

MINISTRY TO ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUALITIES IN RELIGIOUSLY PLURAL AMERICA: MOVING BEYOND CONFRONTING "CULTS"

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By John W. Morehead

Several years ago the newsletter of the Evangelical Missions Information Service noted that due to successful evangelistic efforts the number of unreached people in Zaire had shrunk to "less than 2 percent of the country's population."¹ This was the good news. The bad news was that while the church enjoyed evangelistic success it also became a mission field itself as missionaries from a variety of new religions as well as some old traditions multiplied at the expense of Christian churches. Unfortunately, this scenario is repeated time and again around the world, symptomatic of a global missions and apologetic challenge for the church.

In obedience to the Great Commission missionaries, and missiologists have devised effective evangelistic strategies in order to reach thousands of people groups within the world religions of Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and folk and tribal religionists in their home countries. This is as it should be. Our Lord commanded the church to make disciples of the nations (Mat. 28:19), referring not to individuals defined by geopolitical boundaries so much as distinct people groups defined more by a social structure that incorporates not only the obvious elements such as language and cuisine, but also worldview and religious considerations as well.

But while the missions community has recognized the people groups of the world religions, it has not always recognized the importance of reaching the millions of unreached peoples involved in new religious movements, new age, and neo-Pagan groups and other religious traditions that have taken root in Western society. Estimates vary as to the number of new religions in North America, with a conservative estimate at somewhere between 700 and 1,000.² Examples of growing new religions include not only the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (Jehovah's Witnesses), but also the Brotherhood of the Cross and the Star, Iglesia ni Cristo, Mahikari, Rastafarianism, Santeria, Siddha Yoga, Umbanda, Western esotericism, the New Spirituality (or new age), as well as emerging Do-It-Yourself Spiritualities, Western Hinduism, Islam, and revitalized forms of missionary Judaism. The continuing forces of modernization, secularization, and globalization may provide the social context for the continued growth and spread of religious groups and movements such as these and others around the globe. The new religions and world religions in the West are no longer fringe cultural phenomena, but represent serious cultural and religious movements worthy of attention by missionary strategists, career missionaries, and evangelical academics.

Yet despite the continued growth and impact of these global groups and movements, little serious, concentrated missionary effort has been undertaken by evangelicals to reach this mission field. A number of individuals and ministries have arisen to meet this challenge comprising the evangelical "counter-cult" community. Their efforts have resulted in the production of a number of resources in response to these movements, but the bulk of these materials have focused on apologetic refutation of a given group's doctrine as heresy in contrast to Christian orthodoxy. While an emphasis upon fidelity to biblical orthodoxy is important in order to establish clear doctrinal boundaries for the Christian community (1 Pet. 3:15; Jude 3), it might be argued that "counter-cult" community's use of apologetic refutation as a model for evangelism has been largely unsuccessful. The biblical example would appear to define successful evangelism not merely in terms of how much biblical truth is defended, but rather in terms of receptor-oriented communication of the gospel so that the receptor can understand the gospel in their cultural frame of reference. The differing cross-cultural missions response by evangelicals to world religions in contrast to the primarily apologetic response to new religions is curious. As Australian lecturer Philip Johnson stated, "When encountering world religions the tools of a culturally informed, contextual missiology are employed to reach and disciple adherents. Yet, whenever new religions are encountered we reach for the apologetic toolkit rather than using missiological tools."³

The challenge of new religions provides an opportunity for missiology to benefit the church. Several important steps can be taken by missiologists, missions organizations, and missionaries that will improve the health of the church around the world, and likely result in greater evangelistic successes. The following recommendations are presented for consideration.

1. First, missiology can work to reframe evangelical conceptions of new religions as distinct religious or spiritual cultures rather than primarily as heretical systems or “cults.” The notion that new religions constitute unreached people groups or cultures is not new. In June 1980 the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization formally recognized new religious movements as unreached people groups. By conceptualizing new religions as cultures or people groups we can then understand the important cultural and social, as well as religious considerations necessary to reaching them. Conceptualizing new religions beyond heresy and more along the lines of religious cultures will bring the evangelical response to new religions more in keeping with traditional missionary responses to world religions.
2. Second, missiology can help contextualize the gospel for the cultures of new religions. In traditional evangelical methodologies the message presented to the new religions has been speaker-oriented, focusing on the apologist's cultural matrix and theological concerns often to the neglect of the target culture of the new religionist. The evangelical has often been unaware that a mere monologue is taking place, and often times the evangelical speaker assumes the gospel message has been understood and rejected. The application of principles of cross-cultural missions can help in the development of culturally appropriate evangelistic models. Promising work has already been in this regard such as the *Bridges* program developed by Salt Lake Seminary for reaching Latter-day Saints,⁴ contextualized mission strategies for reaching Wiccans and new age adherents through booth ministries by Philip Johnson and The Community of Hope in Australia,⁵ and a culturally effective outreach to Iglesia ni Cristo by Anne Harper in the Philippines.⁶ The exploration of these creative mission strategies by missiologist will aid in the development of additional models desperately needed on the world's mission fields.
3. Incorporate missiological studies on new religion at evangelical institutions. Very few evangelical academic institutions devote serious attention to the study of new religions on the mission field. Missiologists who teach at Christian colleges, universities, and seminaries might integrate missions studies with courses on new religious movements.
4. Create formal relationships between missions and “counter-cult” organizations. Missions and counter-cult organizations might explore the establishment of formal relationships that will result in a number of helpful endeavors, including the creation of cooperative internships. Missions organizations can have their staff trained in mission to new religions in preparation for the mission field, and in turn, “counter-cult” ministers can be given internships in a missions organization to incorporate missions principles into “counter-cult” ministry. These relationships will not only benefit missionaries in training and “counter-cult” ministers, but can also serve as a channel for retired missionaries to focus their energies in meaningful ways.
5. Provide seminary students with field experience. To raise awareness among a future generation of missionaries and missiologists, we might explore ways in which students pursuing missions studies can be given practical field experience in sharing the gospel with adherents of new religions. Such programs would include practical assignments such as an interview with a Mormon or a Wiccan high priestess, for example. This interview would then result in an essay prepared by the student where they would

explore the theological, missiological, and apologetic issues that arise from such encounters.

In addition to the above recommendations whereby missiology can benefit the evangelical response to new religions, the “counter-cult” community’s emphasis upon fidelity to biblical orthodoxy in response to heresy can also benefit the missions community. In sharing his concerns about the dangers of syncretism, and the definition of orthodoxy and heresy on the world’s mission fields, David Hesselgrave has stated, “Not all missiologists appear to share my concern, but it does seem to me that insofar as dialogue and cooperation can be achieved, the biblical commitment and concern for orthodoxy that has characterized counter-cultists for generations might well serve to focus added light upon complex faith issues that plague missiology today. That light should be highly valued because, in the final analysis, (missions) work without (biblical) faith is dead.”⁷

The challenge and opportunity posed by the new religions is monumental. If we do not respond in obedience to our evangelistic mandate, surely we must respond in order to perpetuate the Christian faith in our postmodern climate of religious diversity, where evangelicalism hovers on the cultural fringe. As David Hesselgrave has stated, “During the era of modern missions, evangelical missionaries have focused on adherents of the major religions and, especially, on folk religionists. As we enter a new century and new millennium it is becoming increasingly apparent that we must also focus on millions who are being caught up in new religious movements emanating from both East and West. They constitute not only a new ‘mission field,’ but also one of our most aggressive competitors for the allegiance of multiplied millions who are turning away from the faiths of their fathers.” As international mission leaders prepare for Lausanne 2004 in Thailand, it is my hope that the often-neglected mission fields of the new religions and world religions receive the attention of the missions community in fulfillment of the Great Commission.

John W. Morehead is a missionary with the Neighboring Faiths Project, as well as co-founder and co-editor of *Sacred Tribes: Journal of Mission to New Religions* <www.sacredtribes.com>. Along with Irving Hexham and Stephen Rost, Mr. Morehead has co-edited and contributed a chapter in the book *Encountering New Religious Movements* (Kregel Publications, 2004).

- ¹ Bradley Hill, "Future of Evangelism in Zaire Demands New Tactics," *PULSE* 22, no. 3 (February 13, 1987), 2.
- ² J. Gordon Melton, "Emerging Religious Movements in North America: Some Missiological Reflections," *Missiology: An International Review* 28, no. 1 (January 2000), 89.
- ³ Philip Johnson, "Apologetics, Mission & New Religious Movements: A Holistic Approach," *Sacred Tribes: Journal of Christian Missions to New Religious Movements* 1, no. 1 (Summer/Fall 2002), available from from <http://www.sacredtribes.com/issue1/apolog1.htm>.
- ⁴ See the website description at http://www.slts.edu/Conferences_Programs/bridges.htm.
- ⁵ Philip Johnson, "Exhibition evangelism & the local church: Reaching people in festivals and markets, available online at www.crossover.baptist.org.au/Resources/TM-PhilipJohnson.pdf.
- ⁶ Anne Harper, "The Iglesia ni Cristo and Evangelical Christianity," *Journal of Asian Mission* 3, no. 1 (2001), 101-119, available online at www.pts.edu/jam/01-1/a-harper.pdf.
- ⁷ David J. Hesselgrave, "New and Alternative Religious Movements: Some Perspectives of a Missiologist." Paper delivered at a national meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society. Retrieved 26 September 2002, from www.emnr.org/articles/new_movements.htm.