

New Religious Currents in America: A Case Study in the Southeast

Benjamin E. Zeller

Assistant Professor of Religious Studies and Director of Honors, Brevard College

American culture and history are replete with new religious currents. Given the diversity of such currents—not to mention American culture more broadly—this paper engages in a case study of new religiosity in one American city: Asheville, North Carolina. Asheville is a microcosm of the most rapidly growing regions in America. The second largest city in Southern Appalachia, which is a generally conservative region, the previous decade has seen a proliferation of migration from other American regions as well as foreign immigration. Asheville has become diverse and even cosmopolitan, hosting immigrant religious groups, new religious groups, as well as the older Christian (and some Jewish) religious denominations.

I have focused on religious advertizing, recognizing the consumerist mindset in much of contemporary religion. During a five month period from June 23, 2010 to December 7, 2010, and one month period in February, 2011, I have collected and analyzed religious advertizing sponsored by groups or individuals. My research therefore considers not only the new religious movements of contemporary Asheville, but how they represent and advertize themselves to the public within the sphere of religious consumption.

Background Information

The city of Asheville is the second largest city in Southern Appalachia, with nearly half a million people living in the Asheville-Brevard Statistical Region according to the 2010 Census.¹ It is known as eclectic and cosmopolitan. The national newspaper

USA Today called Asheville “a counterculture capital ... for sheer numbers of yoga centers, massage therapists, organic produce markets and vegetarian eateries.”² Despite this cosmopolitanism, Asheville also remains a notch of America’s Bible Belt. The majority of the region’s residents are conventionally Christian, and its largest religious institutions are Christian. The Billy Graham Evangelical Association’s missionary training center and retreat center are in nearby Montreat, just outside the city. When visitors drive outside of downtown Asheville itself, they are far more likely to drive past Baptist, Pentecostal, and Methodist churches than they are yoga or Zen centers.

For this project I analyzed advertisements in Asheville’s free local paper, *The Mountain Xpress*. This paper bills itself as Asheville’s “independent news source” and is known as a strong progressive voice in politics, arts, and entertainment.³ I chose to use the *Mountain Xpress* in order to “oversample”—to borrow a term from quantitative sociology—the new religious currents of Asheville. The *Mountain Xpress* appeals to the more progressive residents of Asheville most likely to be interested in new religious ideas and groups. Because I have oversampled this segment of Asheville’s religious environment, I caution against making any sort of numerical claim about the type of new religious currents in Asheville based on my research. That being said, my research indicates that the alternative and new religious currents in Asheville are vibrant, thriving, and extremely eclectic.

A Typology of Religious Advertisement

Before I could consider developing a typology or begin analyzing religious advertisements in the *Mountain Xpress*, I faced the problem of distinguishing religious

from non-religious advertisement. This is far more difficult than one might expect. For the purposes of this study, I excluded advertisements for alternative healing practices that did not claim any specific religious lineage or use religious language, even if they derive from medical-religious systems wherein this distinction is anachronistic or foreign. Many advertisements are not clearly religious or nonreligious, but are somewhere on a continuum, and this is particularly true of practitioners of the metaphysical healing traditions, as Catherine Albanese has labeled it. This being said, nearly all of the religious groups advertizing in the *Mountain Xpress* fit within several basic categories: Asian, Western Esoteric/Occult, Human Potential/New Age, Countercultural Era New Religious Movements, and Christian groups. I have labeled these “religious currents,” since like currents they move somewhat unexpectedly and tend to mix. Theorist of religion Thomas A. Tweed has recommended just such aquatic metaphors, since they prevent essentializing religions as “static, isolated, and immutable.”⁴ With Tweed’s suggestion as background, we now consider just such currents.

Religious Currents Drawn From Asian Tradition

Religious organizations and individuals drawing from Asian traditions purchased the most advertisements in the *Mountain Xpress*, and had the most listings in the free events listing in the back of the newspaper. Some of these advertisements make no explicit religious claims, but nevertheless are rooted in Asian religious traditions. Yoga centers are the best example of this.⁵ Others use visual cues such as *chakras*, OM symbols, or images of individuals in monastic clothing.⁶ In many cases, groups advertise themselves using images or text drawn from outside the Hindu or even Buddhist religious

traditions, but this is generally because they rather eclectically include a variety of teachers and teachings.⁷ Though yoga represents the most numerous of advertisements within the Asian religious currents of Asheville, a number of aryuvedic groups and practitioners also advertise in the *Mountain Xpress* as well, as do a few *bhakti* groups.⁸ Tibetan Buddhist organizations and individuals advertize frequently in the *Mountain Xpress*.⁹

Though not found in the more flashy advertisements, the spirituality event listings contain notices from numerous East Asian meditation groups. Many healing groups or teachers also invoke East Asian religious teachings, most notably that of *qi*, in their advertisements.¹⁰ Yet there is remarkably little religious advertisements from East Asian religious groups or individuals as compared to those drawing from South Asian sources. This is in keeping with the broad influence in yoga and South Asian meditation that Lola Williamson has documented.¹¹ In my appraisal, the strong attraction of these South Asian traditions continues unabated in Western North Carolina.

Religious Currents Drawn From the Western Metaphysical/Occult Tradition

Explicitly esoteric or occult teachers are quite active in Asheville.¹² Psychics are major advertisers in the newspaper, as are dowsers, tarot card readers, and alchemists.¹³ Despite a general lack of social acceptance of astrology, astrological teachers and practitioners frequently advertise in the *Mountain Xpress*. Astrologer Benjamin Bernstein and his “It’s All Good Astrology” purchased advertisements in every week of the newspaper that I collected. Bernstein represents the most important strand of Asheville’s astrology community, what I call therapeutic astrology.¹⁴ Therapeutic astrology promises

not just insights into the future but also healing of physical, mental, and relational ills through religious technology (astrological charts) and technical arts (reading of those charts).¹⁵

Appalachian herbalism is another example of the western esoteric religious currents active in Asheville. Appalachian herbalism traces its roots to multiple sources: Native American traditions, African herbal lore brought by slaves, but most importantly the European cunning tradition that the Appalachian settlers—primarily Scots-Irish and English—brought with them from the Old World. Catherine L. Albanese has called this “cunning tradition” the folk equivalent of the elite alchemical traditions of esoteric renaissance Europe.¹⁶ In the eclectic environment of Asheville, several of these herbalist groups draw from Chinese or Indian herbal traditions as well. There are multiple examples of this modern day cunning tradition present in the advertisements of the *Mountain Xpress*.¹⁷

Religious Currents Within the Human Potential / New Age Milieu

The Human Potential movement is well represented in Asheville advertisements. An emphasis on healing is a common theme in the Human Potential movement, and is certainly strongly represented in the Asheville religious advertisements. Bodily control is also an essential part of this religious current.¹⁸ Body work emphasizes the ability of individuals to control and master the self, and as J. Gordon Melton has noted, this attempt to master and improve the self represents the New Age movement’s understanding of what many other religions call salvation.¹⁹ Yet Asheville gives its own twist to the Human Potential movement in the form of the “empowered birthing” movement, which

teaches spiritual evolution through self-aware pregnancy and birthing. Several teachers advertise their expertise in this area.²⁰ Both teachers look to the birthing experience as an occasion for spiritual practice, and reflect several factors at work in the Asheville religious milieu: the spiritual quest, women's empowerment, and a holistic approach to health, reproduction, and lifestyle choices. Along similar lines, Asheville's large artist community also features its own human potential religiosity, as the *Mountain Xpress* advertisements indicate, fusing art and religious practice as means of self-development.²¹

Religious Currents Comprised of Countercultural-Era New Religious Movements

The new religious movements of the 1960s and 1970s are still present in Asheville, though none of them purchased advertisements in the *Mountain Xpress*. Instead, these groups listed their lectures, gatherings, and workshops in the free listing for events at the end of the paper. While such groups were the vanguard of new religiosity during the 1960s and 1970s, they are no longer the fastest growing, and certainly they are not the best represented through advertising. Yet they are present in Asheville. Among the groups listing their events are: Transcendental Meditation, the Hare Krishna movement (ISKCON), Baha'i, Unity School of Christianity, Chabad, Shambhala, Rastafari, Eckankar, A Course in Miracles, an Eckhart Tolle study group, the Ethical Culture Society, Urantia, and Meher Baba. In some cases, earlier NRMs have inspired less-institutionalized religious groups in Asheville. For example, a *kriya* yoga movement following the teachings of Paramahansa Yogananda meets under the aegis of the Asheville Center for Spiritual Awareness, but does not identify itself as part of the wider Self-Realization Fellowship movement that Yogananda founded.²² Though a sizable

Pagan community exists in Asheville, there are almost no advertisements touting Pagan teachers, healings, or ceremonies. Based on my ethnographic work in Asheville, Pagan groups active in the region prefer to advertise via word of mouth.

What is one to make of the relative dearth and decline of the first generation of American NRMs in today's Asheville? Such groups no longer represent the vanguard of new religiosity in Asheville. The events sponsored by such groups that I have attended have been small, and tend to draw an older clientele of individuals who remember these groups when they first emerged. The older NRMs no longer seem to draw the attention, numbers, or allure that they once did. I propose that this is because they are too exclusive in their religious approaches, demanding adherence to a limited set of norms. Given the overall syncretism of the religious advertisements and groups in Asheville, this exclusivity does not fit within the pattern of today's new new religious world.

Religious Currents Drawn From the Christian Tradition

Asheville's Christians have not entirely ceded the pages of the *Mountain Xpress* to non-Christian groups and teachers, though there are far fewer examples of Christian religious advertising in this avowedly alternative newspaper. The most notable example is a set of repeated advertisements by the West Asheville Vineyard Church (WAVC), a daughter church of the Vineyard movement.²³ For four weeks in late summer and again for four weeks in the spring, the WAVC advertized its "Faith Experiment," of series of gatherings of religious seekers, skeptics, and open-minded Ashevilleans for a free brunch at the Westville Pub to discuss issues of Christian theology. They advertized this series of conversations using what they called "J-Dog," or "Jesus Dog," an image of Christ more

akin to “The Dude” from *The Big Lebowski* than typical iconographic images of Jesus. Clearly The WAVC aimed for a different clientele than the normal Sunday churchgoing crowd, and their *Mountain Xpress* advertisement represented that. Other Christian groups advertise as well. Many of them are mainline denominations sponsoring healing ministries, meditation groups, artistic performances, and social justice special interest groups.²⁴ In these ads, these mainline Christian denominations attempt to speak to the same spiritual seekers who read advertisements for the myriad of Asian, occult, metaphysical, and human potential groups and teachers.

Themes of Asheville’s New Religious Currents

Given the four major currents at work in Asheville’s religious waters, what deeper themes are at work, and what can one say about the new religiosity in Asheville? Three recurrent themes characterize Asheville’s new religiosity: a focus on therapeutic religion, religious syncretism, and religious references and allusions to science. These themes represent broader trends in American religious culture as well.

Therapeutic themes cut across all of the categories of my typology, where we define therapeutic religion as the quest for well-being through healing, body control, and spiritual development. Therapeutic approaches to religion characterize much of American religious practice. Writing of the theological imagination of American women—who fill the majority of pews in American churches—Mary Farrell Bednarowski traces themes of healing throughout mainline and Evangelical forms of Christianity, Judaism, and new religions, across lines of race, class, and region.²⁵ Therapeutic religion is highly active in Asheville, both within healing traditions such as Reiki and Aryurveda, but also yoga,

meditation, New Age, and occult groups. If advertisement are representative of religion on the ground, therapeutic religion is the most important strand of Asheville's new religiosity, and cuts across all of its new religious currents.

Syncretism is also rampant in Asheville's religious world.²⁶ It is in fact a recurrent theme in new American religions. The classic case is Mormonism, which drew from popular Protestantism, radical restorationism, Freemasonry, and cunning traditions.²⁷ Other examples include Theosophy's combination of European occultism, secular science, Hinduism, Buddhism, and spiritualism.²⁸ The syncretism of American religion reveals an underlying truth: religion is a constant flux, seldom existing in reifying institutions such as "Protestantism," "Taoism," or "Occultism." It may seem more obvious when viewed through the lens of Asheville's religious advertisements, but it is a basic reality of religion as actually practiced, vernacular religion.

The third theme that repeats throughout Asheville's religious currents is what I call the rhetoric of science. In my past scholarship on the new religious movements of midcentury America I found extensive engagement with science, and this pattern continues today.²⁹ Legitimation explains part of phenomenon, as James R. Lewis has explained.³⁰ Yet beyond legitimization, science offers an alternative worldview that clearly holds great appeal within Asheville's new religious world. Science cuts across national and cultural boundaries, enabling syncretistic approaches to religion. Since science is true in North America, India, Africa, and Japan, and was true in ancient times as well as today, marking an idea or practice as "scientific" permits its inclusion within a self-defined universalistic scientific-religious hybrid. The use of science also synergizes with therapeutic religion. Since the turn of the previous century, American therapeutic

culture has been defined by medical science and technology. While some religious groups claim alternative approaches to healing outside the medical establishment, they generally do so under the rubric of science.³¹

Asheville's New Religiosity

In this brief survey of Asheville's new religiosity we have considered several characteristic currents, namely religious individual and groups drawing from the Asian, Western Esoteric, Human Potential, Countercultural Era NRM, and Christian traditions. We have also considered three themes that repeated across these currents: therapeutic religion, syncretism, and the rhetoric of science. I want to conclude by returning to a point I mentioned earlier, namely the problem distinguishing religious from non-religious advertisements.

The lack of clear separation between religious and non-religious within Asheville's print culture represents a broader phenomenon, especially in terms of therapeutic religious movements. Since these seem to be the vanguard of new currents in Asheville's religious waters, the inability to clearly distinguish between what is religion and what is not religion will make studying the new new religions of Asheville—and North America more broadly—increasingly difficult in the coming generation. I conclude with a suggestion: the diffusion of religious ideas and approaches outside of religious movements proper is itself a new religious current in keeping with the individualism, anti-institutionalism, and populism that has growing in the West since the Protestant Reformation. Seen from this vantage, new new religions are the culmination of the radical reformation that began in Europe half a millennium ago.

Many of the advertisements that I cite run multiple times. In order to simplify these endnotes, I cite only the earliest example of these advertisements.

¹ United States Census Bureau, *American Fact Finder* (Washington, D.C.). Electronic data available from <http://factfinder2.census.gov>.

² Gene Sloan, "High Country Hip," *USA Today* (October 2, 2003).

³ "Info and About Us," *Mountain Xpress*, <http://www.mountainx.com/info/about> (cited May 4, 2011).

⁴ Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 60.

⁵ "Asheville School of Massage & Yoga," *Mountain Xpress* 16, no. 23 (June 23-29, 2010), 4.

⁶ For one particularly obvious example, see "Asheville Yoga Teacher Training," *Mountain Xpress* 16, no. 49 (June 30-July 6, 2010), 49; repeated as a larger color advertisement as "Bodhana Yoga School," *Mountain Xpress* 16, no. 52 (July 21-27, 2010), 41. Another excellent example is "Ascending the Chakras," *Mountain Xpress* 17, no. 3 (August 11-17, 2010), 68.

⁷ "Asheville Yoga Center," *Mountain Xpress* 16, no. 23 (June 23-29, 2010), 5; "Prama Institute," *Mountain Xpress* 16, no. 52 (July 21-27, 2010), 5; "Prama Institute," *Mountain Xpress* 17, no. 4 (August 18-24, 2010), 10.

⁸ "Blue Lotus Aryurveda," *Mountain Xpress* 16, no. 23 (June 23-29, 2010), 21; "Puja at Maha Shakti Mandir," *Mountain Xpress* 17, no. 28 (February 2-8, 2010), 46.

⁹ "Lama Christie McNally," *Mountain Xpress* 17, no. 4 (August 18-24, 2010), 54; "Banishing Poverty-Mind," *Mountain Xpress* 17, no. 15 (November 3-9, 2010), 30.

¹⁰ "Do You Feel a Calling to Channel Light," *Mountain Xpress* 16, no. 50 (July 6-13, 2010), 30. See also "Prama Institute," *Mountain Xpress* 17, no. 4 (August 18-24, 2010), 10; "Qigong for the Body, Mind, & Spirit," *Mountain Xpress* 17, no. 15 (November 3-9, 2010), 32.

¹¹ Lola Williamson, *Transcendent in America: Hindu-Inspired Meditation Movements as New Religions* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

¹² For an example, see "Practical Secrets of the Western Mysteries," 16, no. 23 (June 23-29, 2010), 32; *Mountain Xpress* 16, no. 49 (June 30-July 6, 2010), 30.

¹³ See "Spirituality," *Mountain Xpress* 16, no. 23 (June 23-29, 2010), 32-34; "Dowsing With Rods and Pendulums," *Mountain Xpress* 17, no. 6, September 1-7, 2010), 34; "Events at the White Horse in Black Mountain," *Mountain Xpress* 17, no. 6, September 1-7, 2010), 35.

¹⁴ "It's All Good Astrology," *Mountain Xpress* 16, no. 49 (June 30-July 6, 2010), 31.

¹⁵ "Astro-Counseling," *Mountain Xpress* 16, no. 49 (June 30-July 6, 2010), 30.

¹⁶ Albanese, *A Republic of Mind & Spirit*, 53-61.

¹⁷ Appalachia School of Holistic Herbalism, *Mountain Xpress* 16, no. 23 (June 23-29, 2010), 27; "Blue Ridge School of Herbal Medicine," *Mountain Xpress* 17, no. 4 (August 18-24, 2010), 25; "Appalachia School of Holistic Herbalism," *Mountain Xpress* 17, no. 12 (October 13-19, 2010), 38.

-
- ¹⁸ “Achieve Balance: Shamanic Bodywork,” *Mountain Xpress* 17, no. 3 (August 11-17, 2010), 18.
- ¹⁹ J. Gordon Melton, “New Thought and the New Age,” in *Perspectives on the New Age*, ed. James R. Lewis and Gordon Melton (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 18-19.
- ²⁰ “Empowered Birthing,” *Mountain Xpress* 16, no. 49 (June 30-July 6, 2010), 66; “Asheville Women’s Wellness & Education Center,” *Mountain Xpress* 16, no. 50 (July 6-13, 2010), 63.
- ²¹ “The Artist’s Way,” *Mountain Xpress* 17, no. 1 (July 28-August 3, 2010), 9; *Mountain Xpress* 17, no. 28 (February 2-8, 2010), 3.
- ²² “Asheville Center for Spiritual Awareness,” *Mountain Xpress* 17, no. 3 (August 11-17, 2010), 31.
- ²³ Robin D. Perrin and Armand L. Mauss, “Saints and Seekers: Sources of Recruitment to the Vineyard Christian Fellowship,” *Review of Religious Research* 33, no. 2 (December, 1991): 97-111.
- ²⁴ “St. Mark’s Lutheran Church,” *Mountain Xpress* 16, no. 50 (July 6-13, 2010), 38; “Pure Sound Bus Tour,” *Mountain Xpress* 16, no. 52 (July 21-27, 2010), 60; “Using Kingdom Authority,” *Mountain Xpress* 17, no. 3 (August 11-17, 2010), 32; “Cathedral of All Souls,” *Mountain Xpress* 17, no. 7 (September 8-14, 2010), 36; “Land of the Sky United Church of Christ,” *Mountain Xpress* 17, no. 3 (August 11-17, 2010), 32; “Asheville Jewish Meditation and Chanting Circle,” *Mountain Xpress* 16, no. 52 (July 21-27, 2010), 58.
- ²⁵ Mary Farrell Bednarowski, *The Religious Imagination of American Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 150-183.
- ²⁶ West Asheville Yoga Center, *Mountain Xpress* 16, no. 23 (June 23-29, 2010), 39; “West Asheville Yoga Center,” *Mountain Xpress* 17, no. 15 (November 3-9, 2010), 51; Pranic Healing Introductory Lecture, *Mountain Xpress* 16, no. 23 (June 23-29, 2010), 30; “Basic Pranic Healing Class,” *Mountain Xpress* 16, no. 50 (July 6-13, 2010), 36; “Quisience Sacred Science Temple,” *Mountain Xpress* 17, no. 28 (February 2-8, 2010), 32.
- ²⁷ D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (New York: Signature Books: 1998).
- ²⁸ Robert Ellwood, *Theosophy: A Modern Expression of the Wisdom of the Ages* (Wheaton, Illinois: Theosophical Publishing House, 1986).
- ²⁹ Benjamin E. Zeller, *Prophets and Prottons: New Religious Movements and Science in Late Twentieth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).
- ³⁰ James R. Lewis, *Legitimizing New Religions* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 93.
- ³¹ For one advertisement that combines all three of the shared themes, syncretism, therapeutic religion, and the appeals to science, see “Maitri Center for Women,” *Mountain Xpress* 17, no. 10 (September 28-October 5, 2010), 27.