

# Religious, Spiritual, Secular: Some American Responses to September 11

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*This paper examines particular examples of therapeutic and meaning-making responses to the events of September 11 from non-traditional religions and secular bodies, with comparative material from mainstream religions, in the United States of America. The intention is to demonstrate two things: that America's religious plurality and cultural diversity gave rise to alternative discourses of meaning concerning September 11; and that these non-traditional religious interpretations and practices occupy a medial position in a continuum of life-shaping belief systems that ranges from traditional religion to secularised, therapeutic values. In the USA, and particularly in New York, the attack on the World Trade Centre provoked a 'time of national trauma' (Stevens, 2002). Spiritual assistance, chiefly concerning two issues - creating meaning from the events, and finding solace or comfort for shock and grief - was sought by many people. In the quest for meaning, non-traditional religions such as the EarthLink Mission (ELM) provided challenging and different interpretations of the events, reinforcing the argument that when studying religion as 'an ordinary form of human practice' the scholar encounters 'socio-rhetorical technique[s] used to create, contest and re-create credible worlds' (McCutcheon, 2003: 168). In addition to interpreting the meaning of the events, religious, spiritual and secular organizations provided spiritual and therapeutic comfort to those who were affected by September 11. Such 'therapy' has become an accepted element in contemporary Western society (Rieff, 1966). From the non-traditional religious viewpoint, the Church of Scientology's Volunteer Minister Programme provided hands-on assistance at Ground Zero, counselling the police, firemen, and others engaged in clearing the site. The general and 'secularised' nature of the contribution of these Volunteer Ministers invites comparison both with corporate strategies to provide comfort to workers and to engage in psychological risk management (Nighswonger, 2001), and the efforts of mainstream religions (especially the monotheisms; Christianity, Judaism and Islam) to comfort and sustain the faithful. There is thus a spectrum of responses to America's 'time of national trauma', from traditionally religious through non-traditionally religious or spiritual, to secular, and this spectrum reflects the greater selectivity and diversity of belief systems*

*drawn upon by contemporary Americans. Also significant is that the non-traditional religions examined are both holistic in outlook and emphasise reconciliation of apparent opposition through very long time cycles; whereas the traditional monotheisms are firmly located in history, and hold dualistic views of oppositional concepts (such as good and evil).<sup>1</sup>*

## **Introduction**

Religions old and new engage in both the business of meaning-making and the provision of pastoral care to members. Since the mid-twentieth century Western society has become more secular, in that 'individualism, diversity and egalitarianism in the context of liberal democracy undermine the authority of religious beliefs' (Bruce, 2002: 30). While this is broadly true, new religions have flourished in this secularised environment, gaining followers as mainstream churches gradually decline. Both old and new religions also now operate along a dual continuum, functioning in both religious and secular ways. This continuum concerns both the nature of belief systems themselves, with traditional religions, non-traditional religions and secular groups meeting the spiritual needs of diverse groups of people; it also concerns the roles played by such organisations in society. For example, the Church of Scientology, like the major Christian denominations, provides religious services for its members, but also educational, corporate motivational, charitable, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, and other services for non-Scientologists (CSI, 1998).

This paper presents two particular non-traditional religious responses to September 11 2001, and provides evidence of non-traditional religious involvement in the effort to help America recover from the trauma of the attacks. This material has been largely invisible since the attacks, because the dominant discourse views September 11 as an event meaningful only in the light of the monotheistic religions, or as part of a 'clash of civilisations' scenario (Huntington, 1996). While this is logical, in that the attackers were Muslim and America is a traditionally Christian nation, identifying and analysing non-traditional and secular American responses to September 11 exposes the continuum of mainstream religious through non-conventional religious to secular 'spiritual' responses to the event, and draws attention to the plurality of religious discourses available in modern, secularised Western society (Lambert, 1999). The literature on the relationship between secularisation and religious diversity (or pluralism) is extensive (for example, Yinger, 1967; Colpe, 1977; Bruce, 1998): suffice to say that a peculiarly contemporary blend of individualism, consumerism, pluralistic legitimacy and relativism permits religious diversity to flourish in the West, even when a dominant religious discourse still exists (Bruce, 1998:33; Bruce, 2002).

That non-traditional religious groups became involved in interpreting September 11 is unsurprising; religion has conventionally played a role in the way that human individuals and communities have understood and managed tragedies

(Maskrey, 1989). Religion, historically functioning to unite communities and provide meaning, can prove decisive in facilitating recovery from disaster. Detailed studies of the Utah floodings of 1983 stress the centrality of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormon Church) in aiding the victims to recover (Bolin and Bolton, 1986: 89-138). However, there are special circumstances in this case: Utah is overwhelmingly Mormon and a common culture can be invoked which is not always present in large, diverse populations; and floods are natural disasters. There are also different factors operating when people perceive disasters to be of human origin (Blaikie, Cannon, Davis and Wisner, 1994) as in the case of the September 11 attacks. It is here argued that the two cases of non-traditional religious involvement in assisting Americans to interpret and recover from the September 11 attacks demonstrate freshness and originality. The ELM explanation of the events draws on Western esoteric currents (Faivre, 1994) which have a long history but have only emerged into public consciousness as the dominant Christian discourse declined; and the Church or Scientology's pastoral care provided at Ground Zero breaks new ground, not because of what they did, which was substantially the same as the contributions of traditional religions, but because it marked the acceptance of a sometimes controversial non-traditional religion, less than fifty years old, into the ranks of those permitted to address a national tragedy.

### **The Meaning of September 11: Some Mainstream Religious Interpretations**

When aeroplanes hijacked by Muslim al-Qaeda operatives brought down the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York in the morning of Tuesday September 11 2001 killing thousands and injuring more, the world's attention was captured by the horror of the event. Estimates place the financial cost to the American economy at \$US105 billion (Goodrich, 2002), but globally this figure will well exceed this: the human emotional cost is clearly incalculable. With regard to religion, the meaning of this event seemed clear; the Christian American nation was under attack by the Muslim world. While President George W. Bush's October 7 address took careful account of *Realpolitik*, stressing that 'America is a friend ... of almost a billion worldwide who practice the Islamic faith' (Lincoln, 2003:99), the televised conversation of American fundamentalists Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, broadcast on the *700 Club* programme on September 13, accused 'these Islamic fundamentalists, these radical terrorists, these Middle Eastern monsters' of wanting to destroy Israel and of having America as 'the ultimate goal' (Lincoln, 2003: 105).

As events unfolded, the monotheistic traditions appeared to have exclusive access to the religious meaning of September 11. This is not surprising, in that America (however secularised and multicultural) is widely perceived as a Christian nation (Bruce, 2002); also America is the ally of Israel, a nation set up in the aftermath of World War II as the state of the Jewish people (Epstein, 1973: 319-23); and the al-Qaeda operatives who conducted the attacks on the World Trade

Centre and the Pentagon were Muslims. Since the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 there had been an increasing tendency to perceive the Islamic world as a replacement for the Eastern Bloc as America's enemy. The September 11 attacks appeared to confirm this.

However, within mainstream religion dissident voices rapidly emerged. Spokespeople for Judaism, Christianity and Islam challenged this perception of opposition and hostility; each stressing the commitment their faith had to peace, the ongoing need for dialogue, and the folly of leaping to conclusions. Stanley Hauerwas, a Christian, cautioned that 'we are not yet ready to develop an adequate theological understanding' (Holst, 2002:44) of the events; and a new stage in Muslim-Christian dialogue was reached by the New Jersey Christian-Muslim Project, with some Muslim participants declaring that 'if some people did things that violate Muslim principles, one could not call them Muslims' (Willimon, Lefebure *et al*, 2002); and record numbers of ordinary people used online sources to discover more about the issues (including religious issues) involved (Grenier, 2001). The Pew Internet and American Life Project polled internet users and 'the view that the availability of religious information online encourages tolerance was held by 62%' (Anon, 2001).

However, post-September 11 America was mobilising for war, initially in Afghanistan and later, in early 2003, in Iraq. This mobilisation was supported in broad terms by religious rhetoric that jarred with the peaceful pronouncements of Jewish, Christian and Muslim groups. This apparent contradiction reveals the tensions within the identity formation of any religious group, and the difficulties that render impossible the isolation of an authoritative 'Christian', 'Jewish' or 'Muslim' position. McCutcheon (2003, 101-102) notes that:

the tremendous effort that has been expended in the media in classifying a small sub-group of politically engaged, oppositional groups of Muslims as 'radicals' or 'fanatics' – rhetorical efforts reinforced by equally energetic attempts to portray so-called mainline Muslims as not politically engaged whatsoever, but, instead, as peaceful and tolerant of whatever status quo happens to surround them – is but one example of the manner in which political and media commentary deploys a series of rhetorical devices in the service of producing a specific sense of both 'us' and 'them' (whomever these two groups happen to include).

McCutcheon is only addressing the problem with 'us' and 'them' positions *vis a vis* Christianity and Islam. This paper exposes the artificiality of 'us and them' positions restricted to monotheism, and the ultimate futility of attempts to maintain strict control of the meaning of events that are seen to have religious or spiritual significance.

## The Meaning of September 11: ELM's Non-Traditional Religious Interpretation

Within the category 'non-traditional religion' there are enormous variations; Buddhism and Hinduism (although ancient traditions) are non-traditional in the United States, although not quite in the same way that the Church of Scientology (founded 1954) is. Scientology is vastly better-known than certain 'fringe' religious groups such as the EarthLink Mission (ELM, 2003).<sup>2</sup> The response of non-traditional religions to September 11 concentrated on the imperative of peace, a message that was often unpopular. This was particularly true in the case of Buddhism, which had up to that point been fashionable. Apropos of Buddhism's recent decline in popularity, Crossette noted:

Nonviolence is no longer in fashion, particularly in New York, where the scars go deep and wounds are still fresh... Robert Thurman of Columbia University, a Buddhist monk and a scholar of Buddhism, said fear of terrorism had paralysed or 'rendered seditious' peace movements or even expressions of non-violence (Crossette, 2002).

Perhaps the reason for the Buddhist message of peace being criticised whereas monotheists of all persuasions could call for peace without fear of hostility lies in the fact of Buddhism's non-traditional status. Buddhists worldwide continued to promote peace as the answer, as did the Church of Scientology, citing (among other words of wisdom) L. Ron Hubbard's 'ideas and not battles mark the forward progress of mankind' and urging increased communication and dialogue, rather than military 'solutions' (Brooks, 2003).

New Age religion is radically non-traditional in a similar way to Scientology: it is often classified as a secularised form of esotericism, incorporating elements of gnostic and non-Christian thought from Western post-renaissance culture (Melton, 1995: 347-348). These New Age forebears include Freemasonry, Swedenborgianism, Spiritualism, Theosophy and occultism. In a classic formulation, Hanegraaff identified the New Age as a Western cultural phenomenon, the major sub-categories of which were channelling, healing and personal growth, New Age science and neopaganism (Hanegraaff, 1998).

The EarthLink Mission (ELM), founded by Chandara in 1995, has as its stated mission '[t]o globally link Earthworkers to a common cause which will enable coordinated efforts of group consciousness to unilaterally and simultaneously perform energetic realignments of the Etheric Earth on the physical earth, thereby accelerating the Ascension Plan in its perfection ([www.earthlinkmission.org/elm.htm](http://www.earthlinkmission.org/elm.htm)). As a movement it combines: elements of Theosophical 'I AM' traditions, including communication with Ascended Masters; channelling; and UFO and alien-based religions (Trimble, 1995: 331-337). It shares with the majority of New Age religious groups the belief that the earth is a living entity (Hanegraaff, 1998; Faivre, 1994). Its key practice, the 'Stargate Alignment,' assists in the optimisation of the earth's energy grid. A Stargate

Alignment is a ritual in which 'cosmic energy is brought into the Earth through a meditation and conscious intention; participants virtually act as "conductors", by connecting their physical bodies and conscious mind to the energies coming to the planet' ([www.earthlinkmission.org/elm.htm](http://www.earthlinkmission.org/elm.htm)). Revelations, for ELM, are received through channelling.

In the wake of September 11 ELM received a large number of channelled messages, the earliest and most substantial being the 'Tobias Material', received by American ELM members travelling in England. These messages were a series commencing on September 8, when an entity called Tobias spoke about hope. On September 11 a group of fifteen Lightworkers (ELM members, called the 'Crimson Circle') were at the noted prehistoric site Avebury, standing in a circle. Geoffrey Hoppe (ritual name Cauldre), the vehicle through whom Tobias spoke, noted that he was preoccupied and spoke chiefly of the way in which old energy, related to older forms of consciousness, tends to build up and explode. After the group became aware of the attack on the World Trade Centre, Hoppe concluded Tobias spoke of this. When they gathered again on Thursday September 13, Tobias articulated the first comprehensive ELM interpretation of the events ([www.earthlinkmission.org/elm.htm](http://www.earthlinkmission.org/elm.htm), [www.crimson.circle.com](http://www.crimson.circle.com)).

Tobias presented the events of September 11 in a substantially New Age fashion, with an emphasis on the need to disseminate negative energies and the positive outcomes of such release:

What we did see over your Earth, and what we have been aware of for a while, was the need for much releasing of old consciousness. There has been a build-up of what you would call negative energies, and we say this without judgment. These are energies of old that needed releasing. ...we do not see that humankind will slide into darkness. There is too much love and compassion at this time. There are many, many humans who are committed to transmuting, and moving into the new energy. But as we have said, you will see much unrest for the next year of time. There are forces that choose not to move into this new golden age, this age of ascension. So they will be acting to prevent global consciousness from moving forward ([www.crimsoncircle.com](http://www.crimsoncircle.com)).

This message does not stand alone; it is part of an extensive, articulated understanding of the September 11 attacks, which includes channelled messages received in the United States and other countries. To follow up Tobias, on September 24 2001 ELM distributed a channelled message received by New Age guru David Spangler (who has an high profile quite separate from ELM) from a being known to him as the 'Soul of America'. This message, which is very lengthy, promotes quite a different and original interpretation of the September 11 events to those vouchsafed by traditional religions; it is, however, harmonious with that of Tobias cited above.

In this event, the Soul of America has acted in a sacrificial way to take on a portion of this energy and hopefully transmute it. It has been doing this for

some time, and in this event, some of that sacrificial activity has manifested itself into the physical. There are energies of hatred and violence circling your world, so to speak, looking to land, and all nations, including your own, are contributing to this simply because people contribute to it in millions of small and mindless ways.

That this particular energy landed in your nation in this way was partly a matter of consequences returning for certain patterns and actions you have set into motion. You cannot avoid paying a price for your own acts of violence in the world. An energy of violence needed to be grounded and was going to land somewhere. The soul of this country took it on, knowing it could absorb this blow. An energy of love and courage has been released into the world. There will be changes and there will be blessings.

This has happened whatever the immediate response of your people and your government may be. If your response is one that recycles the hatred in acts of revenge, this does not mean you have failed a test, only that you have not yet achieved a place of inner confidence and courage in which you can trust in a spirit of love and healing. But you will reach that place eventually.

(<http://www.seedsforanewhumanity.org/Truth/spangler.htm>)

In contrast to traditional religions, this non-traditional interpretation speaks of energies and spirit, rather than God and the clash of religions. It sees humans as inevitably contributing to 'hatred and violence' and the channelled being, the Soul of America, as absorbing 'this blow'. The Tobias material suggests that the tragedy is inevitable and does not seek to apportion responsibility (in contrast to all mainstream religious discussion, when incendiary or placating). The New Age differs radically from monotheism, in that its ethical holism collapses the duality of good versus evil; thus, the Soul of America's references to hatred, violence and suffering are devoid of any association with evil as traditionally understood. Hanegraaff, among others, explains that good and evil are, in New Age thought, surface classifications, under which lies the "'true" spiritual dimension of reality which is beyond duality' (Hanegraaff, 1998: 278). He also notes, importantly, that New Age believers reject the existence of suffering as a proof of the existence of evil. This helps to understand New Age interpretations of the September 11 attacks, as suffering 'is accepted as a necessary aspect of life and evolution' (Hanegraaff, 1998: 280).

For New Age believers and adherents of other Western esoteric currents, the negative elements of existence are the result of negative beliefs: 'sin and guilt do not exist but ... it is the belief in their existence which produces negativity, especially because it legitimates and induces fear' (Hanegraaff, 1998: 295). This explains the Soul of America's emphasis on transmuting negative energies into 'blessings', and the ultimate achievement of 'love and healing'. Translating this into practice, St Aubyn's 1998 volume offers a ritual designed to deal with 'a public tragedy,' which she recommends performing because 'their pain is ours, some of it can be diffused through us' (St Aubyn, 1998: 140-144). This suggests that humans can also do what the Soul of America does; absorb pain and collapse

evil into ultimate progress. This interpretation separates New Age and alternative believers from adherents of traditional religion. Yet, both groups are struggling with meaning, and both are American. This reinforces the artificiality of the 'us and them' position, where the views of Muslims and Christians are the only referents; there are other players in the business of meaning-making in contemporary America.

## **The Meaning of September 11: Some Secular Interpretations**

Many modern Western people are no longer subscribers to formal institutional religion. However, the issue of the meaning of September 11 was no less urgent for these secularists than it was for religious people. A response articulated by Mary Burgen, General Secretary of the American Association of University Professors, indicates the need for thinking people to have freedom to explore this meaning:

There was an attack on academic questioning from mainly conservative sources. These sources rejected academic questioning as moral equivocation in the presence of evil... Although the national leadership was careful not to blame any one racial or ethnic group for the terrorism, its registration of the situation in terms of absolute evil against absolute good tended to mark academic discourses that call for objectivity and skepticism as untenable (Burgen, 2003: 30).

This reaction echoes the hostile reception that the calls for peace from Scientology and the Buddhists received.

The most influential secular meaning making took place at the level of government policy and reflections by academic commentators on the context in which the September 11 events could best be understood. At best, this was the type of discourse referred to by Burgen above, objective and sceptical. Mann tackled the issue from the standpoint of globalisation, exploring issues of economic, military, political and ideological power in relations between the United States and its opponents (Mann, 2001). He calls suicide missions such as September 11 the 'weapon of the weak', noting that 'a dozen or so terrorists, armed with knives and civilian airliners, killed just over 3,000 people, demolished the twin towers of the World Trade Center – just off Wall Street – and one of the Pentagon's five sides: key symbols of US economic and military power' (Mann, 2001: 60). This exposed fragility of the United States meshes with the core contention of Beck (1992) that the central concern of Western societies is the minimisation of risk and that perceived or actual risks create profound anxiety. American secularists sought explanations that could allay these anxieties.

Robert Jervis' sensitive analysis concurred with Beck, in that he saw terror attacks as more shocking to contemporary people, in that they 'are no longer accustomed to war, violent domestic disturbances, and raging epidemics' (Jervis, 2002: 38). He concentrated on the efforts made by American and other secularists



to understand the events of September 11. His crucial contention is that 'there are political and psychological inhibitions to understand why one is hated, since this may lead to asking whether there is some validity to the grievances' (Jervis, 2002: 42). His type of reflective analysis seeks to create meaning through psychological and therapeutic investigation at the level of national identity. Jervis also sees significance in the fact that the American government and President have significantly increased in powers since the attacks, as even government-shy liberals have sought the alleviation of risks to their lives by appealing to the government, accepting a corresponding sacrifice of civil liberties (Jervis, 2002: 45-54). The governmental rhetoric of 'homeland defense' (Pfaff, 2002) inspired many with a sense that security and safety could be restored through vigorous action outside America and greater vigilance within the country.

### **Pastoral Care and September 11: Some Mainstream Religious Contributions**

In New York the September 11 attacks created an instant increase in the congregations of churches, synagogues and other places of worship. Catholic churches such as Our Lady of the Rosary and Our Lady of Victory, both only a few blocks away from Ground Zero, ministered to the distressed, from the provision of tissues, telephones and coffee, the hosting of 'a weekly lunchtime meeting on how to cope with posttraumatic stress' (Lefevere, 2002), and the holding of religious services. The three contributions thus listed reflect the continuum of 'religious, spiritual and secular' which characterises the roles played by traditional religions in modern society. Some priests, like Jesuit Fr. Jim Martin, volunteered to help at Ground Zero. He said Mass amidst the rubble on September 16 2001 for the 'sea of firefighters, policemen, rescuers, medics and steelworkers' (Lefevere, 2002). Franciscan Fr Brian Jordan, the steelworkers' chaplain, told journalists that 'ecumenism and interfaith relations improved... at the site. "All these reservations we have about each other just disappeared. We found our unity here"' (Lefevere, 2002).

In the wider community, Fr Kevin Madigan of St Peter's, the oldest Catholic church in New York, commented on the memorial shrines which sprang up around the site and the surrounding streets, and on the initiatives of the people of New York, such as the Peaceful Tomorrows group. This was formed by some forty families of victims, 'dedicated to promoting effective non-violent responses to terrorism' (Lefevere, 2002). The Protestant United Theological Seminary provided an extensive website, 'Resources for coping with terrorism, tragedy, war and disaster' ([www.united.edu/disasterhelp.htm](http://www.united.edu/disasterhelp.htm)) and the Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church mounted and resourced another website, 'A national tragedy: war and disaster' ([www.lcsm.org/lcmsresponse.html](http://www.lcsm.org/lcmsresponse.html)) (Stevens, 2002). These responses are in line with the expressions of meaning by traditional religions referred to above, where peace and the indomitability of the human spirit were the primary themes.

Jewish groups did likewise for their distressed members. For example, the Curriculum Resources Department of the Jewish Education Centre (an agency of the Jewish Community Federation of Cleveland) developed a resource pack for school classes to enable students to discuss the tragic events and complete activities which both facilitated understanding and brought comfort (<http://www.jecc.org/edres/curric/irc/tragedy.htm>).

## **Pastoral Care and September 11: Scientology's Non-Traditional Religious Contribution**

Maintaining a presence at Ground Zero was a complex process, in that no religious group could set up there to provide pastoral care unless recognised by the authorities, city, state and federal. This is revealed in the previous section, where there is an overwhelming concentration on the Christian churches, Catholic and Protestant. The one exception was the Church of Scientology, which is perhaps the quintessentially modern American religion, founded by L. Ron Hubbard (Bednarowski, 1995). Scientology shares certain features with New Age religions, such as the desire to interpret September 11 as an event that should result in peace, not war, and a hierarchical organizational structure resembling initiatory groups within the Western esoteric trajectory (Martin, 1989). However, in many ways it is quite different to New Age religion, having an institutional structure and definite, exclusive belief system. The chief reason why Scientology has been chosen as the non-traditional religious example with regard to pastoral care is that it is the *only* non-traditional religion that played such a role. There are no other possible case studies. This unique status could be explained by the extensive network of powerful members the Church of Scientology possesses (showbusiness celebrities and politicians being the most visible). It could also be explained by the fact that the Church of Scientology, despite a controversial history, has become powerfully involved in corporate motivational and charitable activities in America, often providing these secularised services to government agencies (Martin, 1989; Bednarowski, 1995).<sup>3</sup>

Scientology has developed a Volunteer Minister Program, first envisaged by Hubbard in 1973 and fleshed out in 1976. This programme is unique in that it is open to anyone. That is, it is an example of the more secularised services that Scientology provides generally to the community rather than only to its members, recalling the continuum of contributions referred to above. While not precisely trained counsellors, Volunteer Ministers provide help in times of need, which may include counselling-type duties. They are also trained in performing a specifically Scientological therapy; Assists (for example a Contact Assist or a Touch Assist). These are actions 'undertaken to help a person confront physical difficulties' (CSI, 1994: 3). Assists may be administered to aid people in 'periods of intense emotional shock' (CSI, 1994: 7). They thus resemble the traditional Christian practice of 'laying on hands'.

Scientology Volunteer Ministers arrived at Ground Zero within hours of the twin towers' collapse. Like the Christian priests discussed above, their role was to counsel and support the workers who were engaged first in rescuing survivors, then in clearing away rubble and bodies over a period of months. Gail Armstrong, editor of Scientology's *Freedom* magazine, condemned the attackers: it is the 'continuing tragedy of our times that fellow human beings can be twisted into killers who believe their acts of hatred, revenge, and cowardly acts of murder and suicide are justified', but quickly shifted focus to the courage and determination showed by the relief workers, which resulted in 'the one result that the authors of destruction did not want: a stronger and united force for good, bound by that courage and determination to defend what is honorable and decent, a people joined and committed to the preservation of freedom for all' (<http://www.freedommag.org/english/press/page03.htm>).

Scientology is a minority religion that has created, and sought strenuously to maintain, strong ties with other minority religions, which demonstrate its deep understanding of the changed Western religious situation; secularisation resulting in a varied religious climate, in which the traditional religion of the West, Christianity, retains its position while gradually losing authority (Wilson, 1995). Armstrong praises the efforts of the Red Cross and the Salvation Army, and extracts a theme of unity from what could have been a shattering experience (Armstrong, 2002). One unique feature of Scientology that remains to be noted is that it is the only non-conventional religion in the United States that was in a position to take a leading role alongside mainstream religious and secular charitable rescue workers.

In practical terms, the Volunteer Ministers, clad in distinctive and instantly identifiable yellow shirts, set up places where they could minister to rescue personnel who were stressed; drew up organising charts; and undertook to provide food and water. All these efforts might be classified as 'secular', but what qualifies Scientology's contribution as non-conventionally *religious* is the practice of 'assists'. A Church of Scientology publication proudly asserts that the Volunteer Ministers:

provided something far more valuable. Scientology technology. Time after time, a fireman who'd lost a fellow firefighter in the tragedy would receive a special technique, called an 'assist,' to help him deal with his loss. Even though workers crawled over mountains of twisted steel, on no sleep, injuries were almost non-existent; and firefighters attributed it to assists received from the Volunteer Ministers (CSI, 2001:8).

This is, of course, a biased source. However, it is interesting in that it demonstrates the Church's own self-understanding of its role at Ground Zero. Finally, Scientology shares with the New Age a belief in the perfectibility of humanity, but its approach is more rational and pragmatic. Thus, welfare work on site was performed, rather than rituals.

## **Pastoral Care and September 11: Some Secular Contributions**

Secular pastoral care took place on a number of levels, and included such bodies as governments, non-government organizations, universities and health care providers. Attention is here focused on secular pastoral care in the corporate world and at the domestic and grassroots level. Like religion, corporations require the ability to maintain some semblance of control in the midst of a crisis. It is expected that some form of contingency or risk management plan should be in place, and the ability of business to manage any crisis means the difference between corporate survival and financial disaster. Yet, no matter how carefully such strategies may be formulated, implemented and evaluated, 'unforeseen events can make a planned strategy obsolete in no time' (Mitome and Speer, 2001). Many authors have been quick to point out (Veysey, 2002) that the events of September 11 provided a 'wake-up call' for the corporate world (not just in North America but also globally), by revealing how ill-equipped organisations were to deal with such terror attacks in America.

Many organisations already had detailed crisis management plans in place to deal with the Y2K crisis which allowed the 1999-2000 transition to occur with minimal impact (Spillan and Crandall, 2002; Zwick and Collins, 2002). Moreover, those businesses who had kept these plans 'active' by annual testing were able to adapt to the effects of September 11 quickly and efficiently. New York City's Office of Emergency Management, with its 'Condition Omega' disaster response plans 'established in preparation for terrorism threats coinciding with Y2K' demonstrated the modern city's ability to deal with a hitherto unthinkable disaster scenario (Cohen, Eimicke, and Horan, 2002).

Boudreau (2002) notes that one of the fundamental goals in any risk management strategy is to ensure that one's employees, as the most important asset of any business, are safe. One of the many studies on employee health and productivity following September 11 reported 'a substantial reduction in productive worktime for employees in all regions of the country during the two weeks following the September 11 terrorist attacks' (Nighswonger, 2001). Another study (Mainiero, 2002), noted that almost half of those surveyed did not discern any changes in their employer's security practices. More important, though, was the 'psychic cost in the minds and hearts of the employees who are the soul of the business' (Mainiero, 2002: 5). 12% reported that organisations had established procedures for dealing with employee emotional needs, and 15% responded that their employers had made counselling more available after the tragic events. In Washington, those providing medical support to Pentagon workers and other nearby office workers and their families, noted that more needed to be done in the future in the 'development and execution of mental health response plans (in) disaster exercises' (Geiling, 2002).

Veysey (2002) offers further support for this perspective by noting that many crisis management plans 'pay scant attention to employees (because) any crisis – and particularly one related to terrorism – will traumatize employees'. Mainiero

asked her respondents about their personal behavioural reactions to September 11: 59% reported experiencing more anxiety about personal safety since and attacks, and 50% reporting that they had made changes to their values, goal and aspirations. Both Wright (2002) and Argenti (2002) stress the importance of effectively managing organisational communication as a way of rebuilding employee morale immediately as an integral of post-event management strategies.

In a personal, rather than a corporate, context, the majority of American (and in particular New York) secularists responded to the trauma of September 11 by viewing it as a psychological attack on their personal safety resulting in a subsequent re-valuation of life, community and small things that contribute to happiness and identity. Magazine and newspaper articles cautioned Americans against ignoring the effects of trauma, and urged them to seek assistance if needed:

Adults can only help the children if they themselves can cope. They must learn to deal with grief and terror, emotions almost everyone has experienced since September 11. Attacks upon this country caused Americans to undergo a grief process that, although not as severe as for those who were victims or who lost loved ones, can be very real (Stevens, 2002).

Specific anxieties that resulted included fear of flying and increased concern for the safety for one's family and friends. Practical responses included commemorative web sites, 'including unauthorized listings of the missing in the World Trade Center' (Varisco, 2002).

Journalists and scholars have recorded ordinary people's responses, which included an increased faith in other people (Yin, 2002); a greater ability to tolerate and accept minor irritations, realising that in the scheme of things they were ultimately trivial (Hall, 2001); a stronger sense of what is really important, and a recommitment to core values (Corliss, 2003: 54); and an interest in visiting spiritual retreats and sacred sites in the United States. This last tendency has seen the launch of a series of spiritual travel guidebooks by 'HiddenSpring, a Paulist Press imprint that focuses on nonfiction "with a spiritual twist"' (Hilliard, 2002: 34).

The consumerist aspects of spiritual travel are matched by the increased purchasing of self-help guides and other New Age oriented publications. Also in this vein, *Cosmopolitan*, a glossy women's magazine, featured an article in February 2002 asking 'Did September 11 inspire you to search for your soul mate?' which included a range of reader responses, some negative, but most broadly agreeing that September 11 led them to re-value and re-commit to their relationships (Anon, 2002).

One of the trends that emerged out of the aftermath of the event of September 11 was that individuals found solace and comfort within the close personal relationships of family members and friends. This trend is currently being identified in two other areas. Firstly, new American home designs post-September 11 reinforce the notion that homes are 'an island of comfort in an ocean of insecurity. It's command central for the modern family in all its configurations, the

place to huddle, socialize and strategize in an increasingly complex world' (Saporito, 2002: 60). Reflecting these trends is the functional change in the role of the kitchen in the new American home, becoming 'family HQ ... the meeting place, the eating place, the social gathering place, the communication exchange' (Saporito, 2002: 62). Secondly, the recent Bali bombings, the Iraqi conflict and the SARS epidemic have driven many in the tourism industry to the brink of financial ruin, most particularly in the case of those firms that rely on international tourism. Travellers have turned their backs on international travel in favour of short-haul domestic travel, and even to the extreme of foregoing any travel away from their home base. Consumer sales of home entertainment systems and other associated technologies all have boomed in the last six months, feeding the latest trend of what the marketeers describe as 'cocooning,' a form of risk minimisation in Beck's (1992) mould and perhaps the individual equivalent of the Bush administration's 'homeland defense' (Pfaff, 2002).

## Conclusion

Sociologist Deborah Padgett makes the point that September 11 was a unique event. This is because it was '**unexpected** (that is, without warning and not during wartime); **sudden, intentional** (that is, neither a natural disaster nor a manmade accident such as Chernobyl); **foreboding** (that is, likely to lead to future terrorist attacks of even greater severity involving biological or nuclear weapons); **witnessed by millions; prolonged over several months** and constant in its coverage by the media; and intensely political in its impact on national and local governments and on the vast military mobilization that ensued' (Padgett, 2002: 186-187).<sup>4</sup>

This meant that, particularly for Americans, it was a matter of urgency that credible meanings were constructed to explain this event. Mainstream religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) demonstrated the traditional religious role in disaster management by contributing to prominent interpretations, but a continuum of other, less familiar and less traditional, meanings were offered by both non-traditional religious bodies, and secularists. Constructing meaning was not the only significant religious/spiritual activity engaged in: the continuum of religious, spiritual, and secular bodies also provided pastoral care, both to their own community members (whether they were believers, citizens in general, or corporate employees) and to others affected by the events.

Despite the tragedy of mass deaths and destruction, and the looming international crisis that resulted in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the events of September 11 2001 were broadly interpreted as giving rise to positive outcomes: mainstream religions, non-traditional religions, and secularists concentrated on human heroism and the spirit of endurance. Sociologists noted that 'disaster mythology', which alleged that social breakdown, coupled with human depravity, inevitably followed disaster (Blaikie, Cannon, Davis and Wisner, 1994), was comprehensively proven wrong. Rather, in the wake of the September 11 attacks,

'altruism was extremely evident' (Fischer, 2002: 125). These themes of renewed faith in fellow Americans, the desire to help, and the need to triumph in adversity, were shared across the continuum of interpretations of September 11, resulting in broad consensus as to meaning.

That the events of September 11 continue to haunt America, and New York in particular, is evidenced by the steady stream of academic and popular publications and journalism describing and analysing aspects of the tragedy: Jim DeFede's *The Day the World Came to Town*; Dean E. Murphy's *September 11 An Oral History*; James B. Stewart's *Heart of a Soldier*; and more than three hundred others and counting. Film has been slower to explore the events, with Spike Lee's magisterial '25<sup>th</sup> Hour' (2002), the tale of drug-dealer Monty Brogan's (Edward Norton's) last twenty-four hours before seven years' imprisonment, being the first cinematic production to feature footage of the devastated site and to use the events of September 11 as a background.

In conclusion, constructing meaning and recovering through therapeutic engagement in the wake of September 11 is an ongoing and evolving process for Americans, and one that has given rise to a multitude of interpretations. Some of these are connected to mainstream religions and conform broadly to expectations, but others are promoted by smaller, less well-known, non-traditional religions, and are more unusual and fresh in their emphases. Secular bodies contribute to the making of meaning for those who are not religious, and often these meanings have spiritual aspects. The importance of this process for America is evidenced by the high level of involvement of both academic (publishing) and popular cultural media (film, internet) in this production of meanings.<sup>5</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>. The authors would like to thank members of the EarthLink Mission (ELM) and the Church of Scientology for providing some of the material that is used in this paper.

<sup>2</sup>. The Earth Link Mission (ELM) was founded in 1995, by Chandara, an American housewife living in Maryland. 'The cosmology of the organization is based on channelled messages from Ascended Masters, etheric beings who are not of this world but located somewhere in space' and the chief ritual associated with the group is the Stargate Alignment, 'held at special sites around the world at equinoxes and solstices where Chandara's followers gather to act as a form of conduit between earth energies, and energy fields in interstellar space which are connected with previous times and civilizations such as Atlantis and Lemuria' (Digance and Cusack, 2001: 223).

<sup>3</sup>. It has not been possible to discover precisely the way in which Scientology's Volunteer Minister Program was granted permission to undertake such a high-profile role in the response to September 11. There is, at present, no academic literature on the subject, and CSI publications tend not to supply details, but concentrate on the aspects of the successful outreach by the Church of Scientology and the garnering of positive publicity (eg CSI publications reproduce letters of thanks from the Mayoral office, the emergency services and so on).

<sup>4</sup>. Author's emphasis.

<sup>5</sup>. The authors would like to thank participants in the 2003 Australian Association for the Study of Religion Conference, 4-6 July, Multi-Faith Centre, Griffith University (Nathan Campus) for their helpful comments.

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