

Hidden in Plain Sight: The Mission Challenge of New Religious Movements

New religious movement (NRMs) represent a neglected mission challenge. The authors discuss the challenge before us, and make strategic recommendations for evangelizing these "less reached" people.

by Everett Shrophire and John Morehead

On March 26, 1997 the attention of the world was focused on a grisly discovery in a mansion in upscale Rancho Santa Fe, California. There, authorities found the decaying bodies of 39 members of Heaven's Gate, a New Religious Movement (NRM) which combined elements of neo-Gnosticism, science fiction, pseudo-Christian teachings and apocalypticism revolving around UFOs. Each of the victims of this mass suicide was dressed in black, their upper torsos ceremonially covered with triangular purple shrouds. Following the teachings of Marshall Applewhite, the group's members did not believe they were committing suicide. Rather, they had merely left their "containers" (bodies) for new, genderless forms resembling popular Hollywood depictions of extraterrestrials residing in a cosmic "Level Above Human."

Unfortunately, as bizarre and tragic as the Heaven's Gate suicides were, they were not the only NRM (popularly called cults) to receive media attention in the last few decades. Just a week prior to the discovery of Heaven's Gate, the latest victims of the Order of the Solar Temple were discovered. Between 1994 and 1997, 74 men, women and children perished in a series of fiery murder-suicides in France, Switzerland and Canada.

In March 1995, followers of Aum Shinrikyo ("Supreme Truth") released sarin nerve gas in Tokyo's subways, killing 12 people and injuring over 5,500 others. Japanese authorities would later discover that Aum's membership and influence was international with over 40,000 followers in at least six countries. It was also well financed with assets of over \$1 billion.¹

In May 1993, David Koresh and the Branch Davidians ended a fifty-one day standoff with federal authorities when the Davidian's compound near Waco, Texas burst into flames. Eighty-four people died in the conflict. In perhaps the best known mass murder-suicide by a NRM, in November, 1978, over 900 people perished in the sweltering jungle of Jonestown, Guyana, under the leadership of Jim Jones.

Yet these are only the most "newsworthy" of the NRMs. Secular psychologist Margaret Thaler Singer notes, when it comes to such groups, there is "a big splash in the news, then people back off from noticing the cults and the exploitative persuasion that surrounds us all."² There are many other NRMs, including the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) which has over 10 million members, the Watchtower

Bible and Tract Society (Jehovah's Witnesses) with over 5 million members, and the New Age movement which may have over 12 million active participants. While it is difficult to obtain exact statistics, conservatively estimated the number of people involved in NRMs is at least 16 million, perhaps as high as 30 million or more in the U.S. and around the world.³

A Neglected Challenge

But the seriousness of the above mentioned events, and the significance of the groups behind them, are quickly forgotten. They intrude on our consciousness only as fleeting images in our busy lives, quickly retreating to the periphery. Unfortunately, American culture still lacks an awareness and comprehension of NRMs as something other than a problem restricted to the religious fringe.

What has been the response of the church? Given evangelicalism's emphasis on sound doctrine, something frequently twisted by NRMs, one might think they would be given a high priority. But the church's attitude has largely consisted of apathy and ignorance. *Christianity Today* writer Tim Stafford keenly noted that:

Our situation is more like the early church's than, perhaps, it has been at

any time since Constantine. Now, as then, Christianity competes with a hundred religions on a spectrum from Krishna to Christ. It is clearly not enough to believe in the supernatural or to feel born again. Precision in belief is essential.⁴

With this pressing need for Christian pastors, missionaries and lay people to understand biblical teaching in contrast with deviations from the Christian faith, one would think that our seminaries would be among the first to show an interest in contemporary groups promoting false teaching under the guise of Christian terminology. Yet only a handful of Protestant denominations have major programs dealing with NRMs. Beyond this, most other seminaries offer nothing more than electives on NRMs, leaving our pastors, missionaries and lay people ill prepared for the aggressive proselytizing that will surely come their way from these groups.

Christian apathy toward NRMs is illustrated by the fact that Aum's terrorist attack mentioned above failed to make the top ten list of newsworthy religious events for 1995 in the January 6, 1996 issue of *Christianity Today*, the "flagship periodical" of evangelicalism.⁵

The situation at the local church level also gives cause for concern. Pastors are overworked and simply do not have the time or training to address the challenges posed by a host of NRMs. Likewise, the average Christian is often unconcerned or confused by this problem. In reflecting on the Christian's response to the proliferation of NRMs and world religions in America, Terry Muck lamented:

An already bewildering variety of religions, cults and world views is sure to grow even more confusing...Yet here is a strange reality: for most American Christians this just does not create an impression. Scholars and demographers talk about it incessantly. But for the average man on the street, it is at most a curious fact. In a recent

survey, *Christianity Today* magazine asked a cross section of its readership to name the ten toughest questions facing American Christianity. The challenge of the world religions did not even register. Similarly, a recent Gallup poll asked American citizens to name their areas of greatest concern for the coming years. Few mentioned the growing religious diversity in our country.⁶

One of the authors will never forget several summers ago working part-time at the U.S. Center for World Mission (USCWM) during the Branch Davidian standoff with federal authorities. Shortly after the media televised the Branch Davidian compound going up in flames, a student on the USCWM campus came skipping into the office exhilarated that the bizarre "cultists" had gotten what was coming to them! One would hope that such attitudes are held by few in America and the church at large, but they may indeed be widespread.

In March of 1987 George Gallup found that the groups that Americans least desired as neighbors were those of strange religious sects and cults. Forty-four percent of the people said they would not want to live next to someone who belonged to a cult... When it comes to prejudice, religion seems to lead the race.⁷

How tragic. This situation cuts us to the heart as we recognize our own failure to take to heart the Lord's teachings to love the alien and the stranger (Deut. 10:19).

Contending for the Faith

In addition to the Bible's ethical teachings about loving our neighbors, the Scriptures give us additional reasons for dealing with NRMs. In a sampling of passages, Jude exhorts the church to "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who

were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ" (Jude 3-4, *New American Standard*). Two items are especially worthy of note in this brief passage. First, we are to "contend earnestly," or put up a good fight for the Christian faith, because the faith has enemies who have crept into the church itself. The problem of false teaching is not always external to the church. Sadly it is frequently internal. Second, the faith was "once for all delivered" to the church. We must be wary of pseudo-gospels given to supplement God's revelation in Jesus Christ.

In Acts, the Apostle Paul warned the elders of Ephesus to "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock... I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:28-30). Peter echoed similar words when he said, "False prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves" (2 Pet. 2:1).

In another important passage, Paul warned the Corinthians, "I am afraid, lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this beautifully." Here Paul reminds us that false teachers and groups are not a 20th century

phenomenon. He then continues reminding us that not everything that looks and sounds Christian really represents the genuine: "For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore, it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their deeds" (2 Cor. 11:3-4,13-15).

In a classic passage dealing with apologetics, or the defense of the gospel message, Peter says we should "Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence" (1 Pet. 3:15).

Challenge of the Next Century

If NRMs represent a neglected mission field, we neglect it to the detriment of our evangelistic mandate to "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you" (Matt. 28:18-19). Not only are we being unfaithful in reaching a significant group of people with the gospel, the NRMs also pose a serious challenge to the church's other mission fields.

NRMs, as pseudo Christian groups, are frequently parasitic, feeding on the successes of Christian evangelism and preying on new converts. The mission periodical of the Evangelical Missions Information Service (EMIS) noted this threat in Zaire. Even as the pool of Unreached Peoples continued to shrink, NRMs and

Eastern religions continued to multiply "often at the expense of the Christian churches." EMIS recognized that the presence of such groups demanded new defensive and evangelistic tactics, and that "the adherents of these various systems represent the 'unreached people' of tomorrow's strategies." ⁸

It is our prayer that Christian leaders will analyze this present time in missions, and seeing the challenge of NRMs, will be motivated to respond with discernment and grace.

Further, every year, the Mormons field over 55,000 full-time missionaries who actively recruit members of Christian churches. Last year alone, they were successful over 300,000 times! Also, most Jehovah's Witnesses are former members of Christian churches. In fact, nearly all NRMs find great success among new Christian converts.

This challenge has not been missed by great missionary thinkers. In "Recovering the Primacy of Evangelism," premiere evangelist Billy Graham listed four trends that "pose a special challenge to Christian evangelism." He insightfully noted that the twenty-first century "may be a time when nations that have historically been Christian not only abandon their Christian roots completely... but increasingly become the targets of aggressive proselytizing by non-Christian cults and religions." ⁹

We should also note that while the missionary enterprise of North America is still strong, if the present trend of the growth of NRMs continues (usually at the expense of Christian churches and denominations),

the support base for frontier missions will erode in response. As Dr. Gordon Lewis of Denver Seminary warned in 1988, "If we wait until 51% of our citizens are sold on a [New Age] cosmic humanism, it may be too late... If the cultural shift to Hindu, [New Age and unbiblical groups'] beliefs continues in America at the present rate, in another twenty years we may have lost a major base for missions to other lands. Hence, an ounce of prevention in America now may be worth a ton of cures later." ¹⁰

For instance, we may be winning converts in some places, but we are losing significant ground to NRMs in other places. The Latter-day Saints are waging an extensive public relations campaign in the United States to convince Americans that they are Christian. They give away free Bibles, delivered by bright, energetic Mormon missionaries, who use these contacts as prospects for conversion. Southern Baptist vocational evangelist Danny Daniels said that if the trend is not reversed, the Mormon church may well define Christianity for the media in the coming century.

Marginalization of Ministry

The presence of NRMs represents a missionary challenge to the Christian church. In response, numerous Christian ministries have risen to meet this challenge. Yet out of more than 500 or more evangelical ministries in the United States, as listed in *Directory of Cult Research Organizations*, only nine are full-time ministries which are fortunate to have paid staff. Related to the lack of recognition within evangelicalism for this ministry, many ministries to NRMs find the financial struggle to be one of the greatest. Ronald Enroth and J. Gordon Melton summarize the situa-

tion:

Unfortunately, the development of ministries to what are perceived as marginal religious groups has tended to marginalize the ministries as well, and has delayed the recognition and acceptance by both mainline and evangelical denominations of the need for mission strategy toward Eastern-metaphysical and occult religion in the West.

Small, poorly-funded, marginalized counter-cult ministries have had and can hope to have but minimal overall impact upon the continued growth and spread of the alternative faiths. . . In the face of this significant cultural phenomena, the small ministries must be content with occasional and individual converts and divert a high percentage of their time away from ministry to fund raising and survival. Churches assign such ministries a low priority when judged by the enormity of other perceived world mission needs.

In the face of this marginalization, leaders of the counter-cult ministries, and sympathetic evangelical and mainline church leaders, must pool their collective resources and develop a new strategy which will engage the whole church in mission and ministry to non-Christian religions in the West.¹¹

Encouraging Signs

Yet the situation facing ministry to NRMs has seen some encouraging developments. The focus of an entire issue of *International Journal of Frontier Missions* on this subject must surely be considered an encouraging sign. In addition:

*Under the leadership of Dr. Gordon Lewis, Evangelical Ministries to New Religions (ENMR) was formed in 1983. ENMR is a promising umbrella organization which provides ethical, doctrinal and research standards for those in ministry to NRMs. It also facilitates cooperative efforts and the sharing of resources and information among members.

*Paul Carden, former director of international outreach for the Christian Research Institute, has created The Centers for Apologetic Research. Mr. Carden has helped bring a renewed emphasis upon missions and

evangelism to the evangelical treatment of NRMs.

*In a constantly changing field involving a wealth of information, Apologia has created two excellent on-line resources: *Apologia Report* and *AR-Talk*. *Apologia Report* is an on-line periodical which provides current, reliable information on a number of NRMs and trends, and *AR-Talk* is an on-line forum for the sharing of questions, answers and resources related to this field.¹²

*The Evangelical Theological Society has formed a group called the Society for the Study of Alternative Religious Movements. Though the group is now small, hopefully other scholars will participate, bringing additional evangelical scholarship to bear on this important topic.

Toward a Better Strategy

Recognizing the challenges faced by ministries to NRMs, we make the following recommendations for consideration by church, denominational and missions leaders:

1. *Concentrated Prayer Focus.* Integral to the work of the defense and proclamation of the faith is the ministry of prayer. To stimulate prayer concentrated on NRMs, prayer resources, such as the *Global Prayer Digest*, might focus specifically on the prayer needs of these groups. The production of prayer resources such as this might bring increased prayer attention for NRMs by international prayer networks such as the AD2000 and Beyond Movement Prayer Track and Concerts of Prayer International, as well as increased awareness and prayer at the local church level.

2. *Broaden the Support Base Through Strategic Relationships.* As previously mentioned, one of the key challenges facing evangelism of NRMs is a shortage of financial

resources, threatening the continued existence of not a few organizations. As Gordon Lewis has argued elsewhere in this journal, independent ministries among NRMs must seek a relationship with home mission boards, perhaps as an accredited agency heading a special task force. Though forming such relationships will be difficult, greater success might be facilitated with the assistance and endorsement of existing mission boards that already recognize the importance and need of evangelism to NRMs. Once secured, such relationships will secure financial stability, and increased awareness and support from churches, denominations and seminaries.

The recent affiliation of The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), a Latter-day Saint scholarly think tank for Mormon apologetics, with Brigham Young University, demonstrates that one of the largest and fastest growing of the NRMs recognizes the need for a well-financed and orchestrated defense of their pseudo-gospel. Might evangelicals learn something from them and emulate it in the defense and proclamation of the saving gospel?

3. *Specialized Training Through Resource Centers, Seminaries and Bible Colleges.* As the non-Western or Two-Thirds World missionary movement continues to play a greater role in world evangelization, the North American mission community will need to respond by revising its role based upon its strengths. This is especially relevant with regards to the mission field of NRMs. Here, North America has an important contribution to make. A great opportunity exists to provide education and training on NRMs from the wealth of North America's informational resources in this arena. Ministries such as Truth-Quest Institute, Watchman Fellowship, Personal Freedom Outreach,

The Centers for Apologetic Research and others, maintain libraries of books, journals, videotapes, audiotapes and files touching specifically on these groups. In addition, organizations such as these have experienced researchers and teachers whose expertise can prove invaluable in equipping pastors, missionaries and lay people in the U.S. and overseas, in concert with missions and denominational agencies as well as seminaries. This wealth of information in North America can be passed along through traditional "in-house" training, as well as through theological education by extension. A specific goal of such training would be to equip resource persons in each Christian church, and to mentor "apologetic interns" to equip a future generation.

To help promote the creation of such programs of study at an increased number of seminaries and Bible colleges, perhaps a cooperative effort could be launched between the Evangelical Theological Society and evangelical educational institutions such as Denver Seminary, Trinity International University, Biola University and the Veritas Graduate School of Southern Evangelical Seminary, organizations with existing programs dealing with NRMs and apologetics. Simply put, NRMs must become a high priority item on the agenda of evangelical theological education for the next century.

4. *Consultation on Evangelism to New Religious Movements*. Just as consultations on Islam helped bring attention to the need for mission to Muslims, a consultation on evangelism to NRMs would help bring needed attention to this mission field. A consultation could be held in North America sponsored by EMNR, perhaps in conjunction with Urbana, and in partnership with mission boards, as well as leading mission agencies such

as the Association of International Mission Services, Evangelical Fellowship of Mission Agencies, Interdenominational Foreign Mission Association and the International Society of Frontier Missiology. The North American consultation would be followed by an international conference, perhaps in Eastern Europe or the former Soviet Union, where the growth of primarily American made and exported NRMs is especially problematic.

5. *Establishment of Endowed Chairs*. The establishment of an endowed academic chair of studies in new religious movements at an evangelical university such as Trinity International University or Biola University is an idea worthy of exploration. Such a position would serve as a catalyst for the scholarly study of new religious movements from a distinctly evangelical perspective. The results of this academic study would help counter the scholarly apologetics of some NRMs, such as the Latter-day Saints, and would also filter down to benefit evangelicals at the parachurch as well as popular apologetics levels. The chair's endowment would also help bring much-needed financial stability to this area of ministry.

Conclusion

In the gospel of Luke our Lord offered a rebuke to the scribes and Pharisees: "You know how to analyze the appearance of the earth and the sky, but why do you not analyze this present time?" (Luke 12:56) It is our prayer that Christian leaders will analyze this present time in missions, and seeing the challenge and opportunity presented by NRMs, they will be motivated to respond with discernment and grace. May the Lord continue to build this mission house lest the watchmen continue their vigil for nought. (Ps. 127:1)

Endnotes

1. William J. Broad, "When a Cult Turns to Germ Warfare," *New York Times*, May 26, 1998, Internet edition at <<http://www.nytimes.com>>.
2. Alan W. Gomes, *Cults* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 18-19. See also Joe Maxwell, "New Kingdoms for the Cults," *Christianity Today*, January 13, 1992, 37.
3. Margaret Thaler Singer with Janja Lalich, *Cults In Our Midst* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995), 28. This book is appropriately subtitled "The Hidden Menace in our Everyday Lives".
4. Tim Stafford, "The Kingdom of the Cult Watchers," *Christianity Today*, October 7, 1991, 20.
5. News, *Christianity Today*, January 8, 1996.
6. Terry C. Muck, *Alien Gods on American Turf* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1990), 14.
7. *Ibid.*, 70.
8. Bradley Hill, "Future of Evangelism in Zaire Demands New Tactics," *PULSE*, February 13, 1987, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Wheaton: Evangelical Missions Information Service), 2. Thanks to Rich Poll of Apologia for providing this reference.
9. Billy Graham, "Recovering the Primacy of Evangelism," *Christianity Today*, December 8, 1997, 28.
10. Gordon Lewis as quoted in James Stephens, "Looking at Buddhist America: A Key to World Evangelization," *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, Vol 10:3 July 1993, 105.
11. Ronald M. Enroth and J. Gordon Melton, *Why Cults Succeed Where the Church Fails* (Elgin: Brethren Press), 130-131.
12. Readers are encouraged to explore these resources. EMNR: <<http://www.emnr.org>>; Apologia: <<http://www.apologia.org>>.

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