NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS AND THE END OF THE AGE

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Before we talk about apocalypticism in the new religious movements, let me define what I mean by the term. Many refer to the so-called "cults" and only to them when they discuss new religious movements. I make my definition considerably more broad. At the same time, the term "new religious movements" is ambiguous, since not all of them are really new, and some I include in the category do not claim to be religious. The key to the concept is that third term, "movements." Whether set in traditional institutions or created almost out of whole cloth, these groups are dynamic, gaining recruits, building new institutional forms, providing for members fresh materials and patterns for the social construction of reality (if I may use that term made popular by Berger and Luckmann). Their roots may go back to such ancient sources as the Bhagavad-Gita, as in Hare Krishna, or to ancient nature religions, as in Druidism or wicca. Or they may come out of modern psychological or sociological techniques and insights, as in *est* or Scientology. But the use of those materials and the social organization of adherents are not traditional, taken-for-granted patterns taught in the home and school. In this way, at least, they are new.

They can be seen as religious particularly within the framework in which we are coming to recognize the nature of religion on a pluralistic world. Religion in this view is considered not an *object* of consciousness so much as a *form* of consciousness.[1] As Wilfred Cantwell Smith has put it, speaking of religion as a conceptual framework, it is

> not part of what a person knows, but the vision by and within which he or she knows (knows, or guesses, or is aware of not knowing). It does not *mean* something; it confers meaning.[2]

These movements, in their ideology, their moral codes, their social organization, provide a framework of meaning by which their members structure the universe, and link their lives to ultimate meaning. Even if the language does not include the word "God," they are in this way religious.

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[1]Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981) p. 93.

[2]*Ibid.*, p. 82.

A common thread in the structure of meaning for many of these groups has been the interpretation of our era as the "end time," whether by that is meant simply the end of an age and the beginning of a new one, or the final denouement of the human race or indeed the entire universe. There are, of course, some objective bases for such interpretations. Since the development of nuclear warfare the destruction of life on earth has been a very real possibility. Socially, we are aware that for industrial nations the period of expansion has fairly well come to a close, with new economic and social requirements putting strains on social institutions, that lead at least some observers to predict a major cultural shift definable as the end of an age. Given such data from our real situation, the new religious movements have made very different interpretations of its apocalyptic potential. They have related to visions of the apocalypse in at least three very different ways. Some have participated in, heightened, and made real for a significant portion of the population traditional apocalyptic visions. Others have perceived the agonies of the end of the age as the birth pangs of a new age for which they claim the role of heralds. Still others serve as places of refuge from what is perceived as a general apocalyptic nightmare in the surrounding society.

The most direct form of apocalypticism, and the inheritor of traditional Christian symbolism for it, has been developed within that branch known as the Jesus movement. This movement, which combined traditional conservative Christianity with elements of the lifestyle of the counterculture of the late 1960s and early 1970s, has largely been absorbed into established evangelical churches as that counterculture has been absorbed into the general culture or has been abandoned by many in the age group in which it developed. There are many reasons why that age group has been prone to apocalyptic visions. These children of the baby boom had been told by many important people that it was their duty to lead their elders into a new age of high technology only they could really understand. The language of the new age, as well as their relative isolation into their own age group led to a discounting of historical approaches that might see the future as a natural unfolding rather than a major break. They were too young to have felt the force of history in their own lives, to have had the feeling of participation in an ongoing effort. Inheritors of the rational science and high technology of the age, they had found their lives not greatly enriched by their products. A break in direction seemed called for, and the greatest break seemed to be in the direction of an anti-intellectual recovery of some elements of their spiritual heritage.

In the early days of the Jesus movement, such groups as the Children of God and Tony and Sue Alamo's Christian Foundation often appeared at major sports events and similar gatherings dressed in sackcloth, carrying placards announcing the end of the world and demanding repentance. Those most direct, most public activities have generally disappeared. The Children of God have renamed themselves the Love Family and seem more involved in spreading love in all its forms than in direct confrontation with an-

nouncements of the apocalypse. No one hears of the Christian Foundation any more, and Berkeley's former Jesus People seem to be spending most of their time investigating other religious groups, seeking out their heresies. It seems as if Enroth, Ericson, and Peters were right when they wrote of the Jesus people some 10 years ago:

> Since the whole ministry of the Jesus People is geared to the confident expectation that Jesus Christ will return in the very near future, the movement is inherently transient. Jesus People ministries come and go with alarming rapidity. Jesus People give no thought to the establishing of long-term ministries, because Christ will return soon and all of the work must be done in the immediate future. It is logical to surmise that if he does not return soon, this revival will lack some of the staying power that has resulted from other revivals. The impact of the movement is more like a match that flares brightly but briefly than a steady candle flame of lower intensity but greater duration. To observe the intensity of many of the ministries, which sometimes involves an almost around-the-clock work load for certain leaders, is to wonder how long these energies can be sustained. If this is not the last generation, someone will have a lot of pieces to pick up—and that someone will have to have a Christian faith not so thoroughly linked to the fiercely apocalyptic mood of the Jesus People.
>
> It is possible that the Jesus People themselves will mellow and mature. Perhaps the apocalyptic mood will wane. After all, almost all of them are very young. They may be able to develop some staying power that will see them through whatever disillusionments come if their eschatology turns out to be inaccurate. Of course, all of these worries will be unfounded if their views turn out to be correct. But how much of the future of the Christian church will we want to wager on that?[3]

Many have indeed mellowed, and lost much of that fierce mood. The current style of those who retain it is probably more accurately represented by such groups as The Way International. Though it calls itself a biblical study foundation, The Way repeats some of the earlier themes of the Jesus movement in identifying with the youth culture and attempting to reach youth through such tools as traveling rock groups. The apocalyptic component of their teachings is redolent of some of the far right movements of the 1950s, so that at least in their Colorado camp members are taught the use of firearms in order to defend themselves and their group in the chaotic times that are to

[3]Ronald M. Enroth, E. E. Ericson, Jr., and C. Peters, *The Jesus People: Old-Time Religion in the Age of Aquarius* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 192-193.

come. The meaning seems clear: the end times are upon us, and they will be violent; be prepared; be armed; be ready to defend the faith.

It becomes more and more difficult to distinguish between the proto-Christian groups—in spite of the high boundary maintenance of some of them—and the more general influence of those who have moved beyond sectarian organization into more individual efforts to reach the public. No one would call the television evangelists new religious movements exactly, and yet such religiously based movements as the Moral Majority are new on the scene. By far the greatest percentage of the audiences of such preachers are culture-affirming rather than concentrating on the end times. And yet there remain elements of apocalypticism, often rooted in that earlier Jesus movement. Probably the most influential writer to come out of the Jesus movement has been Hal Lindsey, author of such books as *Satan is Alive and Well on Planet Earth* and *The Late Great Planet Earth.* The latter has been made into a movie, and Lindsey's influence has outlasted the Jesus movement itself to become a factor in the ideology of fundamentalist churches with a considerably longer history. His work is a dramatic presentation of fundamentalist premillennialism, which holds that social and moral corruption will increase until Jesus returns to take up his faithful in what is known as the Rapture, while the rest of humanity is left to suffer under a thousand-year reign of Satan before the godly Kingdom is established. One even sees bumper stickers with messages such as, "If this car doesn't have a driver, I've been raptured."

But these expressions are now only peripherally related to current groups that fit our designation of new religious movements. They have found an institutional home, and are no longer easy to classify as movements. Another type of apocalypticism, less institutionalized, taps a very different tradition. This can be found in a number of different sets of believers in new books or organizations purported to provide revelations brought by visitors from outer space. These, such as the Urantia Book, for example, teach of the particular place of the planet earth in the history of the universe, prophesying the end of this planet but the escape of some survivors—prepared by this esoteric knowledge—to another habitable area of the universe.

Such ideas are not new, and tend to pick up on speculative works such as those of Erich von Däniken, who traced the origins of human culture to visitors from outer space, citing such phenomena as the pyramids of Egypt, South and Central America, South American ground sculptures, and the like as proofs of such visitation. Back in the 1950s, Leon Festinger and his colleagues investigated a group that expected the world to come as flying saucers emerging from the earth's poles came to rescue true believers in the midst of the destruction.[4] But most believers in such ideas tend to be loosely organized if at all, and tend to disappear without a trace. The primary emphasis in new

[4]Festinger, Leon, Henry W. Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956).

religious movements at the present time seems to be upon the other two orientations toward apocalypticism.

Birth Pangs of A New Age

It has been said that the apocalypse is a clearing of the ground for the new. It is, then, in the more positive interpretation of the end of the age that many of the new religious movements got their start, both those coming out of the Christian tradition and those whose symbolic base is elsewhere. Early in the days of the counterculture, when it was just beginning to take on religious coloration, interpreters of the phenomenon claimed Yeats' *The Second Coming* as their theme:

> Turning and turning in the widening gyre
> The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
> The best lack all conviction, while the worst
> Are full of passionate intensity.
>
> Surely some revelation is at hand;
> Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
> The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
> When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
> Troubles my sight: Somewhere in sands of the desert
> A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
> A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
> Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
> Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
> The darkness drops again; but now I know
> That twenty centuries of stony sleep
> Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
> And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
> Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

This "rough beast"—beast of the Apocalypse or vanguard of the Kingdom—this social movement came to be known as the counterculture, and was viewed with both fear and hope, but in either case with fascination. One of its claims was that it was a mark of the end of the age. One interpretation came out of astrological lore, which claimed that the universe was moving from an age dominated by the sign of Pisces, dark, violent, and repressive, into the Age of Aquarius, a millennium characterized by love and light. While the

purveyors of this astrological lore were not prone to use Biblical language, one could hear in their talk longings at least for the right to say, "Behold, I make all things new; the old has passed away." But the days of love children joyously putting flowers into the gun barrels of their enemies were numbered; there were still bullets in those guns. The former things had not passed away so easily. The rough edges of the beast were evoked by the rough resistance of the old ways. The counterculture went underground, and at least some of its branches turned revolutionary in violent ways, responding to the violence which had been done to their peaceful revolution.

At the same time, other signs of the times could be found within or on the edges of mainline Protestant and Catholic churches, in the form of the charismatic movement. Participants in this movement claimed the text of the messianic age given by the prophet Joel:

> And it shall come to pass afterward,
> that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
> your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
> your old men shall dream dreams,
> and your young men shall see visions.
> Even upon the menservants and maidservants
> in those days, I will pour out my spirit. (Joel 2:28-29)

More post-millennial than premillennial, these Christians found the vanguard of the coming Kingdom of God in the experience of gifts of the Spirit that had been promised the faithful in the end times. Freed by their experience of the Spirit from the constraints of the institutional church, they sought the renewal of that church through the power they felt in their own lives.

The movement has grown both inside and outside traditional church structures. Most adherents have at least attempted to stay within their home churches, seeing their charismatic experience as the source of spiritual power for institutional renewal. At the same time, they inevitably transcend institutional structures, and often split them open. Charismatics tend to accept other Christians who have had the charismatic experience—speaking in tongues, divine healing, the gift of prophecy, and/or a variety of other "gifts of the Spirit" which they recognize—regardless of their institutional base. Catholic Charismatic renewal began as a group of Catholics wrestling with the implications of a book written by a Protestant pentecostalist called in an Episcopal charismatic to explain it and lead them into the experience they sought—and so it goes. The movement in this era tends to be more middle class than was the case earlier, but it reaches across the boundaries of social class, age, race, and educational background. In fact, part of the assumption that this movement heralds the end of the age comes from the experience of being freed from traditional social roles and structures.

The acceptance of all who have had the experience has another side, of course, in a lesser acceptance of those who have not had it, even those who are fellow members of the same church. Many churches have been split by factionalism as members who are not charismatic have felt judged inadequate in their faith by those who are. While church traditionalists often view the movement as divisive sectarianism, charismatics often see the destruction of old forms as necessary, if indeed "the old has passed away and all things are made new."

They stand, then, on the boundary between those who are concerned with the end of the age, *per se,* and those most oriented to the celebration of a new age.

New Age Groups

Perhaps the greatest number of new religious movements at the present time fall mostly into the category of New Age groups. That is, they assume the end of the age and are already structuring not only a worldview but a social organization and moral code appropriate to the new age they think they are entering. New Age groups are not always religious in the traditional sense, though many are. Many more are religious in the generic sense. They speak to new ways of finding ultimate meaning, often stressing the need for regaining emotional aspects of our lives often suppressed in the present culture. They deal with many aspects of life—holistic health, radical forms of education, new ways of structuring economic action, forms of self-government, and the like. But what they have in common is the perception that, as Thomas Kuhn has developed the concept in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,* we are in the midst of a major paradigm shift in our culture.

That is, their apocalyptic vision is not one of violent destruction of the physical world as we have known it, so much as its disappearance as people experience the paradigm shift. Moving from the verities of a Newtonian world to post-Einsteinian uncertainties is not necessarily comfortable, but once one has done so, there is no going back. Once we *see* that relativity and probability are the realities of the world, hard and fast physical laws no longer make sense. So it is in other parts of our lives. It is like one of those test pictures where you can see two different things, according to whether you fix on the figure or the ground. Once you see the alternative one as well, you can never go back to *not* seeing it. It is in this sense, in what Smith said about religion as a way of *seeing,* that I call even the most apparently secular of these groups religious.

At the same time, many are specifically linked to symbol systems and practices traditionally called religious. The new paradigm seems to have traded in much of the sense of transcendence for one of immanence, and many Eastern religions prove more helpful in dealing with that perspective than such Western forms as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It is also easier to see moving from one age to another as less cataclysmic from the vantage of the more

cyclical view of history endemic in many Eastern forms as compared with the straight line view of history found in the Western faiths, where there is a beginning and an end that is an end. In practice also, techniques of meditation or the seeking of ecstasy are forms of religious practice more amenable to a God within than are formal services of "divine worship."

Again, organizational forms change with the change of paradigm. Transcendent gods reinforce hierarchy, immanent ones anarchy or at least some form of democracy. Transcendent gods make power a virtue; immanent gods reign through persuasion, inspiration, imitation. In other words, a change in the basic religious vision of the divine calls into question the intellectual and social structure: it calls people away from traditional forms into a new age.

What religious groups are involved in this? They are really too numerous to name, but they include those oriented toward Yoga, Sufism, Tibetan Buddhism, Zen, Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism, Transcendental Meditation, *est*, many groups related to the human potential movement, theosophy, spiritualism, Vedanta, followers of Gurjeiff, Quakers—old movements and new.

The Escapists

At the same time, new paradigms are frightening, and may actually induce a more traditional apocalyptic interpretation among those most affected by them.

For example, while the charismatic movement has inspired many people to break free of old models and create new ones, the movement has tended to split into two camps. One continues to celebrate the openness and freedom of the new vision. The other, fearful of the anarchy it may bring, has engaged in the creation of new structures more rigid, more hierarchical than that of any of the churches out of which they may have come. As they have done so, some have gone back to older apocalyptic ideas, seeing the society and those in it threatened by ultimate destruction, and themselves less a vanguard of the new age that a place of refuge in the midst of the collapse of the old one.

Apocalypticism does not need to be manufactured out of religious visions in our time. Rather, we find it every time we turn our television dials. Threats of a nuclear holocaust, warnings of irreparable environmental damage, concern about decaying cities, growing crime rates, pollution—a host of subjects bring to us daily the threat of massive, if not universal, death and destruction. The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse ride across our television screens every evening. At the very least, life seems that gray and foggy hell described by C. S. Lewis in *The Great Divorce,* where people keep on doing meaningless things because they cannot think of doing anything else. A religious escape can have real appeal.

A Case in Point

In real life, of course, the approaches to apocalypticism are more apt to be mixed than found pure in any one group. A good example of the way in which a group may be carrier of all three may be found in the Unification Church of Sun Myung Moon. The theology of the "Moonies" has roots in the Judaeo-Christian heritage, including its visions of the apocalypse. Those roots can be traced through the kind of premillennial fundamentalism carried to Korea by many missionaries, and found in printed form in such places as the old Scofield Reference Bible, which includes the notion of dispensationalism. In this view, discrepancies in Biblical practices and moral teachings are explained by laying out a series of dispensations, each involving a different way in which God interacts with humankind. Thus, the expectations of Adam and Eve in Eden were different before the Fall than after, and a new dispensation began with Noah after the flood. The Hebrew exodus reconstituted the relation between God and humankind, instituting the dispensation of law, to be followed by a dispensation of grace through Jesus the Christ. The end of this dispensation, traditionally, has been expected in a literal second coming of Christ.

Moon has taken this model and added only one twist: the second coming is not to be expected out of the sky, with the appearance of Christ with legions of angels, but in the coming of a Lord of the Second Advent, a new messiah charged with completing Jesus' unfinished work, with redeeming not only human soul, but also the political and economic structures of the world, so that a new messianic kingdom can be established on earth, uniting all humankind, all religions, and all institutions into one kingly reign. Moon's adherents are unclear as to whether that new age has begun, with Moon as the Lord of the Second Advent, or is beginning as their movement grows, or is to come when the new messiah is recognized and given homage. For unlike the hidden spiritual kingdom of Jesus, the messianic order of the Lord of the Second Advent is to be quite visible, molding, guiding, and empowering social institutions, beginning with families but extending over the economic and political structures of the world.

Thus the "Moonies" buy into both traditional forms of Christian apocalypticism and New Age orientations. The ways in which they envision the new age are not as radically removed from our current cultural forms as those of some New Age groups. Yet there are areas of considerable overlap. First, they tend to fit into New Age ideas about the recovery of a spiritual dimension to life. Their concept of "heart" and many other spiritualized or pietistic ideas indicate this. At base, Unification theology owes several debts to Immanual Swedenborg, as do a number of the other groups I have put in the New Age category. Similarly, like so many New Age groups, "Moonies" work out of a generally communal base, rather than the individualism which has characterized so much of the process of modernization in our time. They take the family

very seriously, but not the isolated nuclear family that has become characteristic in western industrialized nations. To some extent the Unification Church is conceived of as a single family, on the model of the oriental extended family, with Moon and his wife as father and mother. There are indeed nuclear units, but their communal ties are clearly symbolized in the mass weddings that Moon performs, as well as in his practice of choosing mates for his "children."

Similarly, economic activities are communal, a factor all too threatening to those with whom they compete, for example in their fisheries. In fact, as a New Age group, what they offer is less the kind of decentralized back-to-the-basics structure that many in this category support, than the kind of cooperative industrialization that is making Japanese manufacturers so threatening to many western corporations.

The movement does have roots in the East as well as the West, and incorporates many oriental views and practices that have become popular in New Age groups. While I would hardly agree with those apologists who claim that Moon has created a synthesis between East and West equal to Thomas Aquinas' joining of Greek and medieval Christian thought, the Unification Church is like many New Age groups in its mixture of those two traditions.

The area in which this group is least able to fit the paradigm claimed by the New Age groups is that of the structure of power, for there is no doubt about the hierarchical nature of authority in the Unification Church. Rather, here we revert once again to the older apocalyptic model, because there is a strong strain of expectation of a final Armageddon, where the opponents will be those of righteous capitalism on the one side, led by the Lord of the Second Advent, and on the other the Communist bloc, directly led by Satan. Such a vision always calls for centralization of authority—democratic models have seldom been the choice of military commanders.

There is also a sense in which the Unification Church fits the third type of stance toward the apocalypse as well. Perhaps the clearest example of this type comes from a study done in England by Eileen Barker. Trying to find social characteristics that would indicate a tendency to join groups like the "Moonies," she made a sociological comparison of three groups: members of the Unification Church, persons who had attended some of their introductory lectures but not joined, and persons who had never been involved with them. She found few differences, except in answer to her question about their vision of life after the year 2000. The two non-"Moonie" groups were almost unanimous in bringing up visions of nuclear accident or war, increasing pollution, hunger, overpopulation, and the like—an apocalyptic vision created out of the daily news, if you will. The "Moonies" did not speak much about the international structures their theology posits, but instead tended to envision green meadows full of playing children, cottages with smoke rising from their

chimneys, a sort of peaceful rural retreat—a messianic age far removed from the trends and troubles of the present age. To be in their fellowship was to be protected from the hopeless chaos outside.[5]

There is not really time to give such detailed examination of other groups. I will simply mention that some have moved across the breadth of these types in other directions. Some early apocalyptic Christian groups have evolved into communal structures that may seem themselves as New Age organizations, exhibiting a simplified lifestyle in harmony with nature that they find the hallmark of a new age. Others have developed walls around themselves in order to serve as havens in the present "time of troubles." Groups like Scientology or the Process, which began more as psychological self-help organizations with no particular quarrel with the present age, have moved more and more into sectarian tension with the rest of the society, including at least some expectation that the society is in its death throes.

Conclusion

One could go through other groups and point out similarities and differences. But the point here is to indicate the way in which a sense of the end of the age has been involved in the formation and maintenance of the phenomenon we have called the "new religious movements." At any historical shift of paradigm we have experienced the rise of such movements, as people seek a better way to interpret and deal with changing expectations. William McLoughlin has posited four "awakenings" in American society since the Puritan awakening out of which much of our religious history has originated. These are the First and Second Great Awakenings, the sea change in the churches that led to the rise of the Social Gospel, and the present time. At each of these periods great shifts were occurring in the social and economic patterns of the society. Each of these "awakenings" was accompanied by considerable religious ferment that affected mainline religion, as well as the rise of sects and cults, some ephemeral and some entering the list of voluntary associations in the society, perhaps even its denominational structure. Each of these brought a new vision of the nature of the society, of human nature, and of the individual worth of participants. Out of this new paradigms were constructed, within which people lived in a new age, at least in some ways. At the same time, in those times of change, there were strong forces proclaiming the end of the world, seeing death, destruction, and apocalypse everywhere. It was impossible in the midst of those former awakenings to detect for sure what were the lasting effects, or the ideas or groups which would last.[6] The new paradigm was still hidden. So it is today.

[5]Eileen Barker, "Who'd Be A Moonie?" in *The Social Impact of the New Religious Movements,* ed. by Bryan Wilson (Barrytown, NY: Unification Theological Seminary, 1981), pp 59-96.

[6]William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

What we are most sure of is that the rise of such movements always accompanies major changes that appear to at least some of the people as signs of the end of the world. To some extent these people are right, for they indicate the end of some forms of world-construction that have had to shift to fit new circumstances. Religious groups, by offering an explanation of the shift in terms of ultimate goals and values, assist people to live through such changes without suffering from a loss of orientation that might be totally destructive. They help persons find continuity in the change by positing it as a plan of God or a higher form of religion. They form communities which not only offer persons social support, but also make real in their actions and their conversations the new visions they have found. They provide grounding in some sense of the ultimate the forms of behavior that are necessary to changing circumstances, or else provide insulation from the change so that behavior need not be too drastically altered. Often, when the paradigm shift has occurred for a majority of the population, they become the religious institutions of a restructured society, built on a new perception of the world, of human nature, and of the individual self.

If, as many people think, we are at the end of an age and the beginning of a new one, some of these new religions may be the institutions of the future. But since the nature of the paradigm shift is still unclear, we watch them all with fascination, unable to discern which is the bearer of the new age.

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