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► Religions A to Z

James A. Beverley



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Religions A to Z

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*This book is dedicated to
Andrea Joy Beverley
and
Derek James Beverley,
my wonderful children.
Their love, wisdom, creativity,
and Christian faith mean
everything to me.*

Contents

| | |
|--|------|
| <i>Preface</i> | XI |
| <i>Introduction</i> | XIII |
| Adidam | I |
| Ahmadiyya | 3 |
| Alamo Christian Ministries | 5 |
| Anabaptists | 7 |
| Anglicans | 9 |
| Apostles of Infinite Love | 11 |
| Arcane School | 13 |
| Army of Mary | 15 |
| Aryan Nations | 17 |
| Aum Shinrikyo | 19 |
| Baha'i | 21 |
| Baptists | 24 |
| The Branch Davidians and David Koresh | 26 |
| British-Israelism | 28 |
| Bruderhof | 30 |
| Buddhism | 32 |
| Charismatics | 38 |
| Ching Hai | 40 |
| Christadelphians | 42 |
| Christian Science | 44 |
| Christianity | 47 |
| Church of Christ (Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement) | 54 |
| Church Universal and Triumphant | 56 |
| Concerned Christians | 58 |
| A Course in Miracles | 60 |
| The Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhism | 63 |
| Davidian Adventism | 66 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Doukhobors | 68 |
| Druids | 70 |
| ECKANKAR | 72 |
| Elan Vital | 74 |
| Emergent Church | 76 |
| Falun Gong (Falun Dafa) | 79 |
| Family International | 81 |
| Freemasonry | 84 |
| Fundamentalism | 87 |
| Hare Krishna (ISKCON) | 89 |
| Heaven's Gate | 92 |
| Hinduism | 94 |
| International Churches of Christ | 98 |
| Islam | 100 |
| Islamic Terrorism | 108 |
| Jehovah's Witnesses | 110 |
| Judaism | 112 |
| Kansas City Prophets | 120 |
| Local Church (Witness Lee) | 122 |
| Lubavitch | 124 |
| Lutherans | 126 |
| Methodists | 128 |
| Metropolitan Community Churches | 130 |
| Mormonism | 133 |
| MSIA: Movement of Spiritual Inner Awareness | 144 |
| Nation of Islam | 146 |
| New Age | 148 |
| New Apostolic Reformation | 152 |
| New Thought | 154 |
| Nichiren Shoshu and Soka Gakkai | 156 |
| Nuwaubian Nation | 158 |
| Orthodox Christianity | 160 |
| Osho (Rajneesh) | 164 |
| Pentecostalism | 166 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Peoples Temple | 168 |
| Plymouth Brethren | 170 |
| Polygamous Mormonism | 172 |
| Presbyterian-Reformed | 174 |
| Priory of Sion | 176 |
| Protestants | 178 |
| Purpose-Driven/Seeker-Sensitive Churches | 180 |
| Quakers | 182 |
| Raelians | 184 |
| Ramtha School of Enlightenment | 186 |
| Rastafarianism | 188 |
| Roman Catholicism | 190 |
| Sai Baba | 198 |
| Satanism | 200 |
| Scientology | 205 |
| Seventh-day Adventism | 210 |
| Shambhala | 213 |
| Share International | 215 |
| Sidda Yoga | 217 |
| Sikhism | 219 |
| Solar Temple | 222 |
| Spiritualism | 224 |
| Swedenborgianism | 227 |
| Taoism | 229 |
| Thelema (Aleister Crowley) | 231 |
| Theosophy | 233 |
| Toronto Blessing | 235 |
| Transcendental Meditation | 237 |
| Twelve Tribes | 239 |
| UFO Cults | 241 |
| Unarius | 243 |
| Unification Church | 245 |
| Urantia | 248 |
| Vampire Religion | 250 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| The Vineyard | 252 |
| The Way International | 254 |
| Witchcraft | 256 |
| Worldwide Church of God | 263 |
| Zen | 266 |
| Notes | 269 |
| <i>General Internet Resources on World and New Religions</i> | 271 |
| <i>Resources on World and New Religions</i> | 275 |

Preface

This work is a spin-off from my much larger work called *Nelson's Illustrated Guide to Religions*. In both books I attempt to analyze a large number of religious traditions in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Both books deal with world and new religions, major Protestant denominations, and various movements or trends within larger religious traditions. *Religions A to Z* deals with fewer groups than the other volume and gives less space to many of the groups. Therefore, I urge interested readers to consult my longer book for further study, and also to pay close attention to the recommended reading and Web sites provided in *Religions A to Z*.

My formal study of religion goes back over a quarter of a century. However, specific work for the *Nelson's Illustrated Guide to Religions* and *Religions A to Z* has been ongoing since a sabbatical leave in 1999–2000. I owe a lot to those friends who have encouraged me in my research and writing over the years: John and Trish Wilkinson, Todd Johnson, Kevin and Jill Rische, Annie McKeown, Gary and Peg LeBlanc, John Reddy, Kevin and Sandy Quast, Rodney Howard-Browne, John Axler, Larry and Beverly Matthews, Randy and Susan Campbell, Siddiqi Rae, John Kessler, Ken and Miriam MacLeod, Marta Durski, Dave Collison, Rick and Charis Tobias, Bruxy and Nina Cavey, Pat Minichello, Gladys Chan, Randy and Cindy McCooeye, and Ralston and Cheryl Nickerson.

I also want to acknowledge the influence of several academics in my life. Eileen Barker, Massimo Introvigne, Don Wiebe, and Gordon Melton are valued friends and constant sources of learning about the world of religion, even when we disagree. I am also grateful for continuing encouragement from Hans Küng, my former professor during PhD work at the Toronto School of Theology. His breadth of learning and courage in theological life has been a powerful source of inspiration.

I gladly acknowledge the contribution of Tyndale Seminary administration to my work: Brian Stiller (president), Earl Davey (provost), and Janet Clark (academic dean). Two former deans, Ian Rennie and Brian Cunnington, have also been particularly supportive of my research work. Thanks also to Toby Goodman and Andrew Smith of the IT department at Tyndale. I am very grateful to several friends who have provided academic assistance and help in research: Agnes Choi, Rachel Collins, and Chad Hillier. David Neff and Mark Galli of *Christianity Today* magazine have supported me as a writer and contributing editor.

I also am in debt to key personnel at Thomas Nelson, including Mark Roberts, Michael Stephens, Lee Holloway, and Michael Christopher. Most significantly, Wayne Kinde, Senior Vice-President and Publisher, Nelson Reference and Electronic and Nelson Impact, has been very helpful in his backing of my work.

I am also encouraged by a great circle of relatives, including Bill and Margaret Bulman, Reta Lutes, Norman and Phyllis Gillcash, Mary Beverley, David and Darlene Keirstead, Cindy Beverley, and Lorne and Linda Gillcash. My twin brother, Bob Beverley, is a constant source of love and enthusiasm. As ever, and most important, I am incredibly grateful to my immediate family: my wife, Gloria; our adult children, Derek and Andrea; and Julien, our son-in-law.

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Introduction

It is no small thing to present an analysis of one hundred different religious movements. Readers have a right to know the perspective that I bring to this study. It will be obvious that this work offers more than simply bare facts about the various groups and leaders covered. Rather, *Religions A to Z* provides opinion about many of the controversial issues that arise in the study of the movements covered in this book. While every entry contains basic material that is beyond dispute, I also provide what I believe are necessary criticisms on relevant and important points.

The various traditions in this work are studied from my perspective as an evangelical Christian scholar. I realize that many readers will not share this paradigm or worldview. However, I ask those who follow other philosophies to grant some epistemic patience for the faith tradition that I bring to this study, one that I believe to be the truth. I recognize, of course, that this book would be different if written from a Buddhist, Muslim, esoteric, or other tradition. It would also be a different book if it adopted the standpoint of relativism, postmodernism, or the perspective of the disinterested academic.

Readers should know from the outset that criticisms are offered only when I believe that they are truly necessary. Even then, none of my points are meant to ignore or downplay the ways in which virtually every religion provides love, identity, and meaning to its followers. It will be obvious that this work does not employ the notion of brainwashing to interpret religious life, though I recognize that many leaders and groups are highly manipulative.

I have written this book with a deep recognition of my own fallibility. I am also aware, as I state below, that evangelical Christians have often been careless in response to other religions. Further, even after years of study of particular groups, it is possible to make

mistakes of fact and interpretation. Consequently, I welcome input and correction on what I have written, though I also ask for civility in critique.

To be more specific about my perspective, I have presented in various books a list of ten essentials that form a proper Christian response to religions. These ten principles form the framework I have tried to use in responding to the one hundred movements covered in this book. These core points offer a multifaceted and balanced Christian paradigm for assessing religions. They also are built on appreciation for everything true and valid that can be learned from those in other religions, or from non-Christian academics who provide serious research on new and world religions.

1. *All religions and philosophies are to be measured by the final revelation of God in Jesus Christ.* The Christian must show allegiance to Jesus as the only Son of God and as God's final and ultimate Word to humanity. Contrary to relativism, the Bible does not teach that all roads lead to God. The orthodox Christian tradition has always taught the uniqueness and supremacy of Jesus. Karl Barth, the great Protestant theologian, has stated that Jesus is the one distinction between truth and error.

2. *Commitment to Jesus demands that the study of religion be carried out in love.* Bigotry and ignorance are incompatible with Jesus' command to love. Christian response to other religions has often been marked by hatred, and the evangelical study of religions has frequently been superficial and careless. Though this work includes critiques of various groups, my concerns are raised with the aim of providing truthful and important analysis.

3. *Christian response to religions involves a commitment to truth.* By this is meant not only dedication to Christ as the Truth, but also devotion to accuracy in the world of theology and religion. The commandment not to bear false witness against one's neighbor includes avoiding lies, half-truths, and distortions about the religion of the other person.

4. *Christians must recognize the contradictions and ultimate disunity that exists among the religions of the world.* Contrary to popular opin-

ion, the religions of the world often disagree even on basic points. Buddhists do not believe in God. Jews and Muslims do not accept the Trinity. Mormon males believe they will progress to Godhood in eternity. Unificationists believe that Sun Myung Moon is the Messiah. Jehovah's Witnesses trust the Watchtower Society alone for spiritual guidance. Santeria followers kill animals for religious worship.

5. *Disciples of Jesus must recognize every significant point of agreement with people of other religions, and even with those of no faith.* There is no harm in seeing God's common grace at work in the religions and peoples of the world. Thus, atheists can love their children. Wiccans can be upstanding citizens. Hindus can understand the value of love. Muslims can detest the evils of global terrorism. Non-Christians can serve as moral examples to the Christian community.

6. *Those who trust the gospel of Jesus must note the power of the dominant liberal perspective on religion and religious study.* For over a century the West has seen an increasing emphasis on relativism. Since the 1893 World Parliament of Religions, the acceptance of all religions as paths to God has grown. Mainline denominations have downplayed the missionary enterprise, and liberal theologians have argued that Jesus is not the only Savior. Further, postmodernism has eroded confidence in the Christian Gospel.

7. *The Christian church must affirm that the mercy and love of God shown in Jesus are sufficient to answer all concerns about God's fairness.* The Christian must resist attempts to downplay the supremacy of Jesus or to overstate the unity of religions as a means of making Christian faith more acceptable in a climate of relativism. The wideness of God's mercy is shown best by the grace given at Calvary.

Evangelicals need to continue to emphasize the Lordship of Christ in a world of religions. However, this emphasis must be set in the context of the warnings of Jesus against a judgmental attitude (Matthew 7:1-6). The harsh spirit in conservative Christian theology is inconsistent with the meaning of the Cross of Christ.

8. *Those who trust in the Christian gospel must not forget the wrath of God that stands against the wickedness of a fallen world.* The message of God's justice applies to both secular and religious domains, since the

Lord's name is taken in vain in both. People often carry out evil under God's alleged blessing. The Good News in Jesus is a word of judgment about the folly and sin of a lost humanity.

9. *Christians must repent and be in sorrow for the ways in which we have not allowed the gospel to critique the church through the ages.* Karl Barth has pointed prophetically to the ways in which the message of Christ must be heard by all religions, even Christianity. Barth was correct to recognize that religion can be unbelief, even among those who claim to follow Christ. Christians who engage in self-criticism gain the opportunity to help those in other faiths come to Jesus, the healer and light of the world.

10. *Christian response to religion must include respect for human liberty.* Christians must defend the right of all humans to exercise their free choice on religious matters. A decision for the gospel is real only if made in freedom. Likewise, the Christian respects the freedom of humans to reject any religion, including the Christian gospel. Coercion is antithetical to the way in which Jesus treated others.

Building on this, evangelicals must recognize the importance of building peace between religions, especially on common social and ethical issues. This has been argued best by Hans Küng, in his work for a global ethic.

In each entry in this work I attempt to offer basic facts about history and beliefs, though the contents vary depending on the nature of the group or leader under study. Readers will note that I follow the typology outlined by J. Gordon Melton, my friend and colleague at the Institute for the Study of American Religion. His family model of religions provides a way to make sense of the array of religious groups found in our world. I urge readers to consult his massive *Encyclopedia of American Religions* for more detail.