THE EFFECT OF A NEW RELIGION

The Way International Convention, Muncie, Indiana, 1977

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I. Definitions

Before it is possible to examine the effect of a new religion, it is first necessary to decide the meaning of the term. Therefore, I will try to give a working definition which shall serve for the purpose of this paper.

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary defines the word "religion" as meaning "the service and adoration of God or a god as expressed in forms of worship; one of the systems of faith and worship."¹ It goes on to say that religion is the "profession or practice of religious beliefs."² Thus, whether or not a group is officially a religion according to law or does not even call itself a religion, if it holds to some belief of faith or worship, it would be a religion as defined.

The Way International is a religion, according to this definition. The group holds to several traditional Christian beliefs, and uses "language common to both evangelicals and Pentecostal Christians."³ The Way holds to the belief in God, and the Bible is the sacred writing which is the base of their beliefs. They do not, however, accept the doctrine of the Trinity, believing in Jesus as the Son of God rather than Jesus as God the Son.

According to ex-Way members, The Way believes that anything outside of The Way is devil-oriented and therefore lost. Members are told that traditional churches are a waste of time, and that the only fellowship worth anything is that of The Way itself. The Way teaches its
members that they can have perfect health. In an indoctrination class
called Power For Abundant Living, students are taught of nine mani-
festations of the spirit (I Corinthians 12) and how to operate them.
Included in this are the uses of speaking in tongues and healing.

The Way International is a new religion. In a book by Jacob
Needleman, the new religions are taken to be the non-Jewish, non-
Christian faiths of Americans. The stated beliefs of The Way cause
them to fall into this category. Although their beliefs stem from
Christian teaching, they differ from accepted Christian beliefs.
The denial by The Way of the doctrine of the Trinity is a good example
of this. Another identifying factor of a new religion according to
the precept stated above is the importance of a single leader, Rev.
Victor Paul Wierwille, in the case of The Way. He is the founder,
leader, and only accepted teacher. The Way is a new religion, most
simply seen in its relatively recent appearance on the religious scene.
II. History and Background Data

In a study by Robert Bates, The Way International was documented as having begun in 1941. However, a memo to Ball State officials which was dated December 1, 1976, stated that the group was founded in 1957. Several newspaper articles printed during June and July of 1977 indicate that The Way began in 1947. Rev. Victor Paul Wierwille, the founder of The Way, "began his ordained ministry in the Evangelical and Reformed Church, which has since merged with the United Church of Christ. He resigned from the E & RC on May 23, 1958."¹ The reason for this resignation is given to be that Rev. Wierwille's views had become incompatible with those of the church. Wierwille believed that he was called to make the first pure interpretation of the Bible.

The structure of The Way takes the form of a tree. Members are called leaves, and each member meets with a twig, which is his family. City organizations are called branches, and state organizations are limbs. Each fellowship is usually financially independent, but able to tap state or national funds when need arises. Much of the money going into The Way goes to the international headquarters in New Knoxville, Ohio.

The Way International is not short of money. A large amount of its financial support comes from tuitions paid for the Power For Abundant Living class, ($100 a student,) which is taken by all new Way members. The Way owns a college in Kansas, a center in Rome City Indiana, a publishing company, and a recording company. These are only a part of its widely diversified holdings.

Although Rev. Wierwille is the major teacher of The Way, other leaders are necessary for the 30,000 members in the United States and
abroad. There are two leadership programs designed to fill this need: The Way Corps and Word Over the World. The Way Corps is a two-year program in which students live with their teachers. Word Over the World is a one-year training program after which ambassadors, as they are called, direct Way ministries on college campuses and in cities across the nation. Rev. Wierwille personally controls the teaching and the administration of The Way, and provides most of the written works used by the organization.

From June 18 to July 2, The Way International held the 35th anniversary Power For Abundant Living class at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. (1977) Approximately 3200 Way members were on campus for the class. The Way rented many university facilities, including Emens auditorium and Studebaker Complex residence hall. The group constructed a prayer shack on the Studebaker lawn which was the site of a prayer vigil for the entire two weeks. Classes were held in Emens auditorium, and Way members made use of other university facilities such as the student center, which kept extra hours to accommodate them.
III. Reactions to the Convention

There were many different reactions to the convention of The Way in Muncie. Reactions seemed to fall into four categories: campus, media, local churches, and other reactions. Rather than attempt to deal with them together, I have divided this section of the paper into four parts.

A. Local Churches. In an attempt to gauge the reaction of the community churches, I wrote to seventeen of the local pastors, choosing churches which were either close to campus or had congregations over six hundred members. Those churches close to campus were chosen because I felt that they would have had more exposure to The Way during the convention, and possibly have had more reaction than others. In choosing the largest churches in town, I hoped to get the reactions not only of a larger segment of the church-going population, but of the widest possible span of Muncie area people. The pastors or churches to whom I wrote are:

Rev. Loren Bell, First UCC
Dr. Hunter Colpitts, High Street UMC
Rev. John Constant, St. Andrew UPC
Eastside Missionary Baptist Church
Father Grady, St. Mary's Church
Rev. Marvin Grooms, Riverside UMC
Rev. Paul Keeling, University Christian
Dr. Larry Martin, First UPC
Rev. Richard Martin, Parkview Apostolic Church
Rev. Dan Mattox, First Baptist
Rev. William Meddock, Gethsemane UMC
Rev. Stanley Peterson, Holy Trinity Lutheran
MAGR. Emil Schwier, Saint Lawrence Church
Rev. Willard Niederbrach, Grace Lutheran
Rev. Kenneth Sherfick, Grace Episcopal
Rev. Elmer Sollenberger, Northside Church of God
Rev. Robert Sulanke, Hazelwood Christian Church

Of the seventeen churches thus contacted, ten made some response, either by letter or verbally. The seven churches which did not reply
were generally not near-campus churches. They covered a wide span of protestant denominations as well as the two Roman Catholic churches. It is impossible to judge if there was any reaction in these churches to the Way convention.

Along with the responses from ten of the churches to which I wrote, I also received some input from three other local churches. Of these thirteen churches, five made the statement that there was no reaction or notice of The Way International by their congregations. One of these responses called The Way controversy "a contrived media event of one reporter."¹

Positive responses by local churches to my enquiries were very broad in the range of reactions. Four churches formally discussed the subject of The Way in their worship services in the form of sermons. The sermons attempted to be fair to the group, and included not only background data researched from religious journals, but even segments of the literature being distributed by The Way itself. One pastor's sermon came to the conclusion that The Way and similar groups are a judgement on the church for failure to provide a supportive community for youth, failure to proclaim a relevant faith, failure to challenge the minds of Christians with the faith, and a failure to demonstrate a positive Christian witness.² This conclusion is supported by such religious philosophers as Dr. Will Herberg and by articles in major media such as the New York Times and the US News & World Report. Thus, the reaction of this church leader at least was that of those who are major leaders in the field. Other reactions by ministers included: a letter to the Muncie Star which told the differences between the doctrines of The Way and those of traditional Christianity, a paid advertisement in the Muncie Star which was to direct the Christian
community in its reaction to The Way (against them), and a call from one pastor to his congregation to be open to The Way as a possible revelation of God.

In the congregations, most of the reaction was in the form of questions, with some members against The Way, and others supporting at least their right to use the facilities at Ball State. One church circulated a study on cults including definitions, the results of being in a cult, and information to parents about what to do if their children join one. A student religious movement (not campus oriented) printed an article in their newsletter entitled "The Bible Exposes 'The Way'" which was also circulated as reprint copies.

B. Campus. The presence of The Way International on campus evoked a variety of responses. There are three areas which made some type of reaction. These are the students, the administration, and campus ministries.

An alliance was formed by a group of campus and local ministers to form a buffer zone between The Way and persons (from the community, campus, or elsewhere) protesting their presence on campus. The group of ministers maintained a neutral stance during the convention. They cooperated with the campus police in an attempt to ease tensions and keep any real violence from happening.

The group of campus ministers was on the scene each evening of the convention when the rivalry was most in evidence. They spoke with both the protestors and Way officials in their attempt to keep things calm.

Other reactions by campus ministries included support for their students and classes on how to deal with evangelism by Way members.
University officials had two basic responses to the controversy of The Way on campus. The first response was that The Way was paying for the use of the facilities, just as any other group holding a conference on campus. This was in response to questions about why some facilities were holding special extra hours for The Way.

The second basic response of the administration to questioning was that the university did not have any policy about who could or could not meet on campus. One official did say that there was some advance investigations which gave "no indication of problems." According to articles in both campus and city papers, university officials were told of the possible controversy in an inter-office memo which contained background information about The Way.

Student response was the most varied of the campus reactions. One of the major complaints of the students concerned a problem with parking, since there were so many extra cars in the campus area due to the conference. A complaint was lodged with the university police that cars belonging to The Way and its members were not being properly ticketed. However, a university police official said that the number of tickets issued during the two weeks was comparable to the number issued the previous two weeks. He also said that ticketing was done according to legality of the parked cars and not by whether they belonged to Way members or not.

Another complaint by students was that of harassment by members of The Way. This included accusations of verbal harassment as well as the problems of trying to pass through areas on campus which were in use by The Way.

During the two-week period of the Way conference on campus, there
were thirteen letters to the editor printed in the campus paper concerning The Way. Ten of these letters affirmed the rights of The Way to use campus facilities and hold their own religious views. Only three letters were opposed to The Way. Those opposed to The Way chiefly complained about physical problems of space, privilege, etc., rather than of differing beliefs. The letters which were for The Way also were based on the rights of the group, and most of them stressed the right to freedom of religious belief. An interesting thought expressed in several letters was that of the positive effects of controversy to the university and the students.

C. Media. The emphasis in local media on The Way International was quite strong. Both university and city newspapers were filled with articles, editorials, letters to the editor, etc. concerning The Way. All three papers (The Muncie Star, the Muncie Evening Press, and the Ball State Daily News) reported all sides of the controversy. The Ball State paper in particular printed several pictures, of both protestors and Way members. The Way controversy was prominent in the media simply from the large number of articles printed about it. An article on the opinion page of the Muncie Weekly News opposed the style of reporting used in the other papers as being unfair to The Way.

D. Others. The most obvious reaction to The Way was that of a group of evangelists who preached each evening at Way members. This group was made prominent by the arrests on the first two nights of the conference of several of the evangelists. They were charged with harassing The Way. Protests were led by Rev. George (Jed) Smock, an evangelist with the Terre Haute Temple. Smock led meetings of Christians to
protest The Way, and preached each evening at Way members as they returned to their residence halls after their conference sessions ended. During most of the two week period, the evangelists spoke from across the street from Emens Auditorium where The Way was meeting. The road, Riverside Avenue, was agreed upon by university police to be a buffer zone.
IV. Response of The Way International

The reaction of The Way to the controversies raised about themselves was mild. Spokesmen for The Way talked to reporters only two times, and reactions from Way members were limited to two letters to the editor, one to the Ball State Daily News (written by a BSU alumni) and one to the Muncie Star.

In dealing with the group of evangelists who spent the evenings of the convention preaching to Way members, The Way used legal channels and requested assistance from police to keep the preachers from harassing them. The charges against the evangelists were disturbing the peace, harassment and what was termed by The Way to be "damaging and condemning language."\(^1\) The Way requested restraining orders or warrents to keep the evangelists from harassing them.

The first time Way spokesmen talked with reporters, they explained both the kind of ministry they led, and the reason that they were in Muncie. The convention was termed "an advanced course for graduates of other programs conducted by The Way."\(^2\) Spokesmen attempted to quiet some of the controversy by speaking of the different programs they offered and offering examples to counteract several of the accusations such as forced membership, use of moneys given or paid in, disruption of families, etc.

In the second interview, Way spokesmen said they were pleased with their stay in Muncie and that they felt they had been generally accepted. The rest of the interview was similar to the first in that it was more description of Way programs and background.

After The Way International was finished with the two week conference, they offered a public explanation of the Power For
V. Conclusions

In general, all of the reactions to The Way International conference in Muncie were immediate only. During the time of the conference there was plenty of reaction, but it died down with the departure of The Way. Even with that, the majority of the reaction lay with students at Ball State, and with the media coverage.

Student reaction was the most significant. Rather than being directed at any religious controversy, it was aimed at the problems of a large group of non-students using campus facilities while classes were in session. Although this was a valid question, it was definitely not religious in nature. Student opinion, as shown in the several letters to the campus paper, was very open and accepting of religious views not their own.

The media gave extensive coverage to the controversy of The Way. This in itself may have increased the controversy. Many of the letters written to the papers were in response to articles about the controversy. These letters said (in general) that the controversy was good for Muncie and the university because it could encourage people to be more open-minded about religious issues. Most said that it is the right of men to religious freedom. If the media had printed fewer of the controversial articles they did, or used less emotionalism, there might have been little controversy at all.

The reaction of the local churches was very mild. They paid only a little attention to The Way. The presence of The Way in Muncie did nothing to change the attitudes or direction of local churches.
The Way International conference left no lasting mark on the Muncie community in general. Although it was a fairly large influx of persons who belonged to a new religion, the people here were not changed or influenced by The Way conference.

This is a very good summary from a variety of sources of the highlights of The Way conference. It is simple, concise, and provides an accurate and vivid picture of the event. Well done!
Footnotes

I. ¹Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield, Mass., G. & C. 

    ²Ibid., p. 724.

    ³"The Way: Who Are They And What Do They Believe?" Joel A. 

II. ¹"The Way: Who Are They And What Do They Believe?" Joel A. 

III.A. ¹Personal letter from Rev. Robert Sulanke, Pastor of Hazlewood 
    Christian Church, Muncie, Indiana, to Rhea Riegel, January 1978.

    ²Dr. Laurence A. Martin, "A Decision of the Highest Priority," 
    sermon given on July 10, 1977, at First Presbyterian Church, Muncie, 
    Indiana.

B. ¹Sue Kramer, "BSU Leaders Were Alerted About the Controversial 

IV. ¹"Five Charged With Harassing 'The Way'," Muncie Evening Press, 
    June 21, 1977, p. 3.

    ²George Howe, "Backers of The Way Fight Misunderstanding," The 


