

## A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN TWO ORGANIZATIONS THAT INTEGRATE RELIGIONS

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I conducted a comparative study that took place over a two-month period for the purpose of observing similarities and differences between a rural and an urban religious organization that integrate multiple religions. Sunset Spiritualist Church and Camp is located in north central Kansas in the town of Wells. The particular Inter-Faith Ministries organization studied is located in south central Kansas in the city of Wichita. Sunset Spiritualist Church and Camp is a religious organization. Inter-Faith Ministries is a community service organization with a religious foundation. Both religious organizations have members from multiple religions that work together for the same common goal, and both organizations share a common goal and are Revitalization Movements.

### **Sunset Spiritualist Church and Camp Organization**

Sunset Spiritualist Church and Camp began in Ottawa County Kansas in 1876. Most founding members were previously Quakers. Meetings were monthly in a home rotation fashion throughout Ottawa County. They later became annual meetings when the moon was in first quarter. Camp took place twice a year, at spring planting and at fall harvest in a wooded area alongside a river. Many people came by train from quite a long distance to attend the Camps, which had a carnival type atmosphere with the many tents and various activities. In the 1930's the growing membership organized and secured a permanent structure in Wells, Kansas. They continued to hold meetings along with moon and agriculture cycles, and limited Camp to once a year for two weeks ending around the summer solstice. Spiritualism as a religion was accepted in the county as long as it was in its original structure. After the organization settled into permanent dwelling with more structure, the majority of the people in the county no longer accepted them. In the 1970's, Sunset Church began to have weekly church services and they continue to hold Camp once a year for two weeks still today. In the 1990's they conjoined the church which is primarily made up of their membership, and Camp which is primarily made up of guests, together as one unit rather than two separate entities within one organization.

The original purpose of this organization was to promote knowledge in both religion and science. Within their principles, it says that all their teachings are fact proven by the teachings of Jesus Christ, the Christian Bible, and all other tenets of religion. They say that the teachings of Jesus Christ and the teachings of the Bible are two separate entities. As for all tenets of religion, it is dependant on who is giving the service. Anyone can give a service, and anyone can be a minister. They usually have 25-30 ministers available at most times. The program they had for ministerial training was discarded in mid-1970. They say no one but spirit can decide who is or is not a minister and it is not their place to refuse anyone for any reason. The 1970's through the 1990's was a transition period where Sunset members began to move away from traditional Spiritualism and more towards a combination of multiple religions. Although the church does include some Christianity, it does not claim that Christianity is the only true or right religion, but by consensus of members, it is a helpful focal point for unified understanding. Many of the members have at one time been a Christian although they may be following another religion currently and most practice more than one religion.

They believe in life after death, spirit communication, and in numerous major and minor deities from the multiple religions of the world. In the past, they believed they originated from Adam and Eve. Today many members believe they are the descendants of Adam and Eve who were created through experimentation by alien light beings with a higher vibration than that of a human being. Sermons tend to be a combined mixture of the many diverse religions of the world that they have adopted or are studying, only in a relaxed form. Some of the religions practiced are Hindu, Buddhism, Wicca, Native American Spirituality, Dogon (mathematics) and others. They practice the portions of the particular religion that they like and omit the portions that they do not care for and intermingle the religions as to what works best for them individually and as an organized group.

Most of the members take pride in being a part of the New Age Movement and they say they work hand-in-hand via the internet with multiple religious organizations that all unite together in prayer for the world and in aiding spirit. They feel that the world is in such a negative condition that the deities and ancestors are unable to do their jobs without the assistance of humanity. The term spirit encompasses any or all major or minor deities and ancestors from all religions within their realm of exposure.

Sunset members come from every social and ethnic background but are primarily white and almost all have been through horrendous life experiences. Ninety percent of the active members are women with some college or for-

mal training. Seventy-five percent of the members are unemployed due to either a physical or a mental handicap that they freely discuss, or they say spirit needs their undivided attention as a light-worker. Those who work for a living tend to hold professional or prestigious positions. Many of the unemployed tend to collect funds from any government program available to them, barter, plead, and dumpster dive for subsistence. Most whether employed or unemployed have a supplemental income as a healer, medium, or shaman. It would be fair to say that most are each other's clients during the year and they trade services back and forth. Camp is the time of year that gives them the opportunity to work and receive pay. Camp varies year to year on attendance from 2000 to 5000 visitors who usually are not Spiritualist's. The Sunset Spiritualist's goal is to have peace on earth, extend good will to all of humankind, to end suffering, so that all of humanity can live as one, and they as an organization can achieve this best through meditation and prayer vigils.

### **Inter-Faith Ministries Organization**

Inter-Faith Ministries began in Wichita in 1885 and went through several name changes and alliances in the 1930's before settling on their current name in 1978. They capitalize and stress the capital F in their name to stress that faith is recognized in the divine force of each self and to distinguish their group as being different from other interfaith organizations. They do not mix the teachings, beliefs, or traditions of their individual religious belief systems in their organization.

At their Wichita office, they have two special places for individual religious worship. Indoors is the reflection and renewal room and outdoors is the multi-faith garden with a peace pole written in twelve languages of religious experience. In the corner of the reflection and renewal room is a shelf with statues, incense, candles, and various items from all of the organizations religions. On the wall hangs two artistic woven textiles and lying on the floor in the corner is a single prayer rug. The room is designed to be used by individuals from any of the religions in their organization. They say Hindu's and Buddhist's do not want to stimulate the mind, so the room can be used in such a way that the walls and room appear to be void of all material things so that those practicing these religions can empty their minds to leave room for spirit. The Christians want the wall hangings and other religious items to stimulate their minds and they are free to move the items from the shelf anywhere around the room to stimulate their thinking. In their building, they also have a small gift shop to help generate income, and they have

a large conference or meeting room called the Café Gallery with artistic pieces encompassing the circumference of the room. The artwork is created by individuals from poverty-stricken nations and can be purchased at around \$200.00 to \$700.00. Hanging in one hall is a multi-religion quilt, and on another wall around a corner are pictures of starving Haitians. No one was able to give direct answers concerning the Haitian people pictured other than they help them.

The majority of people on the premises were female and they were unable to respond to most inquiries. Most questions were referred to the male director of the organization, and he failed to give direct answers and tended to share what seemed like a standard script-like dialog of information. He had a tendency to disallow questions or to ignore questions. When he did respond to a question, usually it was to repeat one of the lines from the scripted dialog. General members of the organization were not present, there was no avenue presented in order to contact any of them, and only employees of the organization were available on the premises.

They do not ever use the term church they prefer to use the word congregation and they refer to priests, shaman, and ministers as religious leaders. They focus on reverence of each other and on seeing the image of God in each living individual. Although they use the word God, they add that they cannot use the word God, but do so anyway. They say because they are an organization with multi-faiths that they must be very careful with word usage. Dialog is a central issue; they do not debate, they dialog, and the opinion of one person is the same as another person's opinion. No one can kill, hurt, or harass another. They say tolerance is important and we as people must each tolerate each other. They believe the basic tenet of all religion is to stretch faith in order to make it work, and to put a spin on things. Much of the information received was ambiguous. They say that religion is present in the world and this is where religion is going in the future.

Within their organization are members of the following religions: Baha'i, Eastern Orthodox, Jewish, Native American Spirituality, Roman Catholic, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Protestant Christian, Unitarian Universalists, and more. The organization is not a religion. It is a community service organization whose members consist of a variety of religions united together for a common goal. They say they are not integrated and they are not interrelated, they are inter-religion or interfaith. They provide food and housing for the needy and they have programs such as Operation Holiday, Mother to Mother and Ti'Wiconi. Their goal is to have peace on earth and to provide

good will to all of human-kind, to end suffering, so that all of humankind can live as one, and they as an organization can achieve this best through community service programs.

### **The Language and Goals of Both Organizations**

Both the Sunset Spiritualist's and Inter-Faith Ministries share a common goal that they express through a similar use of language. Both groups see their organization as an influential and integral component towards the creation of a future utopian world. They see the way to this utopia future as being through the unification of religion and through love, light, peace, and harmony, so all of humanity can live as one. This shared belief system is both written and verbal, and is present in the principles or mission statements of both groups. Both organizations believe that all living things are related and interdependent, in individual responsibility, and that each person should treat another the way they want to be treated. They believe that all of humanity is family and should make a united commitment to end all violence and injustice, and that for the world to become better that we must all be as one, so first change individual consciousness in order to change the consciousness of the world.

Power is an issue with both groups; the Sunset Spiritualist's repetitiously say a person has to grab their power, or get their power back, or the underprivileged people or groups of the world have to grab their power. Inter-Faith Ministries left a portion of a board meeting discussion lying out in the open in the boardroom, which referred to power. On the large pad of newsprint on an easel was written the words race + power + power of systems + institution. In their mission statement they say they have "a desire to understand and empower the person behind the face... we call people of all faiths together to build inter-religious understanding, promoting justice, relieve misery, and reconcile the estranged... today is the time to offer hope, healing, and understanding as we face the challenges of our community" (Inter 2004). The Sunset Spiritualist's verbally made the same statement and adds that all of humanity should forgive and forget and move towards a peace that can envelop the entire world. They refer to world peace as ascension of humankind and believe that when this time comes, humanity will be enlightened and live in Heaven on Earth. Both organizations tend to share the same viewpoint concerning society presented in the article *Signs of the Times: Are We Becoming Ik?* (Henslin 2003:77) This article refers to the disintegration of a society. The Ik society broke down to the point of extinction. Both organizations feel that the unification of religions and individuals

in common goals, who are all sharing the same desire for love and peace will bring a balanced and harmonious future for all of humanity preventing our extinction. They do understand that each society has its own culture or belief system. They believe that within every culture there is also a desire for a common goal of balance, harmony, peace, and love between all peoples on Earth. The Sunset Spiritualist's are proud to be a part of the New Age Movement. Although Inter-Faith Ministries use New Age language and they make the same points as persons in these groups. The last line in their script-like dialog was they are not New Agers. The shared language used by both organizations consists of New Age terminology that closely resembles the lyrics used in many of the old songs of the musical group the Beatles.

The 1960's on into the 1970's was an emotionally turbulent time for many people in the United States with the Vietnam War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The Beatles were featured and introduced to the United States in the first world televised program. The program aired in 1967 in multiple languages featuring the song *All You Need is Love* (Marck 2004). In their song *Imagine*, they stressed the concept of being as one, "Imagine...Living for today...nothing to kill or die for... living life in peace. You may say that I'm a dreamer. But I'm not the only one. I hope that someday you'll join us. And the world will be as one...brotherhood of man. Imagine all the people. Sharing all the world... live as one" (Marck 2004). Stressed in many Beatles songs and the single focus of one particular song *Give Peace a Chance*, introduces multiple religions and beliefs systems all with the goal of world peace. The harmonious coming together of humanity is also the focus in the songs *Instant Karma* and *Mind Games* as well as some of their other songs.

The young Beatles band members expressed in their songs a search for individuality, identity, an understanding of the world's conditions, and they shared beliefs from the various religions that they were studying. All of this reflects in the following song titles and more (Marck 2004): The Inner Light, Give Me Some Truth, Crippled Inside, Isolation, Intuition, Across the Universe, The Word, Hello Goodbye, Nowhere Man, Revolution, Taxman, Working Class Hero, Power to the People, Think for Yourself, and Hey Jude.

The lyrics discussed change, their word was love, includes binary opposition and many other elements of spirituality and the need for change in consciousness. In addition to war and poverty around the world, in the United States illegal drug use and divorce was on the rise in the 1960's and the

Beatles managed to touch people world wide in whatever the plight may be. Many people took the Beatles very serious and this showed when the Paul McCartney is dead rumor traveled worldwide causing a great stir around the technological world. However, this stir was miniscule compared to the stir that arose when Beatles albums sales outnumbered Bible sales. Young John Lennon (Schultz 2004) said:

Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue that; I'm right and I will be proved right. We are more popular than Jesus now; I don't know which will go first—rock 'n' roll or Christianity. Jesus was all right but his disciples were thick and ordinary. It's them twisting it that ruins it for me.

Back then he expressed the viewpoint of many young people towards the Christianity movement within the lyrics of his and the Beatles songs. He later apologized for his statement, but this did not prevent his assassination in 1980 for the words he spoke in 1966. His assassination had a tremendous impact on many people possibly raising him up to martyr status for some people. Beatles and Lennon albums have not gone down in price, demand, or availability today. Many people, especially those young then who are middle aged today, looked to the Beatles, especially John Lennon as idols or guiding lights, a type of intermediary. Both the Sunset Spiritualist's and Inter-Faith Ministries use language presented in many of these Beatles lyrics, and of the 40-50 people interviewed between both organizations, all were within the average age of 45-65. They would have been teenagers and young adults during Beatle Mania. The common goal presented and stressed in the 1960's concerning world peace is still prevalent today and reflects in the common goals of both the Sunset Spiritualist's and Inter-Faith Ministries.

After the sermon, the healing service, and the messages given by the healers, mediums and shaman, the Sunset Spiritualist's members close each of their services by joining hands in a circle and together everyone sings a Peace Song. They raise their clasped hands high when they get to the line referring to let there be peace on Earth and let it begin with me. They say the song was introduced many years ago, traveled world wide, and just after the United States 911 Crisis they began to close each service with it. Inter-Faith Ministries has a sculpture they refer to as Ascending of Joy as a focal point in the center of their Wichita office. The sculpture is in a circu-

lar fashion, with wood slats that are representative of octaves or vibrations, like the notes played on a piano. The wood slats in their entirety are intended to represent all individuals of the world and the harmonious circle of peace and love that is possible for humanity to achieve together when united as one.

### **Shared Origins of Both Organizations**

Metaphysics began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and with it came the Transcendentalists. Spiritualist's has acquired many of their ideas from the Transcendentalists, and Spiritualism gained popularity during the Civil War. The National Spiritualists Association formed in 1893 and since the time of their organization have always debated whether or not they should or should not be Christians; they have tended to practice multiple religions simultaneously and also Darwinism. Back then, "the Spiritualists regarded the world as one" (Kyle 1993:70). Spiritualism had a decline in popularity in the 1870's, "with the end of the crusade against slavery, the force of the social reform movement diminished" (Kyle 1993:71). They lost their credibility as a reform movement when they were unable to present themselves as a rational movement and failed to gain the scientific credentials they were seeking (Kyle 1993:258-59).

Theosophy grew out of Spiritualism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as well as many other offshoots of various other religions whose focus was on metaphysical thinking, positive thinking and on inner reality. Religious explosions had peaks in the 1880-1890's, in the 1930-1940's, and again in the 1970's (Kyle 1993:258-59). It was in the 1940's when the Sunset Spiritualist's felt they were no longer accepted in the county. The World Parliament of 1893 took place during one of the religious explosion peaks and multiple religions were represented and present. "The World's Parliament of Religions of 1893 was organized by Unitarians and Universalists of the Free Religious Association," and "the first Parliament was a result of religious leaders desiring peace and harmony among the world's religions, which would in turn foster peace and harmony among nations" (Parliament 1999). The second Parliament, which took place one hundred years later, and religious leaders "saw a dramatic change in people's awareness of the universal truth embodied in all religions," (Parliament 1999) and they switched their focus to include not only harmony and peace, but also individuality. "The World's Parliament of Religions that took place in Chicago in 1893 in conjunction with the World's Columbian Exposition represents an historical event



symbolic of the approaching post Christendom era in America...reflects the growing pluralization of religious life in America" (Needleman 1978:40-41). The Inter-Faith Ministries originated at the 1893 World's Parliament of Religion, and Spiritualist's were present. The Parliaments currently takes place every year and is still supported by both the Sunset Spiritualist's and Inter-Faith Ministries.

Both the Sunset Spiritualist's and Inter-Faith Ministries went through reorganization, name changes, and restructuring around these same religious explosion peak times, 1890's, 1930's, and 1970's. The peaks occurred around times of war, social strife, and technological growth. Additionally, peaks occurred at a time when many new religions were coming to life with the progression of ideas on evolution and science. It is interesting to note that some of the New Age groups that began to rise in popularity in the 1970's and even today on the internet have begun to refer to themselves as NAM, New Age Movement. Politics play some part in the belief systems of organizations catering to multiple religions. Many feel that political systems are corrupt and unjust, catering to the wealthy and excluding people who are not. Many people think wars are occurring without valid reason. The Sunset Spiritualist's share these beliefs with many New Age groups. Concerning the New Age Movement belief system, author Richard Kyle (Kyle1993:297) states this observation, "New Age politics is essentially transformation. Such Transformation requires not merely a change of political structure but a new consciousness. Traditional political ideologies must be transcended so that a new political worldview can be developed." Both the Sunset Spiritualist's and Inter-Faith Ministries say world consciousness needs changed. Wallace discusses stress as a factor in revitalization movements and he says, "If the group action program in nonritual spheres is effective in reducing stress-generating situations, it becomes established as normal in various economic, social, and political institutions and customs. Rarely does the movement organization assert or maintain a totalitarian control over all aspects of the transformed culture" (Hicks 2002: 464).

The belief system that Inter-Faith Ministries and the Sunset Spiritualist's have in common with New Age Movements and Internet religious groups is also shared by some United States politicians. Just after the 911 Crisis, Ohio Congressman Dennis J. Kucinich presented a prayer to United States citizens filled with New Age language. He said, "the union of our country is the union of all people...all people are essentially one...the world is interconnected not only on the material level of economics, trade, communication, and transportation, but interconnected through human consciousness" (Kucinich

2002). The language within the 1960's Beatles lyrics, and the common goals and beliefs of Sunset Spiritualist's and Inter-Faith Ministries since the 1890's, including New Age groups today, is heard regularly on television programs, on the radio, is seen in written publications, and does not stand out in the way that it did prior to the 1970's. The language, common goals, and beliefs are generally accepted, but as Wallace says, it is rare for any movement to gain total control over a culture.

### **Liminality and Revitalization Movement**

The Sunset Spiritualist's differ greatly from Inter-Faith Ministries in how leadership roles are handled. Inter-Faith Ministries conducts affairs in a formal business-like manner and in a democratic structure. At Sunset Spiritualist Church-Camp, the leaders are those who are able to achieve what Van Gennep (Hicks 2002:129) refers to as liminality; a stage of transition and this is their goal. They feel that when they are in this state of being that they are closest to spirit. To reach this stage they reinvent themselves by changing their thought processes and patterns in an attempt to discard basic assumptions acquired throughout their lives. Wallace (Hicks 2002: 460-61), used the terminology "mazeway reformulation." They believe that people like Jesus, Buddha, or Mohammed existed in this state of being, with one foot in the spirit world and one foot in the material world. It is their goal to exist in a stage of not living and not dead, where they can best work for spirit.

The individuals able to maintain a state of liminality handle the leadership roles, and assist the rest of the membership towards reaching and staying in liminality as well. The leadership style does not include any choices or decisions that they say they make individually or as a group; they follow spirits wishes received through messages while in an altered state of consciousness. They will not acquire a new role or status at any time; to do so would be egotistical. They attempt to stay in a frame of mind that they say is nothing and everything at the same time, and prayer vigils are important because to them thoughts are living organisms that manifest into reality. "The vision of the transformed individual is imposed on the world... When a sufficient number of individuals become enlightened... they are expected to transform society by means of a decentralized system of networks" (Kyle 1993:294). They believe everything outside of liminality is an illusion and this illusion includes a hateful world where people are starving, diseased, at war and are in pain. To eliminate this illusion they must first change their own consciousness, and then change the world con-

sciousness. It is their belief that liminality is enlightenment, the state of mind that all people in the world need to achieve for humankind to become one, for Heaven to exist on Earth, and to create Utopia.

Many of the Sunset Spiritualist's express their unhappiness with themselves and their lives prior to their membership with the organization. Most of the active members were no longer a part of mainstream society before their membership, felt alienated, and were in isolation. The organization provided them a controlled safe atmosphere filled with like-minded individuals. Those with past horrendous experiences begin to learn how to trust and cope with living life in mainstream society again. Needleman and Baker say, "A search for identity that has its roots in the conscious and unconscious strivings of the human soul... Many have come to the new movements as a part of an inner search for happiness, for friendship, communal living, authority, a personal sense of integration and intimate contact with a higher power. The new religious movements promise to be, for many, an alternate way of life, a more acceptable way of living in this society... Individualism or personal transformation is a pervasive theme in the new modern religious movements" (Needleman 1978: 213).

The Sunset Spiritualist's members provide each other emotional support. Many of the members and especially the visitors attending Camp have or are in severe states of grief. The rituals and messages provide comfort. People attending Camp have various religious backgrounds and the multi-religion atmosphere provides most guests with some familiarity and comfort. Some members have a history of mental illness. They do not want to be a burden to family members and they desire independence. The patience, encouragement, and support of fellow Sunset members assists them with achieving some their goals. For most members praying and helping others assists them in focusing their attention on areas outside of their own personal misery, providing a sense of direction, purpose, and meaning within their lives. Many of them are trying to heal themselves; they saw themselves as broken people or failures. They have experienced the adverse affects of making poor decisions and choices. Membership does not require making choices or decisions. Personal responsibility is not an issue, everything is turned-over to spirit, and this provides an opportunity for the reorganization of negative or skewed thought processes or a period of regrouping. Many of them seem to be in a process of building a new identity in a safe environment with the support of others who seem to understand them and

accept them the way they are. Most of them do not stay a Sunset Spiritualist member more than two to ten years.

Many move on to be productive and responsible people in mainstream society. Inter-Faith Ministries beliefs are similar to the Sunset Spiritualist's. Although they were unable to say how they helped the Haitian people, the people spoken to at Inter-Faith Ministries were able to say how helping the Haitians helped individuals within the group and the group through giving. Inter-Faith Ministries says (Inter 2004), "if we know how each of us feels we couldn't do the things we do." Both organizations attempt to provide others with a sense of well being, instill hope, help people cope, and offer encouragement, and in return boost their own self-esteem. Both organizations are Revitalization Movements. Wallace says (Hicks 2002:458, "all organized religions are relics of old revitalization movements, surviving in routinized form in stabilized cultures, and that religious phenomena per se originated... in the revitalization process —i.e., in visions of a new way of life by individuals under extreme stress." Both organizations hope to change the way that humanity thinks and behaves. Although Inter-Faith ministries is not a religion, its membership is made up of individuals from multiple religions all seeking the same common goals as the Sunset Spiritualist's and other New Age Movement groups.

### **Conclusion**

Sunset Spiritualist Church-Camp and Inter-Faith Ministries are more similar than different. They differ in their methods towards creating the utopia future that they both desire. They are both similar in their common goals, use of language, in having a relationship with multiple religions, and as religious organizations trying to improve the conditions of the world. Although Inter-Faith Ministries is not a religion, like Sunset Spiritualist Church-Camp, they are both revitalization movements.

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