James R. Lewis
University of North Carolina

THE SCHOLARSHIP OF "CULTS" AND THE "CULT" OF SCHOLARSHIP

> We need to temper our sociological analyses with a more phenomenological and hermeneutical approach to the new religions. I take it as a primary hermeneutical principle that the interpreter must first interpret a text or tradition as it interprets itself. That is to say, I presume that I understand the interpretant better than it understands itself.[1]

The following pages will undertake a critique of the academic enterprise as it manifests in the study of new religious movements, although it is also, by implication, simultaneously a critique of secular scholarship more generally. My objections to new religion scholarship can be condensed to the observation that most of the literature in the field—whatever its other merits—frequently has the effect of *increasing* the sense of the alienness and the otherness of alternative religious groups (thus inadvertently reinforcing rather than undermining popular "cult" stereotypes). Conversely, I want to make the case for a humanistic style of scholarship which, at least as a preliminary move, attempts to give one access to the lifeworld and to the deeper intentionality of the new religions.

My objections to secular scholarship more generally cluster around the tendency of certain academics to adhere naively and unreflective to a *Weltanschauung* derived (ultimately) from Newtonian physics. Utilizing our post-modern self-consciousness that the Englightenment is as much of a creation as any other world-view, the central section of this paper will attempt to undermine the privileged position presumed by the contemporary academic enterprise, especially as this enterprise manifests in new religion scholarship.

1. Frank K. Flinn, "Scientology as Technological Buddhism," in Joseph H. Fichter, ed., *Alternatives to American Mainline Churches* (Unification Theological Seminary : Barrytown, New York, 1983), 92.

Personal Discomfort as a Hermeneutical Starting Point

My orientation to religious scholarship, especially new religion scholarship, is coloured by the fact that for three years during the early 70s I was a member and minor leader in a new religious movement–Yogi Bhajan's Healthy–Happy–Holy Organization,[2] a group which can briefly be described as a happy blend of yoga and Sikhism. As a one time member of an alternative religious group I bring, as might be expected, a somewhat different perspective to the study of new religions.

At the most basic level, this particular perspective works itself out simply as a backdrop against which to check the accuracy or the plausibility of whatever material I read in the field. There is, however, a much deeper level at which much of what is said in new religion scholarship is problematic for me. This broader difficulty is a vaguely felt dissatifiaction which is hard to articulate clearly. At least part of my discomfort lies in the rather simple fact that so many of the questions and categories brought to bear on the study of alternative religious groups are alien to their own central concerns and structures. One of the unintended consequences of this kind of approach is to increase the sense of the strangeness–of the "otherness"–of non-mainstream religions and of their members.

My objection to this style of analysis is at least two-fold. At one level, my dissatisfaction is with the basic accuracy of this type of scholarship. At another level, my discomfort is with the disrespectfulness and the inhumaneness of much of the scholarship. Approaches that, as a matter of course, "explain" religious phenomena in terms of social, political, economic, and psychological variables are *defacto* an "acknowlegement of the otherness of the other, which makes him the object of objective knowledge", and which further "involves the fundamental suspension of his claim to truth."[3]

2. For a concise description of the group, see Alan Tobey, "The Summer Solstice of the Healthy-Happy-Holy Organization," in Charles Y. Glock & Robert N. Bellah, eds., *The New Religious Consciousness* (University of California Press : Los Angeles & London, 1976).

3. Hans-George Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (Crossroad Publishing Company : New York, 1975), 270.

Because this vague feeling of discomfort is, in a sense, my "hermeneutical starting point," it might be useful to attempt, in a playful manner, to induce a parallel experience in the reader (so as to clarify my own perspective). The following is a short excerpt from an anthropological study of a familiar North American Tribe:

The tribe Dr. Thapar studies is called the Asu and is found on the American continent north of the Tarahumara of Mexico. Though it seems to be a highly developed society of its type, it has an overwhelming preoccupation with the care and feeding of the rac–an animal much like a bull in size, strength and temperament. In the Asu tribe, it is almost a social obligation to own at least one if not more racs. Anyone not possessing at least one is held in low esteem by the community because he is too poor to maintain one of these beasts properly. Some members of the tribe, to display their wealth and social prestige, even own herds of racs.

Unfortunately, the rac breed is not very healthy and usually does not live more than five to seven years. Each family invests large sums of money each year to keep its rac healthly and shod, for it has a tendency to cast off its shoes often. There are rac specialists in each community, perhaps more than one if the community is particularly wealthy. These specialists, however, due to the long period of ritual training they must undergo and to the difficulty of obtaining the right selection of charms to treat the rac, demand costly offerings whenever a tribesman must treat his ailing rac.

> At the age of sixteen in many Asu communities, many youths undergo a puberty rite in which the rac figures prominently. The youth must petition a high priest in a grand temple. He is then initiated into the ceremonies that surround the care of the rac and is permitted to keep a rac.[4]

This tongue–in–cheek reconstruction of Americans' preoccuption with the automobile—although perhaps trivial—offers at least some access to the range of reactions I have whenever I read scholarly articles on new religions: First, it takes me a moment before I recognize that the phenomenon which the article is examining was a part of my own experience. Then when I *do* recognize the subject–matter I have system-

4. Patricia Hughes, "The Sacred 'Rac,'" in Seymour Fersh, ed., *Learning About Peoples and Cultures* McDougal, Littell & Company : Evanston, 1974), 37–38.

atically to translate a familiar experience out of its emic categories into an abstract and distant mode of discourse. And finally, I am left with the distinct sense that the analysis has obscured as much as it has uncovered–at least in the sense that it is far removed from the lifeworld of the subjects of the study.

Rationality and World View : Some Unexamined Persuppositions of Secular Scholarship

The uneasiness that I feel with new religion scholarship is—as I have said—difficult to articulate clearly, but the source of my discomfort is located somewhere in the translation from emic into etic categories.[5] And the problem is not even so much in the translation itself, as it is in the presumption that the academic interpretatiod of any given phenomenon one a deeper or truer understanding than the subjects themselves have. This presupposition has the effect of arrogating to the scholar a privileged access to the "rational" perspective, in terms of which she or he can explain the pseudo-rational or non-rational world of the new religions.

This precise criticism has often been made by new religion scholars themselves, but it has largely been directed outwards at the anti-cult movement, and couehed in terms of a critique of radical secularism.[6] The university, however, is one of the most thoroughly secularized institutions in our society. In the words of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, secularism is "the academic estabilshment's *credo*."[7] As a conseqnence, the various academic disciplines themselves, as a matter of course, have fashioned "methodologies that reduce the forms of religion to those human dimensions more consonant with the ideologies and existential situations of non-religious modernity."[8]

5. Much of this section of the paper is dependent on the discussion in Charles H. Long, "Human Centers : An Essay on Method in the History of Religions," *Soundings*, 61 (3) (1977).

6. E.g. Dick Anthony, Thomas Robbins, & Paul Schwartz, "Contemporary Religious Movements and the Secularization Premiss," *Concilium*, 161 (1983).

7. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "The Modern West in the History of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 52 (1) (March 1984), 7.

8. Charles H. Long, "Mircea Eliade and the Imagination of Matter," (Unpublished paper, 1983), 1.

To re-state the issue at hand in a somewhat oversimplified way, the general thrust of much of the literature on new religions is to translate religious discourse into terms compatible with an Englightenment world-view. The deeper tension between emic and etic perspectives, then, at least in this situation, is a conflict between opposing world-views. This issue was expressed very succinctly by Irving Louis Horowitz in a paper published a few years ago in which he noted that at least part of the animosity between a social scientist such as himself and a religion such as the Unification Church flowed out of the more general "tension between the American religious tradition" and "social research as Twentieth-century belief system of its own."[9]

These comments reflect a very naive (for the late Twentieth century) appropriation of the Englightenment perspective on religion.[10] For Horowitz, modernity's secular world-view is "universally obvious" and therefore "really true."[11] But despite the fact that the Englightenment is, in a sense, still largely the frame of reference for our educational institutions, we are decisively past the point in history where we can axiomatically and uncritically assume that this particular world-view is the only valid framework for "real" knowledge. The metaphysical underpinnings of modern civilization have been called into question often enough—probably most noticeably in the revolution in physics which took place in the early part of this century—to make us aware that our present *Weltanschauung* is a historically conditioned human construction rather than *the* self-evident perspective on "reality." To cite Cantwell Smith again, the intelligent modern Westerner has come to recognize that "secularism is one ideology among many others; that it has not been discovered but concocted."[12]

The human sciences have, of course, responded to this changed intellectual climate by moving beyond the positivistic and simplistically reductionistic formulations of the past. But, although we have realized that

9. Irving Louis Horowitz, "Universal Standards, Not Uniform Beliefs," *Sociological Analysis*, 44 (3) (1983), 181.

10. I am "picking on" Prof. Horowitz only because he works in the subfield of new religious movements and because his statement of the issue is clear and forthright.

11. Gadamer, 488.

12. Smith, 8.

> modern science is too diversified and complex an enterprise to yield a world-view, a hard-rock truth, when we refer nowadays to various phenomena as archaic, superstitious primitive, or what have you, we seem [still] to be contrasting them to the characteristic procedures we use in making a scientific technological and industrial society work. Rationality and modernity...thus [continue to be] viewed as synonymous.[13]

Which is only a slighty subtler way of perpetuating the privilaged position of Contemporary secular culture.

This type of chauvinism regularly manifests itself in studies of new religious movements, particularly in studies of third world millenarian movements, such as cargo cults. To quote at length from one critique of this tendency, Karen Fields notes, in *Revival and Rebellion in Colonial Central Africa*, that

> Social scientists rarely offer psychological evidence for their assertions about the irrationality of millenarians. Their assertions are usually derived, *eo ipso*, from the apparently bizarre beliefs built into the ideologies of millennial movements. Circular argument has certified millenarians as mentally deficient. Until the appropriate evidence is adduced, it seems to me a more secure procedure to assume that millenarians acted reasonably, and that what look like hysteria and confusion on a large scale may reflect noting more than the inadequacy of our interpretive schemes. In most analyses of these movements, indigenous frameworks of reason and action are either ignored or supplanted by other frameworks purporting to show what the same people would be doing *if* they had adequate information and *if* they were not confused. Or they are conceived of as victims of the fetishes of their backward social worlds in a way that westerners, happily, are not.[14]

Now briefly to summarize my long and somewhat rambling discussion, the overall thrust of my argument was to indicate that we have portrayed rationality as the preeminent modality of consciousness for gaining access to "true" or "real" knowledge, while simultaneously (without explicitly

13. Joseph Anthony Mazzeo, *Varieties of Interpretation* (University of Notre Dame Press : Notre Dame & London, 1978), 5.

14. Karen Fields, *Revival and Rebellion in Colonial Central Africa : Social and Political Consequences of Missionary Enterprise* (Princeton University Press, Forthcoming), 414–415.

realizing it) equating the possession of rationality with the possession of a secular world-view.

The Enlightenment as a New Religious Movement

While I have, perhaps, overworked a point that did not require such extensive explanation, I have done so with a larger purpose in mind. If we can demote the world-view which our scholarship is embedded in from its privileged position—at least provisionally it might not only open up the possibility of acquiring a better understanding of new religions, but it also might provide us with a different perspective from which to view the academic enterprise.

An initial stumbling-block to this de-absolutizing of the implicit *Weltanschauung* of secular scholarship, however, is our historically conditioned tendency to see religious and non-religious world-views as categorically different: This problem can be overcome by distinguishing between science as science, and the world-view or "mythology" which is derived from the natural sciences.

Science as science cannot "create a world-view" in the sense that "Men do not live, suffer, exult and die by defining themselves in terms of a strictly scientific account of reality."[15] Only an interpretation of the scientific enterprise which transforms science into a secular analogue of religion can provide human beings with an existentially satisfying view of the world. And this is precisely what the Enlightenment was: Instead of being the "story to end all stories,"[16] it represented the recasting of the scientific revolution in terms of a mythic narrative.

A major factor in this transformation of these historical events into a mythology was accomplished unintentionally, via the irreducible narrative quality of historical explanation. This last point is Paul Ricoeur's insight; that the mode of interpretation of historical explanation is inevitably "explanation by emplotment."[17] With the right plots, it was then only a

15. Mazzeo, 135.

16. James B. Wiggins, "Within and Without Stories," in James B. Wiggins, ed., *Religion as Story* (Harper & Row : New York, 1975), 3.

17. Paul Ricoeur, "The Narrative Function," in John B. Thompson, ed. & transl., *Hemeneutics and the Hurman Sciences* (Cambridge University Press : Cambridge, 1981), 290.

short step for these narratives to take on the status of "myths" for the new "faith" in science. (Many of the new narratives were obvious variations — though unconsciously so—on the Christian story).

To concretize this analysis a bit, I would like to engage in a somewhat playful retelling of the origins of contemporary secular consciousness. For a short while, as an academic exercise, imaginatively place the Enlightenment world-view on par with the world view of the communities which are usually the objects of our study. Now, armed with the ordinary tools of religious studies, look back into history at the scientific revolution and at the emergence of the Enlightenment in terms of new religion scholarship.

Like a new religious movement, the new science was resisted at first by the established religion. Galileo was, for example, almost martyred as a heretic. By at least the time of Francis Bacon, there had emerged a vision of a future new age, a better life, which would be ushered in by science and technology. The Enlightenment's soteriology—"progress" as the secularized version of the "Judeo-Christian belief in deliverance-through-history"[18] — thus pointed towards an earthly, corporate salvation, not unlike the utopian vision of most millenarian movements.[19]

Over time, the new faith developed its own origin myths: In some versions, we read about the early scientists and their primordial battles to bring the modern world out of the dark chaos of the middle ages. In other versions, the ancient Mediterranean civilizations were Edens that fell into ignorance and superstition at about the same time that Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of the empire. Although the hagiographies of the great scientists gave them the status of culture heroes, the redeemer in all stories was ultimately Progress, which worked invisibly, like God's Providence, to bring about the redemption of the earth. And finally the "judge" of this new faith was either history in the form of posterity, as in

18. James H. Billington, *Fire in the Minds of Men* (Basic Books/Harper Colophon : New York, 1980), 8.

19. In Norman Cohn's classic work on millenarianism, *The Pursuit of the Millenium* (Oxford University Press : New York, 1970), he outlines five characteristics of the millenarian picture of salvation : Salvation will be collective, terrestrial, imminent, total, and miraculous. It could be argued that the Enlightenment fulfils all these criteria except, perhaps, for the last one (depending on how one interprets "miraculous").

the phrase "posterity will judge,"[20] or history itself in semi-reified form, as in the phrase "history will judge."[21]

The Enlightenment vision of the world continued to gain adherents up until recently because it promised, and was able partially to deliver, what the Melanesians would have called "the secret of the cargo"[22]; that is, the mystic formula for generating tangible, material goods. In this century, however, there have been increasing numbers of defectors from the faith; largely because the cargo went bad in the form of such things as ecological imbalance and imminent nuclear holocaust, but also because it has become increasingly evident that modernity has lost the formula for true human community, and has forgotten the secret of how to provide an overarching orientation for human life.

Those of us in academia are, in a certain sense, latter-day priests of this now established but waning religion, enacting a ritual in which we accumulate "knowledge" for the unstated but implied purpose of making the world a little better place to live in – a diminutive goal indeed when compared with Bacon's buoyant vision in *The New Atlantis*.

Now the purpose of this, hopefully entertaining, reconstruction of the Enlightenment was not to call for an abandonment of the academic enterprise; rather it was to extend the relativizing effect of our academic disciplines back on their own foundations. In other words, my purpose was to undermine the privileged position usually given to secular scholarship, much as the account of the "sacred rac" was designed to undermine the privileged posture that we usually take towards Euroamerican culture. This discussion hopefully clears some ground for a few programmatic recommendations in the field of new religions.

Humanizing the Study of New Religious Movements

One specific suggestion is that although we never act in a vacuum without presuppositions, there ought to be some attempts made to describe more adequately the *Lebenswelt* — the life world — of members of alternative

20. Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (Yale University Press : New Haven, 1932), 142–144.

21. Jacques Ellul, *The New Demons* (The Seabury Press : New York, 1975), 98.

22. Sylvia Thrupp, *Millennial Dreams in Action* (Mouton & Company : The Hague, 1962), 124.

religious groups. Part of the agenda for such a phenomenological analysis should be to demonstrate that members of such groups "are rational individuals who act in a manner consistent with their view of the world"[23] (i e. to demonstrate that "rationality" is not uniquely characteristic of secular culture). Such an approach, at least as a preliminary move, would reduce the sense of the otherness of the subjects of study, and would also indirectly contribute to an undermining of the "brainwashing" thesis. Some of the more sensitive sociological studies of new religious movements have, in fact, partially undertaken such an analysis—I particularly have in mind Robert Balch's reconstruction of the "cultic milieu"[24] — although it seems to me that an approach drawn from religious studies might be somewhat more suited to the task.

My second suggestion is not to drop models and interpretive concepts used thus far in the study of new religious movements, but to re-examine them with a view to eliminating implicitly or explicitly judgemental aspects of them. It has, for example, been asserted[25] that part of the motivation for joining a new religion is to *escape* the ambiguity and the anxiety of the choices, particularly the moral choices, that are forced upon one in a secular society. Such a person is, to use an expression which I find extremely peculiar, "ethically deprived." The implication in this assertion is that the individual is too immature or too mixed-up to make complex decisions on his or her own. If, however, we switch perspectives, it is possible to see how we could say that the individual is *seeking* a context or a framework of values in which he or she can engage in moral self-affirmation. Thus, joining a new religion could be understood as a mature and health-seeking response to a chaotic society. The point is that one cannot assume that the individual who has successfully adjusted to contemporary secular society is axiomatically the standard of health, maturity, and rationality. This line of thinking leads us to consider a related interpretive notion – the often criticized medical model.

23. Roger Allen Dean, *Moonies : A Psychological Analysis of the Unification Church* (University Microfilms International : Ann Arbor, 1981), 6.

24. E.g. Robert W. Balch & David Taylor, "Seekers and Saucers : The Role of the Cultic Milieu in Joining a UFO Cult," *American Behavioral Scientist*, 20 (6) (July/August 1977).

25. E.g. Frederick B. Bird, "The Pursuit of Innocence : New Religious Movements and Moral Accountability," *Sociological Analysis* 40 (4) (1979).

In the field of new religions, some version of the medical model has been regularly employed as a tool for explaining the exceptions to the old socio-economic deprivation model, that is, "the reason why upper middle class kids join those weird cults is because they're mixed-up." Stated in this way, the medical model enables us to imply that the religious groups in question are themselves pathological, or at least symptomatic of pathology.[26] Here, once again, the same model could be retained with an inverted emphasis. In other words, instead of saying that the person joined because he or she had a few screws loose, we could say that the person entered a group in order to seek healing. Once again, it is not the model itself that is necessarily pernicious; rather, it is the implied assumption that successful adjustment to secular society is the highest canon of mental health.

The latter strategy, inverting the emphasis of previous models, is a concrete example of how we could respond to the "legitimate hermeneutical requirement to place ourselves in the other situation in order to understand it"[27] without abandoning the methods of the academic tradition which we have inherited. The former strategy, fathoming the lifeworld of a new religion, is a more difficult task. It entails a setting aside of methodological templates, a distancing of "oneself from oneself" (as much as this is genuinely possible), and an entry into dialogue with the world of the new religion. Without this kind of preliminary openness and receptivity, it would be "worthless to observe more closely, to study a tradition more thoroughly"[28] for the purposes of a truly adequate phenomenological description.

This approach is a difficult one not simply because it is a difficult (and partially impossible) procedure to bracket out one's own presuppositions, but more importantly this approach is difficult because it entails an existential risk. A religion, in other words, does not present itself "primarily as a subject for curiosity or for study from a safe distance." Rather a religion asks existential questions and "demands a personal response."[29] Thus an investigator who had truly taken to heart the de-absolutizing of his or her own secular tradition would necessarily place himself or herself "so as to be

26. E.g. Robert B. Simmonds, "Conversion or Addiction : Consequences of Joining a Jesus Movement Group," *American Behavioral* Scientist, 20 (6) (July/August 1977).

27. Gadamer, 270.

28. Gadamer, 17.

29. P. Joseph Cahill, *Mended Speech* (Crossroad Publishing Co. : New York, 1982), 48.

laid claim to by the other"[30]; that is, he or she would necessarily risk at least a partial conversion to the perspective of the group being studied.

Concluding Remarks

Allow me to conclude with a brief recapitualtion of the principal points made in this paper: Via sustained reflection on a sense of "uneasiness" which I have had with the academic literature in the field of new religions, I was led to focus on one of the implicit assumptions of modern scholarship, which is that rational consciousness can divest itself of its history, and assume a posture of detached objectivity. I further noted that part of what we have learned in this century is that the contemporary academic consciousness, far from being a disembodied rationality which hovers and broods over the dark waters, is thoroughly embedded in the world-view which we have inherited from the Enlightenment. The primary thrust of my analysis was *not* to call for an abandonment of the roots of our scholarship, or even for a wholesale abandonment of the categories of analysis which inform the field of new religions. Rather my purpose was to humble and to relativize our project and our categories, so that our scholarship might become more humanistic and less alienating.

This issue, or this set of issues, is not, however, idiosyncratic to my personal reflections. As was indicated, the problem of the tension between modernity and the religious consciousness has been raised by many other people in the field of new religions in the midst of studies of the cult controversy. What has not been generally acknowledged, however, is that the anti-cult movement's militant secularism, which has been analyzed so lucidly by scholars like Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony, is part and parcel of the very ground on which we ourselves stand.[31] My pre-eminent concern at this time, and the thought with which I would like to end, is that unless this difficulty is squarely faced and grappled with, it seems to me that we will continue, implicitly and unintentionally, to support the anti-cult movement and thus weaken our efforts as responsible academics to defend religious liberty.

30. Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics* (Northwestern University Press: Evanston, 1969), 193.

31. Dr. Robbins scratches the surface of this issue in an article published a few years ago, "The Beach is Washing Awāy: Controversial Religion and the Sociology of Religion," *Sociological Analysis*, 44 (3) (1983).