

New Religious Movements and Missions: An Historical Overview

The relationship between frontier missions and New Religious Movements is neither new nor transitory. NRMs will target the people most vulnerable to a spiritual counterfeit operating as wolves in sheep's clothing (Matthew 7:15). NRMs routinely deny the basic teachings of historic Christianity. What are the lessons from history and how should we reach them?

by Bryce A. Pettit

Missionaries in a mountainous region of Colombia had worked for years preparing a people group to receive the gospel. God blessed their work and a majority of the people accepted Christ. When news of this mission success spread through other parts of Colombia, caravans of another type of missionary began to arrive in the same villages. They were Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons (the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, or LDS), and they arrived in force with dozens of missionaries and thousands of pieces of literature. They saturated the area with their message and over forty percent of the new converts were lost.

Is this an isolated incident? Is it a new phenomenon? Dwayne Black of the World Prayer Center in Colorado Springs, Colorado, thinks it is neither. He is a returned missionary from western Africa, and in a conversation with him I spoke to him of the strategic prayer need related to the growing threat of cults to frontier missions around the world. He had struggled with these groups himself for over forty years while in Africa and he assured me that he understood this growing danger.

The relationship between missions, including frontier missions,

and New Religious Movements (NRMs, the correct term today for the older term cults) is neither new nor transitory. In a recent article on the LDS church, sociologist of religion Rodney Stark has projected that at its present growth rate, by the year 2080, the LDS church will reach a total membership of 260 million members, making it an emerging world religion.¹ Two points make Stark's observations even more relevant to the issue of NRMs and missions. First, the current growth rate of the LDS is higher than Stark's original projection, and secondly, almost all of their "converts" will be new to Christianity, nominal believers, or people with only a brief exposure to the Christian message, not people who have never heard of Christ. In other words, they will target the people most vulnerable to a spiritual counterfeit operating as wolves in sheep's clothing (Matthew 7:15).

Reason for Concern

I bring up this point because NRMs are not simply alternative Christian denominations. They routinely deny the basic teachings of the Bible and historic Christianity, and are often not part of Christianity at all but originate from other world religions and the occult, etc. The NRMs,

for all their fervent efforts, rarely do pioneering missionary work to unreached people groups. In fact, many groups like the LDS church boast of taking advantage of the expense and sacrifice of Christian missionaries to prepare the way for their own proselytizing efforts. Past Christian writers have warned of the threat such groups pose for the world Christian movement, but the threat they outlined was largely ignored.

Marley Cole, for example, in his book *Jehovah's Witnesses: The New World Society*² gave a detailed account of the growth of the Witnesses around the world from 1942 to 1953. During this single decade they expanded their activities in Africa from eleven countries to thirty-four. The number of total ministers (i.e., active membership) grew from 10,070 to 81,793, with the total number of hours spent doing their kingdom preaching (i.e., proselytizing) rising from 2,200,163 to an incredible 16,979,027.

We need to remember that much of this was accomplished during the crisis of World War II. In Europe, during the Nazi conquest of most of the continent, their growth went from 13 countries to 24, and 22,796 total ministers to a sobering 179,374.³ Statis-

tics such as these, however, are now hopelessly out of date. Stark estimates that by 2090 the Witnesses may well reach 195 million in total active membership.⁴ Furthermore, he writes that in 1992 the total efforts of the U.S. and Canadian churches sustained a task force of 41,142 overseas missionaries at a yearly cost of over \$2 billion. The Witnesses, by contrast, maintained a force of 3,279,270 “publishers” (the current term for those active in the Watchtower “preaching work”) with only a budget of \$45 million. Paul Carden⁵ notes that this number is eighty times the number of North American missionaries operating at a fraction of the cost.⁶

In 1996 they spent a staggering 1,140,621,714 preaching hours promoting the message of the Watchtower Society. The total number of magazines, books, Bibles, etc., placed in homes or with individuals was recorded as 334,279,595. They had 366,579 baptisms and the total attendance at their annual communion observation, called the Memorial (a good indicator of the total number of people in Watchtower book studies, family members of JW’s or others being affected by their teachings), was 12,921,933.⁷

The LDS church and the Witnesses are the two largest groups among the numerous NRMs afflicting frontier missionary efforts today, but they represent a small part of a much larger story. They are part of the category known to cult researchers as “Bible cults,” which does not take into account the many New Age cults which have emerged since the 1960s—indigenous religious cults that have emerged once Christianity has taken root in a frontier area, various magic groups, middle eastern religions or the human potential movement.⁸ The growth of these groups at the expense of Christian missionary efforts, as the LDS and

JWs attest, is a cause for serious concern.

The American Context

Although the church has wrestled with challenges from heresies and alternative religions throughout her history, the threat to frontier missions from cults and new religions is a recent phenomenon that deserves special attention. Our orientation to this subject involves understanding the religious history of the United States of America, called by many the Pandora’s Box of cults and new religions. From its earliest days the US has been a haven for alternative spiritualities.

The preeminence of established Protestant denominations, particularly Anglicanism, Congregationalism and Presbyterianism were challenged in their domination by Roman Catholicism, Judaism, the Mennonites, Moravians, Methodists, Deism, Unitarianism, Transcendentalism, Masonry and Native American shamanism. The close proximity of so many divergent religious and philosophical systems combined with the political revolution of the eighteenth century created a political acceptance of religious pluralism. The atmosphere of religious freedom and tolerance that emerged from the American Revolution changed not only the religious history of the world, but it effected the Christian missionary movement as well.

When the American revolution began, the harsh persecution of smaller religious groups that had characterized much of the early history of the English colonies had practically ended. The state churches of these colonies would eventually go through a process of disestablishment that began in 1776 in Virginia and ended in 1833 in Massachusetts. As the Great Awakening (1726-56) swept the colonies, the established religious

bodies found themselves competing against the newer denominations who became more prominent largely because of their proselytizing zeal and the fact that they took advantage of the western flow of the population away from the eastern seaboard. The Baptists and others favored a system of separation of church and state which eventually led to a broader acceptance of freedom of worship without governmental regulation or interference.⁹

Smaller and less socially acceptable Christian denominations such as Baptists, Methodists, Dunkards, Quakers and Roman Catholics initially wished to be allowed to exist without government interruption of their activities, but eventually it meant that the United States would become a vast spiritual supermarket of ideas and religious bodies from old and new religions alike. Granting civil liberties to minority religious groups identified America as an experiment in religious pluralism and tolerance. For example, the first Lutheran synod was organized in 1748, the first Negro Baptist church was formed in Georgia in 1773, the American Universalist Church was founded in 1780 (only four years after the disestablishment process began). Deism became immensely popular after Thomas Paine published his *Age of Reason*, the Russian Orthodox Church began missionary activities to Alaska in 1792 and William Ellery Channing founded the Unitarian Church in 1819, which was closely followed by Joseph Smith founding the LDS church in 1830.¹⁰

The 19th Century Caldron

The struggling efforts of early nineteenth century new religious groups such as the LDS church, various utopian communities and the Spiritualist congregations exploded

into a kaleidoscope of new religious fervor after the American Civil War. Many factors contributed to the tapestry of religions that found a home in the United States. The increasing concentration of the population in cities due to industrialization, along with improved education, communication, as well as transportation and the influx of new immigrants, brought people with new ideas and new religious beliefs into close physical proximity, allowing people to sample new ideas and beliefs.

Although new religious groups were often met with social ostracism and even violence, they would eventually be protected under the U.S. Constitution and were able to survive, and later thrive as part of the American religious experiment. This protection was also extended to marginalized groups such as the Mormons, and as the nineteenth century progressed this became an umbrella for the most diverse religious climate any nation had yet tolerated.

To many scholars the U.S. religious scene is still perceived as having been dominated by traditional religious institutions from Protestant, Catholic and Jewish backgrounds, but this is a mistake.¹¹ The nineteenth century witnessed the formation of several alternative faith systems to rival the Christian majority. They included occultic groups such as the Theosophical Society and the Golden Dawn, the emergence of New Thought groups such as Christian Science, Religious Science and Unity, apocalyptic millerite churches, humanistic beliefs inspired by Darwin, Marx and Freud, the continuing presence of Masonry, along with the entrance of older world religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. The established world religions also had their own variations such as the

Bahá'í faith and the Ramakrishna Mission.

Until this uniquely American religious renaissance began to emerge after the Civil War, Christian missions had little to fear from new religious movements. In fact, one historian of Mormonism documents that from the first missionary efforts of the LDS

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church in 1849 until the end of the century in 1899, the LDS church experienced a declining membership outside the United States.¹² However, the post-Civil War era witnessed an overall change in this situation. A foundation was laid for aggressive proselytizing activities by NRMs that has continued unabated. Focusing solely on early membership numbers has blinded many researchers to the greater civil and ideological impact of the NRMs and their affect on Christian churches and missionary efforts. A foundation was laid that allowed these groups, through persistence and patience, to establish springboards for larger and more complex proselytizing efforts in later years.

Theosophy in India

The context for this change and the impact of NRMs on frontier mission fields did not take place within the United States itself, but rather in India. A Russian mystic named Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and a Union Civil War colonel and newspaper editor named Henry Steele Olcott formed a metaphysical organization in New

York in 1875 called the Theosophical Society. Dedicating itself to belief in a universal brotherhood of all races, to exploring comparative religion and science, and seeking genuine occult phenomena, Theosophy tapped into the circles that had been stimulated by Spiritualism after the Civil War.

The massive loss of human life during the Civil War (600,000 deaths) inspired a search for information about dead brothers, husbands and fathers within the Spiritualist churches and organizations. Blavatsky and Olcott decried the fakery within Spiritualism and founded their own society to distance themselves from the chicanery of the parlor tricks and hoaxes foisted upon desperate people by the Spiritualists. Their search was for a religious treasury that transcended religion and was founded on what they called the Ancient Wisdom that lies behind every true religious tradition.

A scandal broke out over Blavatsky's occult phenomena that made her and Olcott look suspiciously like the Spiritualists they denounced. This helped them to decide to sail for India in 1878, and in 1879 they arrived at the spiritual home of the Ancient Wisdom. When they arrived in India they were appalled at the treatment of the Indian peoples by the British *raj* and by the Christian missionaries, both Protestant and Roman Catholic.

Traditional Indian religions were mocked, technological achievements by the West were used to intimidate the Indian peoples and belittle the accomplishments of their own civilization. The people were denied many civil liberties¹³ and they suffered under many cruel policies.¹⁴ Blavatsky and Olcott determined to undermine the work of the apathetic missionaries as much as possible. Judging by the criticism they received in various missionary magazines, they

were quite successful.¹⁵

Whereas the Theosophical Society had been founded on a belief in the value of all religions, this quickly gave way to openly antagonistic attitudes toward Christianity and a vigorous promotion by Blavatsky and Olcott of Hinduism and Buddhism.¹⁶ Brahmanic Hindus in particular welcomed Theosophy as an answer to white missionary attacks on India as a backward and unscientific civilization.¹⁷ This did not escape the notice of Christian missionaries, and what ensued for several decades was an escalating atmosphere of distrust and hostility.¹⁸

Blavatsky and Olcott took up the banner of these ancient religions using the founding of several colleges, an extensive use of the printing press and fervent proselytizing to communicate to all the peoples of India their own religious and cultural heritage. They even began a youth movement modeled after the Young Men's Christian Association.¹⁹ John N. Farquhar notes that by the year 1884 the Theosophical Society had grown in both numbers and influence with over one hundred branches spread throughout India with many allies among Hindu upper castes.²⁰

Theosophists promoted Hinduism and Buddhism partly to thumb their noses at the missionaries, but mostly to instill pride in the Indian peoples in their own civilization.²¹ The missionaries were in turn livid with the obstruction of their evangelistic efforts by the Theosophists. They saw their activities being weakened by the influence of the Theosophists and looked for every opportunity to denounce them.²²

Yet another scandal over allegedly fraudulent occult phenomena drove Blavatsky, the more charismatic member of the "Theosophic Twins," to leave India. Whether or not Blavatsky was guilty of fraud is irrelevant to the

fact that Theosophy lost much of its momentum for many years because of the scandal. The missionaries were only too happy to aid in publicizing the scandal in their own magazines and newspapers.²³

Theosophy might have faded from the religious horizon of India altogether except that Blavatsky's successor as president of the society, Annie Besant, who turned the efforts of the society away from a search for occult phenomena to championing Indian home rule and social reform. She even participated in the first India National Congress and her numerous writings influenced many leaders in this movement. This provided Theosophy with a platform from which to continue assaulting Christian missionary efforts. Theosophists were instrumental in uncovering many unjust conditions directed against the people of India, winning folk-hero status for some.²⁴

The callousness of Christian missionaries to the plight of the Indian peoples, their religious arrogance and their disdain for anything within Indian culture or religion made the success of a group like the Theosophists a certainty. Theosophy fired major broadsides at the missionaries with observations such as, "What Christianity really is is shown by Krupp cannons,²⁵ by whiskey distilleries, (and) by opium ships."²⁶ These stinging rebukes of Christian hypocrisy inoculated many in India from the message of Christ. Missionary magazines were constantly complaining of the hindrance that Theosophy made to their work. However, Theosophy became a kind of prophetic voice judging the sins of the churches who presented themselves to the Indian people in a confusing array of splintered denominations who identified with the colonial regime of the British.²⁷

Theosophy's lasting impact on

frontier missionary activity can be seen in its participation in the 1893 World Parliament of Religions during the Chicago World's Fair. Many of the speakers from India and other eastern nations were either Theosophists, or had at one time been associated in some way with Theosophy. The popular western belief that Christianity was the final step in the world's spiritual evolution was successfully challenged by these speakers. No one had expected these representatives to argue articulately and persuasively about their own belief systems, much less indict mainline Christianity for its religious arrogance and intolerance.²⁸

Scholars have noted that this religious congress provided the platform that Eastern religions needed to expand their influence into the Western nations. It marked the beginning of the popularity of belief in reincarnation and other Eastern ideas in the mostly Christian countries of Europe and North America. The greatest evidence of the impact of this congress can be seen in the influence of the New Age Movement. The prominence of New Age spirituality in the 1960s, 70s, 80s and 90s was precursored by the presence of Theosophy, occultism, New Thought and Spiritualism in the 1860s, 70s, 80s and 90s. Also, the current challenge of NRMs to missionary efforts was pioneered by Blavatsky, Olcott and Besant, by LDS missionaries in Europe and Latin America and by Christian apathy towards both.²⁹

The Lull Before the Storm

The nineteenth century had been a time of clash of ideas as Darwin, Freud, Marx, higher biblical criticism, etc., stormed the citadels of traditional, Western Christendom. NRMs had a role to play in this assault, but the Church's attention to that assault was blunted in the next century. Two

world wars, the Great Depression, the end of colonial rule, the appearance of nuclear weapons of mass destruction, the rise of global Communism, all worked to preoccupy the Church's energies. Counter-cult activities were limited largely to theological critiques and by ridicule in the form of tracts and small booklets.³⁰ Some, who were more in the mainline Christian churches or who were outside observers of the American religious scene, worked to legitimize NRMs as part of the broader American religious smorgasbord.³¹

An expanding library of books by and about NRMs had little impact on how Christian missions were dealing with their presence outside of North America and the generally christianized Western culture. More attention was being paid to the growing trend away from evangelism to dialogue as a method of encountering the world's religions championed by the World Council of Churches. The great missionary conferences at Edinburgh (1910), Jerusalem (1928) and Tambaram (1938) had maintained the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and his claims to deity and as Savior of the world. This would soon change.

This unique understanding of the Christian message was challenged as being dogmatic, inflexible and insensitive toward the religious heritage of other peoples. Studies in comparative religions strongly challenged the accepted idea of the exclusiveness of Jesus Christ. In 1966, when W. A. Visser't Hooft ended his term as General Secretary of the WCC, the dialogue model would become the accepted method for Christians to encounter the world's religions, but the pressure to change the WCC's position had been going on for many years. The Central Committee of the

WCC met in 1971 and adopted an interim policy on dialogue that profoundly affected the WCC's approach to non-Christian religions, including NRMs.³²

The Post-War Period

The current interest in the effect NRMs have on missionary activities

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began in 1958 when Walter Martin, an evangelical critic of the "cults," was asked to be part of the Pastor's Conference Team of World Vision Incorporated. He traveled over 25,000 miles throughout Africa and Asia speaking to thousands of Christian workers and gathering information on the impact NRMs were having on their missionary efforts. Over the next few years he visited other countries and continued to gather information relevant to the threat these groups posed to world missions.³³ His Christian Research Institute became the model for dozens, and eventually hundreds, of other counter-cult organizations worldwide over the next four decades.

Parallel to this development were several reinvigorating movements among the NRMs in the 1960's. In the LDS church a program known as "Every Member a Missionary" inspired their current rapid expansion and missionary activity. Among some NRMs the year 1975 took on an apoc-

alyptic importance as these groups began to prepare for this date by stepping up their proselytizing efforts.³⁴ Also, the explosion of New Age mysticism received a boost in the 1960s when President Lyndon B. Johnson repealed the Oriental Exclusion Act which had restricted the number of Asian immigrants to the United States. J. Gordon Melton, of the Institute for the Study of American Religions, lists eleven major Eastern teachers, or gurus, who moved to the United States within seven years of the repeal of this legislation.³⁵

The New Age Movement is no longer a marginalized movement birthed in California's 60s counter-culture, but is a global phenomenon affecting business, education, medicine, government, science, media, established religion and entertainment.³⁶ The sophistication of this social and spiritual movement has made it one of the leading alternatives to the Christian gospel around the world. Older, more established groups, both the biblically oriented ones such as the JWs and Mormons, and the metaphysical groups, are copying this savvy approach to marketing and public relations and they are benefiting from it with increased social influence and expanding memberships. After reviewing articles in several magazines and newsletters from a wide variety of NRMs, it has become obvious to me that Christians have now become the target of the largest proselytizing backlash in the history of the world Christian movement.³⁷

Walter Martin outlined several observations that he had discerned from his travels to missionary territories in the 1950s and 60s that bear repeating and updating here.³⁸ His observations are more relevant to groups that claim to be in some sense

Christian, but are helpful for other groups as well. First, in the mission contexts particularly, NRMs are often hesitant to reveal their affiliation with cultic groups. They do not wish to be identified with an organization that has received negative press, or whose teachings have been critiqued and denounced by Christian scholars. NRMs reveal their ties to these groups only after an individual has been immersed in the group and indoctrination has been successful.

This attempt to obfuscate their identity extends to other aspects of their work as well. They usually do not wish to identify their literature as originating with a "cult," and therefore package their message without reference to their true origins. They operate under the rubric of Christian symbols and terminology while consciously denying their historic meanings, and they will rarely identify their public meetings with a sectarian organization. They have become adept at denying the central teachings of historic Christianity while brandishing a Bible to support their own beliefs.

One of the more egregious practices of NRMs is the way they infiltrate large evangelistic rallies. Members of NRMs deceptively pass themselves off as Christian volunteers at spiritual rallies and public evangelistic efforts by noted speakers who attract large audiences. They will steer spiritual seekers away from Christ to their own groups. The parallel to this among other groups that are not oriented toward Christianity is their infiltration of cultural institutions. They use this acceptance as a way to propagandize for their group using the media and celebrity endorsements.

In recent years the situation with NRMs and missions has changed dramatically from the situation that Walter Martin encountered. Most NRMs now perceive little in historic Chris-

tianity that threatens them. Uninformed and ill-equipped to deal with the challenge of NRMs to their evangelistic efforts, Evangelicals in particular have been labeled as intolerant bigots, anti-intellectuals and dangerous to a world movement toward democratic ideals. Rather than presenting themselves as being in harmony with Christianity, many NRMs are now content to be thought of as progressive and forward thinking champions of religious tolerance and political harmony.

The Current Crisis

Christian responses to the burgeoning growth of NRMs has been weak and ineffective. Most counter-cult ministries are absorbed with fund raising simply to remain active. Except for a few older and more visible organizations such as CRI International (Walter Martin's Christian Research Institute), the Spiritual Counterfeits Project, Watchman Fellowship and a few others, counter-cult groups have remained small and concentrated within the United States. Resources in languages other than English have been scarce, and are usually translations of older English works. In some areas this is beginning to change, but the need to go beyond the more highly visible groups such as the LDS church to indigenous groups who have never been analyzed is growing rapidly.

Denominational responses to NRMs have generally been apathetic. The two responses that have been substantially funded and staffed are the Commission on Organizations for the Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod) and the Interfaith Witness Department of the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. Only the IWD ministers outside its denominational boundaries, and it has grown to be a powerful force for answering cultic threats to

its congregations. There are a few other examples, but denominational support for counter-cult ministries has been mostly nonexistent.

Sociologists of religion believe that the Church's apathy toward this threat has historically been due to the assumption that NRMs are a passing cultural fad that will exhaust itself in time.³⁹ This incorrect assumption has been answered by Harold Turner, an authority on the growth of NRMs, who concludes that "the world has never seen more religious innovation and creativity than in the second half of the twentieth century."⁴⁰ He also notes how curious this is in light of the fact that we now live in a world that is becoming monochrome and standardized in so many other directions, e.g., airports, fast-food restaurants, etc.

Churches have certainly had more responses to the growth of NRMs over the last fifty years than these two examples, but they have been through intellectual responses such as publications and conferences, not missionary strategies to reach them, or protective strategies to inform believers of their dangers.⁴¹ One of the most encouraging developments by way of response has been that many Evangelical counter-cult ministries have established branches outside of North America and Europe to counter the presence of NRMs. However, they still generally maintain the precedent set earlier in this century of devoting their time to doctrinal critiques and attacks on the founders and current leaders of these groups.⁴²

A notable exception to the rule is the ministry of the Utah Gospel Mission. At the end of the nineteenth century, pastors from Utah commissioned the Rev. John Nutting to travel throughout the U.S. to recruit missionaries to evangelize the Mormons in Utah. After his death the mission lost most of its momentum until it was revived in 1979 by the Rev. Kurt

Van Gorden. Van Gorden had worked for a number of years with Walter Martin at the Christian Research Institute and left to form a new ministry that would focus on evangelism and recovery from cultic abuse. I was privileged to travel with Van Gorden to Ohio in 1979 to meet with some of Nutting's descendants to obtain much of Nutting's personal research into Mormonism. The family granted Van Gorden's request to revive the Utah Gospel Mission, which still recruits evangelists to minister to the LDS people.⁴³

Another current breakthrough in this area has been the recognition by George Otis, Jr., founder and President of The Sentinel Group, that NRMs should be included in any spiritual mapping exercise undertaken for missionary research. The methods relying on theological critique of the NRMs have done little to impede their growth. Spiritual warfare was a topic that was not discussed in most publications and conferences on NRMs unless it related directly to demonic activity in the occult.

There were a few exceptions to this, of course, but until Otis began to identify and quantify the growing presence of NRMs in world mission contexts, directed concerts of prayer have never been focused on the spiritual strongholds of spiritual darkness related to these groups. Established world religions and recognized animistic religions have been identified as fortresses of spiritual opposition to the gospel, but NRMs have not been perceived to pose the same dangers. I myself have been to many counter-cult conferences, and I have never heard a call for concentrated efforts of spiritual warfare intended to break up the spiritual deception of an NRM group or organization. There has been

a recognition that individuals need prayer for the opening of spiritual blinded eyes, but nothing on the scale that Otis is striving to bring about.⁴⁴

The most important aspects of Otis's work revolve around two missing elements of research into most efforts to evaluate and counteract NRMs. First, Otis recognizes that the

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counter-cult work of the past has culminated in the objectification of the people lost in the spiritual darkness of the cultic systems. Otis is asking that we see members of NRMs not as rabid minions of Satan, but as lost sheep wandering in a spiritual wasteland in need of a redeeming Shepherd.⁴⁵

Walter Martin attempted to make this point in his ministry and writings, but his naturally confrontational style blunted this insight for many Christians. The adversarial stand so often taken by those interested in reaching the NRMs has only worked to validate the NRM's xenophobic fear of persecution and their stereotype of Christians as bigoted and uncaring oppressors of the type that Blavatsky and Olcott encountered in India.

The second needed insight that spiritual mapping brings to this issue is the need to identify and quantify the spiritual strongholds of deception for the various NRMs. Calls for prayer in most counter-cult ministry newsletters revolve around the needs of the staff of the ministry and individuals

who are receiving ministry from the organization. There have been a few prayer initiatives along this line, such as declaring 1997 as the International Year of Prayer for Jehovah's Witnesses, but this effort by many Evangelical counter-cult groups still suffered from the same deficiencies as missionary strategies have in the past. It was vague and had not been researched and promoted with quantified evidence, etc.

When the WorldWide Church of God transformed into an evangelical denomination within the last few years the event was reported with great fanfare. Never before had such a large cultic group departed from its origins to become orthodox. But why should this be such a novel occurrence? Placing the NRMs into the matrix of spiritual mapping has already born much fruit in this area. In their 1997 International Consultation on Spiritual Mapping, The Sentinel Group reported a number of communities around the world that were being transformed because they had employed this form of spiritual warfare to address the needs of their community that included attention to NRMs.

In Kiambu, Kenya (a suburb of Nairobi highly resistant to missionary efforts), a handful of intercessors believed that witchcraft had an important role to play in their town's slavery to violence, the occult and crushing poverty. Spiritual warfare led to the conversion of dozens of bars into churches, a dramatic drop in the crime rate, the removal of a powerful witch from a position of influence with government officials and economic revitalization for the community.⁴⁶

A similar breakthrough was reported from Hemet, California—a sleepy little retirement community. This was a place where Christians were divided along denominational

lines and their churches could only be described as apathetic. The community was plagued with prostitution, drugs and gang violence. Both Transcendental Meditation and the Church of Scientology were moving into the area with plans to build major facilities. It was discovered that the area had been a focus of Native American animism for centuries.

Several prayer initiatives were put into motion by a concerned local pastor and spiritual breakthroughs were soon reported by the churches. Unity and love replaced animosity and division among believers and pastors alike. Their churches began to grow because of renewed evangelistic efforts, especially among gang members. A reconciliation service was organized for various Native American groups which resulted in many dramatic conversions.⁴⁷

Reports such as these illustrate that NRMs are entering a phase of vulnerability to Christian evangelism that is unprecedented in the history of frontier missions. Never before have our evangelistic efforts been this well organized around prayer and spiritual warfare, or so specifically targeted to demonic strongholds, and never have our motives been so clearly identified with the loving heart of God for all peoples regardless of their social, ethnic or religious backgrounds.

In Conclusion

The purpose for doing this article is to inform those in frontier missions of the origins and background of the cultic systems that challenge our evangelistic efforts for the hearts and lives of men and women around the world. The mistakes of the past were discussed only to provide the context and illustrate how spiritual battles fought in the strength of human energies alone only exacerbate the condition of spiritual deception that holds the peoples of the world in bondage

and error.

As the chronological dawn of a new millennium looms on our collective human horizon, are we also on a spiritual threshold of Christian unity and evangelism that will catapult the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ into a new era of spiritual victory over the Satanic domination of much of the world? The evidence that is already pouring in concerning the spiritual advances of the Church's missionary efforts are astounding. Why should we not expect the same for the thousands of new religions around the world? Are Rodney Stark's sociological estimates for the growth of NRMs such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons fatalistically accurate? If God can sovereignly bring an end to Soviet Communism, how much longer can Salt Lake City resist His will?

Endnotes

- 1 Rodney Stark, "So Far, So Good: A Brief Assessment of Mormon Membership Projections," *Review of Religious Research* 38 (Dec. 1996): 175-78.
- 2 Marley Cole, *Jehovah's Witnesses: The New World Society* (New York: Vantage Press, 1955), 24.
- 3 Ibid. Also, Cole reports that in 1952 alone they distributed a staggering 211,888,382 books, tracts, magazines and other written propaganda pieces.
- 4 Rodney Stark and Laurence Iannaccone, "Why the Jehovah's Witnesses Grow So Rapidly: A Theoretical Application," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 12 (May 1997): 133-57, cited by Paul Carden, "The Centers for Apologetics Research October 1997 Prayer Update," (San Juan Capistrano, CA: The Centers for Apologetics Research), 2.
- 5 See his article in this issue for further use of these statistics.
- 6 October, 1997 Prayer Update, p. 2. In a sobering observation, David Bryant cited a study by World Vision International that concluded that if Evangelicals were as zealous as the LDS movement in promoting missions among its young people, some one million short term missionaries could have already been recruited by the year 1980 alone. Regrettably, this citation was left out of the next edition. David Bryant, *In the Gap: What It Means to Be a World Christian*, with a Foreword by Leighton

Ford (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1984), 46.

7. Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, rev. ed., gen. ed. Hank Hanegraaff (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1997), 426.
8. The vast number of American religions requires three encyclopedic volumes to record them. See J. Gordon Melton, ed., *The Encyclopedia of American Religions: A Comprehensive Study of the Major Religious Groups in the United States and Canada*, 3 vols. (Tarrytown, NY: Triumph Books, 1991). Notice that Melton calls his work a study of only the major religious bodies. The proliferation of cults and NRMs makes an exhaustive and up to date reference tool both impractical and impossible.
9. See Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 54-60.
10. Leo Rosten, ed., *Religions of America: Ferment and Faith in an Age of Crisis, A New Guide and Almanac* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975). 615-24.
11. John A. Saliba, *Understanding New Religious Movements* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1995), 37-64.
12. William Alexander Linn, *The Story of the Mormons: From the Date of their Origin to the Year 1901* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1902), 612-13.
13. Raj Bahadur Sharma writes that the House of Commons in England feared that missionary activity in India might pose a threat to the empire. They had to be assured "that the measures aimed at converting and educating the heathens of India" would not result in "giving them any political rights." The missionaries were therefore not sympathetic with any ideas of Indian nationalism. See his *Christian Missions in North India 1813-1913* (Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1988), 207.
14. Gordon Johnson, gen. ed., *The New Cambridge History of India*, vol. 3.1, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India*, by Kenneth W. Jones (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 167-79.
- 15 See "The Theosophists," *The Missionary Herald* 81 (August 1885): 320.
16. James M. Thoburn, *The Christian Conquest of India* (New York: Young People's Missionary Movement, 1906), 214-15. He complained, "The deplorable efforts of individuals from the West, like Mrs. Besant (and) Madame Blavatsky are having an unwholesome influence on the minds of the people."
17. This is in direct contradiction to Kenneth Scott Latourette's belief that The-

- osophy was merely a Hindu mission to Occidentals. See his *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, vol. 6, *The Great Century in Northern Africa and Asia: A.D. 1600-1914* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1944), 204. The appeal of Theosophy to a broad spectrum of intellectuals in India is outlined by Bruce F. Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revived: A History of the Theosophical Movement* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), 79-81.
18. W.J. Lhamon, "Recent Theosophy in Its Antagonism to Christianity," *The Andover Review* Vol. 19 (September 1893): 570-81.
 19. James M. Thoburn, *The Christian Conquest of India*, 215.
 20. John N. Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements in India* (Nai Sarak, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1967), 233.
 21. Robert E. Speer, then Secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, quotes a Hindu contemporary of Blavatsky and Olcott as saying that "to preach Christianity to the Hindu, who had a religion and was civilized before the dawn of history, seems to him, therefore, the most ridiculous thing on earth—indeed audacious." See his *Christianity and the Nations* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1910), 246.
 22. See Harlan P. Beach, *India and Christian Opportunity* (New York: Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, 1908), 140-42. He complained that because of Blavatsky and Olcott, "every variety of alloy of Hinduism and Christianity has been thrust upon the Indian public."
 23. Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements in India*, 233-67 contains a detailed account of the scandal and the drama that was played out between the Theosophists and the missionaries.
 24. Probably the most notable was Olcott, whose work in Ceylon to bring political reform to the oppressed Ceylonese earned him the title of "The White Buddhist." He wrote a *Buddhist Catechism* modeled after the Christian catechism that went through forty editions in his lifetime alone. See Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revised*, 84.
 25. The Krupp family provided munitions for several of Germany's wars.
 26. Julius Richter, *A History of Missions in India*, translated by Sydney H. Moore (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1908), 380. Richter also noted that Theosophists called the missionaries "thick-skulled, bigoted blood-hounds," and missionary teachings as "the purest idiotic trash." *Ibid.*, 390.
 27. See J.T. Sunderland, "Christian Missions in India: Will India Become Christian?," *The New World: A Quarterly Review of Religion, Ethics and Theology* 7 (March 1898): 35-53.
 28. Carl T. Jackson, *The Oriental Religions and American Thought: Nineteenth Century Explorations, Contributions in American Studies*, Number 55 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 243-61.
 29. See Latourette, *The Great Century*, p. 245.
 30. See William C. Irvine, *Heresies Exposed*, with an Introduction by Louis T. Talbot (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1921); Walter Martin, *The Christian and the Cults: Answering the Cultist from the Bible, The Modern Cult Library Series* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1956) and Jan Karl Van Baalen, *The Chaos of Cults: A Study in Present-Day Isms* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1938) as examples of theological critique. I have collected many tracts and booklets from denominational publishers from the early twentieth century on NRMs, and almost unfailingly they objectify and vilify other groups with the same kind of vitriol that Blavatsky and Olcott encountered in India.
 31. Marcus Bach became the theologically liberal mirror image of writers such as Walter Martin and worked to bring "sectarian" groups and their ideas into public acceptance. See his *They Have Found a Faith* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1946). A similar, but more scholarly analysis was provided by Charles S. Braden. See his, *These Also Believe: A Study of Modern American Cults and Minority Religious Movements* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1949).
 32. Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982), 11.
 33. Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, pp. 423-24.
 34. The JWs and the Worldwide Church of God, founded by Herbert W. Armstrong, are the two more well known organizations that used 1975 in this way, but many occultic groups had also fixed on this date as being monumental in the world's "spiritual evolution."
 35. J. Gordon Melton, "The Flowering of the 'New Religious Consciousness: Factors in Its Sudden Growth," in Ronald M. Enroth and J. Gordon Melton, *Why Cults Succeed Where the Church Fails*, (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 1985), 124.
 36. Russell Chandler, *Understanding the New Age*, (Dallas: Word publishing, 1988) gives a general introduction to this broad cultural intrusion of the New Age Movement.
 37. For example, see J. Isamu Yamamoto, "Sects Target New Areas, Make Subtle Changes," *Christianity Today* 34 (Oct. 22, 1990): 52. Several magazines and journals have been reporting on the phenomenon of NRMs in recent years, especially *Christianity Today*, *The Christian Research Journal*, *SCP Journal* (published by the Spiritual Counterfeits Project in Berkeley, California) and the secular journal, *The Cult Observer*.
 38. Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults*, p. 432.
 39. Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, with Lori Kent, "Cult Membership in the Roaring Twenties," in Starke and Bainbridge, eds., *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival and Cult Formation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 234-62.
 40. Harold Turner, "A Global Phenomenon," in Alan R. Brockway and J. Paul Rajashekar, eds., *New Religious Movements and the Churches* (Geneva, Switzerland: WCC Publications, 1987), 8.
 41. See Diana L. Eck, "Responses of the Churches to New Religious Movements: A Report from North America," in Brockway and Rajashekar, *New Religious Movements*, 138-56.
 42. This is John A. Saliba's lament in his recent overview of the situation. See his *Understanding New Religious Movements*, VII-X.
 43. For two years my wife and I directed a parallel outreach to Jehovah's Witnesses at their annual convention at Yankee Stadium in New York City called the Brooklyn Gospel Mission.
 44. The product of Otis's many years of research into this area is contained in his book, *The Twilight Labyrinth* (Grand Rapids: Chosen Books, 1997).
 45. I endeavored to make this point in the context of NRMs and evangelism in my doctoral dissertation for Fuller Theological Seminary. See my "Evangelizing Cults and New Religions: Issues and Strategies in Global Context" (D. Min. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1993), 97-115.
 46. "ICSM '97 Special Report" (Colorado Springs, CO: The Sentinel Group, 1997), 3.
 47. *Ibid.*, 4.

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