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Larson's Book of World Religions and Alternative Spirituality

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Designed by Ron Kaufmann

Published in 1982 as *Larson's Book of Cults* by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Published in 1989 as *Larson's New Book of Cults* by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Larson, Bob, date.

Larson's book of world religions and alternative spirituality / Bob Larson.
p. cm.

Rev. ed. of: Larson's new book of cults. c1989.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8423-6417-X

I. Religions. 2. Spiritual life. I. Title: Book of world religions and alternative spirituality. II. Larson, Bob, date. New book of cults. III. Title.

BL80.3.L37 2004

200—dc22

2003022854

Printed in the United States of America

10 09 08 07 06 05 04
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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INTRODUCTION

I have been writing about cults and new religious movements for decades. The first *Larson's Book of Cults* was published in 1982. *Larson's New Book of Cults*, a revised and updated version, appeared in 1989. But almost before the ink was dry on the new edition, some of the information was already out of date, as groups changed their doctrines, their names, or their leaders. Also, over the past fifteen years, new groups with unique teachings have arrived on the scene and major transformations have occurred in contemporary spirituality that have affected what and how people believe.

The following trends are among the more significant developments of recent years:

- **The changing face of Western spirituality.**

When I first started writing about non-Christian religions, they were a tiny minority in the United States. That is no longer the case. According to Harvard professor Diana Eck in *A New Religious America*, there are now six million Muslims in the United States—more than the number of Presbyterians, Episcopalians, or Jews. Los Angeles is now home to more varieties of Buddhist communities than any other city in the world.

- **The rise of the Internet.**

In 1982, most people had never dreamed of today's nearly ubiquitous access to the Internet, but today it is one of the main ways in which religious groups communicate their ideas and recruit new followers.

- **Our shrinking world.**

Improved travel links cities across the globe, and the Internet and other communication devices connect people instantaneously, even though they may be thousands of miles apart. These developments have enabled religious ideas and philosophies to spread more widely and more quickly throughout the world, creating a new global spiritual melting pot.

- **Changing attitudes.**

As recently as a couple of decades ago, the cultural consensus that dominated Western religious thought was a worldview based on Judeo-Christian theology. Today, however, the majority of people are no longer committed to basic moral values such as those enshrined in biblical codes like the Ten Commandments.

Increasingly, sociologists talk about “spiritual seekers.” These are people who are searching for God, but who tend to look anywhere but inside orthodox Christian churches. Over the last few decades of the twentieth century, there was a drastic increase in the variety of religious options available to these spiritual nomads.

The purpose of this book is to show how the world’s religions and spiritual movements differ widely in their ideas and practices—differences that have eternal consequences. Each commentary is intended to be practical and is based on my personal encounters with spiritual movements in more than eighty countries.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Part 1 of this book provides an overview of spiritual movements and a Christian perspective on world religions, alternative spirituality, and cults. We also establish guidelines for evaluating religious groups from a biblical perspective. In order to help you understand the growth of non-Christian groups, we examine the sociology and psychology of cults and discuss the appeal of non-Christian spirituality.

In part 2, the alphabetical entries of world religions and alternative spirituality summarize the key teachings and practices of various groups and philosophies. They also compare and contrast these ideas with the truths found in the Bible. In some cases, the differences are small, but in others they are significant. Readers need to be aware of these distinctions because many religious groups try to pretend that their views are compatible with Christian teaching even when they are unequivocally opposed to foundational Christian concepts. We have arranged the entries alphabetically for ease of use, and we've included an index in the back of the book that will allow you to search by the names of individuals and other keywords.

Some entries include information about other resources that will help you conduct further research, and some have "See also" references that will help you locate information on related groups and philosophies. We have documented our sources, whenever possible, and we have listed contact information for most groups. We don't necessarily recommend that you contact these groups, but we have provided the information for those who might want more information about a group's claims.

In the back of the book we have also included a recommended reading list that will help you understand world religions and alternative spirituality better. My prayer is that the material assembled here will help you find your way in today's increasingly confusing spiritual marketplace, and that you will be able to help others who may have lost their way.

Bob Larson
Denver, Colorado

1

FAITH MATTERS

Do you remember where you were during the final days of March 1997? That was when thirty-nine members of a group called Heaven's Gate dressed in identical black outfits, lay down on identical metal beds, and methodically killed themselves.

The members of Heaven's Gate had been told that death would be the portal taking them to another life in a galaxy far away (see the entry on Heaven's Gate for more information).

This whole idea sounds silly to reasonable people, but for the thirty-nine people who died because they believed this lie, the outcome was tragic.

Today many people believe that all religions teach the same thing, or that they are all equal, or that it doesn't really matter what someone believes. But the tragedy of Heaven's Gate reveals that it does matter. In some cases it's a matter of life and death. If you aren't convinced, check the entries on Jonestown, the Order of the Solar Temple, and some of the other deadly cults found in the pages that follow.

In most cases people don't die from believing a lie, but often their lives aren't all they could be. In the case of some controlling religious groups, people sacrifice their money, their relationships, and their free will for a self-proclaimed guru's promise of salvation.

TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES

In recent years there has been a paradigm shift in the way people in the West think about religion. Concepts of truth are now considered less important than

subjective experience. The late Joseph Campbell said as much in his book *The Masks of God*: “The swamis are coming from India, and they’re taking away the flock. They’re speaking of religion as dealing with the interior of life and not about dogmatic formulae and ritual requirements.”

Today many people don’t care whether a religion is based on solid truth like the historical resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Instead, there is a vogueish interest in experience and mysticism with little concern about truth or falsehood. If Marshall Applewhite, founder of Heaven’s Gate, says that aliens in a spaceship are waiting to pick up the group’s true disciples, some people respond by saying, “Well, that may be true for you.”

Did Mormon founder Joseph Smith really discover golden plates buried in Palmyra, New York? Did Victor Wierwille (founder of The Way) actually hear the voice of God? Did Scientology’s L. Ron Hubbard truly discover the essence of religion that has eluded saints and scholars for millennia? Millions of Americans have placed their faith in such questionable claims, regardless of whether or not they are true. In fact, it matters little to many mystics whether their system of worship is historically accurate. If we point out that Krishna’s discourses with Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita are mere legends, our assertion is dismissed with a shrug. Experience is what counts.

Consequently, the historical anchors of Christianity of a bloodstained cross and an empty tomb have little meaning to contemporary spiritual seekers. Whether Calvary and the Resurrection actually took place seems less important to them than what they see as the allegorical grandeur of the story.

But truth *does* matter! And when the myths of other world religions and New Age philosophies have been shattered, Bible-based Christians must be ready to offer disillusioned seekers an objectively valid response to the “whys” of life. We must be ready to present the claims of Jesus’ divinity and his sufficiency as our Savior and Lord. “If anybody asks why you believe as you do, be ready to tell him, and do it in a gentle and respectful way” (1 Peter 3:15, TLB).

This book has been written to help provide those answers. The reader whose faith is experientially rooted in the living Word of God will find in these pages a concrete, intellectual rationale for pointing spiritual seekers to the historical Christ.

A SPIRITUAL BATTLEGROUND

Americans value independence, freedom of thought, and the entrepreneurial spirit. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that our nation has given birth to thousands of new religious groups. As a result, the United States has become one of the foremost battlegrounds in the struggle between Christianity and non-Christian faiths.

In a way, however, it’s ironic this struggle has occurred here, because the deists and the devout Christians who settled this land were committed to a

transcendent faith that recognized a God based on the Judeo-Christian model. However, a careful study of America's past reveals that the breeze of freedom that became the tumultuous gale of do-it-yourself spirituality in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries influenced even the early years of settling and exploration.

The promise of freedom of religious expression that originally lured people to this land also fostered utopian, communal, and apocalyptic dreams. American visionaries have always been enamored of idealistic, simplistic, and sacred explanations for life's purpose. This philosophy of manifest destiny has been most evident in times of cultural transition such as during the Armageddon-crazed days of the industrial revolution. Today's rapid growth in non-Christian religious and spiritual groups is the cultural by-product of this uniquely American attitude.

As an American, I support my country's commitment to freedom of religion. On the other hand, I believe that souls for whom Christ shed his blood deserve more spiritually fulfilling answers than those provided by modern myths.

As the reader, you have a right to know I am an evangelical Christian committed to a biblical theological perspective in this book. Does that mean I have slanted the information in an effort to recruit converts? No. But I have tried throughout to compare the teachings of various groups to the Christian faith taught in the Bible and proclaimed by the church for centuries.

However, I have not been commissioned by any church or denomination. Nor do I have a particular bias against any non-Christian spiritual group or leader. My analysis of each religion, spiritual movement, and philosophy in this book is based on orthodox Christian presuppositions alone.

Two basic theological principles have guided my study:

1. "In Christ the fullness of God lives in a human body, and you are complete through your union with Christ. He is the Lord over every ruler and authority in the universe." (Colossians 2:9-10, NLT)
2. "Don't just pretend that you love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Stand on the side of the good." (Romans 12:9, NLT)

This book is not intended to be a sociological or theological treatise. Its purpose is to aid and inform the average person whose friends, neighbors, co-workers, or loved ones may be involved in a non-Christian religion or other spiritual movement. It is also intended to prepare readers to respond knowledgeably and in love the next time a canvassing missionary from a religious group rings the doorbell.

I bear a solemn obligation in writing this book. If Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, really do have inside information about the world's end, and if Scientology really can extinguish our hang-ups from past lives, then you, the reader, have a right to know. If Sun Myung Moon is the Messiah, or if Baha'u'llah was

the Christ, then no personal prejudice on my part should stand in the way of proclaiming these facts.

But if these spiritual leaders and philosophers are in error, then every person whose life this book touches deserves to know the unvarnished truth.

SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE

Some people think it is wrong to criticize another person's religious beliefs. But is it better to smile and say nothing as people follow self-proclaimed messiahs to a false paradise or worse?

I believe it is my obligation as a Christian to talk to non-Christians about their faith, but in doing so I must follow the example of Jesus Christ, who attracted many people to his message through his grace, love, and compassion. Sound theology, doctrinal purity, and aggressive evangelistic techniques are not the whole answer. We are involved in a spiritual battle, but our weapons are not angry words or intimidating techniques. Rather, our mandate is to speak the truth in love.

John 13:34-35 reminds believers that love is the mark of discipleship. And love for our neighbors is the distinguishing characteristic of our love for God. Such is the message of the Good Samaritan parable recorded in Luke 10:30-35. A personal anecdote may emphasize this fact in a practical manner.

As I was writing the first edition of this book at the Colorado cabin where I did most of my writing, there came a knock at the door.

It was pouring rain outside, and when I opened the door, I saw two drenched Japanese-American girls standing on the doorstep. Once inside, they explained that the friends with whom they were traveling had slid off a muddy road and wrecked their car. They asked for a ride to a nearby lodge where they could call a tow truck.

No writer appreciates an interruption, but there was no choice but to render immediate assistance in their distress. The two girls, Harriet and Ellen, were soaking wet and covered with mud. Needless to say, my vehicle suffered the consequences! To make matters worse, on the way to the lodge, the heater fan conked out and the knob to the defroster fell off. One annoyance after another was heaped upon me to exacerbate the situation. After phoning for the wrecker, the girls asked me for another ride to the place where they had joined their friends and left their car—a half-hour's drive away.

There was no question that these young ladies needed my help. What concerned me was that their plight interfered with what I thought was a more important spiritual responsibility—writing this book.

On the way to retrieve their automobile, the conversation centered on the weather and how the accident occurred. Finally, Ellen asked what I did for a living. That led to a lengthy explanation regarding my personal faith in Christ, something neither girl seemed to understand.

“Where do you attend church?” I asked.

“We’re Buddhists,” they replied.

Suddenly I knew why God had allowed this interruption. What I had considered an annoying infringement on my time was God’s way of reminding me that writing this book was not as important as showing God’s love and helping someone in need.

The young ladies’ devout Buddhist beliefs soon collided with my scriptural insistence that Christ is the only means of salvation. When we reached their car, Ellen’s parting words climaxed the episode.

“Well, I guess we won’t really know who’s right until we’re both dead,” she concluded.

“But if Jesus is correct,” I answered, “it will be a little too late for you to find out.”

As I drove off, the Holy Spirit impressed upon me an important lesson: God loves mankind so much that he is willing to provide shelter and kindness even to those who reject his Son.

My knowledge of world religions, particularly Buddhism, would have enabled me to argue effectively on an intellectual level with Harriet and Ellen. But God was more concerned about my extending a Good Samaritan act of love than my winning a theological debate in defense of truth.

When I arrived back at the cabin, I was prepared to pursue this book with new resolve and enthusiasm. Most importantly, I felt the need to do more than simply issue a warning about the dangers of groups like the ones in this book. Dismantling the myth of false religious beliefs is not only the work of biblical apologetics; it is also a labor of love.

BALANCING LOVE AND TRUTH

I wrote this book out of genuine love and concern for people who follow other beliefs. As a Christian, I believe that God has revealed his will to humanity in many ways over the centuries. Most importantly, he revealed himself through Jesus, his only Son, who came to earth to redeem us. People are free to believe whatever they like, but I want them to be aware that there are consequences to their beliefs. Faith matters.

I also want to help people develop better critical thinking skills so that they won’t be seduced when a charismatic leader declares that he alone has the key to understanding the secrets of the Bible.

God created all of us, and as it says in the Old Testament book of Genesis, we are created in God’s image. This means we have a deep spiritual hunger. Over the years, people have developed thousands of different ways of filling that hunger. Can all these religions be true? Not when they teach different things.

It is only through studying what the various groups have to say and com-

paring that to the standard we find in the Bible that we can find our way through the confusing maze of today's religions, alternative spirituality, and cults.

It is my hope that this book will help you in your study.

2

A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON WORLD RELIGIONS, ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUALITY, AND CULTS

It is important for Christians to evaluate other religious groups according to biblical criteria. Not every group will have obvious cultic characteristics, but what they teach—their principles and values—may be contrary to the truth of the Bible. As Dr. Walter Martin, one of the pioneers of cult research, has observed, “A person can be morally good, but if he sets his face against Jesus, his fruit is corrupt.” Whether or not a particular religious group claims to be Christian is not our primary concern. Its members may quote the Bible and claim the endorsement of Christ for their efforts, but if their doctrine and practices are out of step with what the Bible teaches is true, then they are leading people astray. In determining whether a group is essentially non-Christian, we have based our analysis on two central factors:

1. They ignore or purposely omit central apostolic doctrines.
2. They hold to beliefs that are distinctly opposed to orthodox Christianity.

Deviation from either criterion rules out a group’s inclusion in the Christian community. The ultimate gauge of truth and error is whether a belief system conforms to Scripture or the extent to which it departs from biblical precepts. Thus, any group that intentionally manipulates its language to mimic evangelical beliefs must have its semantic distortions exposed. Any group that

THE AETHERIUS SOCIETY

One of the best-known UFO groups, the Aetherius Society encourages members to be willing channels of communication with extraterrestrial beings.

FOUNDER: Dr. George King

TEXTS: King's books, as well as the society's newsletter, *Cosmic Voice*

OVERVIEW: Human beings have long been fascinated by the possibility of alien life forms and flying saucers. For the Aetherius Society, such fascinations are fundamental aspects of their faith.

The group was founded in 1954 by Londoner Dr. George King. In 1955 an alien leader named Master Aetherius of Venus, representing the "cosmic brotherhood" of "space masters," selected King to be the "primary terrestrial channel" for the Interplanetary Parliament.

King's involvement in Spiritualism and various forms of occultism prepared him for leadership of this strange cult. According to a society document, King receives teachings from "Cosmic Masters from other Planets" as well as Master Jesus when he is in "positive Yogic Samadhic trance."

The society's goal is to enlist terrestrials on the side of the "space masters" in their war against certain "black magicians" living on earth.

Society teachings, which appear in King's books and the group's newsletter, *Cosmic Voice*, echo common occult tenets found in many earth-based faiths:

- Reincarnation: "People have lived thousands of lives as people before and they will live endless more 'lives.'"
- Humans are divine: "Man came forth from God and all things are a part of God."
- The Law of Karma: "Everything and everyone is subject to the great all-encompassing Law of God expounded by Jesus in these words: 'As you sow, so shall you reap.'"

The group has reaped few members, though. Its newsletter mailing list has fewer than one thousand names.

Society members are encouraged to maintain contact with orbiting space-ships and assist the occupants of these circling saucers, whose mission it is to direct their "energy" through the minds and bodies of King's followers. Members celebrate a number of holidays, including King's birthday and July 8, which is said to be the date that a gigantic space ship channeled cosmic energies to earth.

SOURCES: The Aetherius Society, "Some Basic Principles Included in Its Teaching"; Ronald Enroth, *The Lure of the Cults* (Chappaqua, N.Y.: Christian

Herald Books, 1979); J. Gordon Melton, *Encyclopedia of American Religions*, 6th ed. (Farmington Hills, Mich.: Gale Research, 1999).

ACCESS: 6202 Afton Place, Hollywood, CA 90028

See also UFOs.

TONY ALAMO

Music Square Church; Holy Alamo Christian Church, Consecrated

This man, once described as a cross between Jim Jones and Elvis Presley, believes he alone speaks for God and makes his followers respond accordingly.

FOUNDERS: Tony Alamo; Susan Alamo and Elizabeth Alamo

OVERVIEW: The year was 1970. I stood at the front door of a small frame house just off Sunset Strip in Hollywood. Outside, a sign read “Alamo Christian Foundation.” Inside, a coed crowd mingled in a somewhat disorderly fashion.

When I inquired about the nature and purpose of their group, the “elder brother” in charge quickly informed me that I was sent from Satan and ordered me to leave. This small communal flophouse was the inauspicious beginning of an Alamo empire that would eventually stretch from a California ranch to a quiet town in Arkansas.

People in Hollywood like fashionable clothes, and for years, a complex figure named Tony Alamo supplied some of their needs. One of Alamo’s for-profit companies specialized in rhinestone-studded jackets that earned him the nickname “Designer to the Stars.”

When others weren’t talking about him, Alamo had plenty to say about himself. He has proclaimed himself the instigator of the “Jesus Revolution” of the 1960s and 1970s. He also claims to have been a successful entrepreneur who “had the touch of Midas” in his business dealings.

Alamo even boasts that he was “exceedingly well-known in the music industry,” and that he advised artists like Elvis, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones. (Mysteriously, he is not mentioned in biographies of these or other artists.)

Most of the media attention Alamo has received has focused on his bizarre

beliefs and the regimented, cultlike conditions in which his small band of followers live and work.

A 1983 *People* magazine article is typical of the coverage Alamo has received:

“In a darkened prayer room inside a sprawling mansion atop a remote, guarded ridge in rural Arkansas rests a coffin. Inside the coffin rests the embalmed body of Susan Alamo, patiently awaiting resurrection. The cult leader has been dead more than a year. Encouraged by Susan’s husband, Tony, her followers kneel by the coffin in two-hour shifts, twenty-four hours a day, every day, to pray for Susan’s return.”

Pilgrimage to a Hollywood Commune

Tony Alamo was born Bernie Lazar Hoffman in 1934 in Missouri. He fancied himself a country gospel star and eventually changed his name to Tony Alamo. In California he met Susan, born Edith Opal Horn in Arkansas or Missouri in the 1920s, who was married to a small-time Los Angeles hood. She and Tony were married once in Tijuana and twice in Las Vegas, to be “triple sure.”

This flamboyant couple with extravagant tastes fashioned an effective organization using Pentecostal-like theology and cultic control techniques. Neither was ordained as a minister. They simply walked up to hippies and drug addicts and asked, “Why are you destroying your mind, your soul, and your body?”

They found people who were ready to try religion. The ranks of recruits were made up of disillusioned street kids who found solace in the regimented lifestyle of the Alamo ranch complex. These converts seldom questioned their deplorable living conditions, though Tony and Susan lived in secluded splendor. Most foundation members seldom saw the Alamos except when their Cadillac Fleetwood zoomed by or when they were bused to Los Angeles to witness a taping of the Alamos’ TV show.

On the Move

The Alamos shifted operations to Alma, Arkansas, in the mid-1970s amidst embarrassing press stories and investigations by various California agencies.

Susan’s daughter left the group, charging that the couple was growing rich while taking advantage of their followers. In another ugly scene, a foundation member severely beat her own mother, aided by Susan’s top lieutenant.

The foundation quickly settled into its new Arkansas home. The Alamos owned as many as twenty-nine businesses in the small town, and soon their businesses spread into several other states. Their business practices sparked new controversies.

Foundation members were expected to consider themselves “volunteers,” running the businesses in return for meager living conditions. The U.S. Department of Labor became interested, and in a case taken all the way to the

U.S. Supreme Court, the Alamos were ordered to pay at least minimum wage to those followers who worked their businesses, from hog farms to hotels.

Even with minimum wage, foundation members experienced living conditions that were far from pleasant. In both California and Arkansas, recruits existed on a diet of harsh sermons and hard labor. Brainwashed into viewing noncult members—including families—as “agents of Satan,” they shunned people from their former lives and unquestioningly worked long hours. They lived under a siege mentality, and the Alamos occasionally called “alerts,” predicting imminent enemy attack.

If a member needed anything—from clothes to surgery—the Alamos required a written request called an “ask” memo. Members were only allowed to have books approved by the Alamos. They had no pets, no radios, no vacations, no movies, no newspapers. Single men and women in the foundation were not allowed to speak to each other. Even in marriage, privacy was hard to find. Susan decided who would have how many children.

One woman who left the cult stated that when she and her husband were finally allowed a house, it had no phone and they could not use the kitchen because all cult members were required to eat in the group cafeteria. They could turn on the heat for only ten minutes in the morning and ten minutes in the evening, even on the coldest days of winter.

Hellfire Humbug

Tony Alamo’s theology mixes end-times paranoia with old-time, hellfire Pentecostalism, though some say their practice of speaking in tongues appeared to be a hypnotically induced utterance. The Alamos taught that all churches except their own were corrupt. In one of the organization’s newsletters, a section called “Message from God” contains this bold proclamation from Tony:

“When God opened my heart, my mind, and my eyes to what He requires of men in order for them to be saved and ensure their eternal salvation, I was shocked to see that almost every pastor, preacher, and teacher was preaching and teaching the exact opposite of what the Bible teaches.”

Members ate discarded foodstuffs and labored long hours in order to “crucify the flesh,” and they zealously believed they were the vanguard of God’s spiritual army. The press repeatedly raised charges of sensory deprivation, enslavement, and brainwashing. These allegations only served to reinforce the persecution paranoia that permeated the cult’s thinking.

In the 1980s Tony Alamo spearheaded several campaigns, including a crusade condemning the Catholic church and calling for the impeachment of then president Ronald Reagan, “one of the pope’s little helpers.” He also launched a campaign to recruit unwed mothers to join or give their children to the foundation.

Members were instructed to pray diligently for the healing of Susan Al-

amo, who died of cancer in April 1982. Susan had been the “handmaiden of God”; she had been expected to miraculously cure herself and then with Tony lead a world crusade. Her death shook the faith of many followers, and Tony ordered members to pray unceasingly in shifts at her coffin.

Tony married his second wife, Elizabeth, in 1985. They guided the declining cult during the 1990s, a time of further trouble. In 1991 U.S. Marshals raided the group’s 265-acre compound in order to force Alamo to comply with a \$1.8 million child abuse court judgment.

A few years later Alamo was convicted of understating his income and failing to file tax returns from 1986 to 1988. These and other troubles led many fashionable Los Angeles stores to pull his line of clothing from their racks.

Once again Alamo claimed the agents of Satan were attacking God’s anointed. “I’m fighting for the freedom of religion,” he proclaimed. But few people listened and fewer still believed Alamo’s heretical views or overinflated claims about his own importance.

SOURCES: Elizabeth Alamo, *It Was All a Lie!* testimony booklet; Tony Alamo, “Biting the Bullet” and “Message from God”; “Arkansas Sect Accuses Catholics of Variety of Ills,” *Charisma*, August 1984, 98–100; Chet Flippo, “Siege of the Alamos,” *People*, 13 June 1983, 29–33; G. W. Hunt, “Of Many Things,” *America*, 25 May 1985, inside cover; Mary T. Schmich, “God and Glitz,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 1991; “Wages and Religion,” *Christian Century*, 8 May 1985, 464.

ACCESS: Music Square Church, P. O. Box 398, Alma, AR 72921; 501/782-7370; www.alamoministries.com

ALEPH

Aum Shinrikyo

The group behind a 1995 nerve gas attack in a Tokyo subway has changed its name and some of its tactics but not its extremist, apocalyptic teachings.

FOUNDER: Shoko Asahara

LEADER: Fumihiko Joyu

OVERVIEW: March 20, 1995, seemed like an ordinary day for the people of Tokyo. But before the morning was over, an extremist cult then known as Aum Shinrikyo had terrorized the city's residents and soared into the international spotlight.

Members of the cult filled plastic bags with the nerve gas sarin and placed the bags throughout the Tokyo subway system. When the bustling city's morning rush hour was in full swing, cult members used umbrellas to puncture the bags.

The subways quickly filled with the deadly gas. Twelve people died and 5,500 became ill. Thousands more were afflicted with a host of physical and psychological ailments.

Years later, news reporter Julie Chao summarized the event: "Long before anthrax entered America's daily vocabulary, a doomsday cult in Japan led by a half-blind guru was experimenting with the substance in a search for ways to kill as many people as possible. . . . The Aum Shinrikyo cult's forays into germ warfare and chemical weapons didn't start or end with anthrax. It also did research on the botulism microbe, poisonous gases, and at one point tried to obtain samples of the Ebola virus."

Why would the cult, which blends aspects of Buddhism and Hinduism and practices like yoga and meditation, want to cause widespread death and destruction? The answers can be found in the group's unusual history.

End-Times Enthusiast

A visually impaired man named Shoko Asahara founded Aum Shinrikyo (which means "Supreme Truth") in Japan in 1987. By the 1990s the group claimed it had fifty thousand members in Japan, Russia, and other countries, including a small contingent in the United States.

Asahara was fascinated with biblical prophecy and end-times scenarios, and he taught his followers to prepare for such eventualities. He studied the book of Revelation in the Bible and the writings of Nostradamus. He made predictions that World War III or Armageddon would happen in the late 1990s.

Critics said Asahara was an insecure, fearful, and demanding guru with a deep persecution complex who manipulated his followers more than he guided them, using drugs to keep them docile when necessary.

Asahara and other members of Aum Shinrikyo made an unsuccessful bid to run for office in national elections in Japan in 1990. Their political involvement raised public awareness regarding Asahara's prophecies. Many people believe the subway attack was his effort to kick-start his own end-times scenario.

Preparing for Survival

Asahara developed a training method that included teachings from tantric yoga, Buddhism, and Taoism and was intended to get students in touch with

their true self. Believing that a worldwide apocalypse was coming, Asahara's teachings focused on making the preparations necessary to survive such a tragedy.

An article in *USA Today* said the group's training focused on surviving the predicted end of the world. Followers were told they could achieve salvation and become a Buddha in one lifetime by progressing through courses on spirituality that stressed the following elements:

- yoga and meditation
- psychic development
- isolation from mainstream society
- monastic lifestyles in group compounds
- three levels of initiation, including earthly, astral, and causal
- evangelistic efforts designed to recruit new members

USA Today also reported that the group operated a number of commercial facilities, including discount computer shops and a library.

Under the Spotlight

Of the many cults in the world, a fair number talk about the end of the world. Most people pay little attention to such groups, but the Tokyo subway attacks exposed Aum Shinrikyo to government investigations and unprecedented media scrutiny.

Investigators and reporters found much about the group that was troubling, and in a criminal trial Asahara and other members of the group were sentenced to prison.

One of those imprisoned was Fumihiro Joyu, who claimed that he had no advance knowledge about the subway attacks since he was in Russia at the time. Although Joyu was convicted of perjury, he was released from prison in 1999 and became the group's new leader.

As with many other cults whose teachings and practices get them into trouble, Joyu embarked on an aggressive public relations campaign. He changed the group's name to Aleph, which means "new beginning," and claimed it had rehabilitated itself.

Many aren't so sure. In an interview published in *The New York Times*, Joyu tried to distance Aleph from Aum Shinrikyo: "Japanese society has nothing to fear from us. I think that the most important factor in resolving this conflict is time. We need time to adapt ourselves to the real world, without losing our basic beliefs, and Japanese society needs time to get used to our different kind of philosophy and values."

But the group's leader simultaneously claimed the old and new groups were linked, telling the *Times*: "Just like you wouldn't stop your connection with physical fathers and mothers who commit a crime, we will not sever our connection with our spiritual father."

Some believe Joyu is sincere, but the Japanese government isn't taking his words at face value. Instead, it has placed the group under intense monitoring by the police and other agencies.

Perhaps that's not a bad idea for a group that in the past has been very serious about honoring Shiva, the Hindu god of destruction.

CHRISTIAN CRITIQUE: Although the group cites the Bible, it is very selective in the passages it cites, preferring the book of Revelation and other texts that are easily misinterpreted. In addition, the group blends together so many different teachings and techniques that in the end its doctrine resembles Asahara's paranoia more than it resembles any of the sources it cites.

The Bible clearly teaches that the end of the world will happen at a time and means dictated by God. No one should attempt to hasten this final apocalypse.

SOURCES: Julie Chao, "95 Attack Sparked Fear but Few Changes in Japan," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 19, 2002, A6; Peter Hadfield, "Japanese cult in subway killing is back," *USA Today*, 21 April 1998; Calvin Sims, "Under Fire, Japan Sect Starts Over," *New York Times*, 28 February 2000, 7A. Other recommended resources include: Christopher C. Harmon, "Comparative Terrorism," *Books and Culture*, March/April 2002, 16; Haruki Murakami, trans. A. Birnbaum and P. Gabriel, *Underground: the Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche* (Vintage, 2001); Anthony Tu, *Chemical Terrorism: Horrors in Tokyo Subway and Matsumoto City*, 2002.

AMERICAN INDIAN SPIRITUALITY

See *Native American Spirituality*.

ANANDA MARGA YOGA SOCIETY

Yoga is supposed to promote inner peace, not outer chaos.
But this group's controversial tactics have caused problems in both
India and the United States.

FOUNDER: Shrii Shrii Anandamurti, also known as Prabhat Ranjan Sarkav

OVERVIEW: What Hindu-oriented group would dare consider its founder a *Maha-Guru (avatar)*—incarnation of God) even after he had been sentenced to life in prison for murder?

The Ananda Marga Yoga Society claims that distinction. The group was founded in 1955 by Shrii Shrii Anandamurti, whose name means “one upon seeing him falls into bliss.” His 1976 murder conviction was overturned in a later trial.

Still, the Ananda Marga Yoga Society remains a source of controversy in India. In 1982 more than a dozen members of the group were attacked and killed by a Calcutta mob that was incensed by reports the society was kidnapping and indoctrinating local children.

The Indian government frowns on the organization, insisting it is fascist and teaches ritual murder.

In the United States, the group has cultivated a more positive image and has attracted three to four thousand followers. The FBI has, however, investigated the group's alleged ties to international acts of terrorism.

Bliss or Blood?

Ananda Marga's leaders preach a message of joy and teach that the group offers followers a “path to bliss.” This path of joy and bliss is laden with yogic principles and practices, including initiation by a guru and daily mantric meditation. Special emphasis is placed upon *Kirtan* dancing, a swaying routine with raised arms. This motion is accompanied by a chant known as *Baba Nam Kevalam*, which means “the cosmic father is everywhere.” These choreographed steps are designed to increase spiritual vibrations and help one realize that “all of creation is a manifestation of the Lord.”

In addition to the *kundalini* yogic techniques, charitable service to society is encouraged as a way to “break down the ego-bound mind.”

But the group is better known for recurring charges and accusations than it is for any good works. In Australia, where the group has a sizable following, three members were imprisoned for conspiring to murder one of the country's political figures.

At one time the group claimed to have five million members in one hundred countries, but few today accept such claims.

SOURCES: Karen Cooke, "Ananda Three Pardoned," *The Age* (Melbourne, Australia), 16 May 1985; *Denver Post*, 15 August 1975, 4BB; "FBI Probes Yoga Group for Link to Terrorism," *Boston Globe* (United Press International), 28 August 1982; Pat Means, *The Mystical Maze* (San Bernardino, Calif.: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1976).

ACCESS: 97–38 42nd Ave., Corona, NY 11368. The group's publication, *Sadvipra*, is available by writing 854 Pearl St., Denver CO 80403.

ANGELS

"Fools rush in where angels fear to tread," wrote Alexander Pope two centuries ago. Today millions are rushing in where they believe angels are treading, but are these beings "angels" or deceptive devils?

The empire of angels is as vast as God's creation. If you believe the Bible, you will believe in their ministry. They crisscross the Old and New Testaments, being mentioned indirectly nearly 300 times.

BILLY GRAHAM, *ANGELS*

The angels are the dispensers and administrators of the divine beneficence toward us; they regard our safety, undertake our defense, direct our ways, and exercise a constant solicitude that no evil befall us.

JOHN CALVIN, *INSTITUTES OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION*

TEXT: Angels are mentioned hundreds of times in the Bible and are regular features in literature and myth. In the 1990s an avalanche of new books and magazine articles portrayed angels in new and unorthodox ways.

SYMBOL: Today angels are usually portrayed as beautiful creatures dressed in white and surrounded by gold.

OVERVIEW: Angels have been around longer than people have, but the 1990s was the decade that brought about a sudden burst in their popularity.

During that time these celestial messengers were the subject of cover stories in *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Redbook*, and other major magazines. In 1993 five of the ten best-selling paperback books were about angels. In 1994 ABC aired a two-hour, prime-time special entitled "Angels, the Mysterious Messengers." That same year brought the premiere of a popular new TV drama series called *Touched by an Angel*, which won awards from many religious groups for its supposedly biblically based approach to life.

But not all the angels popular in the 1990s were so theologically correct. The year 1994 also saw the debut of a new magazine called *Angel Times*. Its premiere issue featured this impassioned statement from publisher Linda Vephula: "I believe it's time for a major spiritual paradigm shift. It's not about dogma, it's not about ceremony, it's not about chanting, it's not about preaching. The message is simple. It's love. Live love. Be love. We are all one."

Time magazine's cover story "Angels among Us" illustrated some of the problems involved in much of the angel euphoria. Writer Nancy Gibbs pointed out that Protestants and Catholics alike expressed concern about much of the current thinking about angels, saying it goes beyond orthodox theology and can turn Christian doctrine into a touchy-feely mysticism that ignores or distorts the truths of Scripture.

Accentuating the Positive, Ignoring the Negative

Like so many other popular contemporary religious and spiritual trends, the recent angel hysteria has focused only on the good: angels are seen almost solely as positive spiritual forces that help people in their daily lives. What's been lost is a more balanced biblical view that sees angels as more complex. The biblical perspective includes two important concepts that are ignored by many modern angelologists:

- Angels are created by God to do his will, not ours.
- Not all angels are good angels.

Like humans, angels were created with free will, which was abused by some of the earliest angels. Lucifer, one of the grandest and most important angels, decided to rebel against God. His rebellion and pride are powerfully described by the prophet Isaiah:

How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High. Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit. (14:12-15)

Divine Intermediaries

The Bible teaches that angels are superhuman beings who serve as intermediaries between the divine and human realm. Both Jewish and Christian traditions emphasize the important role angels have played through the ages. But when angels are removed from this biblical context, confusion creeps in.

As recently as two centuries ago angels were conjured by magicians, wizards, “wise women,” and witches. In addition, angels were blamed for plagues, wars, and other tragic events. Much of this fascination with angels ended with the dawn of the Age of Enlightenment, which emphasized rationality and scientific experimentation over faith and myth.

Today that kind of intellectual thought is losing ground, and misconceptions about angels are growing like weeds. Other factors in the growing popularity of angelology include:

- increased interest in spirituality
- perceived endorsement by orthodox religions that teach about angelic beings
- a belief that angels are more accessible than other forms of spiritual aid and comfort
- the mistaken belief that all angels are always good and helpful

One cult researcher found that contemporary ideas about angels have little in common with the Bible: “These ‘angels’ foster a spirituality without sin, guilt, and God. They are contacted by various occultic means. They bring new revelations that contradict the Bible.”

Only by turning to the authoritative words of the Bible will we be able to separate truth from falsehood concerning the nature and role of angels.

CHRISTIAN CRITIQUE: Historically, Christianity has taught that angels were created by God to do his will. However, the Bible gives an important additional perspective: some angels followed Lucifer in his rebellion against God and were banished from God’s presence.

Today angels are almost universally seen as existing for the benefit of humanity, which ignores biblical teaching about fallen angels. It is also important to note that many non-Christian religious groups, such as Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses, claim that their views were inspired by angels. While this may be true, the only angels who would depart from God’s truth as revealed in the Bible are those who joined Lucifer in his rebellion against God.

While many people may find solace in supposed angelic comfort, it is important that their understanding of angels is based on God’s truth rather than contemporary anecdotes, visionary experiences, or metaphysical speculation.

SOURCES: Nancy Gibbs, “Angels Among Us,” *Time*, 27 December 1993, 56–65; Linda Vephula, “About Angel Times,” *Angel Times*, undated 1994 collector’s first edition (the magazine’s Web site is said to be “under angelic construction”).