

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19650-5 - The Cambridge Companion to New Religious Movements

Edited by Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein

Excerpt

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Introduction to new religious movements

OLAV HAMMER AND MIKAEL ROTHSTEIN

NEW RELIGIONS AND RELIGIOUS INNOVATION

Religions resemble living organisms. They emerge as distinct entities in the religious landscape when, for example, innovations are introduced by a charismatic leader or a schismatic group leaves its parent organization. They gain momentum if they manage to attract adherents, often shifting shape in the process: the leadership of the charismatic individual is replaced by a more bureaucratic institution, or the initial emotional effervescence of the schismatic group subsides. Some religions disappear in the earliest, formative stages, while others manage to survive the turbulent first years. As time passes, they may enter into a phase of relative stability. Changes still take place, but often at a pace that is so slow that established doctrines and rituals seem to be seamlessly transmitted from generation to generation. Only when a new charismatic authority figure takes center stage, a schismatic group breaks out of the organization, or when external forces undermine the stability of the tradition, do changes once again become visible as equilibrium becomes threatened. Finally, even traditions that have subsisted for centuries or millennia can pass into insignificance or oblivion. Gods that were venerated in the distant past – Marduk of the Babylonians, the Egyptian goddess Isis, Zeus of classical antiquity, and countless others – are reduced to names in the annals of research, as rituals in their honor are no longer performed and stories about them cease to be told.

One of the most important aspects of this life cycle is that the rate of religious change is greatest when a movement is young, and in times of social change or crisis. The rapidity with which innovations are introduced makes religious novelty obvious for all to see: charismatic figures can impose radically unfamiliar doctrines and patterns of behavior on their followers, guidelines for belief and action that were adhered to in the early days of a religious movement may be superseded by new doctrines only a few years later, and modes of behavior declared essential

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for salvation while the founder was alive can be replaced by a radically different ethos under his or her successors. Established traditions also change, but do so at a pace that is so slow that their adherents manage very gradually to adapt, or even fail to notice any changes. An optical illusion thus sets time-honored religions in opposition to younger movements that can seem radically alien.

The 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of a number of highly visible new religious movements. The Children of God (later to be known as The Family), the Unification Church, the Church of Scientology, the Rajneesh movement, the Divine Light Mission, ISKCON (the “Hare Krishnas”), and many other young religions caused alarmed reactions from concerned outsiders. These and other new movements seemed so outlandish that many people saw them as evil cults, fraudulent organizations or scams that recruited unaware people by means of nefarious mind-control techniques. Real or serious religions, it was felt, should appear in recognizable institutionalized forms, be suitably ancient, and – above all – advocate relatively familiar theological notions and modes of conduct. Most new religions failed to comply with such standards. The scholarly study of new religious movements, or NRMs (as the young religions of that period came to be called), originated around this time in an attempt to come to grips with the most pressing questions that these developments raised. Who converted to these movements, and how did the process of conversion take place? How did these movements organize? What made them spring into existence, and what did the typical life cycle of such movements look like? Why did so many of these movements exist in a state of seemingly perpetual conflict with surrounding society? And not least: did these movements pose a danger to society?

STUDYING NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS
AS SOCIAL PHENOMENA

Over the years, a sizeable body of literature emerged that addressed such issues. Much of this literature has been written by social scientists, and is based on methods such as participant observation, surveys, and interviews. The picture revealed by this research (summarized in a chapter by David G. Bromley in this volume) was that many of the most alarmist claims about new religions were misguided. For instance, their recruitment strategies often failed abysmally. Only a tiny proportion of those who were approached by missionaries of the new religious movements converted, and of those who did, most left the movement again

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after a shorter or longer period of engagement. The “brain-washing” techniques that some critics believed were used by these movements to coerce outsiders simply did not exist.

It also became apparent that the differences between the new religions and their older counterparts had been greatly exaggerated in the media and in popular perception. Literature on the new religions noted that their modes of organizing, their doctrines, and their rituals were, under an often exotic veneer, quite familiar from older religions. In a perhaps more innocent age, established religions seemed to come with an automatic stamp of approval. However, classifying NRMs as “ordinary” or “normal” religions was not intended as an endorsement of their essential goodness. It just meant that they were not inherently different, and that even the traits that critics identified as problematic were in fact well known from older traditions. The secret teachings of Scientology, for instance, resembled the mystery cults of antiquity. The strong emotional bonds between some members of NRMs and their charismatic leaders were quite similar to the affective ties found between disciples and leaders in older religions. The fact that members of some movements surrendered their finances and autonomy to such leaders did not seem in any way qualitatively different from, say, the desire of some Christians to abandon their previous lifestyles and yield to monastic discipline. The flamboyant display of wealth of some leaders of NRMs could easily be matched by the demonstration of affluence in established religions. The purported absurdity of the doctrines of some new religions lies entirely in the eyes of the beholder – after all, established theological traditions risk seeming just as absurd to critical outsiders. Even the new religions that had descended into a spiral of violence, such as the Peoples Temple in Guyana, whose members either committed mass suicide or were murdered, or the Aum Shinrikyo movement, which perpetrated gas attacks in the Tokyo subway, demonstrated that violence in ways matched by older religions. Besides, it was also clear from the sociological literature that such cases were exceedingly rare.

Years of sociological and anthropological research on unconventional religions thus confirmed the impression with which we started this chapter: new religions are just young religions, and tend to resemble all other young religions. And equally: old traditions such as Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism were once young religions, and as far as the interpretive difficulties allow us to judge from the sources, faced the same challenges and issues as all other young religions, and experienced the same degree of conflict with surrounding society. As Paul

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puts it in 1 Corinthians 1:23, emergent Christianity was a scandal to the Jews and folly to the Greeks.

Most young religions are thus received with a mixture of distance and mistrust by outsiders, and conversely adherents of most young religions view majority society as misguided or corrupt. This was certainly the case in the formative age of now well-established traditions (as the turbulent history of early Christianity amply attests) and this remains the case to this day. Many new religions are characterized by an elitist self-perception. Many promote doctrines that seem truly odd to outsiders, and some reserve access to their core doctrines to initiated members. Quite a few new religions encourage a lifestyle that differs markedly from that of the social majority: members may wear distinctive clothes, choose new names, adopt a mode of communal living that sets them physically apart from others, or adopt dietary restrictions or other modes of behavior that make them stand out as a distinct group. Controversies and conflicts tend to arise with such groups, an issue that is surveyed in James Richardson's chapter. Since tensions with surrounding society are so common, several of the chapters that describe specific movements also deal with this question. Examples include the Church of Scientology, known not least for its policy of entering into litigation with critics (see the chapter by James R. Lewis). As seen in the chapter on Satanism (by Asbjørn Dyrendal and Jesper Aagaard Petersen), conflict can be a constitutive part of the religious movement's identity to such a degree that the most potent symbol of cultural subversion, Satan, is used as a self-designation.

Nevertheless, not all religious innovation entails tension. A chapter on the New Age (by George Chryssides), documents a form of religiosity that tends to reject parts of the mainstream Christian heritage, embraces concepts such as reincarnation, accepts alternative views of history, crafts new rituals and so forth, but is nevertheless rarely seen as a social menace, and has become part of popular culture in much of the West. The main reason for this low level of tension, we suspect, is the fact that New Age interests do not impel people to switch lifestyle to any significant degree, and allow them to pick and choose religious elements without necessarily deferring to the authority of a charismatic leader.

Other topics that have received much attention in the social science-based literature concern the use of modern communications, and the global presence of NRMs. Until quite recently, contacts between members of religious movement were largely face-to-face. Earlier global new religions were spread through the personal efforts of the leaders,

who at great cost and with considerable personal hardship set out on worldwide missionary tours. Present-day NRMs benefit from the ease and low cost of global communications. A chapter by Douglas Cowan discusses the consequences of the Internet for creating and maintaining religious communities.

Globalization affects NRMs across the board. Movements that have originated in the West have gained an international membership. On the other hand, NRMs that emerge in contexts outside of North America and Western Europe are cognizant also of developments in the West, and the creation of new religions takes place on a global scale. Chapters by Marat Shterin and Peter B. Clarke discuss NRMs in Russia and Africa, respectively. Indeed, the conditions for religious innovation are global to the extent that Jihadist movements in the contemporary period, arguably some of the most “alien” of all new religions from a Western perspective, display all the characteristics of new religious movements described in the sociological literature (see the chapter by Reuven Firestone).

STUDYING NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS AS RELIGIONS

The study of new religious movements was thus concerned with a fairly narrow range of (often sociological) questions, but the field has gradually gone beyond this initial focus and has begun to apply the same theories and methods to new religions as to more familiar traditions. The repertoire of basic elements of religions, as found anywhere in the world and throughout recorded history – myths, rituals, sacred texts, conceptions of history, visions of the future – can also be found in young religions, and the theories and methods applied to studying these elements in established traditions can also be profitably applied to NRMs. The mechanisms that promote innovation in religions are also similar in established and in new religions: appeals to charisma or to tradition, the creative reinterpretation of the religion’s heritage of concepts and practices, and so forth. Many chapters in the present volume are concerned with such fundamental elements as these are manifested in new religions, and the basics can be briefly summarized here.

Charismatic leadership

Many new religions are the creations of specific individuals. The founding figure will be vested with the right to direct the everyday activities of the group and define its doctrinal positions. The authority to

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do so derives from the unique status attributed to these leaders, who already in life, and to an even greater extent after their death, are presented in mythological narratives that transform them into exalted beings. An illustrative example is the founder of Scientology, L. Ron Hubbard (1911–1986), who to his followers is not only “every human’s best friend,” but also the most brilliant individual who has ever lived. It is believed that Hubbard gained ultimate insight into virtually all important areas of life, and that the discoveries that he was able to impart to his fellow humans is the only hope for our species. During the first years of his movement, Hubbard played a very visible role, but as his organization grew, he largely withdrew from public life and became inaccessible to his disciples. In particular after his death, a vast hagiographic tradition has been constructed by his organization, and in a sense Hubbard has become freely available again as the center of Scientological devotion, albeit now through texts, videos, and recordings (a phenomenon known in the sociology of religion as the routinization of charisma). Historians of religions and others have documented a less flattering reality regarding Hubbard, but this is a matter of little or no concern for Scientologists, who continue to view Hubbard as an unparalleled genius.

Mythological historiography

A mythologically based historiography that places the movement, its leader, and everything the movement stands for at a crucial point in time and space is another characteristic element of many new religions. Many religions present themselves as the culmination of all previous history: the spiritual insights found in existing scriptures and the revelations imparted to the prophets of bygone times are merely precursors to the absolute truths available through the new religion. Millenarian or apocalyptic theories of what the future will entail are other typical features of the mythological perspective of many young religions. For instance, according to the theologians of the Unificationist movement (also known as Unification Church or informally as “the Moonies,” after the movement’s founder and leader, Sun Myung Moon, b.1920), the very existence of the movement is the result of a divine plan. All problems, whether individual or global, are said to be the result of sinful behavior, and it is claimed that the original sin – the disregard of divine command – originated with Adam and Eve, who failed to form a perfect, divine family. The movement teaches that Jesus was sent to earth to establish the first ideal, “God-centered” family from which a new humanity should rise, but that he also failed. Now, however, “the Third Adam” has appeared in the guise of Moon. The redeemer or savior has finally arrived, and according to unificationist theology we are therefore

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living in an age of transformation. As expressed by Moon: "I have encountered the living God through a lifetime of prayer and meditation, and have been given this absolute truth. Its remarkable contents clarify all the secrets hidden behind the entire universe, behind human life and behind human history."¹ The history of sinful humanity has come to an end, and with the presence of Moon and his wife, the foundation has been laid for a coming golden age.

Reusing existing religious elements

Religions throughout history have incorporated and reused existing religious and cultural elements, and have recombined and reinterpreted myths, doctrines, and rituals that were already available. The foundational canon of Christianity not only refers to numerous events in the Hebrew Bible, but has appropriated the entirety of its predecessor's scriptures as the Old Testament. The emergence of Buddhism is predicated on the critical use and appropriation of pan-Indian concepts such as karma and reincarnation. Similarly, modern religions have roots in already existing religions, and can be classified in a small number of types or "families," depending on whether the main source of inspiration is, for example, Christian, Hindu, or Buddhist. In some cases, the links are easy to detect. The Sathya Sai Baba movement, for instance, is clearly an offshoot of the vast family of Hindu traditions (see the chapter by Tulasi Srinivas). In others, the reuse of tradition is freer, and "tradition" can in some cases be a modern invention. The various neopagan movements, documented in a chapter by Sabina Magliocco, may bear some vague relationship to the pre-Christian nature religions that they wish to recreate, but are essentially new religions. The neo-Sufi movements described by Mark Sedgwick in his chapter draw partly on Islamic sources, but can be very free in their interpretation of what these sources say.

Very rarely, a recombination and re-use of earlier elements becomes the fertile point of departure of a family of its own. One of the most successful of all new religions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is the Theosophical Society. The mother organization lost much of its momentum after the 1930s, although it still has thousands of members worldwide. The main reason for including a chapter on Theosophy (by James Santucci) in the present volume is, however, not its status as a somewhat older NRM, but rather because Theosophy as a set of concepts and doctrines has influenced contemporary popular religion to an unprecedented degree. Theosophical understandings of reincarnation, the human aura, and the chakras (focal points of "energy" in occult human physiology), for instance, have become known to millions of people.

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Finally, NRMs do not only reuse materials from older religions, but have a much vaster pool of resources at their disposal. By incorporating elements from contemporary culture, such quintessentially modern phenomena arise as religions with a psychotherapeutic aim and religions based on an appeal to science (see the chapter on Scientology by James R. Lewis).

Two chapters in the present volume are specifically devoted to the creative crafting of religious texts and rituals (by Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein, and Graham Harvey, respectively). The selective adaptation and creative reuse of existing elements is, however, apparent in all the case studies of specific religions presented in this volume. A particularly apt example of a movement that has used existing elements to create something that at first glance may appear radically innovative is the Raëlian religion (as documented in a chapter by Susan Palmer and Bryan Sentes). On the one hand, it presents itself as a scientific UFO-based religion: its mythology focuses on the deeds of hyper-technological extraterrestrials, whose scientific insights are to be emulated by the human race. On the other hand, its beliefs can also be seen as a radical reinterpretation of Jewish and Christian mythology. The prophet Raël rooted his teachings in biblical narratives, but with the crucial qualification that the Bible had hitherto been thoroughly misunderstood. The creator, Elohim or God, is not really a deity, but actually refers to a group of highly evolved space beings who created life on earth by means of advanced genetics, and the Temple mentioned in the Old Testament is in reality a veiled reference to their laboratories. The “immaculate conception” of mainstream Christianity refers to medically facilitated extra-uterine conception, and “eternal life” to repeated cloning of the same individual.

In most cases, however, new religions recycle old beliefs and rituals in less radical ways. Usually a balance is sought between the innovative and the traditional, so that innovative elements remain rooted in existing traditions. In fact, one of the most frequent ways of justifying the introduction of novel elements is to insist that they represent a return to forgotten truths and ancient revelations. Hence, the adherents of many new religions vehemently deny that there is anything new about the doctrines and practices that they follow.

Notes

- 1 See www.reverendsunmyungmoon.org/teach_read_unification_theology.html.

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Further readings and other resources

A significant number of academic publications on new religions have appeared during the last decades. Some books offer a general discussion, others are devoted to specific religions, yet others are thematic; some are strictly sociological, others multi-disciplinary. References to books and articles on specific new religions or on particular themes can be found after each chapter, but here are a few general titles that can serve as introductory guides for relative newcomers to the field. We limit ourselves to literature in English.

Books

- Arweck, Elisabeth, *Researching New Religious Movements: Responses and Redefinitions* (London, 2006).
- Chrystides, George D., *Exploring New Religions* (London and New York, 1999).
- Chrystides, George D. and Margaret Z. Wilkins (eds.), *A Reader in New Religious Movements* (London and New York, 2006).
- Clarke, Peter B., *New Religions in Global Perspective: A Study of Religious Change in the Modern World* (London, 2006).
- Clarke, Peter B. (ed.), *Encyclopedia of New Religious Movements* (London, 2008).
- Cowan, Douglas and David G. Bromley, *Cults and New Religions: A Brief History* (Malden, MA and Oxford, 2008).
- Lewis, James R. (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements* (Oxford, 2004).
- Partridge, Christopher (ed.), *Encyclopedia of New Religions: New Religious Movements, Sects and Alternative Spiritualities* (Oxford, 2004).

Journals

- International Journal for the Study of New Religions*
www.equinoxpub.com/IJSNR
- Journal of Alternative Spiritualities and New Age Studies*
www.asanas.org.uk
- Journal of Contemporary Religion*
www.tandf.co.uk/journals/cjcr
- Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*
www.novareligio.org

Academic websites

- <http://networkingreligiousmovements.org/>
www.cesnur.org

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