

Feature

Soul business

Madonna made it trendy in the Nineties – but followers of Kabbalah now include City CEOs and entrepreneurs, says **Richard Godwin**

IT IS a beautiful spring morning. I am drinking coffee in the London Kabbalah Centre, a grand Georgian house just behind Selfridges, with three successful businessmen. We are talking about our souls. “Fifteen years ago, everyone I knew was on a plane reading the Warren Buffett book on how to become a billionaire,” says Piers Adam, 50, the owner of boutique nightspots such as Mahiki and Whisky Mist. “Now, everyone I know is trying to understand this sense of hollowness that they feel.” Jamie True, 39, is a serial entrepreneur who founded his first company at 17 and recently made an estimated £15 million from the sale of mobile app Grapple. He wears a complicated watch and is on a no-sugar diet – but he too speaks of a

malaise that conventional means could not heal. “If you go to a church or a synagogue or a mosque, you hear those stories and you think, how’s that going to help me?” he says. “What I find nice about Kabbalah is that it takes the big concepts and tells it to you in a way you can understand.” Like an increasing number of CEOs and business leaders, private-equity men and entrepreneurs, Adam and True seek answers here. Their spiritual mentor is Marcus Weston, 41, who began his career in global cash-management at Citibank until he had an epiphany on the Tube 16 years ago. He ended up taking a course under Rabbi Philip Berg, the founder of modern Kabbalah, and now devotes his life to teaching, proselytising and charitable works.

Kabbalah is efficient. A successful person hasn't got time to invest in random hobbies'

“When I first got into Kabbalah I would often be the only person in the class,” he says. “Now we have a footfall of about 1,000 a week. There’s a marked increase in people who are seeking to answer these questions.” While he assures me that nurses and teachers come here too, it seems that Kabbalah is fast becoming the preferred religion of the one per cent.

Ever since Madonna began wearing a piece of red string around her wrist in the Nineties, Kabbalah has been seen as a weird celebrity sect, not unlike Scientology. Adam himself was best man at Madonna and Guy Ritchie’s wedding. Demi Moore and Ashton Kutcher are also Kabbalists, while some speculate that Gwyneth Paltrow’s interest in Kabbalah (as well as her no-sugar lifestyle) could have hastened the end of her marriage to Chris Martin. Then there are the wacky parts: £289 books in ancient Aramaic, the “holy water” that Madonna once claimed would purify contaminated lakes in Chernobyl, as well as allegations (denied) of tax-avoidance and profiteering.

Weston – a friendly, worldly sort of guy – stresses that it is not a cult, nor even a religion. It is a “spiritual practice” that pre-dates Judaism and draws on the common foundations of all religions. “I don’t think there’s anywhere else in the world that has the credibility of 4,000 years of very tangible spiritual sources.”

Well, it’s true that there is an ancient form of Jewish mysticism called Kabbalah. Its key text, The Book of Zohar, is a Gnostic interpretation of the Torah written in Judeo-Aramaic by a rebel sect of Cathars in 13th-century France. As one Jewish friend puts it: “True Kabbalah comes with a big warning, saying: do not enter. You do not dabble in it. And you do not market it to celebs.”

The contemporary form owes its popularity to the Los Angeles Kabbalah centre founded in the Seventies by Rabbi Berg, a former insurance salesman. Before his death last year, he managed to repackage the obscure and forbidding practice as accessible and contemporary, with a very Californian emphasis on personal growth and a very un-Jewish emphasis on evangelism.

I assumed that one of the reasons for the Kabbalah centres’ popularity among the rich and famous was its high price of entry. Weston insists, however, that they do not charge for their classes. “Mistakes were made in the past,” he admits. When Kabbalah was in its “infantile phase”,



Believers: Marcus Weston, above left, and Jamie True. Below, celebrity devotees Madonna, Ashton Kutcher and Gwyneth Paltrow

they all tried a bit too hard to raise money. “Honestly, now we get so much scrutiny because we have such high-profile members,” Weston says. “The Charities Commission, the Inland Revenue – they come with all sorts of allegations but they always find us squeaky clean.” Adam says he has never been asked for a penny. “Every time I take the kids to church they always pass the collection plate around at the end.” So what does account for its popularity

among the CEO class? Adam, who proves to be rather a thoughtful chap, reckons that people usually achieve financial success at the expense of other areas of their lives. “Successful people often go through two or three divorces. They don’t set out to do that.” They are often driven to make money by insecurity, he says. “Perhaps they weren’t very popular at school, or they were trying to prove something. When the money starts coming in, suddenly

you get respect that you didn’t have before. But the insecurity is usually still there.” Weston puts Kabbalah’s appeal in more business-like terms. “It’s the fact that it’s efficient,” he says. “A successful person hasn’t got time to invest in random hobbies. It has a structure, it’s measurable, in terms of how you feel and how the universe feeds back to you.” I’ve never heard of a religion that describes itself as “efficient”. Does this

mean we could call it a fast religion – the equivalent of fast food and fast fashion? “Oh there’s nothing about spirituality that’s fast. It requires you to change yourself in order to change the world around you.” True can testify to this. He explains that while business success came easily to him, he always had trouble sustaining his relationships. One day in 2007, he and his girlfriend were having their home renovated. She tried to call their

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interior designer but misdialled. Weston picked up. After a slightly confusing conversation, he agreed to come and “bless” their new extension. When he arrived, he and True recognised each other – remarkably, it turned out they went to the same school.

“Marcus said, ‘Well, there must be a reason for all these coincidences, why don’t you do an introductory course?’” True and his girlfriend went along and found their relationship improved almost instantly. He claims that he would have been divorced if it weren’t for Kabbalah.

How does he put it into practice in his day-to-day life? “I think it was Einstein who said the definition of insanity is doing the same thing again and again and expecting different results,” True explains. “Marcus taught me that you don’t move on to the next level unless you break something in yourself.” It sounds like a personal trainer. You don’t get that bespoke treatment in conventional religion, True says, so you don’t get the same rewards. “Religion’s easy. I grew up Jewish and I used to eat bacon crisps in the synagogue. You go each week and there’s a ritual. It’s the same each time. You don’t learn anything.”

KABBALAH also has a long-term structural plan, each class revealing more. “You think you’ve got it but then every week there’s another concept and you’re like ‘Wow!’ It’s not small stuff, it’s big.” So it’s like a kind of business plan for the soul? “Yes,” says True. “Exactly,” says Weston approvingly.

Weston explains that he uses the same techniques in his charitable work with the unemployed, homeless and offenders. “We get involved in that very dark part of London, with people who are not given a chance in life. Kabbalists really understand people’s life, soul and potential. If you can understand your own frailties, your anger, your insecurities – and if you can overcome them with certain techniques that we teach you – then you can begin to win this game of life.” Once they are life-ready, he teaches them entrepreneurship, so that they become job-ready.

That sounds very admirable, I say. But I am beginning to suspect that Kabbalah is a way of helping rich people to feel better about being rich. I turn to True

and ask if he feels guilty about his wealth. “No,” he says. “If I hadn’t earned it, then maybe I would, but I don’t feel guilty because I earned it.”

But plenty of people work just as hard and don’t make that much money, I say. “The reality is, if you’re really talented and you’re working really hard, but nothing’s changing and you’re moaning about it, maybe you need to look into yourself,” he counters. “People might say that I just got lucky. It’s actually a lack of spiritual worth that makes them say that.”

So anyone who questions, say, the unequal distribution of wealth, is suffering from spiritual failure? “That’s a people problem,” he says. “That means people are blocking.” I find this quite surprising from a faith that claims to distil 4,000 years of spiritual wisdom. I thought most religions preach that good work is its own reward? “But you know the great thing about those people? They don’t moan that they don’t have any money. They have a purpose and they have all the fulfilment they need.”

Weston steps in. He explains that money cannot be the root of all evil, it is merely a resource. You shouldn’t feel guilty for “creating” it; you should be more concerned about what you do with it. “If you put it back into society, if you take responsibility for redistribution, and if enough people do that, the whole world improves.”

I turn back to True. Has he become more charitable since coming here? “I think, yes, across-the-board charitable. Not just money but time as well. The way I treat my wife – the answer is definitely yes. Could I do more? Absolutely.”

Eventually, True has to go, having been very generous with his time. I walk out into the street with Adam, who seems concerned at how they will come across. He tells me a story of a very wealthy and insecure retail tycoon he knows who he wishes would come to the centre. “I think the world would probably be a better place if people like that thought a bit more about their souls,” he says.

I think he’s probably right. As I walk down Oxford Street, a song comes into my head, an old slave spiritual: “If religion were a thing that money could buy / Then the rich would live and the poor would die.”

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