From Buddhism to Mormonism: What Christianity is Not!!

Week 8

Jehovah's Witnesses, Scientology, & the New Spirituality

Who is Jesus??

Jehovah's Witnesses

- Grew out of the Millerite "Great Disappointment" of 1844
  - Founded by Charles Taze Russell, who left the Adventists in the 1870's and began to teach a spiritual second-coming rather than a bodily second-coming.
- Deny the Trinity – Jesus is a god, but not God. The emphasis is on God's power, not God's love.
- Use their own Bible translation – The New World
- Believe that full achievement of sainthood will be restricted to 144,000 – all the rest are "Jonadabs"
  - Since nearly all of the 144,000 spots have been taken, it has become preferable to be a Jonadab.
- They refuse military service, don't salute the flag, and refuse blood transfusions
- About 700k in the US and 3 million in the world.

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Church of Scientology

- Founded by L. Ron Hubbard in 1953
  - 1950, published *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health*
- It is a program for enabling the true "thetan" self to recall its identity by clearing the self of involuntary defense mechanisms – "engrams"
  - The goal is to recover god-like abilities
  - "self-salvation" & the progression toward potential
- The underlying "worldview" is like something out of a science fiction novel – not surprising, given its creator.
  - There have been many lawsuits re the publication of Scientology's "sacred texts" – they are astoundingly bizarre! All those who oppose Scientology fall under Hubbard's "fair game" doctrine.
- Relies on a lot of very expensive treatment ('audits'). Can chew up tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars. A very profitable enterprise.

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A New Spirituality for a New Age

- "Spirituality is highly individual and intensely personal. You don't have to be religious to be spiritual."
- "Spirituality is the basic belief that there is a supreme power, a being, a force, whatever you call it, that governs the entire universe. There is a purpose for everything and everyone."
- "Everything is interconnected with everything else. Everything affects and is affected by everything else."
- "Spirituality is the feeling of this interconnectedness. Spirituality is being in touch with it."
- "Spirituality is also the feeling that no matter how bad things get, they will always work out somehow. There is a guiding plan that governs all lives."
- "Spirituality is inextricably connected with caring, hope, kindness, love, and optimism. Spirituality is the basic faith in the existence of these things."

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Why a New Spirituality?

- People are spiritually hungry.
  - This is not new – the most famous formulation is Augustine's: " . . . yet man, this part of your [God's] creation, desires to praise you; for you have formed us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you."
- We Americans are very pragmatic about our religion.
  - If it works for me, it must be true.
  - This is not new either – read William James.
- Vagueness and ambiguity enable us to be pioneers in a spiritual prairie of our own making. We can put the bits and pieces of religion/spirituality together as we see fit.
- Much of the Christian community has given up on the historic truth claims of the church. We don't know them, understand them, teach them, live them, or proclaim them.
  - At a time when cultural diversity is exposing many people to competing and often attractive claims – esp. from the East.

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Post-Christian?

- Europe is decidedly post-Christian.
  - Only government funds keeps many Anglican parishes open.
  - Demographic trends point to an Islamic Europe by 2100. By 2020, 50% of all Dutch youths 18 and under will be Muslim!
- Even in America, large portions of our society are post-Christian, displaced not by another religion, but this vague, self-elevating New Spirituality. This is especially true of pop culture.
  - *The DaVinci Code's* "Christianity as conspiracy"
  - The spiritual evolution of the *Celestine Prophecy*
  - The neo-paganism of Wicca
  - The on-going rebirth of Gnosticism – in some surprising places
  - The increasingly "conventional" wisdom that whatever is really true (which we can't know anyway) is found in many different paths.

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Who is Jesus?

- An ascended Master
- A wise and inspired prophet?
- A God-realized teacher?
- The one human who most fully expressed the reality of God in his life?
- Very God of very God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father?

The historic, apostolic Christian claims about Jesus cannot be reconciled with the claims made by other religions and worldviews.

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Jesus Among Other Gods

- Our lives are built on what we believe to be true, not what we know to be true. Our senses can mislead us. This uncertainty is unavoidable. Our lives are built on a pyramid of beliefs, some of which actually do correspond to reality (and are therefore true) but on others which are not. This pyramid constitutes our worldview. Our life is a long process of building a more reliable pyramid.
- Despite the inherent uncertainties in our beliefs and knowledge we still have to make decisions, every day and in every way. Making a decision about the truth of Christianity is unavoidable. A decision delayed is a decision made. We all must decide where the Christian claims fit into our personal pyramid of beliefs.

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The Christian Story (from N.T. Wright)

"The story is about a creator and his creation,
about humans made in this creator's image and given tasks to perform,
about the rebellion of humans and the dissonance of creation at every level,
and particularly about the creator's acting,
through Israel and climactically through Jesus,
to rescue his creation from its ensuing plight.
The story continues with the creator acting by his own spirit within the world to bring it towards the restoration which is his intended goal for it."

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Final reflections

- Whether we call it Nature, the Way, the Road, or the Tao, there is much that all humans share at a deep level about how it is that we ought to live and the reality of certain truths.
  - C.S. Lewis' example: children are delightful. Lewis did not care much for children, but knew that this made him akin to being color-blind.
- With the so-called "death of God," in a pagan, godless world there is much that we Christians, Jews, and Muslims can agree upon and learn from one another.
  - Muslims pray five times a day. Is there something here that we could learn about our own prayers?
- All religions are a way of life. How well can we understand other religions without having lived them?
- Our best witness to others lies in how we live, not what we say.
- Yet, we are to be prepared to explain our hope in Christ, doing so in gentleness and reverence. We are not to sugarcoat or pretend away our differences with others, but we are to love them as neighbors.

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Winter classes on Jesus or Gospels (begin Jan 10th)

- Monday morning/ Tuesday night
  - Scott Engle
  - *The Gospel of Luke: Jesus, Savior of the World*
- Monday evening
  - Scott Engle
  - *Meeting Jesus: His life and times*
- Thursday lunch
  - Monty Moore
  - *The Gospel of John* – using N.T. Wright's " . . . for everyone" commentary

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