

LCMS Theological Educators' Conference  
Dallas, Texas, March 7-9, 2003

**PART I**  
**THE MYTH OF SECULARIZATION AND THE RISE OF**  
**NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS**

Eric Moeller and Douglas Rutt

“There is an enormous religious change going on across the world, all the time. It’s massive, it’s complex, and it’s continual.” That is how David Barrett, founder and editor of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, described the impact of what are called New Religious Movements, or *NRMs* (Lester, 1). While Peter Berger stated in 1968 that few religious believers would be around by the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, in fact the opposite has proven to be the case. Indeed, Peter Berger later modified his view somewhat, noting in 1980 that there had been an impressive resurgence and revival of religion in the third world, the Soviet Union, and even the Western world (Berger 1980), which, while it did not cause him to give up on the secularization theory, did impress upon him the “immense social pressure of religion” (Berger).

In 2002 the *Atlantic Monthly* reported that “religion is, if anything, on the rise” (Lester, 1). In a March 2005 article in *Christianity Today* entitled “The Twilight of Atheism,” Alister MacGrath stated “atheism is in trouble,” adding “The future looks nothing like the godless and religionless world so confidently predicted 40 years ago.” He highlights the fact that the ideas on religion of famous atheists like Sigmund Freud, who believed that religion was ultimately unhealthy and a negative factor in one’s personality development, have pretty much fallen by the wayside. He points out that religion in the modern world restores a sense of community that people need. And thirdly, he points to the remarkable ability of Christianity to remake itself in order to address challenges posed by society and culture. Finally MacGrath concludes:

Might atheism have run its course, and now give way to religious renewal? The tides of cultural shift have, for the time being, left atheism beached on the sands of modernity, while Westerners explore a new postmodern interest in the forbidden fruit of spirituality. (MacGrath 2005)

In a sense, this topic is a continuation of the presentation I gave two years ago at this conference on the “Future of Christianity.” In that presentation, my concern was the global shift in the “center of gravity” of Christianity to the non-Western world, and the implications of that shift for Western theological education. At one point, I touched upon the idea that globalization would result in the demise of religion. I said that “while it continues to suffer the pressures, hostility and persecution of secularism, the idea of religion, including Christianity, is not dying out. This is contrary to the assertions of writers like Steve Bruce,<sup>1</sup> who insist that, with modernization, the increase in quality of life, well being, affluence, education, etc., there is this sort of law of sociology which

---

<sup>1</sup>Steve Bruce’s latest book, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West*, published by Blackwell, and Edward Norman’s book, *Secularisation*, published by Continuum, are reviewed by Philip Jenkins in the November/December 2002 issue of *Books and Culture* (Jenkins 2002a).

says that religion will not be needed any longer and will disappear. Even many secular sociologists of religion have given up on that thesis.<sup>2</sup>

Of concern in this presentation is the reality that the expression of religiosity in our world today, even in the Western world, often departs significantly from the beliefs of the world's major traditional religions, including Christianity. Sociologists of religion have pointed to several factors which have created this situation, in which New Religious Movements are springing up at an amazing rate, and gathering followers from all segments of society. While MacGrath sees the new interest in exploring the "forbidden fruit of spirituality" as a positive sign for the future of Christianity—and I hope he is right—there is much to be concerned about also, as people seem to be attracted to a variety of beliefs often mixed together in a syncretistic cocktail that is antithetical to orthodox Christianity.

Witness the fascination with the Dan Brown's book, *The Da Vinci Code*. I am convinced that people are not attracted to this book just because it is a good suspense thriller. It is still number two on the New York Times best seller list, and hasn't even been released in paperback yet, as it continues to sell at an amazing rate (check stats). What is interesting, and troubling, is that many people who read that book, return asking for more books on Mary Magdalene, the Gnostic Gospels, The Gospel According to St. Thomas, or anything else to tickle their ears. Note the recent article in the *American Way* magazine as you came down here on Rosslyn Chapel in Scotland (?). It is evidently besieged by visitors, their well worn copies of *The Da Vinci Code* under their arms, who are on a spiritual pilgrimage looking for signs of the Holy Grail, etc. The author reports that when he visited he saw a young man gazing at the ceiling. "You can really feel this place is hiding something," the young man whispered. "It's just a matter of figuring it out" (Honoré, 71).

In the "Oh Gods" article of 2002, David Barrett stated that he and his fellow researchers have found more than "nine thousand and nine hundred distinct and separate religions in the world" on their list, to which they add two to three new religions every day. He adds, "What this means is that new religious movements are not just a curiosity, which is what people in the older denominations think they are. They are a very serious subject" (Lester, 2).

## **PART II**

### **FROM GARLAND(GODLAND), TEXAS TO WOUNDED KNEE, SOUTH DAKOTA: A MISSIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS**

In popular consciousness, new religious movements seem to run the gamut from the bizarre to the tragic, as I highlight here in the title to this presentation. Right here in this metro area a few years back a group of people had gathered expecting the imminent end of the world in Garland. They were mostly of Taiwanese background and believed the name Garland was significant, it sounded to them like "Godland". When the end did not come as they expected, they disbanded and faded from the scene, and seem to have

---

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1986, in which the authors postulate that secularization, rather than leading to the demise of religion, actually maintains and perpetuates religion, as people react against it.

been of little social consequence. On the other hand, one hundred fifteen years ago and several hundred miles to the north, the Native American Ghost Dance religion led to the tragic Wounded Knee Massacre. In both cases, the superficial observer simply concluded that the religious participants were crazed and deluded and that was as far as the interpretation went. Often theologians don't go much further in their understanding. Gordon Melton, a scholar and encyclopedist of worldwide religions, in an article entitled "Emerging Religious Movements in North America: Some Missiological Reflections," recently stated: "The Christian community has generally dismissed [new religions] as 'cults,' and response has been amateurish and inadequate. New religions are serious religious phenomena destined to be part of the religious landscape for the foreseeable future"(Melton:85). Melton has put his finger on something that is important for us as Christians, theologians and church leaders: How should we respond to new religious movements(NRMs)? Our answer to this question depends on two things: 1) direction from the Holy Scriptures and 2) understanding of what NRMs really are and what they mean for their adherents.

First of all, what does the Scripture have to say about our response and attitude towards New Religious Movements. Paul's experience in Athens and his sermon on Mars Hill provide us with a good place to begin. We read in Acts 17:16 that "while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked(*παροξυνετο*) within him as he saw that the city was full of idols." The Greek word used here is *παροξυνομαι*, "to be irritable, be greatly upset," from which we have the English word paroxysm. This is a proper response to much that we see in New Religions. When we see the creativity of human religiosity, when the blind and idolatrous nature of humankind makes itself known with endless new religious inventions, it sends the zealous believer into paroxysms of distress. All false teaching is spiritual poison. We are not humanists.

I have a text written by a sociologist of religion, Robert Ellwood, on my shelf, a survey of world religions. He concludes, after reviewing the riotous diversity of religious belief through the ages that "some of us may have found that just to be in the presence of all this variegated richness is in itself an awareness-expanding, even a religious experience"(Ellwood:464). We cannot take such a position. We know that "the god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the Gospel of Christ, who is the image of God"(II Cor. 4:4). We cannot rejoice in human religious creativity; we must be saddened and even angered by it.

Having said that, I believe we have something to learn from the humanistic interpreters of religion as well. They take very seriously the human side of religion and attempt to interpret its complexities. We should do likewise. As theologians we have a tendency to begin and end our examination of new religions, cults and sects with theological critique, and this can stand in the way of a deeper understanding of the humanity of adherents to new religions or of those who are drawn to their teaching. In missiology, we speak of the importance of receptor-oriented communication. Effective Gospel communication requires us to put ourselves in the hearers' shoes, to see things from his/her point of view, and to connect the message with his/her experience.

We see Paul doing that in Acts 17. Though his spirit was provoked by the idolatry he saw in Athens, he also looked for bridges of understanding in what he saw. He carefully observed the religious practice of the Athenians and he stooped down to read the inscriptions on their altars. He not only was distressed by their error, he also

viewed them and their religious practice with a sympathetic eye. Although he knew that human religiosity does not lead to God--“that the unspiritual man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God for they are foolishness to him and he is not able to understand them”--at the same time, he recognized the reality of a natural knowledge of God and of the yearning for salvation and hope that is found in the hearts of all men. So he said to the Athenians: “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious.” Paul acknowledged the commonality of experience of all human beings. “From one man [God] made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the time set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, although He is not far from each one of us.”

It is this human side of religious creativity that we should seek to understand and appreciate so that we can build bridges of communication for the Gospel. This is where the tools of social science can be useful to us. Social science has long recognized that the phenomenon of new religions is not a marginal one involving a few deranged individuals. Rather, it lies at the heart of human experience in thousands of cultures across the world and across history. Wherever societies are changing rapidly and where different cultures are rubbing against each other and influencing one another, we see the phenomena of new religious movements. They are not just the products of unstable minds. Social science has not been able to establish any firm link between psychopathology and adherence to new religions. The courts in this country have followed this realization, ruling out the idea of collective psychosis or brainwashing as a valid way for understanding the experience of cult members. “Since *U.S. vs. Fishman* in 1990, the courts have ruled against the practice of coercive deprogramming”(Melton:92) which had been in vogue in some anti-cult groups in the 1970's and 1980's.

As an example of the importance of new religious movements, we can look at the history of Native Americans and their resistance to European occupation of their lands and domination of their societies. From the colonial period onward, new religious movements have been an integral part of Native American response to colonialism. The Delaware prophet inspired a nativistic movement in the Ohio country in the 1760's that helped to influence the Indian chief Pontiac to lay siege to Detroit. Tecumseh was inspired by new religious visions to unify the tribes east of the Mississippi against the white threat. The Handsome Lake or Longhouse Religion among the Iroquois, now one of the oldest of North American “new religions,” began in 1799 as a response to Iroquois defeat and confinement to reservations. The Ghost Dance religion swept the western tribes in the 1880's, leading to the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890. Remnants of the Ghost Dance religion still persist among Plains tribes in Canada. Today the most important of the Native American new religions is the peyote religion, sometimes organized as the Native American Church, which combines many of the beliefs of American Protestantism with the sacramental eating of peyote cactus buttons which induce hallucination and altered states of consciousness. These kinds of religious phenomena are repeated around the world under conditions of social change and cross-cultural contact and should not be viewed as something strange or unusual but, rather, as normal and expected human behavior. It is only the secular assumptions of the post-Enlightenment West that led scholars to overlook the importance of new religions in society and history.

We do not have sufficient time to go over all the perspectives developed in social science for the analysis and understanding of these movements. One key concept that is helpful is the psychosocial concept of “identity.” When I discuss identity with students in social science classes I always tell them that identity is about two things: meaning and belonging. Both of these are key to understanding new religions. First of all, they are about meaning. Human beings must have meaning to survive and thrive. Viktor Frankl discovered this as a result of his experience in a concentration camp during World War II. He observed that people can endure terrible suffering when they can ascribe some meaning or purpose to it; but to regard it as meaningless is intolerable to them.

Since they derive from the universal human quest for meaning, new religions are not confined to tribal societies in Third World contexts, they are rampant in the prosperous, urbanized West and in the post-Communist East as well. Rodney Stark and Roger Finke point out that cults and new religions thrive where traditional religions are weak. Their sociological perspective on religion suggests that secularization is not inevitable in modern society precisely because of man’s quest for meaning. Religious involvement is indeed a rational pursuit in that it meets that human need. Stricter religions in fact have greater appeal than secularized ones because of the more satisfying way in which they answer the human quest for meaning. On the basis of this theory, Stark and Finke propose that where traditional religion is weak, there you will find a greater abundance of new religions. The evidence seems to bear them out. The West Coast of the U.S., where church membership rates fall below 40%, is where new religions are most active. “Studies confirm the belief that the West Coast is the land of religious novelty—that’s where all unusual religious groups do best”( Stark and Finke:250). The same is true for “secular” Western Europe where the number of cult movements is much greater than in the U.S. There is no such thing as a spiritual vacuum. Highly secular societies are fertile ground for new religions.

New religions, no matter how bizarre they may seem, have a rationality to them. In some ways they can be seen as analogous to dreams as they are viewed in psychoanalysis. Though seemingly irrational, they tell us something about people’s deepest thoughts, fears and aspirations. New religions appeal to people because they provide meaning and speak about issues that are deeply important to them in terms that make sense to them. We should be like St. Paul and look carefully at the objects of worship(Acts 17:23) and the beliefs and practices that we see in order to try to understand them. We can take Handsome Lake, the Iroquois prophet, as an example. He had a vision in which he saw both George Washington, sitting on the veranda of a house with his dog, halfway to heaven, and Jesus Christ, who told Handsome Lake to “tell your people that they will become lost when they follow the ways of the white man”(Wallace:244). Handsome Lake’s visions may seem strange and even at times comical, but they spoke to a people torn between the ways of the white man, which they were being pressured to accept against their will, and the ways of their culture, which they could no longer fully practice. The symbols of Handsome Lake’s visions, like the practices of his religion, combine the new and the old creatively. They provide an explanation for the experiences of the Iroquois people, charting a path which endorsed certain adjustments to the white man’s ways while at the same time selectively reinforcing and renewing some traditional practices. The messenger of the Gospel will

do well to study and interpret the systems of meaning found in new religions and to try to stand in the shoes of their adherents, so that he can understand the appeal of their beliefs.

New religions are also about the second dimension of psychosocial identity, belonging. Post-modern man recognizes the fallacy of the Enlightenment project of the autonomous rational man who determines his own course and destiny according to the dictates of reason. There is increasing recognition that people are shaped by their community and cannot exist or find meaning apart from that community. New religions attract people because they not only provide community but also derive their strength from previous identities and communal ties to which they appeal. Neo-paganism, for example, often draws from the power of ethnicity as a focus of human community and belonging (Shnirelman 2002). The Black Muslims win their adherents by their emphasis on African-American identity and ethnic resentment. Again and again we see that ethnicity is an important part of new religious movements in contexts of intercultural contact.

St. Paul recognized the power of these realities, as do all of the Scriptures. Returning to Acts 17:26, Paul's words instruct us. He addresses the Athenians with a discussion of what we would call today "ethnicity." "From one man He made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and He determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live." Paul is talking about the importance to people of ethnic identities and attachment to lands. Paul is not addressing the autonomous individual of the Enlightenment or of an individualistic society like the U.S. He is addressing people who see their identity as members of nations(εθνοί). And Paul is only echoing the consistent theme of Scripture since Genesis 12:3, "All nations on earth will be blessed through you."

To address the problem of new religions we must address the reality and power of group identities. People do not come to faith in Christ as isolated individuals; they come in the context of their relationships. That is why we see movements of families and people groups into the Kingdom of God. The Gospel follows these lines of human relationships. Likewise, people do not only resist the Gospel as individuals, they resist as groups. There is individual self-righteousness and self-justification and there is collective and ethnic self-righteousness and self-justification as well. We see this with the Jews and the Pharisees in the New Testament. The evangelist in the context of New Religious Movements must address these group identities and understand their power.

The study of New Religious Movements can make us better evangelists and missionaries. In my M.Div. program twenty years ago we were required to take a course called Religious Bodies of America. It was in many ways a very useful course and I enjoyed it very much. The study of new religious movements and their importance on the world scene requires us, however, to modify courses like Religious Bodies of America. First of all, we need to look at religious groups, not just in their doctrinal context, but also in their social and cultural context if we truly wish to understand them and address them more effectively. Secondly, we need to recognize that the distinction between legitimate and traditional religions and the new religions is not necessarily a very valid or useful one. Human beings remain what they have always been, both religiously creative and idolatrous by nature. We cannot just dismiss certain forms of religiosity as wacky cults if we are to be effective missionaries but, rather, we must take the human reality of new religions seriously.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Berger, Peter. 1980. From secularity to world religions. In *Religion On-Line*.  
<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1726> (February 28, 2005)
- Dawson, Lorne. 1998. The cultural significance of new religious movements and globalization; A Theoretical Prolegomena." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37(4).
- Ellwood, Robert and Barbara McGraw. 2002. *Many Peoples, Many Faiths*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Frankl, Viktor. 1963. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Honoré, Carl. 2005. Fort sacred. *American Way*, (March 1).
- Jenkins, Philip. 2002. The real story of secularization. *Books and Culture: A Christian Review* 8:6 (November/December), 10-11.
- Lester, Toby. 2002. Oh, gods! *The Atlantic* (February), <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/html> (2002february).
- MacGrath, Alister. 2005. The twilight of atheism. *Christianity Today* (March),  
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/003/21.36.html> (February 28, 2005)
- Melton, J. Gordon. 2000. Emerging religious movements in North America: Some missiological reflections." *Missiology* 28(1): 85-98.
- Moeller, Eric J. 1997. *Identity and Millenarian Discourse: Kuna Indian Villagers in an Ethnic Borderland*. Unpublished dissertation.
- Shnirelman, Victor. 2002. "Christians! go home': A revival of neo-paganism between the Baltic Sea and Transcaucasia (An overview)." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 17(2): 197-211.
- Stark, Rodney and Roger Finke. 2000. *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Stark, Rodney and William Sims Bainbridge. 1986. *The future of religion: Secularization, revival, and cult formation*.
- Starkloff, Carl. 1985. Religious renewal in native North America: The contemporary call to mission. *Missiology* 13(1): 81-101.
- Turner, Harold W. 1985. New mission task: Worldwide and waiting." *Missiology* 13(1): 5-21.

Wallace, Anthony F.C. 1969. *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca*. New York: Vintage Books.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1956. Revitalization movements. *American Anthropologist* 58:264-281.