



TRINITY CONSULTATION ON POST-CHRISTENDOM
SPIRITUALITIES: CONSULTATION REPORT

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From October 16 to 19 Trinity International University served as the site for a post-Christendom spiritualities consultation co-sponsored by Trinity, the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization's issue group on postmodern spiritualities and new religions, and the Western Institute for Intercultural Studies. The consultation brought together leading evangelicals scholars and practitioners from around the world representing countries including Australia, Denmark, Sweden, the United Kingdom, as well as various locations from around the United States. This combination of geographical locations, coupled with differing areas of specialty and emphasis in approach, provided a refreshing depth and diversity to a consideration of new religions.

The format for the conference consisted of ten plenary sessions and a number of parallel sessions. The consultation began with the context of the study of new religions by Dr. Michael Cooper. Following his presentation, a plenary session with Dr. Stephen Kennedy of Trinity Graduate School addressed an important and neglected topic in evangelical circles; that of the rights of indigenous people to sacred sites. Dr. Kennedy discussed the legal, ethical and religious aspects of this topic, especially with reference to the struggles of Native American

peoples, which provided the consultation with an empathetic perspective with which to begin the consultation.

The following day Dr. Cooper of Trinity Graduate School discussed the continuing evolution of the Western religious landscape from ancient paganism to contemporary Neo-Paganism. This was connected to the increasingly eclectic spiritual questing of Westerners and the place of Neo-Paganism in this spiritual milieu. He argued that the emphasis on personal religious experience legitimized the cognitive bargaining of Western religious people.

The late morning saw Dr. Gordon Melton of the Institute for the Study of American Religion present on changes in the "New Age" or New Spiritualities, and specifically on the significance of Western esotericism as a major religious tradition that needs to be taken seriously by evangelicals and addressed in more positive fashion, particularly in the area of engagement.

Dr. Terry Muck of Asbury Theological Seminary presented the next plenary message with some interesting reflections on identity construction in light of traditional and modern ways of engaging in this process in contrast with more fluid forms in postmodernity. Dr. Muck then made application of this to missiology as he drew out implications for how a sense of Christian identity might fit into this mix.

Dr. James Beverley of Tyndale Seminary concluded the second day's plenary sessions with a consideration of the emerging church movement. While criticism was included in his discussion, he also acknowledged positive aspects of this movement and what it might be saying back to more traditional and contemporary expressions of church for evangelicals.

The third day of the conference brought a new round of plenary sessions that began with Dr. Craig Blomberg of Denver Seminary



sketching the contextualization spectrum in Muslim contexts and then making application to evangelical-Mormon dialogue. This contextualization spectrum approach has now moved beyond Islam into expressions in Hindu and Buddhist contexts, and Dr. Blomberg's presentation helped put the issue on the agenda for evangelical missiologists in the Mormon context as well.

Dr. James Chancellor of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary led the next plenary session that looked at changes in the The Family/The Children of God since the death of its founder, particularly in the area of sexual ethics. Dr. Chancellor's presentation involved elements that provide the tools necessary for a fresh analysis of The Family as observers consider the possible shift of the group from a lesser tension with society and with evangelicalism in the categorization of "cult" to sect.

Dr. Ross Clifford of Morling College provided a plenary session that helped communicate the significance of the new religions in popular culture as he discussed the importance of a combined pastoral approach with a subjective evidential apologetic for post-Christendom spiritualities. Dr. Clifford's presentation may have been the most emotionally stirring, and it helped academic and layperson alike in their understanding of the pastoral challenges faced by the local church in appreciating and connecting with those impacted by post-Christendom spiritualities and its approach to the spiritual quest.

The final plenary session for the third day was that of Dr. Gerald McDermott of Roanoke College who discussed the church's earliest theologians and apologists and how they responded to the religious movements of their culture in the first centuries of the Christian era. Dr.

McDermott's presentation was a reminder for the church to consider all of the resources at her disposal, including its historical past, in formulating contemporary understandings of and approaches to the new religions.

The final day of the conference involved a panel discussion on the topic of syncretism and contextualization in missions. Participants included Ross Clifford, Gerald McDermott, Gordon Melton, Terry Muck, and Ole Skjerbaek Madsen of *In the Master's Light* in Denmark, with John Morehead serving as panel moderator. This panel looked at the significance of syncretism in intercultural engagement and the communication of the gospel. It defined the terms and issues involved, considered syncretism that takes place in American and Western church contexts that is often not recognized, and while urging caution in contextualization in light of syncretistic possibilities the opposite danger of under-contextualization for fear of syncretism was also noted.

In addition to the plenary sessions a number of parallel sessions were held throughout the conference. These were presented by plenary speakers as well as by other conference attendees, including many students of Trinity International University. Parallel session topics included looking at the neo-spiritual milieu, new approaches to understanding Mormonism, American Buddhism, possible spiritual aspects of hip hop, the Druze, new religious movements in Illinois, a pneumatological contribution to a theology of religions, Burning Man Festival as new spiritual outlet, and Western Christianity.

Another facet of the conference was the meeting of the Lausanne issue group on postmodern spiritualities and new religions in connection with the consultation. Group members from five countries met to discuss the history of the issue group since 2004 and its ongoing



[sacredtribes] *Sacred Tribes Journal* Volume 3 Number 2 (2008):212-216
ISSN: 1941-8167

accomplishments and activities, including the Trinity Consultation associated with the work of the issue group.

The content of the Trinity Consultation on Post-Christendom Spiritualities will soon be available as part of an educational resource that will include video sessions and a training guide. This resource will be of value to Christian academic institutions as well as churches and will be made available in the near future. You can see the lectures online by clicking on the Course Lecture link at *Sacred Tribes Journal*.