

New Religious Movements and Interreligious Dialogue

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Formal interreligious dialogue, as the process is defined in these articles, has occurred between the world religions for over a century. Beginning with the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893, major episodes in dialogue have occurred almost every decade. The founding of the World Council of Churches in 1942 increased the pace of interreligious and interfaith dialogue.

The remaining relatively unexplored frontier for interreligious dialogue is with new religious movements (NRMs). A major reason for this lack of dialogue is that, according to a study by Diana Eck, evangelical and fundamentalist Christians pay far more attention to NRMs than do mainline denominations.¹ As is evidenced by most counter-cult publications, the attitude of evangelicals and fundamentalists toward NRMs is understandably more polemic than dialectic. Evangelicals tend to frame their relationships with new religious movements by examining how the beliefs and practices of the NRMs conflict with orthodox Christianity.

Surprisingly, the polemic response has also frequently been the official reaction of those mainline denominations that have responded to the growth of NRMs. For example, the Lutheran World Fellowship president, Gottfried Brakemeier, said regarding NRMs in Latin America that he harbors "suspicion concerning the aims of many of these religious movements, which frequently are determined by economic and materialistic interests. They preach a God who offers neither ethical orientation nor help in times of crisis and have only one goal, namely to gain a 'place in the sun' in the struggle for survival."²

The Roman Catholic Church Responds to NRMs

The Vatican published a major document regarding the Christian approach to NRMs in 1986. "Sects or New Religious Movements: A Pastoral Challenge," defines cults and sects as groups that "are authoritarian in structure, that...exercise forms of brainwashing and mind control, that...cultivate group pressure and instill feelings of guilt and fear, etc."³ The report also examines the emotional needs met by NRMs that enable them to flourish, and concludes with positive ways in which the Church can counteract the attraction of many to NRMs by involving people more closely in parish life.⁴

The Vatican report downplays the possibility of dialogue with NRMs. "We may know too from experience that there is generally little or no possibility of dialogue with the sects," the report claims, "And that not only are they themselves closed to dialogue, but they can also be a serious obstacle to ecumenical education and effort wherever they are active."⁵

A possible change in the Vatican's position on dialogue with NRMs is indicated in a presentation by Cardinal Arinze, the Prefect of the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogues, to the Cardinals' Fourth Extraordinary Consistory of April, 1991. Instead of disqualifying the possibility of dialogue with NRMs, Arinze speculated that the issue is "how to conduct dialogue with NRMs with due prudence and discernment."⁶

Why Engage in Dialogue with NRMs?

The impetus toward evangelism is a primary reason for dialogue with NRMs. By learning more about the beliefs and practices of new religions, sects, and cults, Christians can learn how to effectively present the gospel in a way that will be understood by members of alternative religions. This impetus can also be translated into relational evangelism. By gaining a clearer understanding of the beliefs and practices of new religious movements, Christians will be more comfortable relating with members in daily life, providing greater opportunities for sharing the gospel.

A less obvious reason for dialogue with NRMs is that it will inform Christians about possible problems in the church. A study several years ago determined that 87 percent of respondents had some religious affiliation before joining a cult.⁷ The 1986 Vatican report found that people joined NRMs to fulfill such basic human needs as a sense of belonging, a quest for transcendence, and the need for activity.⁸ Understanding the needs of individuals that are not being met by the church, but are being met by the NRMs, will enable the church to address these needs and thus increase the retention of church members.

Potential Problems in Dialogue with NRMs

There are numerous potential obstacles to successful interreligious dialogue with NRMs. Several of these are explained below.

Refusal to Dialogue

Many NRMs refuse to interact with other religious communities in anything other than a polemical, evangelistic confrontation. For example, the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society refuses to engage in dialogue, stating, "The whole concept of interfaith is not approved by God."⁹ Jehovah's Witnesses "refuse to ally themselves through interfaith movements with religious organizations that promote unchristian [i.e., non-Watchtower controlled] conduct and beliefs."¹⁰ An NRM that claims to be the one true religion is typically unlikely to participate in interreligious dialogue.

While not inherent in all NRMs, many communities will refuse dialogue due to an isolationist worldview. Such groups frequently promote conspiracy theories that tend to separate members from outside religious influences. The Watchtower Society, for example, teaches that all Christianity is a "a harlot," the "Babylon the Great" of Revelation 18 and 19 that will be destroyed by God because of its deceptive doctrines and political activity.¹¹ The Church of Scientology allegedly claims that critics of the organization "are declared enemies of mankind, the planet and all life. They are fair game."¹² Unfortunately, many evangelicals and fundamentalists may reject dialogue due to similar conspiracy theories regarding NRMs.

Unwillingness to dialogue may also result because members of the NRM explicitly reject evangelical Christianity. These members may be reacting against unpleasant experiences with evangelicals, or an unfulfilling upbringing in an evangelical or fundamentalist church.¹³ Such individuals will likely find little compulsion to engage in dialogue.

Unclear Status and Rapid Development of NRMs

Saliba believes the "Dialogue Decalogue" may be inapplicable to some NRMs because dialogue presupposes an established religious tradition for all participants.¹⁴ The label "New Religious Movement," however, explicitly states the problem: NRMs developed relatively recently. Because NRMs usually do not have well-established traditions and doctrines, they are often unable to match in depth and breadth the theological scholarship of the established religions. Their representative intellectuals may therefore be ill equipped for detailed discussion with highly educated Christian scholars.

Also problematic is the unclear status of NRMs. How long must a religious community exist, many scholars ask, before they have progressed from being an NRM to being an established sect? Is the LDS Church, which was founded in 1830, still to be considered an NRM? Is the Church Universal and Triumphant, which was founded by Mark Prophet in the 1950s, now to be considered a sect? Answers to these questions can greatly influence the approach taken by Christians in dialogue.

The New Age Movement presents additional problems. Because there is no central authority or comprehensive statement of belief, the status of the New Age Movement is particularly unclear. Who can adequately represent the majority of people in the New Age? How can representative intellectuals be identified? Because the New Age Movement is highly syncretistic, is the belief system represented by New Age participants stable enough for discussion? These issues greatly complicate the potential for meaningful dialogue with New Age devotees. ***Obscure Scripture and Vocabulary***

Many NRMs have scripture or revelation that are unique to the community. These sources of doctrine are frequently difficult for non-members to obtain and understand. For example, during the recent doctrinal transformation within the Worldwide Church of God, many of the new and emerging teachings of the faith were officially disseminated only in the articles of their *Worldwide News*, a periodical not generally available to non-members. To understand an NRM's teachings, a scholar must understand the history of the communities, the socio-political climate that may have influenced the communities, and many other keys to proper contextualization and interpretation of the teachings.

Another difficulty is the vocabulary that is unique to the community. Many NRMs use unique terms, frequently incomprehensible to many non-members, to describe their beliefs, practices, and experiences. The Church of Scientology, for example, uses a highly complex vocabulary. The 1983 *Dianetics and Scientology Technical Dictionary* contains 571 pages of definitions for such terms as "clear," "theta," "mest," and "theetie-weetie."¹⁵ The difficulty in mastering what can be an almost foreign language often hinders communication with NRMs.

Even more difficult is when NRMs use the same terminology as Christians, but assign a different meaning to the words. This problem is particularly evident in relations between evangelicals and Mormons. Stephen Robinson observes that both groups use many of the same terms, noting, "This quite often makes communication more difficult than if we spoke different religious languages entirely."¹⁶ Confusion, and sometimes false agreement, can result when both groups are using identical terms to convey very different meanings.

Apologetics Organizations

Many NRMs are hesitant to engage in dialogue with evangelical Christians due to resentment of the criticism leveled by apologetics organizations, such as Watchman Fellowship. Saliba correctly notes that NRMs are offended by the practice of apologetics organizations of negatively contrasting how the NRMs differ from orthodox Christianity.¹⁷ The NRMs frequently link the mission of apologetics organizations with the entirety of evangelicalism, believing that they will be forced on the defensive in any interaction with evangelicals (see "Disguising the Divide," in this issue, for an analysis of the way in which Stephen Robinson emphasizes this point).

Evangelicals are often similarly reluctant to dialogue with NRMs precisely because the new organizations respond apologetically to Christianity. Many NRMs make exclusive claims to truth, disparage other religions, and propose practices that are alleged to be the only means of progressing spiritually. Such a position can, as Saliba notes, make dialogue very difficult.¹⁸

Watchman staff recently experienced this difficulty while engaging in dialogue with a local group who believe salvation can be earned (in part) by speaking a pseudo-Elizabethan style of English. The two sessions consisted almost exclusively of the group haranguing the staff, proclaiming the superiority of their doctrines. Nonetheless, the encounter reinforces the need for dialogue: Watchman staff were able to learn directly from members about their doctrine. The clarified understanding attained by Watchman staff could only be earned through dialogical engagement.

This section is not intended to downplay the importance of engaging in apologetics; Jude 3 makes clear that Christians are to defend the faith. Instead, this section simply identifies a concern NRMs have in dialoging with evangelicals. Successful dialogue depends upon an accurate understanding of how NRMs view evangelical Christians, including objections to the apologetic component of evangelicalism.

The Current Status of Dialogue with NRMs

Several NRMs are currently engaged in interreligious dialogue with Christians. The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (better known as the Hare Krishnas) are becoming increasingly active in interreligious dialogue, viewing the process as an opportunity to increase both the understanding of their movement and the efficacy of their evangelism.¹⁹ Baha'i, a syncretistic NRM that hopes to meld governments and religions into a single global entity, is also involved in dialogue.²⁰

The Unification Church of Rev. Sun-myung Moon is one of the most active NRMs in interreligious dialogue (like Baha'i, Unification intends to bring the world religions into itself). The Unification Church quotes Kenneth Cracknell, the Visiting Research Professor in Theology and Mission at Brite Divinity School, "The Unification Church (which is not an orthodox church) does more for the interfaith movement at an international level than do either the World Council of Churches' Dialogue unit or the Roman Catholic Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christians, or both of them put together."²¹ One of the main ways in which Moon promotes interreligious dialogue is through his sponsorship of the quadrennial Assembly of the World's Religions. The assemblies bring together spiritual teachers, scholars, lay leaders and youth to engage in interreligious dialogue.

The Hare Krishnas, the Unification Church, and the Church of Scientology are supporters of the American Conference on Religious Movements, which facilitates dialogue between Christian communities and NRMs.²³ Also involved in facilitating dialogue are INFORM (led by British scholar Eileen Barker), and the Association of World Academics for Religious Freedom.²⁴ Religious scholar J. Gordon Melton is also active in dialogue with NRMs.

A difference between the dialogue efforts listed above, and the recommendations for dialogue in this issue, is that the above listings refer to dialogues in which all sides are pursuing common ground in an effort to affirm the legitimacy and possible equality of the disparate groups.²⁵ Evangelical Christians, while working to increase understanding and achieve a peaceful co-existence, would be unable to recognize the NRMs as being spiritually equal to Christianity.

Case Study: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

An NRM that has recently begun to dialogue with Christians is the LDS Church. Once like the Watchtower Society in its avoidance of non-evangelistic interaction with Christians, members of the LDS Church have actively pursued dialogue during the presidency of former public relations official Gordon Hinckley.

Apostle M. Russell Ballard asserts that "Mormons and non-Mormons need to build bridges of understanding so diverse religions can co-exist as Christians."²⁶ In pursuit of this objective, Robert Millet (the Dean of Religious Education at Church-owned Brigham Young University) and

Stephen Robinson have met several times in 1997 with Southern Baptist representatives.²⁷ Jay Johnson, a member of the Quorum of the Seventy, was authorized by Hinckley to engage in dialogue with United Methodists in February, 1998.²⁸

The most significant dialogue between an evangelical and a Mormon has been *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (henceforth referred to as *HWTD*), published in 1997 by the evangelical InterVarsity Press (interestingly, *HWTD* was originally to be co-published by IVP and the LDS Church-owned Deseret Books²⁹). Richard Mouw's blurb on the back cover of *HWTD* aptly states the significance of the book: "Some of us have argued, against the relativizers of religious truth, that dialogue with other perspectives should never preclude efforts at evangelism. But neither should a commitment to evangelism rule out genuine engagement in dialogue...The dialogue between Evangelicals and Mormons is long overdue."³⁰

Reactions to *HWTD* have been mixed. Many counter-cult organizations have reacted against some of the difficulties in Robinson's presentation of Mormonism (see "[Disguising the Divide](#)" in this issue). Critics assert that Robinson's opinions are representative of neither historical Mormonism or current LDS leadership. For example, Francis Beckwith notes:

The more interesting divide is not between Robinson and Blomberg, but between Robinson and the founder of Mormonism. Consequently, the agreements between Robinson and Blomberg in their joint conclusions should be taken with a grain of salt, keeping in mind that Robinson, by his own admission, does not speak for the LDS Church, even though some church members agree with his views.³²

Despite this criticism, Beckwith states that the book "is a significant work in American religious history."³³

In contrast to the opposition of the critics of *HWTD*, many evangelical scholars have been encouraged by the attempt at irenic dialogue. Ron Enroth speculates that one reason for this academic approval is that "members of the academy are not as threatened by the format and content of this particular book as some counter-cult ministries seem to be."³⁴ In response to charges that Robinson does not accurately represent Mormon thought, Blomberg states that Robinson, even though a theological "progressive,"³⁵ is accepted as representative of the LDS mainstream by not only a wide spectrum of Mormons,³⁶ but also by some evangelical critics of the LDS Church.³⁷ Robinson, in his own defense, notes that he has received no criticism from other Mormons for his presentation of LDS doctrine, pointing out that LDS leadership would remove him from his position if his teachings were to contradict Mormon orthodoxy.³⁸ >Despite this controversy, many critics and proponents of the book are equally troubled by the difficulties inherent in the joint agreements in the conclusion. As Timothy Oliver points out in the following article, it is possible that Robinson is disingenuous in his agreement with Blomberg. It is also possible that the authors, although intending to present joint agreements to which they assign identical ontological meanings,³⁹ nonetheless primarily agree to the terminology of statements for which each has a different understanding. James White has even suggested that the joint agreements should have been titled, "Dr. Blomberg and Dr. Robinson believe...and that with numerous caveats and redefinitions"⁴⁰ (it should be noted that Blomberg concurs with the first half of White's suggestion⁴¹). As an example of the difficulties presented by the conclusion, both authors agree that "the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are one eternal God,"⁴² but they also acknowledge that they cannot agree on whether "God [is] a Trinity in essence or only in function";⁴³ this disagreement on the nature of the Trinity greatly diminishes the supposed agreement. The joint agreements are thus much more semantic agreements than they are true ontological agreements. Robinson alludes to this understanding of the conclusion when he states, "Concessions have been made on both sides in matters as trivial as phrasing and terminology, and in matters as consequential as accommodating (or tolerating) each other's odd perspective."⁴⁴

The controversy over the value of *HWTD* raises an important question, posed in a review by James White: "The most troubling issue is this: Are we to be seeking this kind of dialogue...Where, biblically, are we encouraged to lay out our areas of 'agreement' with false teachers?" [45](#) In other words, is it theologically appropriate to engage in formal interreligious dialogue with Mormons? The answer to this question, in line with the biblical examples of interreligious dialogue discussed in the first article, is yes, Christians should engage in dialogue in which areas of agreement, as well as disagreement, are identified. Paul's affirmative use of the Cretan poet Epimenides in presenting the gospel to the Stoics and Epicureans of Athens [46](#) (and also in his letter to Titus [47](#)), and his later statement that unbelieving Gentiles who do not have the law may still have the law written on their hearts, [48](#) shows that truth in other religions and philosophies can be acknowledged. At the same time, evangelical participants in dialogue must be aware that such limited areas of agreement are subordinate to the divine truth in biblical Christianity; the truth in other religions will ultimately serve to condemn their members for failing to adhere to the full truth in Jesus Christ. [49](#) If these two poles are held in proper balance, however, then a formal interreligious dialogue that is both educational and biblically orthodox can indeed be pursued. Despite the difficulties inherent in *HWTD*, the book can be an effective foundation for future dialogue that is both academically engaging and theologically accurate. The propositional statements in the conclusion of *HWTD* can be used to structure the format for future dialogical encounters; each participant can describe in detail his or her interpretation of the way in which the statement describes the central orthodoxy and orthopraxy of the community in question. In response to the objections raised by critics of *HWTD*, future dialogue may (and perhaps should) include a larger number, and wider variety, of participants. While it is beneficial to include theological "progressives" (to use Blomberg's description of Robinson and himself [50](#)) to see the possible future religious orientation of the communities, it would also be useful to include prominent "conservatives" to ensure that traditional approaches to belief and practice are presented.

It might also be beneficial to readers if the participants explicitly state the scope of their agreements and disagreements. Because it is appropriate in honest dialogue for participants to disagree on core doctrines and practices, it would be acceptable for future participants in evangelical-Mormon dialogue to acknowledge when they agree to the wording of theological propositions while disagreeing over the meanings each group applies to the propositions. The confusion created by the joint agreements in *HWTD* might have been minimized if both participants had stated the qualifications and reservations that they applied to the conclusion.

Dialogue between evangelicals and the LDS Church can be advantageous to the coexistence of both groups in contemporary American society. Mormons are becoming increasingly involved in social and political activities commonly supported by evangelicals (such as efforts against abortion, physician-assisted suicide, and the legalization of homosexual marriage [51](#)). Dialogue will allow both groups to understand the areas of society in which they can work together while respecting the religious boundaries that necessarily separate them. To be effective, however, this dialogue must adhere to guidelines, such as those laid out in the previous article, that will allow an increase in mutual understanding without compromising doctrinal integrity.

Prospects for Dialogue with NRMs

The growth in dialogue between evangelical Christians and NRMs in the last two decades is reason for optimism. The possibility to increase mutual understanding between religions should be pursued so that the co-existence, scholarship, and evangelism will improve.

Several steps should be taken in further attempts at interreligious dialogue:

1. Scholars at evangelical colleges and seminaries should attempt to establish contact with the representative intellectuals who have expressed interest in dialogue.

2. The framework for dialogue should be clearly identified before dialogue begins. Issues that must be settled in advance may include:

? The agenda toward which participants are working (especially if common statements are to be issued by the participants).

? The format for dialogue (e.g., will the dialogue occur at a school, or via correspondence? How many participants will there be?)

? What are the goals for further dialogue (e.g., will involvement be limited to scholars, or do participants intend for the laity to continue at a local level?)

3. Apologetics organizations should also attempt to engage in dialogue. While many NRMs will not dialogue with evangelical apologists, those who will can increase the clarity of evangelical understanding, and thus reduce the instances of inaccurate and inappropriate evangelical responses to NRMs.

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