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Introducing the Christian Countercult

'The only reason for becoming familiar with other religions and other religious writings', declared the Christian apologist Dave Hunt in 1996, 'would be in order to show those who follow these false systems wherein the error lies and thereby to rescue them' (68). Lest one protest that these sentiments violate the United States' vaunted – not to mention constitutionally enshrined – commitment to religious freedom, conservative evangelicals John Ankerberg and John Weldon answer the charge in their *Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions*. That is, since a 'solidly Christian' America 'seems to have been the divine plan . . . the First Amendment only works as long as we accept Christian principles' (1999: xxix). Take a moment to read that last part again and ponder its implications. More than that, they continue, 'if it does not', which is to say, if American guarantees of religious freedom are not anchored in evangelical Christianity, 'then it gets what it gets – all kinds of religious evils protected by the very amendment which God intended to bless the nation' (xxix). Among these putative evils, warned Walter R. Martin, indeed 'of all the major cults extant in the melting pot of religions called America, none is more subtle or dangerous to the unwary soul than the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' (1980: 63), which Martin called elsewhere 'a polytheistic nightmare of garbled doctrines draped with the garments of Christian terminology' (1985: 226), and whose theology he condemned as 'a blasphemous derivation from the mythology of Greece coupled with unmistakable signs of pagan sexual perversions' (1976: 27).

Known throughout his long career as 'the Bible Answer Man' and considered by many to be the father of modern countercult apologetics, Walter Martin died in June 1989. Though at that point I had no idea who he was, his death occurred less than a week before I was to take up my position as the United Church of Canada minister on a small pastoral charge nestled in the rolling hills and mixed farmland around Cardston, Alberta. To this day I remember the conversation during which I learned of my new posting. After the usual pleasantries, the denominational official paused, then asked in a low tone, 'How do you feel about . . . interfaith dialogue?' 'Fine', I replied carefully, a little confused by the question. After all, I was newly ordained in one of the most liberal Protestant denominations in North America. For us, inter-religious dialogue was all but an article of faith. What could he possibly mean?

'Why?' I asked.

'Well', he said, not a hint of irony in his voice, 'there are some Mormons there'.

As some readers may know, Cardston and its less-populous neighbours, Spring Coulee and Magrath, constituted the northern line of Latter-day Saint

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More Information

(LDS) advance in the late 1880s as they sought to escape newly enacted federal anti-polygamy laws in the United States. As it grew, Cardston became not only the first Temple city in Canada, but a hub for Mormon immigration and expansion into that country. By the time I arrived, 100 years after those first Mormon settlers, of the town's roughly 5,000 inhabitants well over 90 percent identified as Latter-day Saints, and it was said that there were more LDS missionaries per capita in Cardston than anywhere else in the world. Dominating the townscape, the Cardston temple had just undergone a spectacular renovation. The various LDS stake centres were by far the largest and most numerous local houses of worship in the area. And, in both Alberta and Utah, Cardston was known colloquially as 'Salt Lake City North'. But, curiously, it is also the only place I have ever lived where people often identify themselves initially by what they are not. 'Hi, the name's Bob; I'm *not* Mormon' was a common way for non-LDS people to introduce themselves to me, not infrequently with a subtle wink and a tacit nod.

Knowing virtually nothing about Latter-day Saints before I moved to my new pastoral charge, I visited a Christian bookstore in my hometown on Vancouver Island. After explaining my situation, I was handed what the clerk assured me was 'the best book on the topic': Dave Hunt and Ed Decker's infamous *The Godmakers* (1984). I recall saying to my mother, as I was leafing through it a few days later, 'Mom, they're sending me to Mars.' The world Hunt and Decker described was an alien one indeed. Strange and secretive rituals, magical underwear, the ongoing practice of polygamy, the quest to become gods of their own planet, all of this and more combined with the remarkable claim that Latter-day Saints 'take more non-barbiturate sedatives, tranquilizers, antidepressants, stimulants, pep pills, heroin, cocaine and LSD than non-Mormons' (Hunt and Decker 1984: 19). Reading *The Godmakers* made it seem as though I was headed for some kind of weird, hedonistic, junkie paradise. Of course, it wasn't that way at all.

Most of the Latter-day Saints I met there were friendly, and for the five years I lived in Cardston, they appeared to me relentlessly normal as they went about their lives. Some were better than others. Some worked hard, others less so. Some of their kids were well behaved, others, well, not so much. In short, apart from their religious beliefs, they were just like anybody else. Though recognizing that I was 'different', many of them went out of their way to make me feel welcome in their community. More conspiracy-minded folks in my own congregation were convinced that this overt show of affection was nothing more than a tactic aimed at recruiting the new minister, but that never seemed the case to me. In fact, I suspect that the proprietor of the local Latter-day Saint bookshop retains the distinction of having the only store anywhere in the

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world to stock copies of my first book (Cowan 1991) – most of which undoubtedly remain on the shelves to this day. And I never once saw evidence of heroin, cocaine, or LSD.

My point here is that I was so struck by the disparity between Hunt and Decker's hostile, pugnacious description of Mormonism and my experience in this profoundly LDS enclave that I began to collect materials similar to theirs from evangelical bookstores and churches across southern Alberta. I wanted to understand this strange obsession with the dangerous religious Other, and I was astonished at just how much of it there was and how deeply ingrained it is in evangelical culture. I found not only anti-Mormon material, but anti-Jehovah's Witness, anti-New Age, anti-Hindu, anti-Buddhist, anti-Pagan, anti-Catholic, indeed anti-just about any religion you could name. Gradually, a picture emerged of a conservative, mainly Protestant subculture dedicated to defending its narrow vision of the Christian faith against any and all competitors. Eventually, this collection grew to include the many hundreds of books, magazines and journals, news articles, pamphlets and tracts, broadsheets and one-off polemics, newsletters, audio- and videotapes, and, later, the rambling plethora of Internet shovelware – material that is simply replicated from website to website – that became the data set informing both my doctoral dissertation and much of my early academic work (Cowan 1999, 2002, 2003a, 2003b). All of which brings us to this Element.

'Strange as it may seem', Dave Hunt wrote in *The Cult Explosion*, the first of his more than thirty books on the topic, 'most cults are basically the same' (1980: 19). Arguing a position that only hardened over the course of his career, and which is still shared by those whose Christian identity is shaped at least as much by their opposition to other religious traditions as by devotion to their own, Hunt concludes that 'in spite of the apparently wide differences among the many cults, beneath the surface they all rest on a common foundation: the four lies Satan used to trick Eve' (19). According to Hunt at least, these are (a) the human possibility of godhood, (b) the rejection of moral absolutes, (c) a denial of death, and (d) that 'knowledge was the key to godhood and immortality' (110). Epitomizing the Christian countercult worldview, he concludes: 'There is an undeniable point-by-point correlation between these four premises of the serpent's philosophy and the basic ideas underlying not only paganism-occultism but also modern science, psychology, sociology, and every human religion. The odds against this happening by chance are too astronomical to calculate' (110). Indeed, for Hunt and hundreds of other countercult apologists, both lay and professional, whether well organized or entirely ad hoc, 'Satan is the author of every cult and false religion, and his imprint is clearly seen on them all' (239).

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More Information

For most of those populating my growing library of source material, new, alternative, and emergent religions were clear evidence, for example, of *The Culting of America* (Rhodes 1994). The increasing presence of other world faiths highlighted the problem of *Alien Gods on American Turf* (Muck 1990). Some countercult apologists asked *Have You Witnessed to a Mormon Lately?* (Spencer 1986), while others warned darkly about sinister *Angels of Deceit* (Lee and Hindson 1993) and *Satan's 'Evangelistic' Strategy for This New Age* (Lutzer and DeVries 1989).

It is worth remembering that, at its most basic level, religion is always and everywhere a matter of perception and perspective, and that this is especially the case when exclusive faith claims and matters of cosmic consequence are at stake. What is seen depends on who is looking, what they are looking at, and the lenses through which they survey the cultural landscape around them. As I have pointed out elsewhere, 'this may seem an obvious insight, but it's astonishing how frequently it's forgotten. We so often seem to think that the way *we* see the sacred, if we claim to see it at all, is the way *everyone* sees it' (Cowan 2020: 7). Or, more to the point, the way everyone *should* see it if they know what's good for them.

Welcome to the evangelical Christian countercult.

Put simply, as I describe it in this Element, the Christian countercult is a relatively small, but surprisingly influential apologetics movement that exists largely within conservative evangelical Protestantism. Although minor variants exist within Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, particularly in Europe and Russia, the vast majority of modern countercult material is rooted in scriptural and doctrinal interpretations that go back in spirit, if not always in denominational lineage, to *The Fundamentals*, the twelve-volume collection of essays defending Protestant Christianity published in the United States between 1910 and 1915.

Even today, if you go into virtually any Christian bookstore (whether bricks-and-mortar or online) and search the shelves labelled 'Cults and Sects', 'Other Faiths', or 'World Religions', you will find many of the sources that I used more than twenty years ago still in print and prominently displayed, often in revised and updated editions. Evangelical scholar Douglas Groothuis, for instance, continues to insist on the importance of *Confronting the New Age*, just one of his books explaining 'how to resist [this] growing religious movement' (1988; see Groothuis 1986, 1990). James Bjornstad, on the other hand, still cautions Christians about the religious *Counterfeits at Your Door* (1979), while Robert Morey provides ongoing advice on *How to Answer a Jehovah's Witness* (1980), but more recently asks *Is Eastern Orthodoxy Christian?* (2015). By now, I imagine you can guess his answer. Similarly, in *Hidden Dangers of the*

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Excerpt
More Information

Rainbow, Constance Cumbey warns anyone who will listen about 'the New Age Movement and Our Coming Age of Barbarism' (1983), while in *Demon-Proofing Prayers*, freelance exorcist Bob Larson offers his own patented 'guide to winning spiritual warfare' (2011). For his part, Walter Martin produced multiple editions of his magnum opus, *Kingdom of the Cults*, first published in 1965, but which, more than thirty years after his death, continues to appear in revised editions as 'the definitive work on the subject' (2019; see also Martin, Rische, and van Gorden 2008). Online, virtual iterations of such long-standing countercult groups as the Religious Analysis Service (RAS; www.ras.org), Spiritual Counterfeits Project (www.scp-inc.org), Evangelical Ministries to Non-Christian Religions (EMNR; www.emnr.org), Watchman Fellowship (WF; www.watchman.org), and the venerable Christian Research Institute, which Martin founded in 1960 (CRI: www.equip.org), still patrol the battlements, constantly on guard for the encroaching religious Other.

The Road Ahead

Whether they pursue countercult apologetics as a profession or as an avocation, whether they are focused on one particular group or regard the entire multi-religious landscape with existential alarm, whether they are part of an organized movement or follow their passion for the most part alone and online, evangelical countercult apologists regard any religious belief, practice, or faith tradition – from alternative interpretations of the Christian message (e.g., Freed 1980; Watters 1987) to different religions altogether (e.g., Hunt 1998a; Matrisciana 1985) – as both a threat to the validity and security of their own worldview, and as a 'problem of practical life' in terms of the ironclad mandate of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16–20; see Mannheim 1952).

However, despite its popular emergence in North America after the Second World War, the countercult as a reaction to religious competitors is hardly a new phenomenon. As such, Section 1 of this Element places the modern movement in broad historical context as one ripple in a stream of Christian antipathy dating back as far as the early church, but finding its more precise antecedents in the nineteenth century. Following this, Section 2 briefly outlines countercult development in the twentieth century, particularly its post-war institutionalization and, in some cases, professionalization. By the end of the 1990s, the appearance of the World Wide Web had changed the nature of the countercult yet again, providing for a democratization of Christian apologetics that believers before that time could scarcely have imagined. Christian countercult organizations and ministries exist in many countries around the world, and share a common purpose in defending their own faith, most often through apologetic critique and proactive

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More Information

evangelization of other faiths, but occasionally by means of outright attack (see, e.g., Di Marzio 2020; Fautré 2020a, 2020b). This Element will mainly consider the countercult as it has developed in North America.

It is important to note, however, that evangelical Christian concern has not been the only response to the emergence of new and what many regard as questionable religious movements. Beginning in the late 1960s, a secular anticult movement quickly became the popular face of new religious opposition, largely because of its fearmongering proclamations and outré tactics. Although they are often considered part of the same social response to alternative religious groups, the secular anticult movement (ACM) and the Christian countercult movement (CCM) are, in fact, very different from each other and approach the problem of new religions in very diverse ways. 'Broadly put, the secular ACM proceeds according to different versions of the "brainwashing" or "thought-control" hypothesis and takes as its point of departure allegations of physical and mental abuse, attacking a number of nontraditional religious groups on the basis of alleged violations of civil liberties' (Cowan 2002: 340; see Introvigne 2022b). The Christian countercult, on the other hand, opposes new and alternative religious movements 'not primarily because of their alleged recruiting and retention methods, but because of their ontology, not by virtue of their presumed (anti-)social behaviour, but simply by virtue of their existence' (Cowan 2002: 340). Thus, Section 3 parses the difference between anticult and countercult in terms of their underpinning epistemologies, their respective apologetic methods and tactics, and their desired outcomes. Though both movements identify their religious opponents as cults, what they mean by that term, how they arrive at a determination about whether this group or that constitutes a cultic threat, and what they think should be done about it are very different – and should not be confused.

Section 4 discusses the modern Christian countercult in terms of its sociology of knowledge, as an extended exercise in evangelical worldview maintenance that has at least the potential for significant social impact. In the first instance, despite its often grandiose claims to front-line action in the face of new religious competition, the Christian countercult is largely a movement internal to evangelicalism, one that is often less concerned with converting others than with reinforcing the correctness of its own religious vision and thereby propagating an ongoing prejudice against any faith but its own. Despite the popularity of such series as the Zondervan Guide to Cults and Religious Movements (e.g., Hawkins 1998; Mather and Nichols 1995; Passantino and Passantino 1995; Yamamoto 1998) or apologist Ron Rhodes' numerous *Reasoning from the Scriptures with* [insert problematic religion here] books (e.g., 1993, 1995, 2000, 2001), the reality is that very few of the evangelical believers who

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More Information

consume countercult material will interact with new religion adherents in any meaningful way. Despite innumerable stand-alone volumes ranging from *Confronting the Cults* (Lewis 1966) and *Cult-Proofing Your Kids* (Martin 1993) to *When Cultists Ask* (Geisler and Rhodes 1997) and *Right Answers for Wrong Beliefs* (Slick 2002), evangelicals may 'cult-proof' their children, but they will rarely if ever 'confront the cults' directly or be placed in situations where 'cultists ask' them for anything other than directions. Rather, for these believers, countercult literature serves a different purpose altogether: it demonstrates in no uncertain terms the unimpeachable superiority of their own religious worldview, but does so by pointing out what it regards as the fatal flaws in all religions other than their own. Through the consumption of countercult apologetics, evangelical believers remain convinced that they have all the 'right answers' for any kind of 'wrong belief'.

This is not to say, however, that the Christian countercult has had no social impact. A number of countercult groups, for example, have promoted events intended to confront what they consider harmful religions, including protesting at the opening of new LDS temples or Scientology buildings, organizing weekend workshops that conclude with witnessing trips to this new religion or that, or sponsoring a variety of call-in radio programmes and podcasts. Works such as *The Godmakers* do not exist in a vacuum.

Prior to co-writing *The Godmakers* with Dave Hunt, Ed Decker, a Latter-day Saint who converted to evangelical Christianity in 1976, produced a short film, also titled *The God Makers*. (Note: although there is inconsistent usage across the countercult and relevant media, *The Godmakers* refers to the Hunt and Decker text, *The God Makers* to the Decker film.) Onscreen interviews with ex-Mormons and anti-Mormon apologists, animated lampoons of LDS theology and ritual, and dire warnings about the manifold dangers presented by the church frame a fictionalized class action lawsuit Decker and his fellow apostates hope to bring for what they see as 'fraud', 'deliberate misrepresentations', and 'causing family break-ups' (Decker 1982). According to one reporter at the time, '*The Godmakers* [*sic*], a 56-minute film produced by a group of former Mormons, has fueled claims of "religious pornography", as well as a wave of threats, harassment and violence in many of the places it has been shown, including Idaho where a fourth of the state's residents are Mormon' (Bossick 1983: 5). Decker himself claimed at the time that *The God Makers* was 'being shown more than a thousand times each month, with an average attendance of 2,500 people at each showing, or about 250,000 viewers per month' (Bossick 1983: 6). Setting aside Bossick's faulty maths, Decker is actually claiming that *The God Makers* was seen by two and a half *million* people every month. To put that in perspective, according to Decker, in the year following its release *The*

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Excerpt
More Information

God Makers was seen by more people in one month than many high-budget Hollywood films during their entire theatrical run.

Decker's clear and slightly ridiculous exaggeration notwithstanding, the film was marketed to churches throughout the United States and, not surprisingly, generated a considerable number of complaints. After a months-long investigation, the National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ) declared rather anticlimactically that Decker's film 'does not – in our opinion – fairly portray the Mormon Church, Mormon history, or Mormon beliefs'. That said, the NCCJ also criticized *The Godmakers* [*sic*] for its 'extensive use of "half-truths", faulty generalizations, erroneous interpretation, and sensationalism', finding 'particularly offensive the emphasis in the film that Mormonism is some sort of subversive plot – a danger to the community, a threat to the institution of marriage, and is destructive to the mental health of teenagers'. The letter concludes that, because '*The Godmakers* [*sic*] relies heavily on appeals to fear, prejudice and other less worthy human emotions', the 'continued use of this film poses genuine danger to the climate of good will and harmony' (National Conference of Christians and Jews 1984). Yet, nearly forty years after its release, a recent featured review on Amazon's Internet Movie Database, a standard online reference for all things cinema, television, and video game, warns that 'it is incredible all the crazy stuff that Mormons teach and it is frightening to see what they can do to you if you try to escape from them once your'e [*sic*] in their group. Do not trust Mormons, be afraid' (Leakhead 2020).

Section 5 of this Element considers the future of the Christian countercult which, unlike its secular counterpart, shows no signs of declining or fading away. Indeed, the situation is quite the opposite and for readily understandable reasons. Many of the books produced by prominent countercult apologists of the 1980s and 1990s are being reprinted or released in specialized e-book format. Many of these 'movement intellectuals' (Eyerman and Jamison 1991) – as well as those who have been influenced by them and, in some cases, have taken up their apologetic mantle – continue to write, publish, and speak publicly, responding now to such diverse threats as Islam (considered by many the fastest-growing religion worldwide) and atheism (one of the fastest-growing demographics among secular nations; e.g., DeStefano 2018; Hahn 2010; McFarland 2012; Miller 2012).

As liberal secular democracies become more diverse, both culturally and religiously, conservative evangelicals will feel increasing apologetic pressure to reinforce the infallible and insuperable nature of their own faith. In this respect, both 1 Peter 3:15, in which Jesus' followers are enjoined to 'always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have', and Jude 1:3, urging believers 'to contend earnestly for the faith',

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Excerpt
More Information

will continue to carry at least as much weight as the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16–20). Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, for instance, EMNR (which changed its name in 2022 from Evangelical Ministries to *New* Religions) continues to produce yearly conferences at which many of the same people share many of the same stories, making the same apologetic arguments in the face of the same supposed religious threats.

To understand the modern evangelical CCM, it is necessary to look nearly two millennia back to the beginnings of what would eventually become the Christian church, a global religious phenomenon that accounts for more than one in every four people around the world.

1 The Christian Countercult in Historical Perspective

Although it has a number of significant antecedents, the Christian countercult as I describe it here came to prominence mainly under the force of multireligious expansions in the West following World War II. In Britain, for example, the Witchcraft Act of 1735 was repealed in 1951, replaced by the more specific Fraudulent Mediums Act, a decision that, among other things, cleared the way for self-declared modern Pagans to step out of the broom closet and into the public square, allowed for the publication of such books as Gerald Gardner's *Witchcraft Today* (1954), and eventually led to an increase in general interest in witches, witchcraft, and Wicca (see Ankarloo and Clark 1999; Berger 2005; Cowan 2005b; Hutton 2019). Across the pond, concern that Christian dominance was waning led to incorporation of the RAS in 1946, the principal mandate of which was to 'provide a *comprehensive and aggressive* specialized service, denominationally unrelated, designed to *enlighten and safeguard uninformed and unwary* individuals and groups against those false teachings which definitely prevent men from finding the saving grace that is obtainable alone through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ' (Religious Analysis Service, n.d.; emphasis added). Nearly two decades later, the 1960s saw the repeal of profoundly racist statutes which, to that point, had limited immigration from a specific group of countries, notably in Southern and Eastern Europe and Asia. This new openness invited a host of religious immigration and entrepreneurship, which provided competition for Christianity, to that point the virtually unchallenged faith tradition in the United States. Riding the wave of various countercultural movements, both America and Europe witnessed an explosion of alternative Christianities, novel interpretations of the faith that rejected the staid preaching of the past and sought to reach younger audiences with more relevant gospel messaging (see Lucas and Robbins 2004; Miller 1995). While many of these groups were swiftly condemned as cults, they all addressed what leaders and

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Excerpt
More Information

adherents alike saw as the patent failures of the traditional Christian church. None of this, however, should suggest that the issues with which countercult apologists concerned themselves had not been around for much, much longer than that.

A Brief History of Christian Antipathy

What does 'real' Christianity mean? Who are the 'true' Christians? Under what conditions can one claim 'legitimate' allegiance to the Son of God? And what are we to do about those who profess such fealty falsely? Beyond that, how should those who follow the one true God – and insist that all others do so as well – respond to the plethora of different spiritual visions spilling out from the human religious imagination? Questions such as these have vexed Christians almost since the inception of the church and not only driven the development of increasingly sophisticated theological apologetics, but also contributed to some of the most turbulent and consequential geopolitical developments of the past two millennia. Indeed, the history of Christian antipathy towards competing interpretations of the faith itself, as well as the glut of alternative traditions crowding the religion marketplace, goes back to the very beginning of Christian community.

Acts 15 and Galatians 2, which scholars consider complementary (though not identical) accounts of the same event, describe competing visions of Christian identity and church membership that occurred within just two decades of Jesus' death. According to the biblical texts, some leaders of the nascent church were adamant that adherence to principles laid down in the Torah – and for men, at least, manifest in the rite of circumcision – were requirements for inclusion in the Christian faith. Absent these, believers could not call themselves followers of Christ. Indeed, 'unless you are circumcised', Antiochene believers were told, and the ritual performed 'according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved' (Acts 15:1). Paul, the fiery convert from Tarsus and celebrated apostle to the Gentiles, objected sharply. Thus, at the Council of Jerusalem, dated to around 50 CE and often considered the first of Christianity's major ecumenical gatherings, the decision was made to require no more of non-Jewish converts than 'to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality' (Acts 15:29). While the intervening 2,000 years may have blunted somewhat the theological force of this particular debate, it's worth noting that the central issue was soteriological: who could be part of the Kingdom of God and, more importantly, who was to be excluded.

Consider just a few of the more well-known versions of this same basic argument – quarrels, debates, even all-out armed conflicts that have fractured the Christian church from its earliest centuries to the present day. While the

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