

World Religions in Context

by Dr. Norman E. Allison (Fall, 2002)

On October 3-5, 2002, there will be a significant and timely gathering of missions professors, mission leaders, missionaries and others who are vitally interested in the people of this world and in the mosaic of religious beliefs which they hold. This year's annual meeting of the EMS and the Interdenominational Foreign Missions Association (IFMA) offers a unique opportunity for people in both groups to interact with a common agenda, a study of "The Christian Response to World Religions." As Dr. John Orme, executive director of IFMA writes, "The IFMA and the Evangelical Missiological Society (EMS) have partnered for a rich program. The five plenary speakers and nearly thirty workshops will provide interaction and dialogue. Additionally, the International Society of Frontier Missions, and the Evangelical Ministries to New Religions make available full tracks, this is a world-class line up of gifted resources" (IFMA News, Summer, 2002). As we come together for this significant event, we recognize more than ever the great diversity of religious beliefs which are all around us. In fact, the USA is really a microcosm of the religious pluralism which exists in our 21st century world! The events of September 11, 2001, have, moreover, jolted many people in this country into a re-examination of their relationship with other religions. Although I have served as a missionary in the Arab Middle East and have taught missiology for a number of years, my thinking is patterned to a great extent by my training in cultural anthropology. I anticipate the upcoming conference will draw together theologians, anthropologists and many others with varying academic backgrounds who will contribute to our understanding. Now since I am an anthropologist, I would like to give you a few thoughts which I believe would aid in our thinking about world religions. Let me note up front that I realize that anthropology takes a humanistic approach to the study of religion. In spite of this, and in some cases because of this, it does have valid contributions which can help in our quest for understanding. I will mention only two salient points from many which might be considerations. Religion has been a focal point of anthropological research since the early days of the discipline, though attitudes toward it have changed radically over the years, and definitions change with each textbook. One significant aspect of anthropological study in the field is that religion is understood properly only in the context in which it is found. If we study Islam, for example, we cannot really understand these beliefs in isolation from Muslims. And if we talk to Muslims in Indonesia, we find Islam there to be different from Islam in Saudi Arabia. There are contextual aspects to our study of world religions which cannot be minimized. Anthropologists see religion as a segment of a larger entity known as "worldview," and more precisely as a "religious belief system" which is intertwined with worldview at the core of every culture. One writer says, "A worldview provides people with a structure of reality; defines, classifies, and orders the 'really real' in the universe, in their world, and in their society. Religion provides people with their fundamental orientation toward that reality" (Alfonso Ortiz in *We, the Alien*, P. Bohannon, 1992, p. 234). Perhaps one of the greatest services rendered by anthropology to the study of religion has been the tenet which delineates differences between what people say they believe and what they really believe. An anthropologist doing fieldwork never takes what informants say at face value; the test is always, does their behavior back up what they say they believe? As we look at the different world religions, we need to be aware that the true beliefs of the theologians in those religions are one thing, the true beliefs of the vast majority of people in those same religions is an entirely different thing. The latter is often called a folk religion but a tremendously important part of the overall picture. This is seen clearly, for example, in the contrast between Islam in the writings of Kenneth Cragg and those of Phil Parshall and Bill Musk. Let's keep these thoughts in mind as we approach this great time together, with the firm belief and practice which joins us in the fellowship of the

Gospel of Jesus Christ, and in the unity of belief that: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12)

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