

Bearing False Witness?

An Introduction to the
Christian Countercult

Douglas E. Cowan

Foreword by Jeffrey K. Hadden

PRAEGER

Westport, Connecticut

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Confronting Cults

The only reason for becoming familiar with other religions and other religious writings would be in order to show those who follow these false systems wherein the error lies and thereby to rescue them.

—Dave Hunt, countercult apologist

INTRODUCING THE CHRISTIAN COUNTERCULT

One can encounter the Christian countercult in a variety of ways. Walk into almost any evangelical bookstore, for example, and you will undoubtedly find a section labeled “Other Religions,” “Cults and Sects,” “False Religions,” or something similar. Although these sections range from a few shelves to entire display cases, most contain titles such as *Cult Watch* (Ankerberg and Weldon 1991a), *Cult-Proofing your Kids* (Martin 1993), *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Martin 1997), and *Occult Invasion* (Hunt 1998). Some of these books are organized along encyclopedic lines and describe an assortment of religious groups and traditions; others focus on just one group and often include specific suggestions for evangelizing group members. Some, such as Martin’s *Kingdom of the Cults*, are designed as a permanent desk reference; others, such as Alan Gomes’s *Truth and Error: Comparative Charts of Cults and Christianity* (1998), are meant to be carried in one’s briefcase, overcoat, or pocketbook. At some point, though, all compare and contrast the various religious leaders, groups, and movements the authors consider with evangelical or fundamentalist Protestantism.

On the other hand, perhaps you live near a Latter-day Saints temple, one of more than sixty in the United States alone. Walking past the temple one day you may encounter evangelical Christians from countercult ministries such as Saints Alive in Jesus (Ed Decker), Utah Lighthouse Ministry (Jerald and Sandra Tanner), or Mormonism Research Ministry (Bill McKeever) passing out leaflets on the street. An especially popular activity at new temple openings, when the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints invites the non-Mormon public to view a temple prior to its consecration, countercult apologists often give out tracts explaining why they believe Mormonism is not Christian. They

engage visitors in conversation to that same end and very occasionally picket the streets and avenues leading to the temple grounds.

Finally, imagine that a family member or friend has just announced her decision to start auditing with the Church of Scientology, to put herself under the shepherding movement of the International Church of Christ, or to take dharma vows as a Zen Buddhist. Upset by this unexpected religious choice, you turn to the Internet—the most active source of quick-and-easy information in human history—to learn more about the group. Depending on your search terms, however, rather than official Web sites for the group in question, any one of hundreds of countercult Web sites could appear. “Answers in Action,” the “Bible Truth Mormonism Page,” “Ex-Masons for Jesus,” and “Jehovah’s Christian Witness” are just a few of the sites dedicated to various aspects of countercult apologetics.

These are just some of the venues in which the Christian countercult movement operates. With roots that stretch back to the theological shifts of the nineteenth century, including the emergence of such sects as the Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Christian Science, the Christian countercult is that branch of evangelical Protestantism most concerned with the growth of religious pluralism and with the advent of new and often controversial religious movements. Because these movements expand the range of available religious choice in society, they invariably threaten the sense of ontological uniqueness that has marked Christianity since its rise to dominance in the West. Long before the secular anticult appeared in the late 1960s and gained public attention in the 1970s with often lurid stories of brainwashing and deprogramming (see chapter 2), evangelical Protestants had been cataloguing and comparing emergent religious movements in North America. From Eber Howe’s *Mormonism Unveiled* (1834) to George Hamilton Combs’s *Some Latter-day Religions* (1899), from William Irvine’s *Heresies Exposed* (1935, originally published in 1917 as *Timely Warnings*) to Walter Martin’s *Kingdom of the Cults* (in fourth edition, 1997), and from occasional sermons in evangelical pulpits to the advent of professional apologetics organizations such as the Christian Research Institute, Spiritual Counterfeits Project, and Personal Freedom Outreach, the Christian countercult has been enormously influential in constructing and maintaining the popular image of new and controversial religious movements in North America.

As a social movement, in many ways the countercult is multifaceted and indistinct, with exponents that range from the academic to the popular, and the erudite to the absurd. It encompasses large corporations as well as individual ministries; its membership includes both full-time apologists who have devoted their professional lives to researching and writing about new religious

movements, and ordinary Christians who only want to know how to respond to the evangelistic advances of Mormon missionaries or Jehovah's Witness pioneers. The resources the countercult brings to bear on what it regards as the growing problem of cults, sects, and so-called false religions vary also—print publication of books, magazines, and newsletters; radio broadcasting; audio- and videocassette production; direct mail appeals; proactive evangelistic encounters; professional and avocational Internet Web sites; as well as lecture series, training workshops, and countercult conferences. The polymorphous character of the movement means, among other things, that there are no reliable membership statistics available. Since religious pluralism characterizes the social environment in which the countercult resides, movement intellectuals (a concept discussed more fully below) regard all committed Christians as potential participants in the countercult movement. Thus, while fewer than 100 apologists publish commercially and consistently in North America, the actual number of Christians engaged in countercult apologetics at all levels is impossible to determine.

Bearing False Witness? is an introduction to this Christian countercult movement. Even though some of the countercult exponents I discuss range from the extremes represented by writers such as Constance Cumbey, Dave Hunt, and Texe Marrs to the more erudite portrayals of evangelical Christianity one finds from apologists such as Robert Bowman, Walter Martin, and Carl Mosser, I contend that the organizing principles of countercult apologetics remain the same throughout. That is, the cognitive praxis of the countercult movement revolved around two poles: the apologetic, the ongoing construction and maintenance of the evangelical Christian worldview; and the evangelistic, the continuing effort to convert to evangelical Christianity those who follow other religious traditions.