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Olav Hammer , Karen Swartz
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Introduction

The study of new religious movements (NRMs) was born at a time when much of the West found itself in the grip of a rising moral panic.[1] Most of Europe and North America had majority Christian populations, but, by the 1960s, globalization and countercultural impulses had begun to alter the cultural landscape in increasingly noticeable ways, including the rise of a number of highly visible new religions, such as Scientology, the Hare Krishna movement (ISKCON), the Children of God, and the Unification Church. In a sense, this development was nothing new. Religious creativity was flourishing for generations prior to the appearance of these recent arrivals, and observers of the cultural scene could have pointed at numerous movements, like Spiritualism, Theosophy, Christian Science, and the Jehovah's Witnesses, as examples of such predecessors. Christianity itself, of course, was once a new and controversial religion during its formative years nearly two millennia ago (see, e.g., Hammer & Rothstein 2023) and has since that time spawned innumerable, and initially unfamiliar, offshoots. Religious innovation, in other words, is a perennial and ubiquitous phenomenon. Such facts, however, are often left by the perceptual wayside when potential threats are sensed, and thus the new religions of the post–Second World War era provoked various, and frequently negative, reactions among the general public. Concerned parents of young converts, Christian apologetic writers, and representatives of the media painted them up as decidedly bizarre and nefarious cults, and a common argument made by the critics of these newcomers was that they were so brazenly different from the more established religions that they must have made use of extraordinary methods for recruitment. Perhaps, according to this line of reasoning, these organizations had developed particularly effective brainwashing techniques for luring the innocent and unaware into their clutches (see, e.g., Introvigne 2022). Some critics believed that cult members had become so bereft of the ability to draw upon the powers of their own free will that being subjected to a regime of deprogramming, which might involve such elements as abduction and being held in isolation, was the only way to liberate them.

By the mid-1960s, approaches of a more academic provenance aiming to understand these movements had begun to take form, and, perhaps unsurprisingly, they tended to concentrate on coming to grips with what were then the most pressing questions provoked by these developments. The study of new religions was thus from its earliest days heavily oriented toward a particular set of sociological approaches and focused on such themes as recruitment patterns

[1] The indispensable monograph discussing the origins and development of the study of new religious movements is Ashcraft (2018).

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and conflicts with mainstream society. That the area came to be dominated by this specific set of approaches had nothing to do with any kind of inherent logical necessity; instead, historical contingencies led to a particular mode of investigating new religions establishing itself as the self-evident choice.

At the time of this writing, more than half a century has passed since the field was established, and the markings of such a pronounced sociological emphasis on their "otherness" are still apparent. This unmistakable slant in focus is in some respects a paradox. One of the most robust findings of research carried out on NRMs is that they largely resemble religions with a longer history and a more established presence. Approaches that treat new religions just like any other religion and hence analyze them in ways that have been staples of the comparative study of religion as a historical and cultural phenomenon are, although certainly not entirely absent, less common than perspectives mentioned earlier. The aim of the present Element is to provide an entry-level introduction to NRMs as seen through the lenses of a selection of approaches that highlight the many features that they share with historically more well-established religions. In particular, we take up examples of the ways in which the leaders and members of NRMs, just as their peers do in traditional religions, craft and disseminate myths, create and perform rituals, compose, study, and comment upon canonical texts, and, not least, manifest their presence by means of producing a material culture which can include such elements as sacred buildings as well as objects stemming from the natural world which are treated in ritualized fashion. A section is devoted to each of these topics.

Why are new and older religions similar to each other in so many ways? The concluding section of this Element will, by calling upon the cognitive science of religion (CSR) for help, offer a few possible answers to this question. Underlying this last part is the argument that the human brain is the result of a long process of evolution. According to this perspective, conceptualizations of deities are products of the human mind and hence are similar in various religions, as are the rules these suprahuman beings wish us to abide by. The comparative study of religions should, however, not just highlight their commonalities but also contribute to a greater understanding of their differences. Since religions are part and parcel of the culture of a given society, it stands to reason that they mirror particular social and historical contexts, a theme that will be briefly explored in these final pages.

In order to illustrate various points we wish to make along the way, we will make use of a mix of examples which to some extent represents our own areas of interest and expertise. The cases we present largely come from the religious landscapes of Europe and the United States. Some concern movements already studied by the first generation of NRM scholars (such as Scientology and ISKCON).

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Others have to do with new religions with a historical background in late-nineteenth-century occultism (like Theosophy and Anthroposophy). Yet other cases discussed here are not, strictly speaking, part of organized new religions but instead of what sociologist Colin Campbell (1972) called the cultic milieu: ephemeral movements, unaffiliated individuals, and loosely knit networks of people whose practices and beliefs are considered heterodox by mainstream society (e.g., Flat Earth theories and Reiki healing).

Two final questions remain to be dealt with before we close this introductory section. First, how recently produced does a religion need to be in order for us to consider it as being new, and, second, which kinds of phenomena do we count as religions? The former admittedly invites a certain degree of arbitrariness. One could argue that the term "new religions" is merely another way of saying "religion in its formative stage" and then study, say, emergent Christianity in the first decades of the Common Era as an NRM. Much scholarship has, however, tended to confine the term to signifying religions of the modern age, with the Second World War often serving as a rough starting point, but this can be seen as a matter of convention rather than as a solidly argued and theoretically grounded delimitation. No essential difference, we argue, would seem to demarcate a movement that was founded a century or more ago from more recent arrivals on the scene, and our examples therefore are taken from a span of time that begins with the birth of Mormonism around 1830, and which continues to the present day.

The second question, what counts as a religion, also requires a somewhat arbitrary answer. As a very basic way of addressing it, we take religions to be socially shared practices and concepts which ultimately refer to a culturally defined suprahuman dimension. The qualification "socially shared" means that we exclude idiosyncratic ideas and behaviors belonging to the private domain of a single individual and that we consider to be religions not only structured movements one can formally join as a member, but also social formations organized in less overt ways. From this perspective, it follows that people who have read and found plausible a book about reincarnation or who have taken a course on a spiritual topic or who have participated in a Facebook group devoted to such topics or who have consulted a practitioner of a form of healing or divination, and who have done any or all of these things with no further degree of commitment, have all been at least minimally engaged with a religious practice. This broad understanding of the term "religion" also leads us to use as examples phenomena that insiders would not necessarily recognize as religion or as religious (as is the case with many of the loosely organized New Age practices) or whose spokespersons would vehemently deny are religions (as is the case with Anthroposophy). Toward the end of the last

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section, we will briefly return to the question of why insiders and researchers can have diametrically opposed answers to whether any given phenomenon in contemporary culture can fruitfully be understood as religion.

1 Myths

New religious movements, like their more traditional counterparts, provide narratives that elaborate upon the creation of the cosmos, the emergence over time of various cultural advances, the course of history, and the end of time. Some NRMs take as their point of departure the stories found in existing religious traditions, others draw selectively upon science and popular culture, whereas yet others promote remarkably innovative accounts. Narratives of this kind are typically labelled myths when encountered in more well-established religions, and it seems natural to use the same label to categorize structurally similar stories in NRMs. The term "myth," however, has been defined and understood in a variety of ways, and before proceeding to discuss specific categories and examples found in NRMs, we will introduce a perspective on myth that we will apply throughout this section. We will then provide instances of the ways in which crucial events in the passage of time, from the creation of the world to its eventual demise in an eschatological future, are presented in various NRMs. We will highlight in particular how the ideology of these movements is reflected in mythological form. As mentioned in the Introduction, religion, as we understand it, can take other shapes than organizations with a well-defined locus of authority, and the last part of this section deals with the ways in which mythological creativity can function when people in loose networks united by little more than an interest in unconventional ideas jointly create stories about the emergence of human civilization or the structure of the cosmos.

Approaching the Study of Myths

The term "myth" is, and has been, understood in a bewildering variety of ways. One common approach is to define it as a particular narrative genre. Consider this bare-bones summary of the story told in the first chapter of the book of Genesis. The narrative explains God's first steps were creating the heavens and the earth. Gradually transforming and setting in order a world of darkness and chaos, God created light, separated land from water, and made vegetation spring forth. God arranged the heavenly bodies, created the innumerable animals that populate the world, and ended the job by creating human beings "in his image." The narrative we just offered, minimalist and lackluster as it may be, fits the definition proposed in a widely cited text that defines myths in terms of their

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genre (Bascom 1965). It deals with a time in the distant past when the world was being organized and it has a suprahuman protagonist (God) as its main character.

In popular usage, myth often serves to refer to a narrative that does not accurately represent the facts of a situation. This meaning of the word is commonly traced back to the ancient Greeks, and to Plato in particular, who distinguished *mythos* from *logos*. While these two terms have a convoluted history, the latter eventually came to signify a true account as opposed to the far more dubious *mythos*.[2] Adopting the normative evaluation that results from imposing such a dichotomy, proponents of evolutionist and secularist understandings of cultural change assumed that mythological accounts of matters like the origin of the cosmos would give way to scientific ones in modern societies. This, however, has clearly not been the case: old myths are retold, and new ones continue to be created, which demonstrates that such narratives are as central as ever to the religious imagination. Unsurprisingly, stories that we classify as myths continue to be told by many religious insiders simply because from their perspective, they are true. For millions of conservative Christians, for instance, the creation accounts appearing in Genesis remain relevant because from their viewpoint, they are accurate renderings of historical happenings. Approaches that stress that myths fulfill important functions other than merely offering explanations for diverse phenomena suggest additional reasons for their persistence in the modern age. For example, an insistence upon the first human couple having been created separately from all other creatures provides a counternarrative against a Darwinian account that many regard as a sinister attack on Christian core values; for many, this has become a central identity marker for a range of religiously conservative people who may identify their beliefs as creationist.

Functionalist accounts of myth go back to the emergence of the study of religions, but radically divergent opinions have been voiced throughout the history of the field regarding precisely what that function is.[3] Does myth encode fundamental processes in the human psyche, as Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, each in their own distinct way, maintained? Is it the expression of a profound truth about a sacred reality, as Mircea Eliade proposed? Does it, as Claude Lévi-Strauss suggested, arrange thought in accordance with the rules of an underlying structural grammar? Although Freudian, Jungian, Eliadean, and structuralist approaches continue to have advocates, their influence appears to have waned over time. By contrast, a substantial and enduring stream of writings explores the function that

[2] Lincoln (1999: 3–43) discusses the shifting meanings of the two terms in antiquity.
[3] Surveys of various approaches to myth include Strenski (1987), Dubuisson (2014), and Segal (2021). For a brief, but quite inclusive list, see McCutcheon (2000: 193–8).

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myths fulfill in legitimizing particular social orders. We find an early example in *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (originally published in 1926) where the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski suggests that myths are narratives that justify present-day customs, such as carrying out a ritual or following a social rule, by narrating how those customs stretch back to the dawn of time. Malinowski's approach to myth largely sees a society and its culture as an organic whole that functions smoothly because myths provide the fundamental charter that legitimizes the social order. Any complex society will, however, encompass people with different interests, and later writers have explored the role myths can have in justifying social inequalities and the dominance of one group over others. Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (1957), in particular, explores the ways in which narratives, rituals, and images can simultaneously convey an overt surface message and project an underlying ideological subtext. His most celebrated example is a picture featured on the cover of the French magazine *Paris-Match* in which a young Black soldier performs a military salute while facing an object outside the frame of the image that the viewer will, based upon the suggested context, likely assume is a French flag. Barthes' claim that the image legitimized colonial oppression by pretending that people who were colonized by France loyally supported the political order of their colonizers may not seem particularly radical today, but his reading was far more subversive at the time. As this case suggests, Barthes cast the net widely and applied the term "myth" to a very diverse set of data. In more recent years, prominent examples of such approaches that focus on the ideological functions of myths in a narrower sense, that is, narratives that form part of a religious system, include Bruce Lincoln (1999) and Russell McCutcheon (2000).

That myths are permeated by ideological messages is hardly a controversial statement. Stories about human origins can argue that wealth ought to be in the hands of certain people and not others, that only a particular social group should wield power, that one gender is inherently superior, or that one ethnic group should be allowed to dominate others. The myth of the Fall told in chapter 3 of Genesis describes the expulsion of the first human couple from the Garden of Eden, an event that forced them to exchange their previously utopian existence for a life in which they would experience suffering. Eve was the first to eat of the famous forbidden fruit, and when God discovered her disobedience, he decreed that all women were henceforth to be ruled over by their husbands (Genesis 3:16). Unsurprisingly, this passage has been frequently invoked to justify patriarchal demarcations of gender roles.

A point that Barthes also makes is that the pervasive underlying ideology his analysis uncovers is that of the dominant class, which for him was the French bourgeoisie. Since NRMs are rarely dominant within their host societies, one would not expect their myths to unequivocally reflect the prevailing ideology of

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the surrounding culture. On the contrary, the very notion of a minority religion implies that a group of people has concluded that the truths that they proclaim and the practices they espouse are superior to those of the mainstream. This oppositional stance lies at the core of a seeming paradox. New myths are rarely completely novel. Instead, they are constructed through the process of bricolage identified by anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966: 16): They are fashioned by people selecting elements from a pool of existing cultural resources, whereby these elements are combined in novel and perhaps unexpected ways, and a few truly innovative claims are added. The myths that place new religions in opposition to the values and beliefs of mainstream society thus depend on the ability of creative individuals to reuse existing cultural elements, and as the following examples illustrate, the oppositional ideological messages they promote will in various ways both reflect and reject some of the values of mainstream society.

Creation Myths

The Nation of Islam, an organization founded in 1930, promotes a message of Black ethno-nationalism crafted in religious terms.[4] A central myth of this movement describes race relations in a distant past. According to it, a Black deity by the name of Allah created the first humans, the tribe of Shabazz, who lived in Mecca and the Nile valley. This first race of human beings was Black, like their creator, and were possessors of an advanced level of scientific knowledge. Roughly 6,000 years ago, one of their most gifted scientists, Yakub, created a new race as the result of a 600-year-long process of breeding. The pale beings that emerged were, however, found to be evil devils. They were dispersed into an area that is today known as Europe and were permitted to rule the world from there for 6,000 years. The myth thus conveys a form of racial gnosis; that is, it teaches the members of the Nation of Islam that Black people and White people are fundamentally different, that White people are inherently inferior, and that the domination of much of the world by people of European descent is coming to an end. In a society that has oppressed and marginalized Black people for centuries, this is clearly an ideologically oppositional counter-narrative. At the same time, the myth aligns with key aspects of majority culture. It builds upon and inverts a concept of race that was formulated in the nineteenth century by writers such as Arthur de Gobineau (1816–1882), whose publications present history in racial terms and extol the supposed superiority of Whites. Although early sources sometimes present the myth as an undisputed

[4] On the Nation of Islam, see Gardell (1996). Its origin myth is summarized and discussed in Ansari (1981: 162–7).

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