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Summary Statement

A repeated theme in the essays of this issue of the journal is the need to rethink the ways we view people from New Religious Movements in light of Jesus' earthly ministry. Two images by artist Wayne Forte aesthetically frame these essays between the stories of the Acts of the Apostles and of the Samaritan woman at the well. The first image, *Acts* (2010), speaks to us of what happens when followers of Jesus are filled by the Spirit with zeal to proclaim the gospel but are then challenged to take up ministry of reconciliation across social, cultural, and even religious divides. The second image, *Woman at the Well* (*Seeds*), portrays the deeply intimate and yet unsettling knowledge that Jesus demonstrated in his encounter with the Samaritan woman. In our attempts to think biblically about who are today's religious outsiders (Samaritans), these images and stories give us much on which to meditate.

On the Cover:

Wayne Forte, *Acts* (2010)
 78 X 82 inches
 Oil and acrylic on canvas

See back cover for more on the artist.

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FALL 2013
 Volume 4 • Issue 2

dialogue

EVANGELICAL INTERFAITH

Vision Statement

This journal seeks to create space for evangelical scholars and practitioners to dialogue about the dynamics, challenges, practices, and theology surrounding interfaith work, while remaining faithful to the gospel of Jesus and his mission for his Church.

Views expressed in Evangelical Interfaith Dialogue do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the editors or the seminary. Produced in limited quantities.

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WHO ARE TODAY'S SAMARITANS?

Engaging New Religious Movements

A jog through the urban neighborhoods around my apartment in Long Beach reveals the familiar landmarks of the Jewish, Buddhist, Catholic, Methodist, and Lutheran presence in this city, but also buildings for smaller religious groups such as the Community of Higher Consciousness and the Morningland Community of the Ascended Christ. This city is a microcosm of the larger pattern of emerging religious pluralism in the United States.



But religious diversity is not celebrated by everyone in the U.S. While in theory it is politically correct to be tolerant of other religious groups, the proximity of such communities—especially those labeled by some Christian apologists as “cults” but are described less pejoratively by others as New Religious Movements—can surface primal dispositions of fight or flight in even the most “open-minded” of Christians. “Can I pray with a Mormon neighbor?” “Should I allow my child to go to a slumber party at a friend’s house whose parents are Muslim?” “What do I do if my son starts to date a Jehovah’s Witness?” Questions like these raise real challenges of ordinary life in religiously pluralistic contexts in the U.S. And if a recent discussion with a group of forty adults from my church is any indication, underlying these questions are deep-seated fears of possible spiritual contamination, doctrinal compromise, and loss of religious certainty. These primal emotions require us to examine our own dispositions along with our theological framework for relating to those who belong to new religions.

In the lead article, John Morehead provides an overview of evangelical approaches to New Religious Movements in the U.S.—those religious groups that have emerged alongside of historic world religions either as restorationist movements aimed at recovering lost religious truths or as movements that are novel in origin. Morehead goes on to argue that the New Testament stories of Jesus’ encounters with Samaritans are instructive for how we approach those who belong to New Religious Movements. Following the example of Jesus, Morehead argues that evangelicals should trade their fearful suspicion of these religious groups for the grace-shaped approach revealed in Jesus’ actions towards people from minority religious groups.

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EVANGELICAL APPROACHES TO NEW RELIGIONS: Countercult Heresy-Rationalist Apologetics, Cross-Cultural Missions, and Dialogue

For about a decade, evangelicals ministering to “cults”¹ have developed divergent camps based upon very different understandings of these religious groups and what constitutes appropriate responses to them. After introducing new religious movements in the context of cultural trends, I will respond to them using three approaches: a heresy-rationalist apologetic, the lens of cross-cultural mission, and dialogue. Along the way, my advocacy for cross-cultural mission and dialogue will be evident in my analysis and critique. I will conclude with thoughts that evangelicals can use for further reflection on these methodologies in ministry.

“Cults” and New Religious Movements

Although Christianity has been and continues to be the dominant religion in the United States, the religious landscape has also been home to a number of “cults” or new religious movements.² A survey of the material produced by evangelical “countercult” ministries, which specialize in these groups, reveals that a large number of new religions are addressed, but only a select few receive attention in any great detail. These include Mormonism and Jehovah’s Witnesses as well as “the occult” and “New Age.” The group’s perceived danger to the church appears to be the criteria that determines which ones receive attention and critique.

Stepping back a bit for perspective, evangelicals should keep in mind that the samples of new religions addressed by the countercult ministries are not the only new religions or alternative forms of religiosity in America or in the West. In addition to the Bible-based groups like the Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses, we should also be aware of the Western

esoteric tradition,³ which includes various forms of Pagan spirituality. In addition, increasing numbers of people are now pursuing an eclectic do-it-yourself spirituality that eschews institutional religion and draws upon any number of religions and spiritualities in a consumer-driven cafeteria style. This overlaps with the much-discussed demographic segment called “the Nones,”⁴ those who responded to recent surveys on religious affiliation by claiming no connections to institutional religious bodies.

“... increasing numbers of people are now pursuing an eclectic do-it-yourself spirituality that eschews institutional religion and draws upon any number of religions and spiritualities in a consumer-driven cafeteria style.”

Common Misconceptions of New Religious Movements

Sarah Taylor

The responses of such individuals are best interpreted⁵ as part of the continuing trend towards dissatisfaction with institutional religion and preference for an individualized spiritual quest.

With this broader perspective in mind, although the new religions represent only a small part of America's religious makeup, they are greater in number than often recognized, and only a handful of them receive the special attention of evangelicals. Even so, while their numbers are small comparatively speaking, they are religiously and culturally significant. In our new spiritual marketplace, as Christopher Partridge has noted, "New religions and alternative spiritualities should not be dismissed as the dying embers of religion in the West, but are the sparks of a new and increasingly influential way of being religious."⁶

New Religions and the Evangelical Movement

Historically, countercult concerns over the new religions can be traced back to the early 1900s to the work of William C. Irvine. In his historical analysis of the countercult, Gordon Melton discusses the 1917 publication of Irvine's book *Timely Warning*, later reprinted in 1973 as *Heresies Exposed*, as a book that would later pave the way for opposition towards "cult" groups as threats to Christianity.⁷ Prior to this, in the nineteenth century, other groups had been opposed as heresies,



For the past several decades, evangelical Christian outreaches to members of new religious movements have largely taken the form of apologetic confrontation.¹ Evangelicals—who tend to value doctrine and belief in correct doctrine above experience and practice—may try to classify new religious movements using primarily doctrinal categories and, in so doing, misread the actual meaning of these religions to their practitioners. When examining new religious movements, evangelicals may be wise to take Lesslie

Newbigin's advice to seek to understand each religion "on its own terms and along the lines of its own central axis."²

The spiritual lives of many members of new religious movements revolve around experience, religious practice, and rituals.³ Paganism has no official doctrine whatsoever, though the various Pagan traditions share a reverence for the natural world.⁴ Missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints encourage religious seekers to examine the feelings they have when reading the Book of Mormon and to ask God directly for confirmation that the Church is true. Of the questions Latter-day Saints are asked that establish their worthiness to enter the temple—where Mormons perform sacred ordinances and renew covenants—only a minority of the questions address belief, while the rest address issues of practice.



In part because new religious movements often emphasize praxis over doctrine, these groups generally are not static—nor, in most cases, do they aspire to be. Both Latter-day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses value progressive revelation, God's ongoing communication of truths to his people. For Latter-day Saints, reforms to the Church come by way of divine revelations to the Church's prophetic leadership, while Jehovah's Witnesses have a Governing Body that makes alterations to doctrine.⁵ Within Pagan spiritualities such as Wicca, each adherent chooses a path or combination of paths that feels right to him or her; evolution in religious practice occurs more regularly at the individual level.⁶ When seeking to understand new religious movements, it may be as useful for evangelicals to learn *how* their practitioners think as it is to learn *what* they think.

Misconceptions abound regarding new religious movements. Perhaps most commonly, these movements are thought to all merit the designation "cult" and to be categorically different from religions with longer histories. But though this may be accurate of some new religious movements, such generalizations cannot be made about the category as a whole. Having no central authority figures or official rules, Pagans would be particularly difficult to classify as belonging to a cult, as within Paganism, control over one's religious experience is situated firmly in the hands of the individual. And some Pagans believe in a plurality of spirit beings share many commonalities with Hindus, whose soft polytheism can look quite similar in practice. Many comparisons have been made between Mormonism and Islam: the founding prophet of each faith was visited by an angel, and both faiths prohibit gambling and alcohol, emphasize good works, have a history of polygamous marriages, and teach that the Bible has been corrupted to some degree. And the political neutrality, emphasis on eschatology, and commitment to lay leadership of the Jehovah's Witnesses have been shared at various points in time by several mainstream Christian sects. It may be, in fact, that the only common factor present in all new religious movements is that they are, relatively speaking, new.

such as Spiritualism, Christian Science, and Seventh-day Adventism, with Mormonism standing out as the recipient of some of the greatest attacks. Melton notes in this regard, “Anti-Mormonism became a popular ministry among Protestant bodies and to this day provides the major item upon which evangelical countercultists apply themselves.”⁸

The number of heretical concerns multiplied over the course of the nineteenth century, and various books were produced in response. With the arrival of the twentieth century, modern liberal Protestantism came to be seen as the new threat. Fundamentalist Protestants mounted a defense by affirming various doctrinal essentials contra liberalism, such as the Trinity and the Virgin Birth of Christ. In the context of this struggle, the next major figure arose in Jan Karel Van Baalen. His book *Chaos of Cults* (1938) covered a wide variety of groups and provided a doctrinal refutation of their teachings by way of an appeal to the authority of the Bible. Melton notes that this volume went through numerous reprints and revisions, and its presence coincided with the end of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy in 1930. Evangelicalism would arise as part of the fallout from this battle, and with it,

According to a recent Pew Report, Jehovah’s Witnesses is the fastest growing religious groups in the United States. Jehovah’s Witnesses New World Headquarters is moving from Brooklyn (*pictured on the left*) to Warwick, New York. The most public faces of the church are the three publications the *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*, the *Watchtower*, and *Awake!* which are translated into hundreds of languages and distributed in 239 countries. District conventions (*upper right*) are held each year where Jehovah’s Witnesses meet together and receive Bible teaching, baptism, and ministry training.

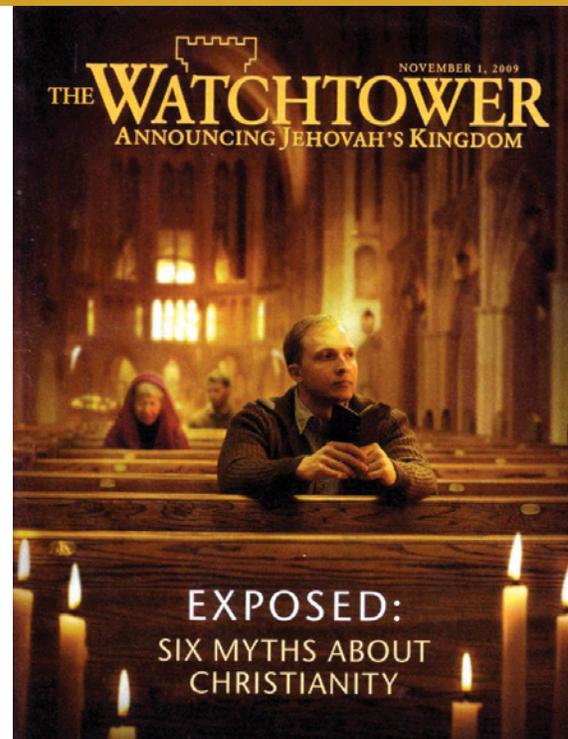
“Evangelicals sensed a need to draw even stronger boundaries to their community than Christianity in general.”⁹ This set the cultural and religious context for the rise of Walter Martin, who raised the bar for Protestant concerns about the threat level posed by heretical groups. In Melton’s view,

It is easiest to see the countercult movement as it emerged in the 1950s as a boundary maintenance movement that found its dynamic in the Evangelical movement’s attempt to define itself as an orthodox Christian movement while rejecting its imitators and rivals.¹⁰

Although several decades have passed since the fundamentalist-modernist controversy and the birth of the countercult as a boundary-maintenance movement, evangelicalism retains a strong sense of both its boundaries and the need to defend them from perceived enemies. Jason Bivins views evangelicalism as a religion that is combative and “preoccupied with boundaries,”¹¹ including the line between orthodoxy and heresy. The skirmishes over this particular boundary marker are played out, in this writer’s estimation, through the construction of an evangelical faith identity that includes a combative posture towards other religions, particularly the new religions.

Countercult Heresy-Rationalist Apologetics

Evangelicals have utilized a variety of approaches in responding to the concerns posed by the new religions. After surveying countercult literature, Philip Johnson identified six basic apologetic models.¹² By far, the dominant model is what Johnson labels the



Overview of Beliefs and Practices: Jehovah's Witnesses

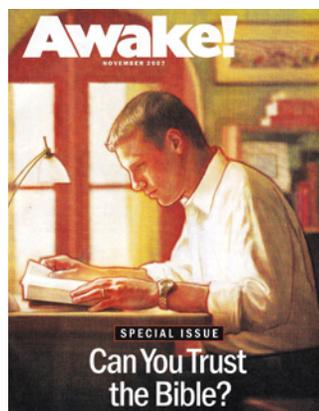
Jehovah's Witnesses believe in one God, whom they refer to as "Jehovah God." They reject as unbiblical the doctrine of the Trinity, believing that holy spirit is Jehovah God's impersonal force, and that Jesus was God's first creation and was not himself God. The church is largely not ritualistic, though it recognizes two sacraments: communion and baptism. Most active Jehovah's Witnesses attend five religious meetings each week and spend ten hours per month proselytizing door-to-door.¹ Witnesses eschew all holidays of pagan or nationalistic origin, commemorating only one day each year, the anniversary of Christ's death.² Church members abstain from politics—voting included—believing that God's kingdom, not earthly governments, will ultimately resolve the world's problems.³

"heresy-rationalist apologetic." This approach uses a template of systematic theology and apologetics that involves doctrinal contrast and refutation. Doctrines understood as central to evangelical Christianity, such as the nature of God, Christology,

and soteriology, are contrasted with the corresponding views or their assumed counterparts in the new religions. When the doctrinal perspectives of the new religions are found to be incompatible with Christianity, a biblical refutation is offered. In addition, this approach can also include apologetic elements that seek to find the rational inconsistencies or shortcomings in the worldviews of the new religions. The emphasis on orthodoxy versus heresy, and the inclusion of apologetic refutations of competing worldviews come together to form the heresy-rationalist apologetic approach.

Johnson notes that this analytical grid of heresy versus orthodoxy has historical precedent, such as Van Baalen and others who were significant in utilizing this methodology.¹³ But in terms of the person responsible for cementing these ideas into the fabric of evangelicalism, it is difficult to overestimate the significance of Walter Martin.¹⁴ He had a direct or indirect influence on much of the countercult, and his books and presentations using the heresy-rationalist apologetic have also shaped much of the pastoral and popular evangelical theological and methodological assumptions about the new religions.

The positive elements of the heresy-rationalist apologetic should be acknowledged. Johnson points out¹⁵ that it excels in helping Christians develop discernment in regard to orthodox and heterodox doctrine: it involves a high view of Scripture in terms of its authority and inspiration and teaching; and it can provide teachers and other members of the church with the tools necessary to warn of heresy and maintain doctrinal integrity.





Johnson goes on in his analysis to provide several examples of exemplary books of both an academic and popular nature that have utilized this approach.

Cross-Cultural Missions to New Religions

However, the heresy-rationalist approach is not without its shortcomings. In 2004, an international group of evangelical scholars and mission practitioners met in Pattaya, Thailand, as part of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization. One of the issue groups, IG #16, was devoted to the study of new religions. Issue Group #16 produced one of the more

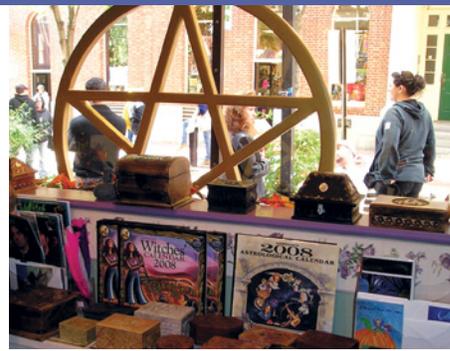
extensive Lausanne Occasional Papers (LOP 45) to come out of this gathering, and it included critical interaction with the heresy-rationalist apologetic.¹⁶ In this paper, the group concluded that several elements “make doctrinal analysis unsuitable for use as *the sole or primary method for evangelism to new religions.*”¹⁷ These include the following:

- A confrontational style of argument that fails to build bridges and confidence between the messenger and recipient
- Utilizing the wrong set of biblical texts that rebuke false prophets and teachings in the church and applying them to groups outside our ecclesiastical walls

Overview of Beliefs and Practices: Paganism/Wicca

The terms “Pagan” and “neo-Pagan” can be used interchangeably to describe modern practitioners of nature-based religions, most of whom connect their religious practice with ancient polytheistic beliefs and practices. Pagans are a diverse group of people with widely varying religious exercises, but most expressions of Paganism are ritualistic and include, in some form, a practice of magic.⁴ One such expression is Wicca, which itself is quite diverse. Wiccans typically believe in a Moon Goddess and a Horned God, complementary divine polarities that are thought by some to be symbolic and by others to be actual beings.

Wiccans perform periodic rituals celebrating rites of passage, the moon’s phases, and the sun’s cycles. When performing a ritual in a group, Wiccans typically situate themselves in a circle and place candles in each of the four cardinal directions around the circle, and they may call upon deities to purify and oversee the rite.⁵ Ceremonies often include meditation, chanting, and performing ritual dramas. The Wiccan Rede—“Though it harm none, do what thy wilt”—is Wicca’s only ethical guideline, and Wiccans tend to take seriously the ideal of harming no one.



From left to right: The wheel of the year marks the eight seasonal festivals in Paganism. These eight festivals serve as the point of convergence among all the varieties of modern Paganism. Rituals vary between geographic contexts and groups as the following pictures portray. A Romuvan Priestess in Lithuania leads a group of celebrants in a ritual. A group of flower girls accompany the Lady of Cornwall at the Gorseth Kernow festival in Penzance, UK. Candles are lit to ancestors and then planted in dirt from a graveyard. Given the intimate connection to nature, rituals and festivals typically take place outdoors in open spaces, cemeteries, or sacred sites such as Stonehenge. Books, astrological charts, and supplies support the growing interest in Paganism. The Museum of Witchcraft in Boscastle, Cornwall, England, has the world's largest collection of Wiccan artifacts, including the sculpture of the Horned God of Wicca.

- Inappropriately drawing upon Jesus' rebukes of the religious leaders within his own religious tradition as a model for evangelistic communication with those outside the church
- The focus on rational arguments without a relational context that includes caring and respect for other individuals
- Lack of field-tested practical advice and the use of "armchair strategies" without recourse to the sensitivities needed to communicate beyond offering apologetic arguments¹⁸

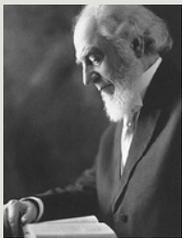
Many of the individuals involved in this issue group had each previously wrestled with their concerns about the heresy-rationalist approach long before participating in the meeting in Thailand. Although they had taken different routes along the way, fresh biblical, theological, and missiological reflection, interactions with the academic literature on new religions such as that from the social sciences, and personal encounters and relationships with those engaged in the spiritual quests of the new religions were all important parts of this process of critical reflection.

As a result of this critical process, new approaches were developed that drew upon biblical examples that contextualized the gospel message, case studies in the history of Christian mission, and the discipline of cross-cultural missiology. This resulted in a conceptual

shift wherein the new religions were understood primarily as dynamic religious cultures¹⁹ rather than deviant systems of heretical doctrine. This change of perspective from cults to cultures coupled with concerns about the heresy-rationalist apologetic led to the formation of new missions approaches, examples of which are included in the 2004 Lausanne Occasional Paper. Additional examples and more extensive treatments can be found in the book *Encountering New Religious Movements*.²⁰ This volume involved a number of the people connected to the Lausanne group on new religions, and its articulation of a cross-cultural mission model for engaging new religions resulted in a *Christianity Today* Book of the Year Award in the category of Missions/Global Affairs. It has also received positive reviews in academic theological and missiological journals and websites.²¹

Lausanne Issue Group #16 met again in Hong Kong in 2006,²² and again at Trinity International University in 2008.²³ As a result of the Trinity consultation, *Perspectives on Post-Christendom Spiritualities* was published, which included the contributions of several participants.²⁴ The development and utilization of cross-cultural mission approaches to new religions continues and now represents a significant alternative to countercult apologetic approaches.

Jehovah's Witnesses: Charles Taze Russell



In the late nineteenth century a group of Bible students near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, undertook a systematic analysis of Christian doctrines with the Bible and attempted to return to the early Christian practices of the first century. One of these students was

Charles Taze Russell, who became one of the early leaders of this restorationist movement and the first editor of *The Watchtower* magazine published by the Jehovah's Witnesses New World Headquarters. Today Jehovah's Witnesses are the fastest growing religious group in the United States with a membership of 7.5 million worldwide.

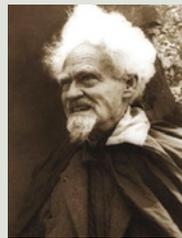
Latter-day Saints: Joseph Smith



Joseph Smith's First Vision in upstate New York in the spring of 1820 marked the beginning of what would later culminate in the founding of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1830. Since its inception Mormonism has become a global faith with a

membership of over 14.5 million members, 57 percent of whom live outside of the United States.

Neo-Paganism: Gerald Brousseau Gardner



Paganism includes a diversity of individuals and groups that seek to reappropriate ancient pre-Christian rituals from nature religions of Europe. There is no founder of Paganism, but Gerald Brousseau Gardner's books *Witchcraft Today* and *The Meaning*

of Witchcraft in the mid-twentieth century helped popularize Wicca in Western societies.

Walter Ralston Martin



Walter Ralston Martin was a pioneer of the Christian countercult movement that began in the mid-twentieth century. Martin is best known for his book *The Kingdom of the Cults* (1965), and for his *The Bible Answer Man* radio broadcast that began in 1960. Martin

was a Christian apologist prominent in conservative evangelical circles who focused much of his countercult apologetics against the unorthodox doctrines of Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism, and Christian Science. Martin's approach to countercult apologetics continues to influence how many American evangelicals relate to people of other faiths.

Objections to the Missions Approach

The development of cross-cultural mission approaches to new religions has not been well received in all segments of evangelicalism. Given that the model was developed in part as a critique of the countercult and their use of a heresy-rationalist apologetic, it is not surprising that individuals within the movement have been its most vocal critics. Although no countercult spokesperson has published an essay in a peer-reviewed journal critiquing the mission approach, I have had email exchanges in years past with some of these individuals. As a result of these conversations, some of their main objections to the mission approach are summarized below, followed by my brief responses.

Inaccurate representation of the countercult. One common objection is that the critique offered of countercult ministries and methodology is not accurate and is based on misunderstanding.

In response, we should recall the extensive academic research into the countercult done by figures like Johnson, Melton,²⁵ Cowan,²⁶ and others. In addition, many now involved in cross-cultural mission approaches were formerly involved in countercult ministries and at one time utilized heresy-rationalist approaches themselves. It is difficult to see how this depth of research and experience with countercult methodology could lend itself to such gross misunderstanding.

Mission approaches are already being done by the countercult. Another objection is that countercult ministries are already doing cross-cultural mission work, and thus these "new approaches" really represent nothing new. However, a careful comparison of the heresy-rationalist apologetic with cross-cultural mission approaches reveals a sharp contrast, as even one secular scholar has been able to discern.²⁷

Biblical texts appropriate for Christian heresies. Countercult critics also take issue with the allegation that the wrong set of biblical texts are utilized in a heresy-rationalist apologetic. In their view, when these texts are applied to Bible-based groups, or to those heretical systems that arose within the Christian community, the application is appropriate. However, this argument still does not address the basic hermeneutical issues of the orthodoxy versus heresy template raised in the initial criticism of the heresy-rationalist apologetic. In addition, the biblical texts used by the countercult are not restricted to Christian heresies, but are also applied to those new religions such as the “New Age,” Transcendental Meditation, and the International Society of Krishna Consciousness.

Heresy-rationalist apologetics wins converts, so why consider an alternative? One final argument from countercult spokespersons is that the heresy-rationalist apologetic is an evangelistically pragmatic one—that is, it results in converts. In response, it should first be noted that such claims are anecdotal. No scientific survey data has been done in connection with countercult methods and the disaffiliation and reaffiliation journeys

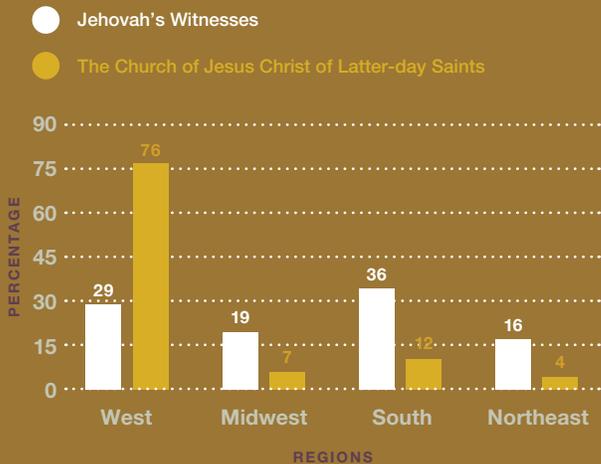
of those in new religions. Second, the complex and multifaceted personal journeys of former members of new religions must be taken into account. Apologetic arguments do have value, but they would seem to be most effective when individuals have already begun to make an exit. Such individuals are looking for dissonance reduction and justification as to why a religious migration towards Christianity would be a more appealing alternative.

Although I have noted the positive aspects of discernment and apologetics, in addition to the shortcomings described above, it is also ethically problematic. Penner has expressed concerns about various forms of “apologetic violence.” He defines one form as “a kind of rhetorical violence that occurs whenever my witness is indifferent to others as *persons* and treats them ‘objectively’—as objects—that are defined by their intellectual positions on Christian doctrine or are representatives of certain social subcategories.”²⁸ The heresy-rationalist apologetic fits within this definition and raises ethical issues for consideration.

Furthermore, the use of heresy-rationalist apologetics as an evangelistic methodology is pragmatically flawed. It is far more

Interfaith Demographic Information

DISTRIBUTION ACROSS THE UNITED STATES



Source: <http://religions.pewforum.org/portraits>

GLOBAL DISTRIBUTION: TOP COUNTRIES

JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

- Number of Ministers (members) who teach the Bible worldwide: **7,538,994**
- Members living in the U.S.: **1,203,642**
- Countries with the highest numbers of Jehovah's Witnesses:
 U.S. **1,203,642** NIGERIA **344,342**
 MEXICO **772,628** ITALY **247,251**
 BRAZIL **756,455**

(Sources: www.jw.org; 2013 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses)

LATTER-DAY SAINTS

- Number of Latter-day Saints: **14,782,473**
- Members living in the U.S.: **6,321,416**
- Countries with the highest numbers of Latter-day Saints:
 U.S. **6,321,416** PHILIPPINES **675,166**
 MEXICO **1,317,700** PERU **577,716**
 BRAZIL **1,209,974**

(Source: www.mormonnewsroom.org)

PAGAN

- The number of self-identifying adherents of Pagan traditions is difficult to estimate for a number of reasons. Some estimate that there are **3 million** adherents worldwide.
- Members living in the U.S.: **1.2 million**
- Countries with large number of Pagan practitioners:
 UNITED KINGDOM **80,000** CANADA **45,000**

(Sources: http://adherents.com/Nafi_n.html; <http://wildbunt.org/2008/02/parsing-pew-numbers.html>; <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1478870/Spiritual-Britain-worshippers-over-170-different-faiths.html>; <http://wildbunt.org/2013/05/canadas-25495-pagans-and-7-8-million-nones.html>; <http://www.patheos.com/Library/Answers-to-Frequently-Asked-Religion-Questions/How-many-Pagans-are-there.html>)

likely that the use of apologetic confrontation as evangelism shuts down openness rather than creating opportunities for fruitful witness. In the view of new religions scholar John Saliba, apologetic confrontation “is neither an appropriate Christian response nor a productive social and religious reaction to the rising pluralism”²⁹ of our time. I concur with this and with his further conclusions that

apologetic debates rarely lead unbelievers or apostates to convert; they do not succeed in persuading renegade Christians to abandon their new beliefs to return to the faith of their birth. Harangues against the new religions do not lead their members to listen attentively to the arguments of zealous evangelizers. On the contrary, they drive them further away and elicit similar belligerent responses.³⁰

Dialogue and the New Religions

Evangelicals have been involved in interreligious dialogue with the world religions for many years,³¹ but dialogue with the new religions has been rare. Melton mentions meetings between Christian leaders and the Unification Church in the 1970s, as well as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness in the 1990s.³²

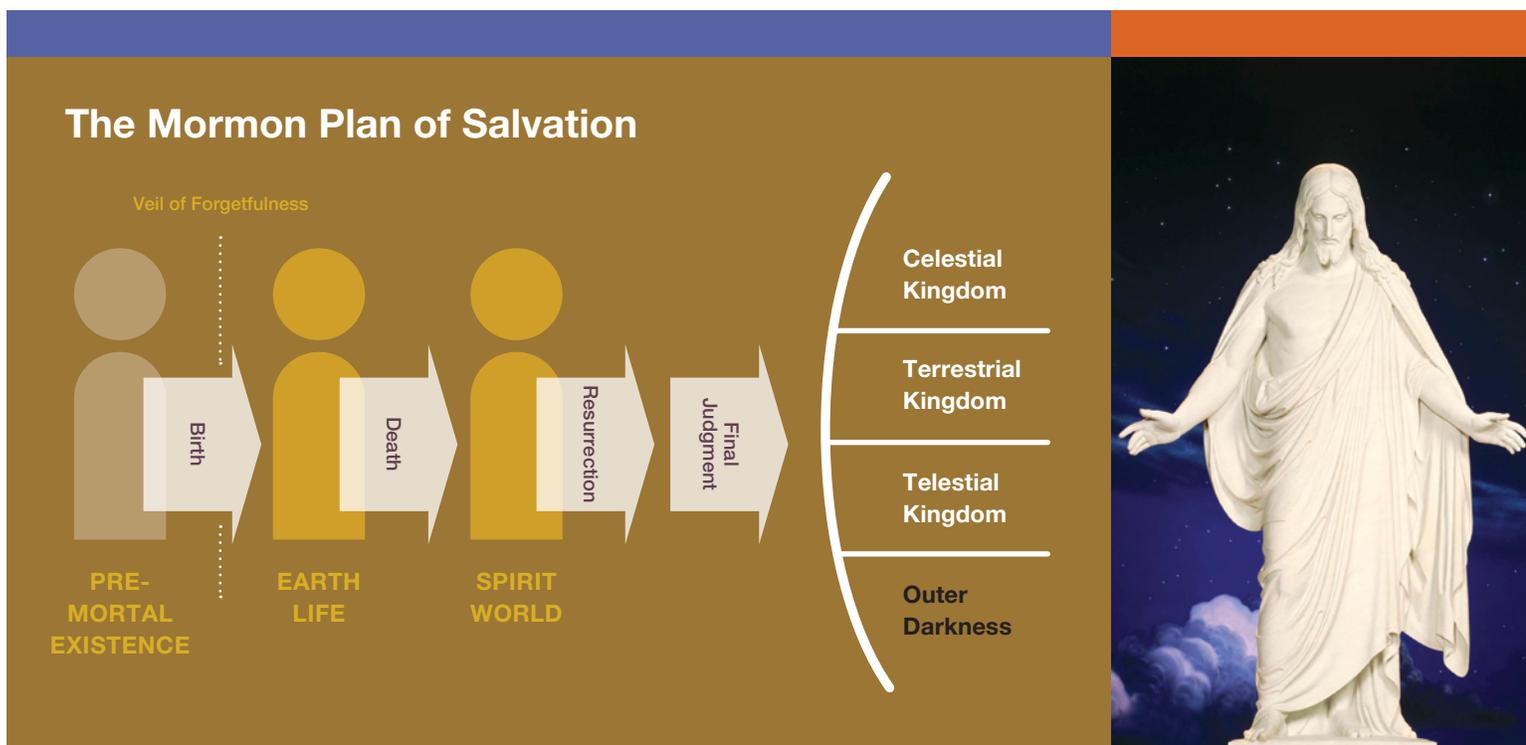
The most extensive dialogical interactions by evangelicals with the new religions have been discussions with Latter-day Saints. In 1992, former Mormon and Denver Seminary student Greg Johnson shared the writings of Brigham Young University professor Stephen Robinson with Craig Blomberg.³³ Robinson and Blomberg went on to develop a relationship and begin a series of discussions that led to the publishing of *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and*

an Evangelical in Conversation.³⁴ This became a catalyst for a variety of developments that began the process of dialogue between evangelicals and Mormons. Richard Mouw worked with another BYU professor, Robert Millet, to begin a series of conversations between evangelical and Mormon scholars. These dialogues are ongoing. After graduating from seminary, Greg Johnson founded Standing Together in Utah and began a series of public dialogues with Millet in a variety of venues. These and other dialogues between evangelicals and Mormons have also spawned new books³⁵ providing those unable to witness the dialogues with a sense of the nature of these interactions.

More recently, dialogue partners from the new religions have expanded beyond Mormonism. Evangelicals have reached out to the Pagan community with an eye toward developing relationships and ongoing conversations,³⁶ and as a way of moving beyond the hostility of the past in order to form a new paradigm for interfaith dialogue³⁷ and religious diplomacy.³⁸

Obstacles to Dialogue with New Religions

In general, Christian dialogue with the new religions has faced many obstacles, several of which Saliba has discussed. Two stand out as especially significant. First, he notes that many Christian approaches have been “centered around orthodoxy,” which has resulted in a theological response that “has been apologetic and dogmatic.”³⁹ He sees this as a hindrance to what could be more fruitful approaches to dialogue. Second, Saliba notes the presence



of a strong sense of distrust because Christians presuppose that the motives of those in the new religions are “dishonest and/or insidious.”⁴⁰ These represent significant challenges that will have to be overcome before constructive dialogue can move forward in this context.⁴¹ In order to accomplish this, evangelicals must be self-critical about the dialogue process. As I argued in 2007 in my workshop at Standing Together’s Student Dialogue Conference on Evangelical-Mormon dialogue, evangelicals need to engage in thoughtful reflection about defining dialogue, the type of dialogue they are engaged in, its goals and the processes involved, and how this relates to evangelism and mission. In our self-critique, we must also ensure that we strike a balance so that our desires for civility in dialogue do not compromise our ability to acknowledge foundational differences with our conversation partners.

Further Issues for Reflection

In recent decades evangelicals have been experimenting with new ways of understanding and engaging those in the new religions. In my view, missional and dialogical approaches are the best way forward. I conclude this essay with a few suggestions on how evangelicals might continue to develop these methodologies further as we engage not only the adherents of the new religions, but also those of other religious traditions in our pluralistic world.

Look again at the example of Jesus. Strangely, we often fail to ask whether our way of engaging those in other religions is in keeping with the example of Jesus. Bob Robinson has made this point well in his book *Jesus and the Religions*.⁴² There he calls

Overview of Beliefs and Practices: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Latter-day Saints believe in a Godhead composed of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, three separate beings who are one in purpose.⁶ According to Latter-day Saint theology, the early church’s priesthood authority was lost with the deaths of Christ’s apostles, but was restored again in 1829 and is now conferred to worthy males by the laying on of hands.⁷ The Church is led by modern-day prophets and apostles who advise and instruct the Church regarding various timely issues.⁸ Latter-day Saints perform two main public rituals—baptism by immersion and partaking of the sacrament (communion)—as well as various private rituals that take place within Latter-day Saint temples. Latter-day Saint temple work includes making and confirming religious covenants, sealing family members together as an eternal unit, and performing baptisms on behalf of people who have passed away without a knowledge of the gospel.



Left: A graphic depiction of the Mormon story of salvation. *Right:* Missionary work, the nuclear family, and family lineage all play important roles in the religious experience of Latter-day Saints. According to LDS teaching and practice, humans are offspring of God the Father and it is to one’s family that a person is sealed for eternity. A strong sense of belonging is fostered to immediate family members and a high value is placed on family genealogy.

Organizations Focused on Engaging New Religious Movements

The Western Institute for Intercultural Studies (WIIS) educates and equips individuals, congregations, and Christian academics as they communicate the Christian faith to adherents of new religious movements and world religions. Their approach involves two main areas of ministry: informed understanding and culturally sensitive evangelism. In fulfillment of these emphases, WIIS focuses on education and training, multimedia resource production, and scholarly research.

www.wiics.org

Sacred Tribes Journal is an online publication that explores the study of religion, including new religious movements, world religions, and popular spiritualities and “religion-like” self-identities, in a scholarly and multidisciplinary fashion. The journal draws together the combined insights of sociologists, anthropologists, religious studies scholars, theologians, as well as missiologists and those from other disciplines from around the world. *Sacred Tribes Journal* also incorporates a dialogical approach to examining key topics in religion.

www.sacredtribesjournal.org

The Evangelical Chapter of the Foundation for Religious Diplomacy prepares evangelicals for relationships and conversations with members of religious groups that want to engage more deeply with evangelical Christianity. This is accomplished via four main areas of concentration:

1. equipping university students,
2. education and relationships at the local church level,
3. raising awareness about the challenges to evangelical credibility, in the public square with regard to pluralism and dialogue, and
4. networking.

All chapters affiliated with the Foundation for Religious Diplomacy work toward:

- creating a network for trustworthy interreligious conversation,
- preparing people to become culturally bilingual interreligious diplomats,
- promoting relationships between people of differing religious traditions, and
- facilitating conversations among people holding opposing religious views.

www.religious-diplomacy.org/evangelichapter

attention to Jesus’ encounters with Gentiles and Samaritans, and he argues that these encounters provide a very different model than the encounters of many Christians in the West. Robinson examines a great number of biblical texts, and in the case of Luke 4 he concludes that “interpretive practices that allow Christian readers either to ignore (*or only to comment critically on*) people of other faiths are at odds with the example and commentary of Jesus himself.”⁴³

Adopt a Christological hermeneutic. I previously argued that the heresy-rationalist approach draws upon the wrong biblical texts as the foundation for engaging the new religions. This issue can be pressed further beyond specific texts to the implications of the New Testament’s Christological hermeneutic. Derek Flood explores this by way of the Apostle Paul’s use of the Old Testament in Romans 15:8–18. Paul quotes Psalm 18:41–49 and Deuteronomy 32:43. Flood notes that in his use of these texts, Paul edited the material so as to remove “the references to violence against Gentiles, and recontextualized these passages instead to declare God’s mercy in Christ for Gentiles.”⁴⁴ Flood concludes by suggesting that “if we wish as Christians to adopt Paul’s way of interpreting Scripture, then we need to learn to read our Bibles with that same grace-shaped focus.”⁴⁵ A greater attention to the New Testament’s Christological hermeneutic holds significant implications for the theological foundations of a grace-shaped engagement with new religions.

Replace a hostile faith identity with one of benevolence. I noted above that evangelicalism has a strong sense of boundaries and a preoccupation with considerations about who is in and out with regard to orthodoxy. This tendency is greatly magnified in the countercult, and it often leads to the formation of hostile faith identities regarding outsiders, particularly those of other religions. I suggest that as we reconsider the example of Jesus and adopt a more consistent Christological hermeneutic of grace and peace, we should also make new efforts at loving our religious neighbors, including those whom many consider a threat. Loving our religious neighbors as ourselves in the way of grace—even while retaining a healthy set of boundaries and concerns for sound teaching—will help transform hostile faith identities into benevolent ones. 

John W. Morehead is the Custodian of the Evangelical Chapter of the Foundation for Religious Diplomacy. He has been involved in interreligious dialogue in the contexts of Mormonism, Paganism, and Islam. He is a coeditor and contributor to *Encountering New Religious Movements: A Holistic Evangelical Approach* (Kregel, 2004), and editor of *Beyond the Burning Times: A Pagan and Christian in Dialogue* (Lion Hudson, 2008).

Evangelical Approaches to New Religious Movements Brad Hickey



Global advances in technology, systemic social upheaval, and the vast increase in the exchange of ideas, products, and worldviews between cultures have increasingly produced spiritual seekers who do not identify with traditional religious institutions. Instead, modern spiritual seekers are turning to person-centered, buffet-style spiritualities typically termed “cults” or, more recently, classified as “New Religious Movements” (NRMs). At this time, three related approaches have characterized a vast majority of evangelicals’ interactions with NRMs. What follows is a brief summary of countercult apologetics, a cross-cultural mission approach, and interreligious dialogue.

Drawing from a rich tradition that includes the church fathers and the Reformers and deeply influenced by the works of Walter Martin (author of *The Kingdom of the Cults*), countercult apologists are historically characterized by a resolute commitment to the defense of orthodox doctrine and their specialization of doctrinal analysis. When confronted with other religious groups, countercult apologists often use an engagement model that Phillip Johnson has termed a “heresy-rationalist apologetic.” The heresy-rationalist approach views other religious groups through the lenses of Christian doctrine and uses apologetic disciplines to refute incompatibilities and delineate the lines between orthodoxy and heresy. Reconciliation or reintegration back into the church requires renunciation of error and acceptance of orthodoxy as defined by the countercult apologists.

Countercult apologists have often been remarkably successful in buttressing confidence and faith in the veracity and reliability of the Christian tradition. They are also responsible for providing the church with a plethora of tools and information of varying quality that have sounded warnings concerning heresy and that have also met with some success in reaching disciples of new religions. However, with the growing recognition that NRMs must be approached and understood on their own terms, and given the shortcomings of doctrinal and apologetic approaches, the viability of the heresy-rationalist model as a primary method of evangelization is being increasingly reassessed.

A significant number of scholars and missionaries, in part represented by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, have called for a shift away from confrontational methods and towards relational forms of evangelism called the “critical incarnational approach.” The critical incarnational approach draws from the life and ministry of Jesus, who took on human nature in order to communicate his truth through the cultural

symbols, words, and actions of the time period in which he lived. Christ participated in the culture of his day and transformed lives through developing deep and meaningful relationships with those around him.

In like manner, the critical incarnational approach tends to view adherents of NRMs and other new religions through a cross-cultural lens—as unreached people groups living in Western nations. Viewing NRMs as unreached people groups shifts the emphasis from one of confrontation and doctrinal refutation to a focus on the NRM’s need to experience the transforming power of Jesus. NRMs can then be

“By offering the NRM the opportunity to engage in long-term, mutually respectful relationships, evangelicals intentionally create a safe place from which an NRM can observe genuine examples of Christian ethos and belief. In turn, this may allow for conversion and discipleship of previously unreached adherents.”

understood as complex, intricate subcultures that require missionaries and apologists to listen carefully to each person’s story in order to identify how the Spirit of God may be leading him or her to be open to the gospel. Perceiving an NRM as a unique unreached subculture also requires apologists and missionaries to love and respect the NRM adherents even when there is potentially great disagreement between them.

In related fashion, interreligious dialogue attempts to forge relationships between evangelicals and NRMs based on trust and genuine regard for the other. In addition, the interreligious dialogue attempts to clarify terminology in order to avoid bearing false witness of the others’ beliefs and practices and to clearly perceive where differences and commonalities exist. By offering the NRM the opportunity to engage in long-term, mutually respectful relationships, evangelicals intentionally create a safe place from which an NRM can observe genuine examples of Christian ethos and belief. In turn, this may allow for conversion and discipleship of previously unreached adherents.

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FROM FEAR TO OPENNESS:

Witness and Boundary-Maintenance in Evangelical Approaches to New Religions



As an undergraduate at Moody Bible Institute, a prominent evangelical Bible college, I was required to take a course entitled “Personal Evangelism.”

The course set out to increase effectiveness in “soul-winning,” part of which involved mastering techniques specifically targeted toward members of cults. Indeed, an entire section of the course was shaped by a required text called *What the Cults Believe*, written by Irvine Robertson. I remember becoming fascinated at the time with the dangerous esoteric knowledge to which I was becoming privy. As it was narrated to us, these cults—encompassing everything from Mormonism to Eastern-influenced spirituality to Rosicrucianism—were not simply new forms of “lost” religions; rather, they were manifestations of Satan’s ever-changing forms of cunning.¹

A course on personal evangelism certainly follows from D. L. Moody’s legacy. Yet, looking back, two questions immediately come to mind. First, why construct the category of “cult” as a special point of emphasis for evangelism, and second, how does a group come to be assigned to this category? John Morehead’s piece on the contours of the evangelical countercult movement sheds some light on these questions. As he points out, the heresy-rationalist approach to new religious movements is deeply embedded in the history of American evangelicalism. This model follows from the rationalistic biblical presuppositionalism that has largely defined traditional evangelical theologies of religion. That is, evangelicalism’s traditional inerrantist approach to Scripture has engendered a privileged view of evangelical interpretations of Christology, soteriology, and other systematic theological categories. This viewpoint, Morehead rightly claims, positions evangelicalism over against other religions, and even other forms of Christianity, engendering an impulse to reify one’s own position by falsifying competing claims.

This does not address, however, the question of why cults receive special attention in this process of falsification. Why was there not in my course a separate unit on Islam or Hinduism, rather than on “cults” such as Baha’i and Hare Krishna (which borrow from

elements of Islam and Hinduism, respectively)? To answer this, I will first approach the second question I posed above regarding what qualifies a group as a “cult” in the evangelical countercult movement. Morehead asserts, “the group’s perceived danger to the church appears to be the criteria that determines which ones receive attention and critique.” The obvious question here, then, is why certain groups are perceived to pose a greater danger to evangelical Christianity than others? In the book I referenced above, Irvine Robertson affirms the following definition of a cult: “any religious group that differs significantly in some one or more respects as to belief and practise from those religious groups which are regarded as the normative expressions of religion in our total culture.”² Despite the claim of the heresy-rationalist approach that all truth claims must be tested by Scripture alone, this definition appears to endorse a culturally relative understanding of what constitutes religious legitimacy. In fact, by this definition, the Christian Dispensationalism that emerged in the United States in the latter half of the nineteenth century could be considered a cult, insofar as its hermeneutical approach to Scripture diverged significantly from normative Christian orthodoxy. Yet Dispensational theology has had considerable influence in evangelical Christianity and, if not deemed credible by all, at least it is typically not considered heresy on par with a “cult.” Indeed, the very book on cults I have been referencing is produced by Moody Press, the publishing arm of a Dispensationalist Bible college.

It therefore appears that the category of “cult” is a highly arbitrary construction, one whose creation requires some additional motivation to mere zeal for the protection of orthodox Christian truth. Robertson provides a hint as to what this could be when he writes in his introduction, “our consideration will deal mainly with the cults that are pseudo-Christian and with others that impinge upon the true Christian as well as the nominal Christian.”³ His concern, in other words, is less with systems of belief that are at this moment in history considered culturally legitimate and self-contained “religions.” Certainly members of other religions are to be evangelized, but for Robertson and other countercultists,

the larger danger seems to lie in the religious hybridity of groups that borrow from and alter tenets belonging to “legitimate religions.” Further, this danger is particularly acute when Christianity is the subject of this corruption.

In her famous work *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas argues that purity insists that categories remain distinct or one is presented with the danger of chaos. To illustrate this point, she examines the abominations listed in the book of Leviticus, which, at first blush, seem highly arbitrary. For instance, the pig—cited in Leviticus 11 as unclean—has “divided hoofs and is cleft footed” but “it does not chew the cud” (Lev 11:7 NRSV). This alone hardly renders a pig literally filthier than other animals. Yet the chapter begins by stating, “Any animal that has divided hoofs and is cleft-footed and chews the cud—such you may eat” (Lev 11:3 NRSV). Douglas contends it is the fact that pigs, and the other animals rendered unclean, do not perfectly conform to a divinely sanctioned category (e.g. animals with cleft feet, divided hoofs, and that chew the cud) that makes them impure.⁴ In short, they confound boundaries. Likewise, in their challenge to traditional religious dogma, religious hybridities—particularly “pseudo-Christian cults”—present the danger of chaos to sanctioned, evangelical boundaries. Douglas writes, “margins are dangerous” because “any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins.”⁵ She contends,

Purity is the enemy of change, of ambiguity and compromise . . . the final paradox for the search for purity is that it is an attempt to force experience into logical categories of non-contradiction. But experience is not amenable and those who make the attempt find themselves led into contradiction.⁶

I believe this is why the countercult movement maintains such sustained attention in evangelicalism. A relative newcomer on the Christian scene itself, evangelicalism, as noted above, has historically been particularly interested in maintaining and legitimizing its own boundaries. Christian hybridity therefore presents a special danger to established evangelical doctrinal categories. This threat is interpreted by countercultists as a special form of Satanic cunning precisely because it mixes categories, a move that is perceived as shifty and tricky.

What, then, is a more fruitful way forward? I believe Morehead is right to support a dialogical approach, which would “replace a hostile with a benevolent faith identity.” An obsession over who is in and who is out has the consequence of a confrontational mode of evangelism that, in the end, diminishes witness. Though my “Personal Evangelism” syllabus used the terms *witness* and

soul-winning interchangeably, there has been a shift among some evangelicals from proselytization to a more holistic form of witness, one that is *lived* rather than *done*. Indeed, while Morehead challenges the veracity of the countercultist claim that the heresy-rationalist apologetic wins more converts, I would go further to argue that such a utilitarian approach to evangelism is problematic in its presupposition that the number of converts is an indicator of success. Jesus did not run after the rich young ruler to convince him that his logic was flawed. Rather, he lived the gospel through word and deed and issued gracious invitations for others to join him. For us to share in this model is to trust in the work of the Holy Spirit rather than understanding ourselves to be marketers for God.

Morehead’s call for “a greater attention to the New Testament’s Christological hermeneutic . . . for the theological foundations of a grace-shaped engagement with new religions” strikes to the heart of this form of witness. If evangelicals shift the evangelistic focus from threatened boundary-maintenance to the embodiment of love of God and neighbor, then dialogue becomes a natural form of witness. There is, of course, risk here that comfortable boundaries will be contested. The late missiologist David Bosch has illustrated this possibility in his interpretation of the Cornelius story in Acts 10:1–11:18. He renames the story “The Conversion of Peter,” who was astonished that salvation extended not only to Jews, but to Gentiles as well. From this scripture Bosch asserts that in the act of witness, Christians must be prepared to be changed, to have one’s understanding of Christ be challenged and one’s faith corrected.⁷ Yet if we look to the Jesus of the Gospels, this type of boundary-altering encounter was his *modus operandi*. He was constantly challenging the neat and tidy constructs of those he encountered. It might just be, then, that dialogue—both with members of established religions and “religious hybridities”—is not only a new way forward in terms of outward witness, but perhaps also a spiritual discipline to which we are all called as disciples of Christ. 

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FLESHING OUT THE THIRD WAY



Several years ago I gave a paper on Jewish-Christian dialogue at the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem. The conference was the culmination of four years of intense theological dialogue between Orthodox Jewish theologians and

orthodox Christian theologians. The meetings of the previous years had often been punctuated by moments of tension when one scholar would charge that another was “dead wrong” or “fundamentally misinformed” or “misrepresenting the tradition.” We Christians learned that this was par for the course for most of our Jewish friends, who had grown up debating one another—often with raised voices in the yeshiva and synagogues and beyond—but usually concluding with words of affection or at least cordiality.

I remember the tension when an esteemed Jewish scholar, famous around the world for his many books and lectures in major world capitals, told us all—Christians and Jews included—that Christians could not be included in the Abrahamic covenant. And the equally uncomfortable moment when a world-class Jewish philosopher said that it was his duty to warn us Christians that we were guilty of idolatry because we were worshipping a man. I also remember the tension I felt while delivering my paper in Jerusalem when I said that the four issues which historically have divided Jews and Christians—law, resurrection, Trinity, and incarnation—were all based on Jewish principles, so that only the identity of Jesus divides us. I was surprised to see that these arguments were greeted with smiles and warmth by my Jewish auditors, but that their smiles disappeared and everything got quiet when I finished my paper by pleading with them to accept messianic Jews as genuine Jews.

But even more surprising was what happened after all these moments of tension. Our dialogue went deeper and became more serious. Jews learned things about Christians they did not previously know, and we Christians learned things about Jews that we did not previously know. And miracle of miracles, we learned from one another. Christians learned something about the distinctively Jewish character of the covenant, even while it admitted Gentiles (or so we Christians and some of our Jewish friends believed) by adoption or associate membership. Jews learned that Jesus and Paul were observant Jews—something most Jews had never considered.

My point is that the best interreligious dialogue emerges from respectful but honest exploration of the deepest differences. This exploration is in the context of friendship and shared lives and mutual respect, and it never confronts with a style that is confrontational or hostile. It does not assign bad motives to the other or assume eternal perdition for those on the other side of the theological divide. But neither does it avoid discussing in depth the points of the most dramatic differences, which are usually doctrinal, and the discussion of which sometimes creates tension. That tension can be productive without diminishing shared respect. Oddly, it can enhance mutual respect.

I appreciate my friend John Morehead’s helpful recommendation of a healthy way to dialogue with devotees of new religious movements. He is right to criticize those so-called dialogues which are more monologues and in which doctrinal analysis is conducted without respect for the other, or the interreligious arguments that are made without any expression of care and respect for the other. He suggests properly that we should acknowledge truth (however partial) and moral virtue in the person with whose theology we disagree.

But I am also cheered that John does not deny the need for dialogue and apologetics to stress the need for discernment and doctrinal integrity. I am glad that while John criticizes an obsession with boundaries, he does not denounce concern for “a healthy set of boundaries,” and that he rightly recognizes the need to “warn of heresy.” For while that last word sends shivers up the spines of theological liberals, it resonated with the early church fathers. They embraced it, for they believed that heresy meant the grave possibility of worshipping something other than the true God, and that such worship could have eternal consequences. They read the Bible and saw that the Bible warns repeatedly in both Testaments that our utmost danger is idolatry—which in this era means that we think we are worshipping God when in reality we might be worshipping a false imitation. They argued against Docetists and Arians and Gnostics and Donatists—all of whom insisted they were true Christians—because they (the Fathers) believed that attachment to the wrong view of God could prevent union with the Trinity, apart from which there was only darkness.

Now when I say this, I am not presuming that my Mormon friends, for example, are going to hell. We may all be together in the new heavens and the new earth, for all I know. We are saved by the Triune God, not by our theology. But I cannot and should not presume that what I believe about ultimate reality makes no difference, for the testimony of the Law and the Prophets and the Apostles is quite the opposite. I dare not treat doctrine and belief cavalierly—not if I really care for those with whom I dialogue.

Permit me to point out a few slight inaccuracies in John's essay. First, the infamous "Nones" have been misinterpreted by nearly everyone, including the report prepared by the Pew Forum. The crack sociologist of religion Byron Johnson has shown that a high percentage of these Nones actually regularly attend nondenominational churches, and check "None" because their church is not part of a denomination. So those who are on an "individualized spiritual quest" are not as many as the media hope.

I also wish the essay had not treated fundamentalists and evangelicals as the same group. The original fundamentalists such as J. Gresham Machen, who argued carefully against Protestant liberalism, were light years from the anti-intellectual biblicists associated with that moniker today. The deliberate use of the term *evangelical* in this century dates to the formation of the National Association of Evangelicals in 1942, which was a careful attempt to distinguish evangelicalism from fundamentalism. In contrast to the fundamentalist separation from modern culture, the "new evangelical" theology (led by E. J. Carnell, Harold Ockenga, and Carl Henry, and inspired by Billy Graham) was committed to engaging with culture in an attempt to transform it through the gospel.

The essay also needs, I think, to distinguish more carefully between evangelism and interreligious dialogue. Those are two different animals. I agree completely that evangelism should not use doctrinal analysis as a club, or as a "harangue," without getting to know the religious other as a fellow human being who deserves respect, as does his/her religious tradition.

But is interreligious dialogue always wrong to make doctrinal analysis "primary"? Even when conducted in this manner of respect and friendship that I have described? Our four-year Jewish-Christian dialogue was focused not solely but primarily on theological—of which doctrine is necessarily connected—differences concerning covenant and mission. We all came to be friends, in some cases visiting one another's homes. But what drew us into friendship was our common pursuit of theological and doctrinal truth. We all believed that something of truth was to be gained by fighting

it out, as it were, with respect and civility. And I think we all believed that we had gained in knowledge of the truth by that friendly fight, so to speak. So I think that rather than eliminating all "rational apologetics" that seek to know the difference between truth and heresy, we should avoid false dichotomies. We do not have to choose between an in-your-face or up-your-nose apologetics and not engaging in rational apologetics (two ways), but between respectful and humble ways of doing rational apologetical dialogue (a third way), and ways that are disrespectful and arrogant.

I think we have good models of this in Craig Blomberg and Steve Robinson's *How Wide the Divide* and Phil Johnson and Gus diZerega's *Beyond the Burning Times*, which John Morehead edited. I like to think that Bob Millet and I did this in our *Claiming Christ* (now republished as *Evangelicals and Mormons*).

One last word: We need to beware of proof texting that cherry-picks only what we want the Bible to say. We're all conscious of how the Walter Martins have done this sort of thing. But we need to be careful that we don't do the same when advocating for a kinder and gentler dialogue. For example, I don't quite agree that the "New Testament's Christological hermeneutic" speaks only of grace toward Gentiles—or of grace that avoids all talk of doctrinal differences and the possibility of idolatry. Jesus warned of the Gentiles' sins at Sodom and Gomorrah (Matt 10:15) and castigated his theological opponents with a fervor many of us would call "fundamentalist" if we did not know who was speaking (Matt 23). Imagine calling our interlocutors snakes, hypocrites, filthy tombs, and children of hell! When Paul faced Gentiles on Mars Hill, he said not a word about grace but warned of judgment. In Romans 1 he characterized Gentile behavior as generally idolatrous.

Of course we should not call names. We can leave that to Jesus. He warns us not to judge the motives or destiny of anyone (Matt 7:1). But we should also beware of avoiding all tension and deep wrestling with differences in the name of a putative "grace" that is not the same thing as biblical grace, which always springs from a first concern for truth. Without the latter, it's not worth the time and money crossing the country or world to do so-called dialogue. 

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A CHRISTOLOGICAL AND TRINITARIAN APPROACH TO INTERFAITH DIALOGUE



I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to John W. Morehead's essay "Evangelical Approaches to New Religions: Countercult Heresy-Rationalist Apologetics, Cross-Cultural Missions, and Dialogue." I resonate with

Morehead's perspective and will offer a Christological and Trinitarian proposal that complements his approach.

In John's Gospel, we find the Gospel writer presenting Jesus as the living Word (John 1:1, 14, 18). One of the implications arising from this presentation is that biblical truth is to be framed relationally. In John 14:6, we find that Jesus refers to himself as the way, the truth, and the life. While propositions matter, biblically based, doctrinally true propositions find their point of reference and ground in Jesus—the truth who is personal. He is the ultimate truth of God to which such true propositions correspond.

One theologian who has reflected at length on a Christologically framed approach to truth is Karl Barth. In the *Church Dogmatics*, volume I/1, Barth presents the Word of God in threefold form: Christ as the living Word is revelation; Scripture as the written Word is revelation's primary witness; church proclamation serves as revelation's secondary witness.¹ Donald Bloesch makes the following claim concerning Barth's view: "There is something like a perichoresis in these three forms of the Word in that the revealed Word never comes to us apart from the written Word and the proclaimed Word, and the latter two are never the living Word unless they are united with the revealed Word."²

What bearing does all this talk of a Christological model of the Word and truth have on our present discussion? Many evangelicals talk at length about relational or, more specifically, friendship evangelism. The appropriate ground for such talk is the identity of Jesus Christ as the living, personal Word, who becomes incarnate (John 1:14) and who reveals to us the Father (John 1:18; 14:6–7) in the Spirit (John 14:23–26).

The relational-incarnational model noted here still accounts for rational consideration and rigorous argumentation, as illustrated by Jesus' challenge to members of the Jewish rulers, as recorded

in John 5. The living Word who breathed the Scriptures to life as his written Word enters his people's lives (see John 1:11) and challenges the rulers' attempts to control God's written Word—which involves their rejection of him, his claims, and his work (John 5:18). Jesus counters them by claiming, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39–40).

It is worth noting that Jesus engages the Jewish religious leaders differently than he does such individuals as the Samaritan woman with her syncretistic beliefs and her community (see John 4:1–42). It is also important to highlight the contrast between Jesus' engagement of this Samaritan woman and Nicodemus, one of the members of the Sanhedrin (John 3:1–21). Jesus challenges Nicodemus much more fervently than he does the woman at the well for their respective forms of error (in the case of Nicodemus, see John 3:5–12). Nonetheless, in both cases, we find Jesus engaging them relationally. In fact, it is most likely the case that both individuals come to faith in him in due course (in the case of Nicodemus, see John 7:51–52; John 19:38–42).

In each instance, Jesus creates space in his life for his views to be heard. After all, he is the Word who became flesh. Rather than engaging in drive-by evangelism, Jesus inhabited the people's cultural universes, understanding not simply their worldviews but also their social settings. Jesus' form of engagement makes it possible for evangelicals to approach people holistically, which goes beyond simply understanding and addressing their belief systems. A relational-incarnational model that builds upon Jesus' way enables one to place people's beliefs in the context of their social environments and to approach each person on his or her own terms, as illustrated by Jesus' various encounters, including those with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman.

I have sought to model the use of such a framework as I engage Mormons, Pagans, Buddhists, Muslims, and others. Mormons and Buddhists are not "ists" or "isms." They are people. I have never encountered a generic person. Each person must be accounted

for in individual and personal terms,³ as reflected in Jesus' encounters with the people in his day. With this in mind, it is very important that I come to understand why this person is a Buddhist or Mormon or Pagan: what is it about the particular tradition that speaks to this person and engages him or her personally, holistically, and in particular terms? It is worth noting in each instance that while these various traditions espouse beliefs of various kinds, they do not ultimately approach religion and spirituality in conceptual or doctrinal terms, as many Christian communities do. Christianity is unique in this regard and has influenced comparative religion analysis with good and bad results.

We should not conceive of religion exclusively in terms of beliefs, although evangelicals should account for beliefs in engaging other religions. As Nicholas de Lange writes,

The use of the word "religion" to mean primarily a system of beliefs can be fairly said to be derived from a Christian way of looking at Christianity. The comparative study of religions is an academic discipline which has been developed within Christian theology faculties, and it has a tendency to force widely differing phenomena into a kind of strait-jacket cut to a Christian pattern. The problem is not only that other "religions" may have little or nothing to say about questions which are of burning importance for Christianity, but that they may not even see themselves as religions in precisely the way in which Christianity sees itself as a religion. At the heart of Christianity, of Christian self-definition, is a creed, a set of statements to which the Christian is required to assent. To be fair, this is not the only way of looking at Christianity, and there is certainly room for, let us say, a historical or sociological approach. But within the history of Christianity itself a crucial emphasis has been placed on belief as a criterion of Christian identity. . . . In fact it is fair to say that theology occupies a central role in Christianity which makes it unique among the "religions" of the world.⁴

A theological or doctrinal approach to approaching religions is not comprehensive. One must also speak of the cultural, experiential, and historical dimensions, including consideration of various traditions' stories, symbols, rituals, and practices. In view of de Lange's analysis, it is critically important that evangelicals differentiate between the questions they themselves wish to raise concerning other faith traditions in view of evangelical convictions and the questions these traditions raise of themselves. It is important not to impose on another tradition evangelical methods and value judgments when seeking to assess these religions on their own terms. Evangelicals must learn to approach Mormons and Pagans from their own tradition's vantage point, including self-assessment pertaining to matters of internal coherence and personal appropriation, while also addressing evangelical concerns of

external correspondence, accounting for various traditions' claims that give rise to competing notions of ultimate reality.

Jesus is not a doctrinal proposition or system, but is paradigmatically important for assessing all truth claims regarding God from the Christian vantage point. Moreover, given that Jesus was incarnate in a given cultural milieu, we must present his claims and engage people in concrete terms, accounting for the web of their social settings—including stories, symbols, experiences, rituals, and practices. If we evangelicals wish to be fully biblical, we must

“ . . . Buddhists are not “ists” or “isms.” They are people. . . . Each person must be accounted for in individual and personal terms, as reflected in Jesus' encounters with the people in his day. . . . it is very important that I come to understand why this person is a Buddhist or Mormon or Pagan: what is it about the particular tradition that speaks to this person and engages him or her personally, holistically, and in particular terms? ”

approach people from an expansive framework, as our Lord did and does. This expansive framework has made it possible for me to approach people of good faith, who are on other paths, in good faith as unique representatives of their particular traditions. As a result, it has opened up doors for understanding, not misunderstanding, and heart to heart, life on life engagement at their centers of worship, in classroom sessions at my seminary, and over potluck dinners and one-on-one conversations over meals.⁵ 

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THE CULTURE OF COUNTERFEIT CHRISTIAN RELIGION:

Engaging the Unique Dimensions that Deter Effective Dialogue



John Morehead's lead article recommends that Christians adopt a missions approach to those in "new religious movements," viewing them "primarily as dynamic religious cultures rather than deviant systems of heretical doctrine." He argues that a "heresy-rationalist" approach will be less effective in ministry to Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, and those of other such groups because such an approach leads to hostility, a lack of caring and respect, an unbalanced focus on doctrine, and a failure to take into account the culture of these groups.

Of course, engagement with any person, regardless of his or her faith tradition, that is characterized by anger, disrespect, and belligerent confrontation not only deters effective dialogue but is generally un-Christlike. I also agree that there are key cultural elements that characterize new religious movements and that understanding these elements only enhances our effectiveness in sharing the gospel.

Culture of Novel Exclusivism

However, I would suggest that there are certain cultural elements that place some new religious movements into their own unique subset. Their primary social/cultural characteristic is that of *novel exclusivism*. A "novel exclusivist" group claims that despite its comparatively recent origin in the history of Christianity, it is the only true and right Christian religious organization currently on earth to the exclusion of every other religion or denomination. This view is common to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the United Pentecostal Church (Oneness/Jesus Only), and others that claim "Christian" identity. Because such groups rely heavily on their identification and association with Christianity while denying many of its core teachings, they are also referred to as "counterfeit" Christian religions. This cultural characteristic of novel exclusivism, however, is not shared by other new religious movements that do not purport to be Christian, such as Baha'i,

variations of Pagan spirituality, Wicca, or those movements with roots in Eastern mysticism or New Age philosophy and practice.

In this article I will share cultural lessons I've learned in 25 years of full-time ministry that has been a blend of cross-cultural missions and discernment-apologetics ministry oriented to exclusivist new religious movements. I have interacted with members and former members of these groups at nearly every level of authority in over a dozen countries. The cultural elements I address add dimensions to these exclusivist groups not commonly found in other new religious movements. Unfortunately, these cultural components are sometimes overlooked in more generalized discussions of new religious movements, but must be taken into account in order for true dialogue to take place. When ignored, Christians can come away from an encounter frustrated, confused, and even deceived. Effective engagement and evangelism of those in exclusivist groups/Christian counterfeits requires a careful, compassionate, Spirit-led blending of both apologetics and missiology.

This blended methodology has characterized the ministry of the Institute for Religious Research and is the result of not only my personal experience but that of dozens of other ministry colleagues. The tools we have developed have resulted in hundreds of people, including former LDS missionaries and bishops, not only leaving the LDS Church but also coming to vibrant, fruit-bearing faith in Christ.¹

Understanding the Culture of Counterfeits

A number of distinctive cultural dimensions characterize the exclusivist new religions. In addition to the *culture of novel exclusivism* already discussed, such characteristics include a *culture of organizational truth* (spiritual truth is whatever the organization currently says) and a *culture of persecution* (any questioning or critical evaluation of the group is considered persecution). Given the length constraints of this article, nothing more will be said about the above three characteristics so that I can briefly develop four other characteristics and explain their significance for effective engagement and evangelism.

1. Culture of membership. *Eternal life and right relationship with God are primarily tied to one's continued membership in the group and faithful adherence to the group's rules and rituals.*

Unlike evangelical Christian churches, which teach that salvation and eternal life are found in Christ alone regardless of one's denominational membership (or lack of it), exclusivist new religious movements regard membership as absolutely necessary for ultimate salvation, and consider leaving the religious organization as apostasy. Therefore, serious questioning or doubting of the organization (even if it does not involve questioning or doubting Christ) is portrayed as the first step toward losing one's salvation.

We can only effectively engage members of such groups when we recognize this cultural hesitancy (even aversion) to question or doubt, which is so different from the rest of our culture that seems so ready and willing to question anything and everything. As we interact we will seek first to establish relational trust that earns the right to question those things often taught to be unquestionable.

The important flip side is that until members are exposed to information that exposes the falsity and unreliability of the organization and they are prepared to reject the organization's exclusivist claims, they will have neither desire nor motivation to transfer their trust and allegiance from the organization to the true person and work of Jesus Christ. True concern and compassion should therefore embolden us to present carefully documented information that respectfully challenges the accepted culture of group membership for salvation.

2. Culture of authority. *Only teachings and interpretations of Scripture provided by the group (or in agreement with them) are to be accepted as true and inspired.*

This component is closely tied to the previous point. Failure to take it into account will often result in well-meaning Christians sharing Scripture or biblical teaching only to be told, "that is just your interpretation." Furthermore, the Christian's interpretation will be deemed invalid because they are not a part of the group. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses dismiss any views from Christians outside their sect as tainted by association with "Christendom," which is regarded as an expression of Babylon the Great. Mormons regard all Christians outside the LDS Church as lacking the "priesthood," a spiritual authority that can only be received through another Mormon.

This culture of authority and the assumption that only the group has the truth means that most group members will not consider an alternate point of view until the group's authority has been challenged. This is in essence what Jesus did with the Samaritan woman at the well. He gently but pointedly told her she was on the wrong spiritual path. "You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22).

3. Culture of insider language. *Christian doctrines are reinterpreted by redefining biblical and theological language.*

While members of exclusivist new religious groups reject traditional Christian beliefs, it is quite common for them to claim otherwise. For example, I've had both Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses claim to believe in salvation by grace alone once they knew I was a committed Christian. However, further dialogue and careful questioning revealed they had radically different understandings of what this meant. Mormons, for example, understand salvation by grace alone to mean that virtually all people will be resurrected with immortal bodies whether they believed in Christ in this life or not, but that such immortality may be experienced in a lower spiritual realm separated forever from the presence of God.

Had I not been aware of the group's unique interpretations, I would have wrongly believed the person shared a biblical understanding of salvation. This is why it is crucial that cross-cultural-mission approaches be informed by an understanding of the exclusivist group's redefinition of Christian terminology.

4. Culture of deception. *Use of deception, including the denial of accepted core teachings, is acceptable if it will advance the group's cause, protect the group's image, or assist in its proselytizing.*

The first time I encountered this cultural component I was surprised and stymied. While attending a Mormon temple open house in Latin America, an LDS Church leader denied the Mormon teaching that "God was once a man like us" as he stood in a circle of people who were asking questions. Surprised, I calmly challenged his denial, even quoting Joseph Smith from a book published by the LDS Church. He persisted in the denial, and not having the book at hand, I was unable to document my affirmation.

About four months later I was in a similar situation in Venezuela. When I expressed concern about the LDS teaching that God was once a man like us and had progressed to become a God, LDS

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DIALOGUE AND MISSION: The Way Forward



Evangelical Christians should welcome the new direction being offered by John Morehead in approaching other religions, especially as they exist in the modern West. What we used to call cults and more recently have termed new religions are indeed an important cultural artifact of our time and, in the form of some of their nineteenth-century exemplars, most notably the Latter-day Saints and the Jehovah's Witnesses, are having a significant global impact. If history offers us any insight, we can be assured that most of the new religions will be with us for the long haul, and a few will grow into significant religious bodies.

At the same time we are living in the midst of some unprecedented changes. The emergence of so many new religions has paralleled the radical growth in population that has seen the world's population increase from three billion in 1960 to seven billion today, while the United States has grown from 200 million to above 300 million in the same period. This radical growth allows room for all religions (not to mention irreligion) to grow simultaneously. Christianity has continued to grow spectacularly in the last generation even as secularists have organized and gained a new voice, older world religions have expanded, and new religions have proliferated. In the midst of this growth, however, adherence to Christianity has genuinely shrunk in its major bastion, Europe, and some of the older denominations have showed measurable decline in North America.

Possibly as important for the growth of Christianity, the end of colonialism has provoked a change in world mission. The loss of government support for missionary work has led to a revival of the world's religions, their development of a missionary impulse, and the demand for an end to secular privileges to Christians above those granted to other religions. Throughout much of the world the church faces some blowback for its alignments with often-repressive regimes in replacing a country's traditional religion. Since the 1970s, we have seen the reemergence of indigenous religions in Asia and Africa and must now encounter learned Buddhist, Muslim, and Hindu apologists. We can no longer think of Christianity as having a corner on theological and philosophical scholarship.

All the projections for the new generation suggest that Christianity will continue to grow numerically, but will remain the religious home

to about a third of the world's population. It is yet to be seen whether European Christianity will stop its decline. In the United States, Christianity will continue to grow, but, as it already approaches over 75 percent of support in the population, will likely not grow much more percentage-wise. The community of non-Christian religions (and of the anti-religious and non-religious) will remain a strong minority presence. While those who adhere to other than orthodox Christian perspectives are most visible in urban areas, they now are appearing in the rural countryside. We meet them as we shop, their children attend the public schools, and slowly they emerge on the public stage as entertainers, sports figures, and politicians. And while new religions are not simply the product of angry ex-Christians, we do notice that many Western adherents of other religions are former Christians who had a bad experience in the church in their younger years, some of whom are happy to testify of how they found light and truth in their new faith.¹

Most new religions fit into that narrow five percent of non-Christian religious groups in North America. They are Buddhist (Vipadsana meditation, Soka Gakkai), Hindu (Hare Krishna, Self-Realization Fellowship), Sikh (3HO Sikh Dharma), Shinto (Tenrikyo), and Muslim (Sufi Order). Some are adherents to the third Western religious tradition, esotericism (the new Gnostics, Scientology, Wicca), and many are new variant forms of Christianity or Judaism (Philadelphia Church of God, Kabbalah Centre).

I have been a long-time critic of what Morehead calls the rational-apologetic approach to the new religions. Its proponents have more often than not viewed the new religions as inferior forms of religion, which has led them to dismiss any need for understanding them, to denigrate them, and to see their adherents as misguided, duped, or even stupid.² This approach has, in my opinion been unproductive, in that it has led to few converts and done little to prevent the flow of people from the Christian community to them.

Dialogue appears to be the more productive way forward. On a practical level, dialogue, when done according to the rules, does produce understanding—the effects of the post-World War II Jewish-Christian dialogue being the most obvious example. On a secular level, we who reside in the West will have to work with members of new religions at our jobs, in social circles, and especially

with our children in the public schools. Some understanding of the values articulated by the different new religions, values that we also share, should produce a stronger cohesion in our own communities.

Even more practical, Christians in other lands often face discrimination and even persecution because in parts of Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, Christian churches are the new religions on the block. How we treat and interact with the strangers in our midst serves as a parable of the benefits of religious freedom and the possibilities of a religiously pluralistic society that can be and should be carried to other lands.

And on another level, as members of new religions show some interest in Christianity, our ability to build on the positive elements of their former faith will go a long way in welcoming them into a Christian worshipping community. There is nothing like dialogue, and the firsthand familiarization it gives us of other faiths, to assist us in our Christian mission.

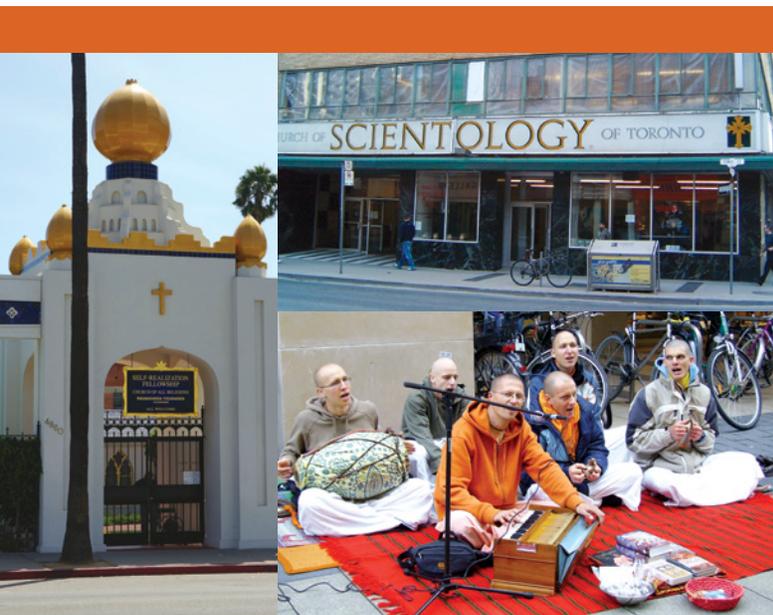
Having suggested some reasons to engage in dialogue, let us be clear that dialogue with the new religions is never easy. Like dialogue with the older faiths, it requires preparation and patience, and the ability to listen and be open to engaging the other. But the situation

with new religions offers additional problems. First, new religions are just that—new—and often they are concentrating so much on their own survival and establishment that they have yet to develop the tools for dialogue. They most often come from a learned tradition, but have yet to create an intelligencia (i.e., trained theologians). Some groups have been formed in reaction to an over-intellectualized approach to faith, which they see as destructive of spirituality. And, just as some Christians often see themselves as discriminated against and misunderstood, so many members of new religions have experienced discrimination and are surprised when anyone wishes to understand them.

Second, new religions are not all alike. When we label one a “cult” and now lump them together as “new religions,” it is easy to forget that they are very different from each other, and almost nothing we say about new religions in general, except that they are not like us, is true. Zen Buddhists differ from Wiccans as much as they do from Christianity. In like measure, Scientologists are very different from Hare Krishnas or members of the fundamentalist LDS. Both the secular cult awareness and Christian countercult movements faltered in their presupposition of the common shared traits of new religions.

That being said, there are many openings for dialogue. At present, a number of the new religions have developed a learned body of representatives who possess the ability to speak seriously about their faith and a willingness to engage like-minded Christians in conversation. One thinks immediately of the Unification Church, the Hare Krishnas, Pagans and Wiccans, Soka Gakkai, and Tenrikyo, and among the older “new religions,” of groups such as New Thought, Theosophy, and the Latter-day Saints, not to mention the more questionable new Christian movements such as Word of Faith Pentecostalism. All of these forms of faith show every sign of being with us for the foreseeable future. Just as we now train missionaries we send to foreign lands to understand the dominant faiths of the regions to which they go, we should be able to raise up Christian leaders who know and understand the world’s religions in their newer vibrant faiths that are now present and growing in the West. EIFD

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Left: The Self-Realization temple on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood, California.
Top: The church of Scientology in Toronto, Canada.
Bottom: A group of Hare Krishna men sing in downtown Leipzig, Germany.

PERSONAL ENCOUNTERS WITH NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS



The church's missional mandate to make disciples of the nations has inspired many Christians to evangelize adherents of new religions. Over the past half-century many lay ministries and parachurch groups have been created in North America and around the world that concentrate on reaching adherents of new religions. To some extent this concern for ministry to new religions has developed independently from professional missionary organizations and from academic theologians.¹

One way this evangelistic work has been shaped is via Christian apologetics. Here the task of evangelism is framed around addressing important belief-blockers that obstruct devotees of new religions from responding to the call to repentance and faith. In broad brushstrokes it is fair to say that a high percentage of Christian literature on new religions uses a standard analytical template. A typical strategy involves drawing attention to key statements made by teachers of new religions about the nature of God, the person and work of Christ, and biblical authority. The key statements are assessed and invariably rejected for their deviations from orthodox Christian teaching in light of an exegesis of biblical passages.²

It is helpful to step back from this corpus of literature and thoughtfully reflect on its effectiveness. Apologists affirm the twin mandates to make disciples (Matt 28:18–20; Acts 1:8) and to give reasons for faith (1 Pet 3:15). They take their cues from biblical warnings about false prophets (e.g., Deut 13:1–5; Matt 7:15–23; Acts 20:26–32; 2 Pet 2:1–3), and also from the example of the early church fathers' responding to heresies. At its best this approach empowers us to know why we believe what we believe. It can also have an impact on unorthodox groups that view the Bible as God's revelation. The mass conversion of the Worldwide Church of God in the 1990s from heterodox to orthodox belief is a rare but fruitful case in point.

However, there is an unwholesome underbelly in pop apologetics. It is one thing for the offense of the gospel to cut to our hearts. It is entirely another thing for devotees to be treated like spiritual lepers. If we see our encounters with devotees as akin to Luke Skywalker locked in combat with Darth Vader, then we are light-years away from the missionary mandate. There are plenty of unsavory cases, as Andrew McLean laments: "It is easy to parody another religion, and neopaganism is a parodist's delight."³ Missionary circles,

such as the Lausanne World Committee for Evangelization, has sounded a clarion call to root out bad behavior and to critically reflect on praxis.⁴

Another reflection concerns the assumption that all new religions are doctrinally based. The impression that we have truly understood a group once we complete the doctrinal comparisons is mistaken. Allied to this misleading impression is the reductionist tendency to opt for a one-size-fits-all method of evangelism. Jehovah's Witnesses and Christadelphians look to the Bible as divine revelation. However, to be a member of either group means your personal life story of hopes and fears is lived in the context of a distinct global subculture. It is pastorally insensitive to think we really know somebody once we figure out his or her "doctrines."

Many other movements do not start with the Bible or put much emphasis on creating a tidy parcel of doctrines. The eclectic and popular nature of the "self-spirituality" advocated by Oprah Winfrey eludes our efforts to sift it through a doctrinal template. A narrow doctrinal apologetic likewise hits a brick wall when pigeonholing Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love*. Most new religions place enormous emphasis on performing the correct rituals rather than on doctrine. To glimpse something of Wicca, Hare Krishna, and Siddha Yoga means paying much attention to what adherents practice in their rituals.

In recent years several missionary practitioners have invited the church to reevaluate its outlook on new religions. Too often we have taken a barren road by misconstruing Jesus' clashes with the Sadducees as a model for talking to devotees. We need to ask searching reflective questions: Am I truly representing the person of Christ to devotees? Am I a vessel of the Holy Spirit or just being plain arrogant in what I say and do? Am I deceiving myself by masking my fears and trying to win an argument at all costs?

We might find it more instructive to consider the person-centered approach of Jesus with Zaccheus (Luke 19:1–9) and the Samaritan woman (John 4:1–26), and of Peter with Cornelius (Acts 10:26–48). They were not "reached" by having their false doctrines debunked. Similarly, consider the way in which Paul addressed Athenian culture—one that was biblically illiterate (Acts 17:16–34). Like the other apostles' speeches in Acts, Paul emphasized the power of the risen Christ to change lives. His sermon had no Bible quotes but still followed the biblical plotline from creation to incarnation.

It is encouraging to see ministries among new religions enriched and transformed by learning lessons from cross-cultural missions. John Drane advises us to invest time in listening to people, being committed to journeying with them, and being realistic about mission.⁵ Drane is very wary of formulaic approaches that claim to deliver maximum dividends for minimal effort, particularly in efforts to reach people attracted to do-it-yourself forms of spirituality.

Ken Mulholland realized that Utah has a distinct culture saturated and unified by socially binding customs and experiences of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.⁶ The Latter-day Saints place a high premium on an inner witness of God's Spirit confirming the truth. This whole way of "knowing" is so remote from evangelical emphases on systematic theology.

We risk being vulnerable and experiencing culture shock when we step outside our comfort zones and meet devotees of new religions.

I have felt enriched by taking a prayerful, person-centered approach to dialogue and witness-bearing. Devotees of all stripes want to discover how they can become the best possible person they can be. It is thrilling and fruitful to invite people to start considering how Jesus Christ can enable them to understand who they are, and to explore through him who they might become. EIFD

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JOEL B. GROAT Response (continued from page 23)

leaders immediately and vehemently denied it, accusing me of repeating anti-Mormon lies, and asserting that Joseph Smith had taught no such thing. They were so insistent and indignant I thought perhaps they were not aware of this teaching. So, I took out my copy of *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* in Spanish. But as I flipped to page 427 to read Joseph Smith's declaration about God being a man like us, everything changed. The anger and indignation became patronizing acquiescence: "Of course that is what Joseph Smith taught; that is an important doctrine in our church."

I was stunned. They did know. In less than sixty seconds what had been vociferously denied was now placidly affirmed. I've since had similar experiences with both Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses, and have had similar scenarios play out in an LDS context in nearly a dozen countries. Jehovah's Witnesses call it "theocratic warfare strategy"; Mormons refer to it as "lying for the Lord." I have documented this deliberate deception at every level, from average members giving temple tours, to LDS missionaries who have visited our office, all the way to General Authorities lying in television interviews to the host commentator.

It is critical this culture of deception be taken into account when engaging those from exclusivist new religious movements. Most of us assume when we engage in dialogue about matters of personal faith that people will be honest about their religion's core beliefs. It is difficult to reconcile a person's devotion to their faith with an equal dedication to protect the image of the group or its leaders

using deceit and dishonesty. Yet, this has been amply documented, even apart from my extensive experience.²

I now make these cultural components an essential part of my teaching and training of evangelical pastors and other leaders overseas, so they can effectively engage exclusivist groups and prepare their people as well. Understanding how these groups view and relate to outsiders enables us to respond with patience and compassion in the face of denial and deception, and it can help us avoid unrealistic expectations during initial dialogue. Gently helping the person see their dishonesty, or the dishonesty of the group when their own leaders have misled them, often opens doors to further dialogue and the exposure of the other cultural elements already discussed. When this is motivated by a deep concern for him or her as a person who is first and foremost a fellow image bearer of God, he or she gets a taste of what it means to be genuinely cared for and opens up to a true dialogue of the heart in which the truth—in contrast to the lies they believed socially, emotionally, and spiritually—can truly begin to set them free. EIFD

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End Notes

Evangelical Approaches to New Religions: Countercult Heresy-Rationalist Apologetics, Cross-Cultural Missions, and Dialogue

- ¹ In the academic study of new religious movements there are a host of methodological issues for consideration. My focus in this essay is restricted to evangelical assumptions and perspectives. For a helpful introduction to the topic, see George D. Chryssides, *Exploring New Religions* (London and New York: Cassell, 1999).
- ² Philip Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). In keeping with my desires to avoid pejorative language, and in keeping with the academic literature on the topic, hereafter I will refer to these groups as new religious movements.
- ³ J. Gordon Melton, "From the Occult to Western Esotericism," in *Perspectives on Post-Christendom Spiritualities: Reflections on New Religious Movements and Western Spiritualities*, ed. Michael T. Cooper (Moring Press and Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 2010), available at <http://www.sacredtribespress.com>.
- ⁴ "'Nones' on the Rise," The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (October 9, 2012), <http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx>.
- ⁵ Elisabeth Drescher, "Does Record Number of Religious 'Nones' Mean Decline of Religiosity?" *Religion Dispatches* (October 9, 2012), http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/atheologies/6493/does_record_number_of_religious_%22nones%22_mean_decline_of_religiosity.
- ⁶ Christopher Partridge, "The Disenchantment and Re-Enchantment of the West: The Religio-Cultural Context of Western Christianity," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 74, no. 3 (2002): 250.
- ⁷ J. Gordon Melton, "The Countercult Monitoring Movement in Historical Perspective," in *Challenging Religion: Cults and Controversies*, ed. James Beckford and James V. Richardson (London: Routledge, 2003), 102–13.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 104.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 106.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ Jason C. Bivins, *Religion of Fear: The Politics of Horror in Conservative Evangelicalism* (London: Oxford University Press, 2008), 30.
- ¹² Philip Johnson, "The Aquarian Age and Apologetics," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 34, no. 2 (December 1997): 51–60. Johnson expands on this discussion in his *Apologetics, Mission & New Religious Movements: A Holistic Approach* (Salt Lake City, UT: Sacred Tribes Press, 2010), available at <http://www.sacredtribespress.com>. Countercultists sometimes take issue with this typology and nomenclature, but John Saliba has described Johnson's work in this area as "probably the most insightful, carefully articulated, and detailed analysis of a Christian approach to the new religious movements." John A. Saliba, *Understanding New Religious Movements*, 2nd ed. (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003), 321.
- ¹³ Johnson, *Apologetics, Mission & New Religious Movements*, 9.
- ¹⁴ Melton argues that Martin's significance to the countercult is so great that its history should be understood in terms of "before Martin, Martin's lifetime, and post-Martin developments" (Melton, "The Countercult Monitoring Movement," 103). In addition, Saliba also references Martin's work as exemplary among evangelical apologetic approaches to new religions (*Understanding New Religious Movements*, 203–39).
- ¹⁵ Johnson, *Apologetics, Mission & New Religious Movements*, 11.
- ¹⁶ Philip Johnson, Anne C. Harper, and John W. Morehead, eds., "Religious and Non-Religious Spirituality in the Western World ("New Age")," Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 45 (Sydney, Australia: Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization and Moring Theological College, 2004), <http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/lops/860-lop-45.html>.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 12; italics in original.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12–13.
- ¹⁹ Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe, *New Religions as Global Cultures: Making the Human Sacred* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997).
- ²⁰ Irving Hexham, Stephen Rost, and John W. Morehead II, eds., *Encountering New Religious Movements: A Holistic Evangelical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2004).
- ²¹ For example, see Larry J. Waters' review for Dallas Theological Seminary, <http://www.dts.edu/reviews/irving-hexham-encountering-new-religious-movements>.
- ²² Ole Skjerbaek Madsen, "New Religious Movements and New Spiritualities the Focus of the Lausanne Consultation on Christian Encounter with New Spiritualities" (February 2007), Lausanne World Pulse.com, <http://www.lausanneworldpulse.com/lausannereports/02-2007?pg=all>.
- ²³ Trinity Consultation on Post-Christendom Spiritualities, <http://www.lausanne.org/en/about/resources/email-newsletter/archive/457-lausanne-connecting-point-november-2008.html>.
- ²⁴ Michael T. Cooper, ed., *Perspectives on Post-Christendom Spiritualities: Reflections on New Religious Movements and Western Spiritualities* (Sydney, Australia: Moring Press and Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 2010).
- ²⁵ J. Gordon Melton, "Emerging Religious Movements in North America: Some Missiological Reflections," *Missiology* 28, no. 1 (2000): 85–98.
- ²⁶ Douglas E. Cowan, *Bearing False Witness? An Introduction to the Christian Countercult* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, 2003).
- ²⁷ Douglas Cowan, "Evangelical Christian Countercult Movement," in *Introduction to New and Alternative Religions in America*, vol. 1: *History and Controversies*, ed. Eugene V. Gallagher and Michael Ashcraft (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, 2006), 143–64.
- ²⁸ Myron B. Penner, *The End of Apologetics: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 132.
- ²⁹ John A. Saliba, "Dialogue with the New Religious Movements: Issues and Prospects," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 30, no. 1 (1993): 54.
- ³⁰ Saliba, *Understanding New Religious Movements*, 220.
- ³¹ Terry C. Muck, "Evangelicals and Interreligious Dialogue," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 36, no. 4 (1993): 517–29.
- ³² J. Gordon Melton, "New Religious Movements: Dialogues Beyond Stereotypes and Labels," in *Christian Approaches to Other Faiths*, ed. Alan Race and Paul M. Hedges (London: SCP Press, 2008): 308–23.
- ³³ Craig L. Blomberg, "The Years Ahead: My Dreams for Mormon-Evangelical Dialogue," *Evangelical Interfaith Dialogue*, Fall 2012, 8–10.
- ³⁴ Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997).
- ³⁵ Robert L. Millet and Gerald R. McDermott, *Claiming Christ: A Mormon-Evangelical Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007); and Dr. Robert L. Millet and Rev. Gregory C. V. Johnson, *Bridging the Divide: The Continuing Conversation Between a Mormon and an Evangelical* (Rhinebeck, NY: Monkfish, 2007).
- ³⁶ Philip Johnson and Gus diZerega, *Beyond the Burning Times: A Pagan and Christian in Dialogue*, ed. John W. Morehead (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2008); John W. Morehead, "Guest Post: Pagan-Christian Dialogue, Mistrust, and a Difficult (But Needful) Way Forward," Sermons from the Mound (March 14, 2013), at Patheos, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/sermonsfromthemound/2013/03/guest-post-pagan-christian-dialogue-mistrust-and-a-difficult-but-needful-way-forward/>.
- ³⁷ Gina A. Bellofatto, "Evangelicals and Interfaith Dialogue: A New Paradigm," Lausanne World Pulse (May 2013), <http://www.lausanneworldpulse.com/1224?pg=all>.
- ³⁸ For a consideration of the differences between interfaith dialogue and religious diplomacy, see my essay "Interfaith and Religious Difference: A Dialogue About Dialogue" (February 8, 2013), at Patheos Evangelical, <http://www.patheos.com/Evangelical/Interfaith-and-Religious-Difference-John-Morehead-02-08-2012.html>.
- ³⁹ Saliba, "Dialogue with the New Religious Movements," 54.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁴¹ The Foundation for Religious Diplomacy has developed a set of guidelines called “The Way of Openness” that provides religious rivals and critics with a way to engage in conversations about their fundamental differences while building trust. This enables partners to engage each other in civility while maintaining a peaceful tension in their unresolvable differences. To learn more, visit <http://www.religious-diplomacy.org>.

⁴² Bob Robinson, *Jesus and the Religions: Retrieving a Neglected Example for a Multi-cultural World* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 39. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁴ Derek Flood, “The Way of Peace and Grace,” *Sojourners*, January 2012, 34–37, <http://sojo.net/magazine/2012/01/way-peace-and-grace>.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Common Misconceptions of New Religious Movements

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³ Johnson, Harper, and Morehead, “Religious and Non-Religious Spirituality,” p. 13.

⁴ Patheos Library, “Paganism,” <http://www.patheos.com/Library/Pagan.html>.

⁵ The Watchtower, “Our Active Leader Today,” September 15, 2010, p. 27; James E. Faust, “Continuing Revelation,” *Semiannual General Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (April 1996).

⁶ Wicca.com, “Various Wiccan Traditions,” <http://wicca.com/celtic/wicca/wiccas.htm>.

Overview of Beliefs and Practices

¹ Patheos Library, “Jehovah’s Witnesses: Rituals and Worship,” <http://www.patheos.com/Library/Jehovahs-Witnesses/Ritual-Worship-Devotion-Symbolism>.

² Jehovah’s Witnesses Official Media Website: “Our Beliefs,” <http://www.jw-media.org/aboutjw/article32.htm>.

³ Jehovah’s Witnesses Official Media Website: “Our Relationship to the State,” <http://www.jw-media.org/aboutjw/article11.htm#neutrality>.

⁴ Patheos Library, “Paganism: Rites and Ceremonies,” <http://www.patheos.com/Library/Pagan/Ritual-Worship-Devotion-Symbolism/Rites-and-Ceremonies.html>.

⁵ ReligiousTolerance.org, “Wicca: Overview of Practices, Tools, Rituals, etc.,” http://www.religioustolerance.org/wic_prac.htm.

⁶ LDS.org, “Godhead,” <http://www.lds.org/topics/godhead?lang=eng>.

⁷ Preach My Gospel, “Laws and Ordinances,” p. 83. http://www.lds.org/languages/additionalmanuals/preachgospel/PreachMyGospel___00_00_Complete___36617_eng_000.pdf.

⁸ Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Why Do We Need Prophets?” *Liahona* (March 2012).

From Fear to Openness: Witness and Boundary-Maintenance in Evangelical Approaches to New Religions

¹ Irvine Robertson, *What the Cults Believe* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 9.

² *Ibid.*, 12–13.

³ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), 54–55.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁷ David J. Bosch, “Evangelism: Theological Currents and Cross-Currents Today,” in *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church*, ed. Paul W. Chilcote and Lacey C. Warner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 13–14.

A Christological and Trinitarian Approach to Interfaith Dialogue

¹ See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, I/1: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 111–12.

² Donald G. Bloesch, *Christian Foundations*, vol. 1: *A Theology of Word and Spirit: Authority and Method in Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 190. Bloesch will later refer to Barth’s connection of this threefold model of the Word of God to the unity within the Trinity involving the Father, Son, and Spirit (p. 314 n. 10). See also *Church Dogmatics, I/1*, 120–24.

³ See my blog post, “Mormons and Buddhists are not ‘Isms’ or ‘Ists.’ They’re People” (April 17, 2012), Uncommon God, Common Good at Christian Post Blog, <http://blogs.christianpost.com/uncommon-God-common-good/mormons-and-buddhists-are-not-isms-or-ists-theyre-people-9409/> (accessed on 7/1/2013).

⁴ Nicholas de Lange, *Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 3.

⁵ For example, see my blog posts, Uncommon God, Common Good at Patheos Blogs: “Why Did the Buddhists and the Evangelical Christians Cross the Road? To Have a Potluck” (June 24, 2013), <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/uncommongodcommongood/2013/06/evangelicals-and-buddhists-share-and-probe-a-unique-and-fruitful-dialogue-in-portland/>; “Multi-Faith Discourse: Beyond Lampion Tract Propaganda” (June 22, 2013), <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/uncommongodcommongood/2013/06/multi-faith-discourse-beyond-lampion-tract-propaganda/>. See also my essay “Table Fellowship with Our Buddhist Neighbors for Beloved Community,” to be published in 2013 in the Association of Theological Schools’ journal, *Theological Education*. The article is based on the report for the grant received by the seminary and university’s Institute for the Theology of Culture as part of the ATS Hospitality and Pastoral Practices project to work with Buddhists in our community to develop practices of hospitality and neighborliness.

The Culture of Counterfeit Christian Religion: Engaging the Unique Dimensions that Deter Effective Dialogue

¹ A recent caller to IRR reported they were aware of at least 300 people who had left the LDS church as a result of our *Lost Book of Abraham* DVD. They estimated at least two-thirds had also come to faith in Christ.

² See for example LDS employee Ken Clark’s extensive article titled “Lying for the Lord,” online at <http://www.mormonthink.com/lying.htm>, and Helen Whitney’s documented experiences with LDS deception during the making of her PBS documentary *The Mormons*, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p34EYx0fq2Q>.

Dialogue and Mission: The Way Forward

¹ See, for example, Maria M. Ebrahimji and Zahra T. Suratwala, eds., *I Speak for Myself: American Women on Being Muslim* (White Cloud Press, 2011); or Bhikkhuni Miao Kwang Sudharma, *Wonderful Light: Memoirs of an American Buddhist Nun* (Aeon Publishing, 2007); or Sirona Knight, *A Witch Like Me: The Spiritual Journeys of Today’s Pagan Practitioners* (Career Press, 2008).

² This understanding is most clearly imbedded in the very name of the Berkeley-based countercult organization, the Spiritual Counterfeits Project.

Praxis: Personal Encounters with New Religious Movements

¹ See my analysis, “Apologetics, Mission and New Religious Movements: A Holistic Approach,” *Lutheran Theological Journal* 36 (2002): 99–111.

² For example, Walter R. Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1985); Ron Rhodes, *The Challenge of the Cults and New Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).

³ Andrew J. McLean, “Neopaganism: Is Dialogue Possible?” *Lutheran Theological Journal* 36 (2002): 112.

⁴ See “Religious and Non-Religious Spirituality in the Western World (‘New Age’),” *Lausanne Occasional Paper 45* (2004), at <http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/lops/860-lop-45.html>.

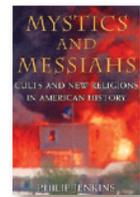
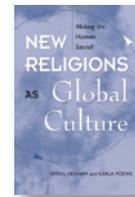
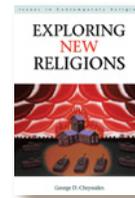
⁵ John Drane, *Do Christians Know How to Be Spiritual: The Rise of New Spirituality and the Mission of the Church* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2005).

⁶ Kenneth Mulholland, “Bridging the Divide,” in *Encountering New Religious Movements*, ed. Irving Hexham, Stephen Rost, and John W. Morehead II (Grand Rapids: Kregel 2004).

Further Exploration of New Religious Movements in the U.S.

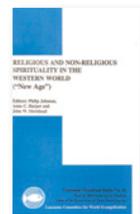
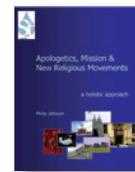
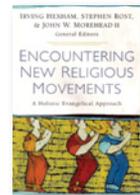
Understanding New Religions

- George D. Chryssides, *Exploring New Religions* (London and New York: Cassell, 1999).
- Lorne L. Dawson, *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
- Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe, *New Religions as Global Cultures: Making the Human Sacred* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997).
- Philip Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- John A. Saliba, *Understanding New Religious Movements*, 2nd ed. (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003).



Cross-Cultural Missions

- Michael T. Cooper, ed., *Perspectives on Post-Christendom Spiritualities: Reflections on New Religious Movements and Western Spiritualities* (Sydney, Australia: Morling Press and Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 2010), electronic version available at www.sacredtribespress.com.
- Irving Hexham, Stephen Rost, and John W. Morehead II, eds., *Encountering New Religious Movements: A Holistic Evangelical Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2004).
- Philip Johnson, *Apologetics, Mission & New Religious Movements: A Holistic Approach* (Salt Lake City, UT: Sacred Tribes Press, 2010), available at <http://www.sacredtribespress.com>.
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Dialogue

- Philip Johnson and Gus diZerega, *Beyond the Burning Times: A Pagan and Christian in Dialogue*, ed. John W. Morehead (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2008).
- J. Gordon Melton, "New Religious Movements: Dialogues Beyond Stereotypes and Labels," in *Christian Approaches to Other Faiths*, ed. Alan Race and Paul M. Hedges, 308–23 (London: SCP Press, 2008).
- Paul Louis Metzger, *Connecting Christ: How to Discuss Jesus in a World of Diverse Paths* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012).
- John A. Saliba, "Dialogue with the New Religious Movements: Issues and Prospects," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 30, no. 1 (Winter 1993): 51–80.



With this story we are pleased to initiate a new online resource for readers of this journal. On a regular basis we will feature case studies from Christians in diverse contexts around the world who, like Ramesh in the story below, are attempting to translate their faith as faithful followers of Jesus. Part one of his story is printed here and part two is available online: www.fuller.edu/eifd.

A Hindu-Christian Funeral: Interfaith Dialogue or Capitulation?

Ramesh Chand

I was born into a Hindu family. My father worked in a temple. Both of my parents were sick when I was born. When I was about four years old, my parents' health worsened to the point where it was no longer safe for my sister and me to remain at home. We were sent to a boarding school (Children's Home). It would be 16 years before I lived with my parents again. At the Children's Home, which was run by the Reformed Presbyterian Church, I was educated and I learnt about Jesus.

When I was 16 years old, I received Jesus Christ as my saviour. My parents did not approve of my decision because they thought that this meant I would cut myself off from the family and rebel against my family obligations. However, my desire was to share Jesus Christ with my parents. I wanted to honour my father and mother as God commanded in the Bible. On one of the visiting days in the Children's Home, I gave a Bible to my parents and promised to take care of them. Since then, Jesus became another god for my parents. Years later, when I went home, I saw the Bible placed next to Krishna's idol.

In 2004, while I was in my first year of postgraduate study, my mother called to tell me my father was seriously ill. He had suffered another stroke that caused multi-organ failure. His condition was complicated by his diabetes. By the time I reached home the doctors had given up on my father's health. My father, realizing that he was going to die, started the preparations for his death. According to a promise to his gods and goddess, he shaved his head

and beard (which was a mark of his office as a priest) and offered his hair to them. In his last days, he talked constantly about his religion and my faith in Jesus Christ. He wanted to change, but due to communal and social pressure, he did not dare to take that stand. His last words were that he was proud of me and that sending me to a Christian institution was a good decision. His death led to one of the most challenging parts of my interfaith dialogue.

As the only son in my family, the funeral responsibilities for my father were placed solely on my shoulders. I could not ask anyone else to perform the funeral procedures. According to Hindu belief, if I abandoned my responsibilities and did not lead the cremation, the soul of my father would not rest in peace. Moreover, according to social custom, I would be expelled from the community and my family.

Having an intimate knowledge of the requirements of the funeral and cremation, I dreaded what I would have to do. Many times I wished that I could just leave and forsake my family responsibilities. I could call it a sacrifice for the Lord. After all, should I not leave my father and mother to follow Jesus? I considered leaving but my mother wept inconsolably and asked me to fulfill the funeral duties so that the soul of her husband could rest in peace.

During this difficult time, I called friends and teachers for their guidance on my participation in the cremation procedure. Most of the views suggested finding an alternative to actual participation in the cremation ceremonies because it would be very difficult not to compromise my faith in that situation. However, there were a few Christian friends who told me that the fulfillment of the cremation was also part of honouring my parents, although they had no ideas as to how I would lead the Hindu cremation ceremony without compromising my faith. However, they assured me of their constant prayer support. In this most difficult time in my life, I cried to the Lord and prayed like Namaan (2 Kings 5:18), "I will honor my parents even in death, and while I do so, if by mistake I stumble, the Lord please pardon your servant."

