctorate program at a conservative Baptist seminary will explore the life lessons of the Bible at a time when self-help spirituality is being popularized by celebrities like Oprah.

The spirituality doctorate at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary arrives at a time when the cultural interest in spirituality — and disinterest in organized religion — is growing, said Michael Haykin, a church history professor in the seminary's Ph.D. program.

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"The way the word (spirituality) is used broadly in our culture, it's very eclectic and it can mean whatever a person wants it to mean," Haykin said. "So we're trying to ground it in a certain context."

Scholars disagree on how to define the term. But it is widely used to refer to devotional practices of religion and the interior individual experiences of believers, according to the book "Christian Spirituality: An Introduction," by Protestant scholar Alister E. McGrath.

Spirituality differs from a purely academic, objective or detached approach to religion, which focuses on identifying key religious beliefs and practices rather than delving into how people experience and practice their faith, McGrath wrote.

Christian spirituality, he wrote, "concerns the quest for a fulfilled and authentic Christian existence, involving the bringing together of the fundamental ideas of Christianity and the whole experience of living on the basis of and within the scope of the Christian faith."

From Beatle George Harrison's embrace of Hare Krishna in the 1960s to Madonna's advocating of Kabbalah three decades later, celebrities have played a major role in introducing lesser-known and non-Christian spiritual practices to the public. Haykin said Americans were not familiar with Kabbalah, a form of Jewish mysticism, before Madonna began talking about it in her music.

"Spirituality is such a buzz word today," said Don Whitney, founder and president of the seminary's Center for Biblical Spirituality.

Whitney said his review of the book "The Secret," touted by Oprah on her talk show, is the most-read article on his website. But he said many media-driven forms of spirituality leave out God and Jesus in exchange for a focus on the individual.

Whitney said too many Americans, Christians included, want to accept God "kind of cafeteria-style ... Heaven, yes, no thanks on the hell."

Evangelical and traditional Christians have been fighting the self-help movement since the 1960s, arguing that obsession with individual betterment is at odds with Christian teachings. Evangelical pastor Rick Warren's best-selling book "The Purpose Driven Life" opens with the words, "It's not about you. If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God."

Other evangelical authors, like Texas pastor Joel Osteen, have embraced the self-help genre. Osteen's book, "Your Best Life Now" explores self-betterment at home and in the workplace.

Haykin and Whitney noted that many Americans describe themselves as spiritual but aren't followers of any particular organized religion.

"Even within the sphere of Christianity there are many people who will turn to a lot of non-Christian traditions or emphasize

forms or practices of spirituality that are not rooted in scripture," Whitney said.

Arthur Holder, a Christian spirituality professor and dean of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, Calif., said modern-day spirituality seekers share a common pursuit with the 19th-century American transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who said: "I should not talk so much about myself, if there were anybody else whom I knew as well."

"They were drawing on Hindu and Buddhist traditions and putting that together with kind of a broad interpretation of Christianity," Holder said. "This is a long-standing movement."

The California school — a graduate school and consortium of nine theological seminaries and eight centers and affiliates from many faith traditions — offers a Ph.D. in Christian spirituality. Holder said students in the program are also required to take a comprehensive exam on a non-Christian religious tradition.

Holder said some recent topics by doctorate students in the program include studying the spirituality of Christian Korean women in a changing society and Christian understanding of suffering after the Holocaust.

Biblical spirituality is a budding pursuit at other higher learning institutions, as well. Diane Traflet, founder of the 4-year-old Institute for Christian Spirituality at Seton Hall University, a Catholic school, said in the last two years there has been an increasing demand from students for courses on Biblical spirituality.

"So we now offer a course in the spirituality of John, we offer a course in the spirituality of the Old Testament, and those classes are packed," Traflet said. "People are very very interested in them."

In Louisville, the Southern Baptist seminary's biblical spirituality doctorate program has three students so far and the first started his course work in January.

Haykin said courses will deal with spirituality concepts in the Old and New Testaments, how Christians have understood spirituality throughout history and how modern Christians can use the life lessons.

For example, Haykin pointed to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, where Paul talks about the Last Supper, when Jesus mapped out a course for his disciples before the crucifixion.

That passage is certainly something one might hear during a sermon in an evangelical church. But Whitney said the studies in the seminary's Ph.D. program go deeper than the stories Baptist preachers tell their flocks.

"Unlike an exposition of scripture one would hear from a pulpit, the Ph.D. will have a much more academic emphasis," with research into historical and theological studies, Whitney said.

Adam McClendon, the seminary's first spirituality Ph.D. student, will spend the next five years in class work and on research of the subject, he said.

The former Marine, now a 33-year-old father of four, said the degree could provide a career in writing or lecturing, but McClendon said he sees his future as a pastor or lay leader in a local church.

McClendon described spirituality as a "conduct of life," or what Christians call "holiness."

"Our lifestyle really reflects what we truly believe about God," he said.

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