

FROM “CULTS” TO CULTURES: *BRIDGES* AS A CASE STUDY IN A NEW
EVANGELICAL PARADIGM ON NEW RELIGIONS

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Paper presented at The 2009 CESNUR Conference, Salt Lake City, Utah, June 11-13,
2009

Introduction

The late 1960s saw the rise of turbulent times in America as various facets of “mainstream” culture were called into question by the country’s youth. America’s religious life was not exempt from process. Although novel religious ideas have been a part of American history and culture for many years, the increased presence of eastern gurus and the counterculture’s fascination with mysticism and alternative forms of spirituality gave the impression to certain segments of society that a “cult explosion” posed one of many threats to the country.¹ In response to the presence of these new religions, or “cults” as referred to more popularly, two segments of American culture rose in response. The first was the secular anti-cult movement, represented by groups such as the now defunct Cult Awareness Network, and the American Family Foundation (now called the International Cultic Studies Association). From the perspective of the secular anti-cult the new religions represented exploitation and a threat to freedom of choice in religious matters as gurus and leaders of new religions were alleged to engage in various forms of brainwashing.

Another very different response to the new religions arose out of the Christian subculture which adopted a self-designation as the counter-cult movement.² While sometimes overlapping with the secular anti-cult in their concerns over the new religions, in general the counter-cult follows a different trajectory which will be explored briefly

later in this paper. Whether consciously or not, both the secular anti-cult and evangelical counter-cult have contributed to the marginalization of new religions in American religious life. Quite naturally, the evangelical counter-cult has done this largely within the evangelical subculture as they have shaped its attitudes, understandings, and responses toward new religions both in neighborhood churches as well as in the public square. Although academic studies have tended to focus on the secular anti-cult, the evangelical counter-cult movement represents an interesting response to the new religions in its own right.³ In this essay I will sketch the primary counter-cult approach to new religions, and then describe the emergence of a new multidisciplinary, academically-informed paradigm among evangelicals. This shift in understanding of new religions has resulted in the production of new resources which seek to re-educate an evangelical audience about the new religions. One such resource will be examined as a case study in the form of *Bridges*, which presents Mormonism as a culture rather than as a “cult.”

Counter-Cult Movement and New Religious Movements

The counter-cult movement is an influential source in the shaping of evangelical attitudes toward new religions. It is difficult to know exactly how many people are involved in this movement in the United States, but it is likely that several hundred individuals, and several organizations, ranging in size from single individuals to those having a small staff, comprise this movement.⁴

Given their evangelical perspective, the counter-cult movement approaches the new religions from a particular theological framework which differentiates it from the secular anti-cult with its emphasis on actions rather than belief systems, or “deed not

creed.” Australian researcher of new religions, Philip Johnson, has analyzed the vast body of materials that the prolific counter-cult movement has produced for evangelical consumption concerning the new religions, and as a result developed a typology and nomenclature related to the categorization of the various approaches the counter-cult takes in regards to the new religions.⁵ Although six basic models are identified in Johnson’s typology, by far, the approach most prominent in counter-cult circles is that labeled the “heresy-rationalist apologetic.” In this approach, counter-cult individuals begin with theological orthodoxy as defined by Protestant evangelicalism in terms of doctrines such as the nature of God, Christology, and soteriology as the overarching concerns, and then the views of various new religions are examined and contrasted. In light of this comparison the doctrines of the new religions are construed as heresies, and a refutation is offered by way of various biblical passages.⁶ In addition to the theological analysis and refutation, many counter-cult apologetic approaches also incorporate critique of the coherency of various worldviews associated with the new religions.⁷ This emphasis on identifying and critiquing heresy, coupled with the incorporation of a rational critique of the new religions, results in the heresy-rationalist apologetic.

As awareness of the Johnson typology and critique of the heresy-rationalist apologetic has become known among the counter-cult it has not been well received.⁸ Even so, in John Saliba’s assessment of various theological approaches to new religions he characterizes Johnson’s analysis of the evangelical approach as “[p]robably the most insightful, carefully articulated, and detailed analysis”⁹ available.

Although size of the counter-cult movement is very small compared to the size of evangelicalism as a whole their influence in shaping evangelical understanding of new

religions through the heresy-rationalist apologetic must not be underestimated. A trip to a Christian bookstore and a perusing of the “Cults and World Religions” section will reveal a number of volumes that approach the new religions, and many times the world religions, from the heresy-rationalist perspective. In addition, the counter-cult has an extensive presence on the Internet,¹⁰ and these print and digital sources are extremely influential in shaping evangelical attitudes to, understandings of, and forms of engagement with adherents of new religious movements.

The Emergence of a New Evangelical Paradigm

As a result of the counter-cult approach to the new religions several forms of marginalization have resulted: 1) the counter-cult has been marginalized in the academic community, either being ignored or largely viewed in negative fashion; 2) the perception of the counter-cult among the adherents of new religions is one of marginalization as the way in which the new religions are represented by the counter-cult is viewed in strongly negative fashion; and 3) perhaps most curiously, counter-cult approaches to the new religions may have resulted in the counter-cult being marginalized and treated with fringe status themselves within evangelicalism. As I have written elsewhere, “The counter-cult response to what was perceived as the religious fringe relegated the counter-cult to the fringes of the evangelical subculture.”¹¹ It is in this context that a new approach to new religions has arisen within evangelicalism.

Evangelicals in several countries, including Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States,¹² independently came to the conclusion that the counter-cult heresy rationalist approach was problematic on a number of fronts. In response a new paradigm

was developed that addressed perceived shortcomings. This new paradigm exhibits at least four significant facets.

First, the new paradigm is positive and holistic. The emphasis on in the counter-cult movement is on apologetic refutation, on “countering” something as in the name “*counter-cult*”.¹³ Although this posture and methodology is often construed by counter-cultists as a positive means of evangelism for adherents of new religions, it is probably better understood in the negative, as a means of refutation that functions as a form of boundary maintenance for evangelicals that speaks more to their need for doctrinal and worldview definition and protection.¹⁴ Gordon Melton has observed that

The counter-cult approach originated as an evangelism effort, but with that proving unfruitful, counter-cult spokespersons have now redefined their work as apologists and limited their public activity to boundary maintenance for the evangelical community.¹⁵

In addition, advocates of the new paradigm recognize the limited value of boundary maintenance approaches beyond serving the sometimes important but narrow function of “preaching to the choir.” As Saliba has noted in this regard,

[A]ll that the heated denunciations of the new religions do is to reinforce the attitudes and beliefs of both their members and detractors. Apologetic debates rarely lead unbelievers or apostates to convert; they do not succeed in persuading renegade Christians to abandon their new beliefs to return to the faith of their birth. Harangues against the new religions do not lead their members to listen attentively to the arguments of zealous evangelizers. On the contrary, they drive them further away and elicit similar belligerent responses.¹⁶

Those evangelicals who have developed the new paradigm recognize that there is a place for doctrinal and worldview contrast between religions traditions, and even a contextualized form of apologetic engagement when appropriate, but that these must take

place within a more positive, expansive, and holistic framework in regards to the new religions.

Second, the new paradigm utilizes a broader understanding of the new religions. In the counter-cult approach, theology and a branch of theology in the form of apologetics are the primary tools used to understand the new religions. Those developing a new paradigm recognize that theology remains an important discipline for those evangelicals seeking to understand the new religions in relation to the Christian faith, but a broader theological framework must be utilized, one that seeks to bring theology into dialogue with other disciplines.

Third, related to the second aspect just discussed, the new evangelical paradigm seeks broader theological understandings of the new religions through a multidisciplinary framework. Disciplines such as religious studies, the sociology of religion, and anthropology are studied so that the insights provided from these academic disciplines might inform the evangelical understanding of the new religions. Theology itself is also probed more deeply so that the history of Christian engagement with other religions across cultures, and interreligious dialogue become important tools for theological enrichment. Through this process theology is then brought into dialogue with these avenues of thought so that broader, more informed, and enriching forms of theology are developed.¹⁷

Fourth, the new paradigm involves a dramatically different framework, reframing the understanding of new religions as distinct religious or spiritual cultures rather than as heretical belief systems or cults. Those developing the new paradigm recognize that the new religions incorporate elements of doctrine and worldview that are at variance

with Christianity (as well as recognizing those elements that are not in conflict), but viewing the new religions as little to nothing more than cults or heresies results in a limited understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of the new religions, and tends to engender largely negative forms of interaction. Instead, the new paradigm moves beyond conceptions of heretical cults in recognition that the new religions involve not only their own unique doctrines and worldview, but also unique vocabulary, rituals, sacred narratives, and other elements that provide a sense of religious and social identity which come together to provide the adherent with a sense of cultural identity. This idea dovetails with the thesis of Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe wherein new religions are construed as global cultures.¹⁸

Resource Case Study: *Bridges*

Over the last several years, the development and utilization of this new paradigm among evangelicals has moved beyond the efforts of a few isolated individuals to the formation of a small but growing international network.¹⁹ Participants in this network have been involved in the production of new resources as a means of contributing to the body of scholarship on the new religions, as well as to facilitating a new evangelical understanding of them, and informing engagement with their adherents in more promising ways.²⁰ One of these resources fits well with the location of this CESNUR conference given its focus on The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In the remainder of this paper I will examine the educational program called *Bridges* as a case study for the types of resources currently being developed as a result of the new paradigm.

In 2002 the Winter Olympic Games were held in Salt Lake City. As the announcement of this location was made prior to the event, many members of the evangelical Christian community in Utah were both excited about the prospects of becoming the focus of the world stage, and concerned about the possibility of negative evangelistic efforts directed at members of the LDS Church. As a result of this concern Salt Lake Theological Seminary²¹ was asked to produce a new resource that would serve as a model for a positive understanding of Mormonism and interactions between traditional Christians and Mormons. The final product was a video-based training tool called *Bridges*.

The basic premise of *Bridges* is that Mormonism should be understood as a culture rather than as a cult. The producers of *Bridges* noted that the *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*,²² in an entry by Dean L. May, included Mormons. The rationale for this classification involved the existence of various characteristics which function as cultural markers and which differentiate the “us” of Mormonism vs. the “them” of non-Mormons. In addition to the obvious characteristic of religious worldview, other cultural markers include a history of conflict (particularly with Protestant Christians) and a resulting sense of persecution, a westward migration across the United States that is often equated in Mormon minds with the Jewish exodus, distinct marriage practices including the past practice of polygamy and temple marriage, special dietary regulations in the form of the “Word of Wisdom,” and a sense of group distinction and at times isolation in terms of its stance in relation to non-Mormons.²³ All of these cultural markers come together to form a sense among Mormons of being a distinct and different people in terms of existing as a separate culture or subculture.

Bridges begins with this foundational premise that Mormonism is best understood as a culture. The resource includes five modules that impart core ideas as part of a basic philosophy of understanding and engagement. These include an emphasis on interactions between evangelicals and Latter-day Saints through the development of relationships rather than confrontation. This does not mean that *Bridges* does not discuss the differences between evangelicalism and Mormonism, but that such differences, when they arise, are part of a broader landscape of discussion. It also involves recognition that complex and difficult subject matter is best discussed within the context of relationships. Another foundational principle of *Bridges* is “a commitment to understanding the unique culture of Latter-day Saints and finding of points of contact within that culture”²⁴ so that the evangelical understanding of the Christian message can be shared. The cultural perspective on Mormonism, and a commitment to relationships and common ground, come together to form a basic philosophy imparted by the *Bridges* training program.

Ken Mulholland, one of the principals involved in the creation of *Bridges*, estimates that over 25,000 Christians have been through this training series. The response by evangelicals to this approach tends to follow a general pattern. Many evangelicals have their understanding and opinions of Mormonism shaped by the counter-cult heresy-rationalist perspective as found in many books and websites that discuss Mormonism. As a result, there is often great resistance to the idea that Mormonism is best understood as a culture rather than as a cult. This was my experience in teaching *Bridges* in a church in northern California. After the five modules were completed, an attendee approached me and shared that during the first module with the discussion of the cultural aspects of Mormonism she almost left and did not complete the training because she knew

Mormonism was a cult. But after sitting through the complete series and giving the cultural framework and new paradigm a try she came to the conclusion that it was a better way to understand Mormonism, and in her view it holds greater potential for dialoguing more positively with Latter-day Saints. In my experience with *Bridges* such reactions are common, and for this reason *Bridges* and other resources with a similar philosophy, hold great potential for creating fresh perspectives among evangelicals in their understanding of not only Mormonism, but new religious movements and world religions as well.

Conclusion

It remains to be seen what impact the new paradigm and resources like *Bridges* will have on evangelicals in large numbers, or whether a critical mass can be reached resulting in a paradigm shift that overthrows the dominant heresy-rationalist paradigm. New religions like Mormonism do not seem to be of major concern to many evangelical churches as they once were during the so-called “cult wars” of the previous few decades. It may be that the 1980s represented the height of influence for the counter-cult when films like *The Godmakers* (Jeremiah Films, 1982) were shown around the United States and viewed by thousands of Christians. But despite the dramatic lowering of the new religions on the agenda of issues of concern to evangelicals and their churches, the continued influence of the counter-cult movement should not be underestimated. Those developing the new paradigm will continue to meet resistance to their approach both from the counter-cult and from popular evangelicalism which has become accustomed to thinking of new religions in terms of heresy and threat rather than culture and opportunity. Despite the uphill battle, the new paradigm on new religions among evangelicals, and the resources based upon them, hold great potential for re-educating the

evangelical subculture, but it will take a great deal of time, market infusion, and financial resources to facilitate a large scale shift in thinking.

¹ Philip Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 175.

² George D. Chryssides presents a summary of both the secular anti-cult and Christian counter-cult approaches in chapter 10, "The counter-cult movement," in *Exploring New Religions* (London and New York, Cassell, 1999).

³ John A. Saliba includes a helpful discussion of "The New Religions in Christian Theological Perspective" in chapter six of *Understanding New Religious Movements*, 2nd ed. (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press). For a more extensive analysis and valuable critique of the counter-cult movement see Douglas E. Cowan, *Bearing False Witness?: An Introduction to the Christian Countercult* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003).

⁴ Statistics are not available on the current number of counter-cult individuals and organizations, but as of 1996 443 evangelical counter-cult organizations were tallied in Keith Edward Tolbert and Eric Pement, *1996 Directory of Cult Research Organizations* (Trenton, NJ: American Religions Center, 1996).

⁵ Philip Johnson, "The Aquarian Age and Apologetics," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 34, no. 2 (December 1997): 51-60.

⁶ This approach is exemplified in any number of evangelical books on the topic. Examples include the major influence in the development of this model found in Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, revised updated edition, Ravi Zacharias, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Bethany House, 2003). Examples of other popular authors that utilize the heresy-rationalist approach include John Ankerberg & John Weldon, *Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions* (In Defense of the Faith Series, 2) (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1999); and Ron Rhodes, *The Challenge of the Cults and New Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001).

⁷ E.g., Douglas Groothuis, *Unmasking the New Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), and Francis J. Beckwith & Stephen Parrish, *See the Gods Fall: Four Rivals to Christianity* (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company, 2000).

⁸ This awareness was facilitated by Johnson's essay "Apologetics, Mission and New Religious Movements: A Holistic Approach" in *Sacred Tribes Journal* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2002): 5-220 (information retrieved from http://www.sacredtribesjournal.org/images/Articles/Vol_1/Apolog_Johnson.pdf, accessed 20 May 2009), as well as my chapter "Where Do We Go From Here?: Transforming Evangelical Responses to New Religions," in Irving Hexham, Stephen Rost, & John W. Morehead II eds., *Encountering New Religious Movements: A Holistic Evangelical Approach* (Grand Rapids, MO: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2004).

⁹ John A. Saliba, *Understanding New Religious Movements*, 2nd ed. (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press), 221.

¹⁰ See the discussion of this in chapter 8, "The Siege in Cyberspace and the Democratization of the Countercult," in Cowan, *Bearing False Witness?*

¹¹ John W. Morehead II, "Where Do We Go From Here?," in *Encountering New Religious Movements*, 288.

¹² The situation among evangelicals in Europe is different in that the heresy-rationalist paradigm has not been nearly as influential. Here, figures like Ole Skjerbaek Madsen in Denmark and Lars Johansson in Sweden approach the new religions from a perspective very different from that in America. See Ole Skjerbaek Madsen, "Theology in Dialogue with New Age or the Neospiritual Mileu," in Viggo Mortensen ed., *Theology and the Religions: A Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), and Lars Johansson, "Mystical Knowledge, New Age, and Missiology," in J. Andrew Kirk and Kevin J. Vanhooser eds., *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999).

¹³ Even former Denver Seminary professor Gordon Lewis, a figure sympathetic to the counter-cult, urged a new sense of self-identity that moved beyond confrontation. See Gordon R. Lewis, "New Religious

Movements and our Mission Responsibility,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 15, no. 3 (July-September 1998), 118, (information retrieved from http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/15_3_PDFs/01%20Lewis.pdf, accessed 20 May 2009).

¹⁴ This is examined in depth in Cowan, *Bearing False Witness?*.

¹⁵ J. Gordon Melton, “Emerging Religious Movements in North America” *Missiology* 28, no. 1 (January 2000): 93-94.

¹⁶ Saliba, *Understanding New Religious Movements*, 220.

¹⁷ Missiologists utilize this form of theological reflection and it has been used for centuries in regards to the world religions. This is only recently the case in regards missiologically informed approaches to the new religions. For an example of theology in dialogue with other disciplines in missiology see Gailyn Van Rheenen, “From Theology to Practice: The Helix Metaphor,” *Monthly Missiology Reflection* #25, (information retrieved from <http://www.missiology.org/mmr/mmr25.htm>, accessed 20 May 2009).

¹⁸ Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe, *New Religions as Global Cultures: Making the Human Sacred* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997).

¹⁹ This network is facilitated through the Religious and Non-Religious Spirituality in the Western World issue group (www.lop45.org) as part of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization.

²⁰ Examples of these resources in the area of scholarship includes the revamped electronic *Sacred Tribes Journal* (www.sacredtribesjournal.org), and examples of those resources aimed at helping evangelicals conceptualize the new religions and engage their adherents in more positive fashion include Philip Johnson, Anne C. Harper and John W. Morehead, eds., *Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 45, “Religious and Non-Religious Spirituality in the Western World (‘New Age’)”*, 2004 (information retrieved from http://www.lausanne.org/documents/2004forum/LOP45_IG16.pdf, accessed 20 May 2009); Hexham, Rost and Morehead, *Encountering New Religious Movements*; Philip Johnson and Gus diZerega, *Beyond the Burning Times: A Pagan and Christian in Dialogue* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2008); and the Consultation on Post-Christendom Spiritualities held at Trinity International University in October 2008 (a summary report and videos of plenary sessions can be accessed at http://www.sacredtribesjournal.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=81&Itemid=2).

²¹ Financial challenges resulted in the recent closing of the seminary (www.slts.edu), but *Bridges* and similar resources are now the intellectual property of and promoted by the Western Institute for Intercultural Studies (www.wiics.org).

²² Stephan Thernstrom, ed., *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1980): 720-31.

²³ Armand L. Mauss has discussed the ongoing oscillation in Mormon history between isolation and emphasis on Mormon distinctives, and desires for acceptance and emphasis on similarities with traditional Christianity and non-Mormon culture in *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

²⁴ Kenneth Mulholland, “Bridging the Divide: Cross-Cultural Missions to Latter-day Saints” in Hexham, Rost and Morehead, *Encountering New Religious Movements*, 159.