THE NEW (AND OLD) RELIGIONS AROUND US

Lay School of Religion
Luther Seminary
February 7 to March 14
Mark Granquist
Schedule of Our Sessions

February 7 - Overview on American Religion
Judaism

February 14 - Islam
Bahai – Nation of Islam

February 28 - Buddhism
Hinduism

March 7 - Latter Day Saints (Mormons)
Jehovah’s Witnesses – Christian Science

March 14 - New Religious Movements – Krishna, Unification
NRMs – Scientology, Children of God, etc
Rationale and Our Approach

America has always been the home of many different faith traditions. By now there is a bewildering array of religions (new and old) about us. Some are world religions that have come to our shores (Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism). Others are religions developed in America and spread to the world (Mormonism, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Scientology, and many others). We will try to understand these various religious groups in our midst, and a Christian reaction to them.

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March 7 – Session 4

First hour - Mormons
Second hour - Jehovahs Witnesses and Christian Science

If you want to read a good general resource on these topics, see Jacob Neusner, ed., *World Religions in America* 3rd edition, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003.

For this session, the best chapters would be 12, 13, and 17
Religions “Made in America”

America as a “Religious Supermarket” - great choice available

Freedom to develop your own religions as you see fit
- not directly seen this way – claims of new revelation

19th and 20th centuries in America – periods of great religious ferment and development of new forms of religion
- 1800s to 1840s – Westward expansion
- 1870s to 1900s – Shift toward industries and cities

Three religious groups in this session come from this time
Great Awakening and Restorationism

Great Awakening – period of intense religious ferment
- most Americans at the time were unchurched
- tremendous competition for members – confusing

Which group is correct? Strong push to transcend divisions

- Disciples of Christ, “Christian” Churches

Generation of religious “Seekers” (nothing new)
Joseph Smith and the Mormons

Joseph Smith Jr. (1805-1844) – Upstate New York
- Received revelations from God – led to buried tablets
- Book of Mormon – “Second Testament of Jesus”

Led to form a renewed/restored “Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints” – informally LDS – one “true” church
- communal settlements in Ohio, Missouri, Illinois
- great conflict with others – Smith killed in 1844

Successor – Brigham Young led the Mormons west to Utah
- envisioned theocratic realm in isolated West
Growth of the LDS Church

Missionaries sent to US and Europe – new immigrants came West

US took over the West – Utah becomes a US territory
  - long struggle over polygamy – eventually resolved 1890

LDS has come to dominate the inter-mountain region of the West

Through mission work – spread to US and the world
  6 million in US, 6 million more outside the US
Mormon outreach

- early Mormon missionary outreach
- immigration from England, Scandinavia and Germany
Mormons as a percent of all church adherents, 1990

- Idaho: 53%
- Nevada: 23%
- Utah: 90%
- Wyoming: 21%

Map showing the percentage of Mormons in each state.
What do Mormons Believe?

Authorities:  - Christian Bible, Book of Mormon, other writings
             - Prophetic sayings of Mormon President
               (Smith and others) – Doctrines and Covenants
             - President can bring “continuing revelation”

Beliefs:     - Completely new vision of God and humanity
             - Reject traditional Christian conceptions - Trinity
             - humans progress toward divinity (exaltation)
             - “Works righteousness” – ethics and morality
             - Ceremonies through the Mormon temples
             - Marriage unto eternity – family emphasis
Are Mormons Christians?

Mormons would say that they are the only true Christians

Depends on what one uses to define Christianity
  - sociologically – indistinguishable from Evangelical Protestants – conservative morality and politics
  - theologically – a completely new religion, based off of Christianity, but bearing little resemblance to it

No major Christian group accepts the validity of Mormon baptisms – a former Mormon would need to be re-baptized
Other 19th Century Movements

1. Spiritualism and Metaphysical Movements
   - rejecting traditional Christian categories
   - seeking a broad “Religion of the Mind”
   - manipulate this world and the mind itself

   Spiritualism extremely popular 1840s to 1880s

2. Conservative Christian Apocalypticism
   - William Miller - Millerites – end of world – 1843/44
   - “Great Disappointment”
   - Seventh-Day Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses
Christian Science

Mary Baker Eddy (1821-1910) and Christian Science

19th century – time of religious speculation and innovation
- healing and health religions – special diets and practices

Eddy was quite ill for most of her early life – sort many healers
- discovered the idea that illness and healing were just constructions of the Mind – could be changed
- Science and Health, with Keys to the Scriptures
- new religion would flourish in middle-class homes
Christian Science Practice and Identity

Adopt many forms of traditional Christianity – with changes
- Christ “saves” through teachings, not crucifixion
- Bible is authority when read through Science and Health
- no reality to sin and evil – just errors of the mind

Only God and realm of the spirit exist – matter is unreal
- healing comes not from physical world, but the Spirit

Medical care – discouraged as a meaningless activity that draws the believer away from the need to reorient the mind
- consult Christian Science “Practitioners” for assistance
Christian Science in America today

In early 20th century – rapid growth of CS brought tremendous opposition and fear - a new cult that was enslaving people

Towards the end of the 20th century, CS has been in a prolonged decline - no membership figures, but a severe loss of members

Contemporary issues and visibility revolve around questions of medical health-care, especially for CS children

- widely publicized cases where CS parents seek to use spiritual means to heal their children
- states have stepped in and compelled medical care
Apocalypticism – Jehovah’s Witnesses

Long Christian fascination with the end of the world – can the Bible be read in such a way as to predict this?

  - Apocalypticism – world will end in a climactic battle
  - God versus Satan – Book of Revelation

Pre-Millennialism – final battle of Armageddon

  - Christians must hang on – stay faithful to the end (test)

Bible Prophecy movement in late 19\textsuperscript{th} century

  - remnants of the Millerite movement and others
  - extreme Biblical literalism
Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society

Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916) and “Judge” J.F. Rutherford
- leaders of this new movement – “Jehovah’s Witnesses”
- centrally run out of headquarters – Brooklyn NY

Jehovah’s Witnesses belief and practice
- the world (even Churches) are controlled by Satan
- governments and society – no cooperation at all
- JW’s not Protestants – deny Christian Trinity
- God created both Jesus and Satan, who rebelled
- Jehovah is God’s proper name – to be used
- own distinct translation of the Bible
Witnesses and the Modern World

Belief that the end of the world is very near – (begun in 1918?)
- “millions now living will never die”

Task of the true Witnesses of Jehovah
- remain pure – don’t get mixed up with Satan’s realm
  - no cooperation with government, if possible
- spread the news of Jehovah – save people

- Legal conflicts with US government – freedom of Religion?
- JW’s in numerical decline – “in the front door, out the back”