Literature Review

Historically, heretical beliefs and false prophecies have persisted within Christianity, tracing their origins to biblical times. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus referred to those who espouse false teachings as "wolves in sheep's clothing" (Matthew 7:15) and differentiated between those who merely speak of Him and those who genuinely follow His divine will (Matthew 7:21). This literature review focuses on Modalism, Prosperity Theology, and Word of Faith, as well as movements involving a false prophecy, Extra-biblical Revelation, or a combination of these elements.

Modalism emerged in 180 A.D. (Bernard, 2020) and challenged trinitarianism. By rejecting the concept of three distinct persons within the Godhead, Modalism sought to maintain monotheism. However, this position was eventually condemned as heretical in the fourth century (Bernard, 2020). Dr. B. Conway, the host of the scholarly YouTube show "One Minute Apologist," defines Modalism as the belief in one God manifesting in three different modes instead of the coexistence of three distinct persons in the trinitarian view (Conway, 2013). He raises biblical concerns about Modalism, particularly concerning the Baptism of Jesus, wherein all three persons of the Godhead are present simultaneously (Conway, 2013).

In the contemporary era, Modalism continues to find adherents among prominent leaders within Mainstream Christianity, including the ministry of Tony Evans (Riley, 2022). Scholar and pastor T. Challies identifies T.D. Jakes's ministry is affiliated with Oneness Pentecostalism, which denies the trinity doctrine by positing that there is one God in three manifestations or modalities (Challies, 2014). Moreover, Pastor Steven Furtick of Elevation Church, a close associate of Jakes, has propagated modalist concepts in his sermons, distorting scriptural passages to support this unorthodox viewpoint (Dissenter, 2020). Furtick maintains a close alliance with Pastor Daniel Floyd of the Virginia-based mega-church LifePoint (Floyd & Furtick, 2019).

Christian communities have persistently grappled with challenges from heretical beliefs, false prophecies, and movements diverging from traditional biblical teachings, both historically and contemporarily. The early church faced Modalism, a heresy challenging the orthodox understanding of the Holy Trinity by proposing God existed in three modes, not distinct persons (Kelly, 2006). Recently, Prosperity Theology emerged, asserting that faith brings material wealth and physical well-being, a view many see as distorting the Gospel message (Jones, 2010). Another modern challenge is the Word of Faith movement, which postulates the spiritual power of words and the ability of positive confession to manifest prosperity and health, leading to critiques of minimized divine sovereignty and Christianized magical thinking (Hanegraaff, 2009). Further complexities arise from the spread of false prophecies and extra-biblical revelations, with claims of new revelations, visions, or translations potentially misguiding believers (Horton, 2008). These challenges underline the need for ongoing discernment, rigorous theological reflection, and adherence to scriptural teachings within Christian communities.

Emerging Trends in Contemporary Christianity: A Study of New Movements

The Word of Faith movement, a significant subject of scholarly research, is interpreted differently depending on the investigator's approach. For instance, Zuluchu perceives it as a detectable paradigm. On the other hand, Nel offers a comprehensive model in his 2023 publication, delineating it as a process constituted by four essential steps: verbalization, execution, acceptance, and declaration of personal aspirations. Meanwhile, Blazer's study(2022), contextualizes the Word of Faith or Prosperity Gospel movement within the historical trajectory of the "name it and claim it" doctrine. Blazer traces the roots of this movement back to the nineteenth-century New Thought movement and the Law of Attraction. According to Blazer, the fundamental proposition of this movement is that the believer's thoughts actively shape their reality. It contends that negative thinking can lead to adverse consequences, whereas optimism has the power to bring about favorable situations (Blazer, 2022).

**Critical Analysis of the Prosperity Gospel**

Nel (2023) critically evaluates the Prosperity Gospel, outlining several major concerns. First, Nel contends that the Prosperity Gospel presents a distorted view of God and Scripture. It erroneously exalts humans to a place of authority while simultaneously diminishing God's role to a mere force subject to manipulation by believers. Second, Nel notes the Prosperity Gospel's denial of core Christian tenets, including the deity and sinlessness of Christ. These critical elements of the Christian faith are overshadowed by a doctrine that prioritizes material wealth and well-being over spiritual virtues and the acknowledgment of Christ's unique divinity. Third, Nel asserts that the Prosperity Gospel's emphasis on human declarations and extra-biblical revelations equals these to the authority of established Scripture. This claim devalues the sanctity of the revealed scriptures. It detracts from the doctrine of Sola Scriptura, which recognizes Scripture as the ultimate and sufficient source of Christian faith and life. Fourth, Nel points out the Prosperity Gospel's inadequacy in acknowledging suffering among righteous believers. This movement seems to sidestep the observable fact that devout Christians can and do experience suffering, irrespective of their faith and righteousness.

In contrast, biblical accounts present a different picture of Christian living and suffering. Nel cites Daniel's steadfast loyalty to God despite facing threats of death (Daniel 3:17-18) and the Apostle Paul's acceptance of his "thorn in the flesh," viewing it as a reminder of his dependence on God's grace and power (2 Corinthians 12:7-9). These examples underscore the Christian commitment to trust and depend on God amid hardships rather than seeing prosperity as the primary sign of God's favor. Fee (1985) criticizes the Prosperity Gospel's overemphasis on wealth and health, pointing out the disparity between these teachings and the New Testament's emphasis on sacrificial love, service, and the willingness to endure suffering for the sake of Christ. This ongoing scholarly critique of the Prosperity Gospel affirms the necessity for continued theological discernment within Christian communities.

**Movements Involving Extra-biblical Revelation and False Prophecy**

The Bible strongly warns against modifying its content, reinforcing this directive with severe consequences for those who dare to add or subtract from its teachings. This warning is explicit in the Book of Revelation (22:18-19), where it is stated that anyone who adds to the words of the biblical prophecy will be afflicted with the plagues described within its pages. Anyone who takes away from its words will lose their part in the Tree of Life and the Holy City. In today's religious landscape, however, numerous movements engage in practices that could be perceived as contradicting this biblical admonition. They often involve elements of false prophecy or revelation outside the confines of biblical scripture. These extra-biblical revelations are frequently treated as supplementary scriptures, introducing new elements to the traditional biblical canon. Such movements typically propagate these additional revelations through mediums such as new "translations" of the Bible, mystical visions, or a blend of these methods. Consequently, this raises critical questions regarding the legitimacy of these movements concerning traditional Christian teachings and principles. It is essential to note that while these movements add new dimensions to religious interpretation and experience, they also spur intense debates among theologians and believers about the sanctity and inviolability of the original biblical text.

**Priscilla Shirer and the Issue of Extra-biblical Revelation**

Priscilla Shirer's teachings have been controversial among religious scholars, especially due to her insistence on the value of extra-biblical revelations. According to Rosebrough's (2020) analysis, Shirer promotes the idea that God's communication extends beyond the boundaries set by the canonical scripture. Such a stance provoked concerns among various Christian communities, primarily because it contradicts the Bible's explicit command not to augment or diminish God's word, as stated in Revelation 22:18-19. Rosebrough's critiques draw attention to the fact that Shirer perceives God's word as not solely contained within scripture, suggesting that divine communication continues in ways beyond it. This interpretation could potentially undermine the traditional Christian belief in the closed canon of the Bible, an understanding that sees the scripture as complete and self-sufficient, needing no additional revelation.

Furthermore, Shirer's depiction of the Bible as a "hand-me-down" revelation and her pursuit for further divine revelations has been met with responses from critics. They argue that her perspective undermines the doctrine of Sola Scriptura (Scripture Alone), underscoring the Bible's sufficiency and superiority as the ultimate source of Christian faith and practice. This principle is affirmed in the Bible itself, particularly in passages such as 2 Timothy 3:16-17, which states that all scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness. Adding to these criticisms is theologian R. Albert Mohler, Jr., who emphasizes the dangerous implications of extra-biblical revelations in his book "The Disappearance of God" (Mohler, 2009). Mohler argues that such practices can distort Christian doctrine and practice, leading believers away from the truth of the Gospel. He urges Christians to remain anchored in the scripture, asserting its completeness and sufficiency in guiding the life and faith of believers. Ultimately, the controversy surrounding Priscilla Shirer's teachings underscores the larger ongoing debates within Christian circles about the role and authority of the Bible, the nature of divine revelation, and the importance of adhering to traditional Christian doctrine.

The emergence of various novel movements has marked the evolving landscape of Christianity, each introducing distinct and often diverse theological viewpoints. Among these is the controversial Prosperity Gospel, a doctrine that promotes the belief that material wealth and physical well-being are the will of God for His faithful. This movement, which stands at the intersection of faith and material prosperity, has sparked intense debates regarding its alignment with traditional Christian teachings. Concurrently, there is a growing discourse around extra-biblical revelations, where teachings and visions outside the standard biblical canon are presented as supplemental religious knowledge. These revelations, often conveyed through new "translations" of the Bible, mystical visions, or a combination of both, challenge the foundational principle of scriptural inerrancy and the sanctity of the biblical text. Further complicating this landscape are the challenges brought forth by heretical beliefs that deviate from traditional Christian doctrine. These divergent views threaten the homogeneity of Christian theology, introducing alternative interpretations that often conflict with established teachings. Scholars and theologians are meticulously scrutinizing these developments, engaging in rigorous academic discourse to unravel the complexities these movements bring. Their objective extends beyond merely understanding these contemporary dynamics; it is an effort to assess their implications for the present and future of Christian theology and practice. These studies form a critical part of the ongoing conversation about the evolution of religious belief, the importance of scriptural integrity, and the diverse ways faith is understood and lived out in our contemporary world.

Religion and Education in America

Fraser's seminal work (2016) meticulously examines the complex relationships among religion, education, and law within the United States. His exploration traces various historical eras, offering valuable insights into significant shifts and transformations in these relationships. Fraser discussed the heavy influence of Protestant ideals in the early stages of public schooling and illustrates how early American schools integrated Protestant teachings into their curricula with various carefully selected examples and primary sources. This Protestant influence echoes Hunter’s (1991) discussion of how religious disagreements, primarily of a Protestant nature, influenced various social arenas, including education.

Fraser also delves into the subsequent struggles of religious minorities, such as Catholics and Jews, who aimed to preserve their distinct religious identities while navigating a Protestant-dominated education system. His discussions of the landmark court decisions that established a 'wall of separation' between church and state in public education provide a solid groundwork to understand the legal dynamics involved in these struggles. Addressing contemporary issues, Fraser scrutinizes the debates surrounding school prayer, the teaching of evolution, and the introduction of religious themes in textbooks. His analysis parallels Chancey's (2007) analysis of Bible courses in contemporary public schools and their inherent tensions.

Moreover, Fraser thoroughly examines the controversial issues of private religious schooling and homeschooling, focusing on the state's role in regulating religious education and the ensuing legal battles. This analysis offers invaluable insights into the ongoing discourse on the freedom of religious expression in education. Lastly, Fraser offers a progressive perspective by analyzing emerging trends and potential future challenges. He highlights the growing influence of non-Christian religions in the United States and anticipates how this may reshape the religious landscape of American education.

Fraser demonstrates how, despite the Constitution's prohibition of a state religion, the religious beliefs of the populace continued to exert significant influence on the education system. Founders such as Horace Mann, while advocating for examining sacred texts and traditions in the curriculum, emphasized the separation of indoctrination, leaving religious instruction to the churches attended by the students (Fraser, 2016). However, as the country progressed, the removal of mandated Bible reading and school-sponsored prayer in the 1960s signified a shift away from overt religious practices in public schools (Fraser, 2016).

Fraser's work, in conjunction with the works of Hunter and Chancey, contributes significantly to the understanding of religion and education in the United States. By exploring the intersection of these fields with the law, these scholars provide a multidimensional perspective that promotes a deeper comprehension of the complex dynamics at play.

**Religious Literacy**

In his work "Religious Literacy," Stephen Prothero (2008) addresses the concept of religious literacy and delves into its significance as a pressing societal concern. Prothero's definition of religious literacy encompasses many elements, including religious terms, symbols, beliefs, scriptures, and heroes used in American public life. The author emphasizes the need for religious literacy in the American context, especially when comparing it to compulsory religious education in European systems. He discussed how many American students lack a comprehensive understanding of their religious heritage, creating a disconnect between faith and comprehension.

**Structure and Content of Religious Literacy**

Prothero's (2008) work comprises three sections containing two chapters. The first section, "The Problem," explores the issue of religious illiteracy in American culture and presents a compelling case for its importance. The second section, "The Past," delves into the historical trajectory of religious education in the United States, culminating in its current state. The final section offers solutions and reflections on addressing religious illiteracy in various contexts. Additionally, the book includes a glossary of standard religious terms commonly misunderstood or misused due to a lack of formal education on the subject. An appendix features The Religious Literacy Quiz, an instrument used by Prothero to assess students' understanding of religion at the outset of his religion courses. Prothero acknowledges that religious literacy is crucial for understanding opposing worldviews and one's faith. This aspect is particularly significant for believers seeking to pass on their religious heritage to the next generation, whether as followers or future religious leaders.

The works of Fraser and Prothero provide valuable insights into the historical evolution of religion in American public schools and the importance of religious literacy in a multicultural society. Together, they contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between religion, education, and the law in the United States. They also offer potential solutions for addressing religious illiteracy in contemporary society.

Cultural Trends

Considering the limited resources and opportunities for the American public to gain a comprehensive understanding of Biblical Christianity, the responsibility of the church to prioritize robust worldview development becomes increasingly vital. However, recent studies based on the American Worldview Inventory (AWI) have revealed a disconcerting trend of declining adherence to foundational Christian beliefs within the American community.

**Findings from the American Worldview Inventory**

The AWI has been instrumental in assessing the state of American Christianity in recent years. The 2020 AWI report, "The Church and Worldview," presented alarming statistics regarding evangelicals. It indicated that more than half of evangelicals do not read the Bible daily, fully embrace absolute truth, or recognize the reality of human sin. Additionally, one-third and one-half of evangelicals hold beliefs that diverge from Biblical teachings. The study further revealed that only slightly over half of Pentecostals and Charismatics identified as "born-again," while the figure dropped just below half for mainline Protestants. In a subsequent AWI study conducted in 2021, researchers investigated the notion of being a Christian (Barna, 2021). The findings indicated that while many self-identified Christians held core biblical beliefs, they embraced several unbiblical tenets simultaneously. These included beliefs in the inherent goodness of people, karma, the notion that all religious beliefs are equally valid, the primacy of faith over the specific content of belief, and the possibility of earning salvation.

**Implications of Recent Studies**

The implications from these AWI studies suggest a troubling trend within American Christianity, characterized by an erosion of adherence to essential biblical teachings. This decline in biblical worldview development is particularly concerning given the limited opportunities for public education on Biblical Christianity. As such, it underscores the imperative for churches to address this issue and prioritize the cultivation of robust biblical worldviews among their congregations.

The AWI studies conducted in recent years reveal a disconcerting decline in biblical worldview development within American Christianity. The data highlights the need for the church to play a pivotal role in fostering a more profound understanding and adherence to foundational biblical beliefs among its members. To address this critical issue, concerted efforts are required to strengthen the theological education and spiritual formation of believers, helping them navigate the complexities of modern society while firmly anchored in the timeless truths of Biblical Christianity.

**Unveiling Unbiblical Practices**

Apologists C. Hinn and J. Peters engage in a candid conversation about their experiences with healing and the prosperity gospel movement in an episode of SO4J-TV (Peters & Hinn, 2018). Pastor J. Peters, who has dealt with cerebral palsy throughout his life, voices concerns about the inadequate considerations provided by many prosperity gospel leaders and churches for sincerely faithful Christians facing health issues (Peters & Hinn, 2018). He notes that individuals and their loved ones are often subjected to the distressing belief that their afflictions result from a lack of faith or insufficient giving (Peters & Hinn, 2018). In another episode, C. Hinn, who grew up in the prosperity gospel movement led by his uncle Benny Hinn, shares his journey of leaving this influential group (Peters & Hinn, 2018).

Former New Agers J. Peck and S. Bancarz recount their conversion to Christianity and identify the encroachment of new age practices within Christian churches (Bancarz & Peck, 2018). Drawing from their prior experiences in the new age movement, the authors highlight various examples of unbiblical concepts present or tolerated in modern Christian churches (Bancarz & Peck, 2018). These problematic practices include labyrinths, contemplative prayer, meditation, yoga, and near-death experiences that diverge from Gospel teachings (Bancarz & Peck, 2018). The revelations offered by C. Hinn and J. Peters in the context of the prosperity gospel movement shed light on the potential harm caused by distorted teachings within the Christian faith. The misguided notions of faith, healing, and prosperity can lead to the emotional and spiritual distress of believers grappling with health issues. Similarly, the insights shared by Peck and Bancarz call attention to the challenges posed by the infiltration of new age practices in Christian worship, raising concerns about fidelity to biblical teachings within contemporary Christianity. The testimonies of apologists C. Hinn and J. Peters and the revelations presented by Peck and Bancarz (2018) reflect critically on the prosperity gospel and the influence of new-age practices in modern Christianity. These discussions prompt a reevaluation of Christian teachings and practices, emphasizing the need for greater discernment and adherence to biblical principles within the church to preserve the authentic essence of the Christian faith.

**Prominent Voices**

During 2021, various distinguished Christian authors earned substantial recognition in commercial literature, as their publications pervaded the top 100 bestsellers list. Joel Osteen, renowned for his messages of encouragement and positivity, demonstrated his formidable reach and enduring influence in the Christian literary sphere by securing three spots on this coveted list with his works *Empty Out the Negative* (2020), *Peaceful on Purpose* (2021), and *You Are Stronger than You Think* (2021) (Christian Book Expo, 2023). Simultaneously, Priscilla Shirer, a highly respected author, and orator, experienced considerable acclaim. Two of her publications found their place within the top 100 list, with one earning the distinction of two awards (Christian Book Expo, 2023). This accomplishment further cements Shirer's status as a profound voice within Christian literature, deftly exploring themes of faith and spiritual evolution, as evidenced by the scholarly commentary by Mooney (2023).

In juxtaposition, despite an extensive array of contributions to Christian literature, Tony Evans was absent from this list (Christian Book Expo, 2023). However, his ministry's website affirms his authorship of over 150 publications throughout his ministerial career (Evans, 2023), underscoring his continuous dedication to disseminating Christian knowledge and literature. As Goodwin (2023) aptly noted, Evans' comprehensive body of work significantly influences Christian ideologies and discipleship, a notion not necessarily reflected in the commercial metrics of bestseller lists. Meanwhile, T.D. Jakes maintained a substantial presence on the list, as two of his works procured rankings of 34 and 42, respectively (Christian Book Expo, 2023). These ranks substantiate Jakes' lasting popularity and resonate with Bailey and Smith's (2023) comprehensive study on the reception and influence of Christian literature. Conversely, Steven Furtick, despite his multidimensional contributions to Christian culture and literature, did not feature on the Christian Book Expo's top 100 list for 2021 (Christian Book Expo, 2023). Nevertheless, Furtick's accomplishments are highlighted by his ministry's website, portraying him as a pastor, Grammy-award-winning songwriter & producer, and New York Times best-selling author (Steven Furtick Ministries, 2023). Peterson's (2023) critical analysis in the Religious Studies Review posits that Furtick's influence extends beyond mere book sales, illuminating his significant contributions to the broader Christian culture. These authors' collective literary endeavors and commercial success underscore their substantial influence within the contemporary Christian book market. By offering a reflection on the prevailing trends within Christian thought and providing valuable insights into contemporary believers' religious perceptions and concerns, they significantly contribute to the literary landscape of contemporary Christian writing.