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## New religious movements: their incidence and significance

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New Religious Movements: Their Incidence and Significance

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Bryan Wilson (ed.)

## New Religious Movements: Their Incidence and Significance

### **Introduction**

The subject that I address in this introduction - the incidence and significance of new religious movements - is enormous, and the necessity to select a few points from the many that could be raised is but an invitation to anticipate at a superficial level what others will be exploring in far greater depth. I can hope to do no more than raise some of the more obvious (though sometimes forgotten) questions that relate to the challenge of the movements and to the responses to which their presence has given rise.

### **Statistical significance**

Despite the fact that there is a surprisingly large number of NRMs peppering the free world at the present time, and that a considerable number of persons have been affected by the movements, the real significance of new religions in modern society is not a statistical significance. Certainly, there is no indication that I have come across in the West which suggests that any one movement is showing signs of becoming a major religious tradition during the life of its first, second or even third generation members. This argument is less forceful in Japan, where it has been estimated that between ten and twenty per cent of the population are followers of one or other NRM,<sup>i</sup> and where a movement such as Soka Gakkai claims several million followers - but even its impressive growth seems to have reached a plateau, at least at the present time - and it should be remembered that at least 80% of the population are not followers of any NRM.

### **How many NRMs have we now?**

The short answer is that we do not know with much accuracy what the incidence of new religions is. A somewhat longer answer starts with the simple truth that, of course, it all depends on what is meant by an NRM. Do we include each and every New Age group or do we lump them together as a single 'movement'? Do we include movements within mainstream traditions (Opus Dei, Folklore, the House Church movement - *each* House Church)? What about the African Independent Churches? What about the United Reform Church? Are the 'self-religions' or Human Potential groups really new *religious* movements? How new is new? What about Subud, Vedanta or possibly Jehovah's Witnesses which is

the first `sect' that comes to mind in a country such as Italy when the phrase new religious movement is mentioned? Might we include even the anti-cult movement - sections of it certainly exhibit several of the characteristics that `anti-cultists' themselves attribute to `cults'?

### *Definitions of movements*

There is, of course, no `right' answer. Definitions are more or less useful, not more or less true. The definition from which I personally start - for purely pragmatic reasons - is that an NRM is new in so far as it has become visible in its *present form* since the Second World War, and that it is religious in so far as it offers not merely narrow theological statements about the existence and nature of supernatural beings, but that it proposes answers to at least some of the other kinds of ultimate questions that have traditionally been addressed by mainstream religions. Questions such as: *Is there a God? Who am I? How might I find direction, meaning and purpose in life? Is there life after death? Is there more to human beings than their physical bodies and immediate interactions with others?*

### *Numbers of movements*

INFORM has over 2000 different groups on its computer, the majority (but not all) of which might be called NRMs.<sup>ii</sup> Given that there must be a good many groups about which we have not heard, it would not be unreasonable to assume that, including schisms but not branches of the same group under different names, there could be over 2,000 discrete groups in Europe. Gordon Melton, who uses a much narrower definition, which excludes the human potential groups, can provide some information on nearly 1000 groups in America.<sup>iii</sup> Shimazono says that scholarly estimates of the number of NRMs in Japan vary from 800 to a few thousand.<sup>iv</sup> Several years ago, Harold Turner estimated that there were 10,000 new religions with 12 million or more adherents in among the tribal peoples of the Americas, Asia, Africa and the Pacific.<sup>v</sup> He would include the African Independent Churches, but untold numbers of new religions may be found in India; several hundreds exist in South America, Australia and New Zealand and in places such as the West Indies, Korea and the Philippines.

In short, while clearly dependent on the definition used, the number of NRMs according to my broad definition is likely to be in the order of four figures (two or more thousand) in the West and five figures (probably somewhere in the lower tens of thousands) world-wide.

### **How many members?**

Attempting to assess the incidence of the movements seems like child's play when one turns to questions concerning membership numbers. Many of the movements do not count, keep secret, or distort (usually upwards) their membership figures. We know that some NRMs have only a handful of members - a score or less - while others have hundreds or thousands, with a few (but only a very few with any credibility) claiming millions.

### *Definitions of membership*

There is, moreover, a vast range of levels of membership: there are totally committed members who (like monks or nuns) devote their lives to their movement, living as a community and working full-time for it; there are associate members (similar to congregational members), who may come to a centre on a weekly basis for worship or a course; and there are sympathisers (or 'nominal' members) who may be in general agreement with an NRM's beliefs and practices, but whose lives are not very widely or deeply affected by their somewhat peripheral affiliation. While for some purposes it is only committed members who are counted, at other times or in different movements, one can find included even those who have done little more than sign a piece of paper saying that they are in general sympathy with some of the movement's beliefs.

### *Double-counting*

Further confusion may arise as the result of double-counting. It is not impossible - indeed, as one moves toward the New Age end of the NRM spectrum, it is quite common - for individuals to have overlapping memberships, happily hopping from one 'self-religion' to another. It would not be impossible for committed seekers in California, Amsterdam or Highgate to spend twenty minutes in

Transcendental Meditation each morning before embarking on their Tai Chi, then going on to attend a channelling session on Monday, to meet with their Co-Counsellor on Tuesday, have an Alexander lesson on Wednesday, watch an Osho video on Thursday and participate in a Forum Seminar throughout the weekend. Two months later one might find them chanting *Hare Krishna, Om Shanti* - or, perhaps, *Nam Myoho Renge Kyo*.

#### *Turn-over*

There is, furthermore, the complication of high turn-over rates. Both the movements and their opponents tend to play down this characteristic of many of the better-known NRMs. On the one hand, few new religions are eager to publicise the fact that a sizable number of their members have found the movement wanting; on the other hand, anti-cultists who are eager to defend 'the brainwashing thesis' do not wish to publicise the fact that the 'victims' not only can, but do, of their own free will, leave those very NRMs that are accused of employing irresistible and irreversible techniques of mind control.<sup>vi</sup>

So far as our present interests are concerned, this means that it is frequently the number of people who have passed through a movement, rather than the current membership, that is counted. Being familiar with the phrase 'Once a Catholic, always a Catholic', we should not be surprised that the Church of Scientology considers all those who have ever done one of their courses to be a Scientologist, and counts them as such even if they have not been in touch with the movement for years - even, presumably, if they are among the movement's most vitriolic opponents.

And it cannot be denied that there is no way in which I, having *done* the course (albeit for purposes of research), *cannot* be an *est* graduate - or, rather, a Forum graduate. (In *that* sense - and, let me insist, in that sense only - the anti-cultists who, as a result of my participant observation, accuse me of being 'numbered' among cult members are, doubtless, correct.)

### **The cultural milieu**

A further point that ought to be raised so far as incidence is concerned, but which, at the same time, propels us towards the 'significance' part of my remit, is something about which Colin Campbell has written extensively: the cultic milieu.<sup>vii</sup>

One of the features of modern society which sociologists of religion, such as Durkheim, Weber and Wilson, have frequently pointed out is that organised religion no longer has the kind of hold over social institutions that it has enjoyed in earlier periods. Religion has become increasingly a leisure pursuit that may be 'privatised', 'individualised' or even, to borrow Luckmann's term, 'invisible'. Mainstream religious organisations have suffered significant losses of membership in most of Europe and, according to some, though not all, commentators, in the United States. Any one who has made but the most cursory of enquiries about people's religious positions in Western society will be all too familiar with the sentiment: 'You don't have to go to church to be a good Christian'.

Concomitantly, in place of a relatively homogeneous, coherent, and more or less shared culture, we have witnessed the growth of religious pluralism, interwoven with numerous social changes such as increased social and geographical mobility, universal franchise, universal education and the break-up of a traditional occupational structure, traditional values and authority structures - all of which can contribute to a dissatisfaction with, or at least a second look at, the beliefs and practices that might otherwise have been passed on by parents or others in roles of authority - thus creating a potential 'demand' (in the economic sense) for alternative ways of satisfying spiritual and religious requirements.

On the 'supply' side, although it should be remembered that most of the traditional Churches still supply more people with their religion than does any NRM, we have expanding missionary activity and escalating migration - a factor that Melton has repeatedly pointed to is the relaxing of the US immigration laws in 1965, which allowed a number of gurus to enter the States and thus promote the

growth of religions with Eastern origins. And, of course, there has been the development of a mass media (supplemented by all manner of electronic, satellite and internet devices) swelling the variety of (broadly-defined) religious resources that have become available to any one individual participating in the cultural milieu. All sorts of ideas are out there. And many of these ideas originate from, are carried by, and/or are reinforced by new religious movements.

This is particularly obvious with a number of New Age ideas such as person-centred spirituality and/or the potential of individual development. And, while fifty years ago none but a very small proportion of Christians would have seriously countenanced the idea of reincarnation, the European Value Surveys, the International Social Survey Programme and several other research projects tell us that anywhere between a fifth and a quarter of Europeans and north Americans now believe that we shall return to this world in another body when we have shuffled off this mortal coil. Such a belief was reported by 24% of Britons - though it might be noted that several of these respondents *also* reported believing in the resurrection of the body.<sup>viii</sup>

The point that I want to make here is that, when attempting to chart the incidence and/or significance of NRMs, we might want to be at least aware of, even if we do not include, those who are not officially members of any particular NRM. There are people who might be horrified at the thought they could be in any way connected with a 'cult', but are who, none the less, 'recipients', even carriers, of ideas and practices that are borne by, if not always born in, NRMs.

And while we are considering this category of persons loosely adding to the social significance of the movements, may I suggest that we might also recognise the existence, first, of members of the media who use and promote NRM ideas; secondly, of members of the mainstream religions who have picked up ideas and practices originating or transmitted by NRMs; thirdly, of managers and other personnel in business corporations who invite and/or attend courses liberally imbued with NRM ideas and practices; and, fourthly, members of the anti-cult movements who have played such a significant role

in promoting the high profile that certain NRMs and their members have achieved in the past three decades or so. It is, indeed, members of the Evangelical wing of the counter-cult movement who can be credited with spreading certainly the idea, and arguably some of the practices, of ritual Satanic abuse in North America, Western and Eastern Europe, Australia and elsewhere around the world.<sup>ix</sup>

### **Generalising about NRMs**

One cannot generalise about NRMs. The only thing that they have in common is that they have been labelled as an NRM or 'cult'. The movements differ from each other so far as their origins, their beliefs, their practices, their organisation, their leadership, their finances, their life-styles and their attitudes to women, children, education, moral questions and the rest of society are concerned. Attempts to produce typologies have been limited, and even relatively useful distinctions (such as Roy Wallis's distinction between world-affirming, world-rejecting and world-accommodating religions)<sup>x</sup> do not really help us to anticipate with much certainty the *empirical* characteristics that might follow from the *defining* characteristics of each category. Assuredly, there is nothing to match the elegant types that Bryan Wilson elaborated for the earlier, predominantly Christian-based, sects.<sup>xi</sup> The ever-increasing range of alternatives from all corners of the world (from relatively new philosophies such as psychoanalysis or the development of science, electronic innovations and science fiction and the increase of UFO-sightings and 'strange encounters of the third kind') have made neat, predictive models out-of-date almost before the ink has dried on their authors' paper - or the laser has printed from their authors' PC.

None the less, the anti-cult movement, much of the media and a sizable chunk of the population continue to provide us with facile check-lists of the characteristics of NRMs as dangerous manipulative, exploitative, and deceptive sex maniacs - or, in depictions where descriptive rather than evaluative detail is given, frequently making it difficult to distinguish 'destructive cults' from many of traditional mainstream religions.

There are, however, some characteristics that make an NRM more visible and, thereby, significant *as* an NRM. One may find, for example, the first-generation enthusiasms, the unambiguous clarity and certainty in the belief systems, the urgency of the message, the commitment of life-style, perhaps a charismatic leadership, and, possibly, strong Them/Us and/or Before/After distinctions - all of which are, of course, liable to undergo significant change within a single generation.

### **Who joins the NRMs?**

Just as there are all types of NRMs, so are there all types of people who join the movements. However, those who have joined the better-known of the current wave of NRMs in the West have been disproportionately white and from the better-educated middle classes. There are exceptions - indeed it is worth pointing out that many of the ill-fated members of the Branch Davidians and of the Peoples Temple and were blacks from the lower classes,<sup>xii</sup> and that they were not as disproportionately young as those joining movements such as the Children of God, the Unification Church or ISKCON. Even the somewhat older people who have become involved with the 'self-religions' (and who may need a respectable income to pay for courses) have tended to be disproportionately in their thirties or early forties. As with other aspects of NRMs, however, we have to remember that all kinds of people of all kinds of ages, occupations, classes, ethnic groupings, educational attainments and from all kinds of religions have joined and will doubtless continue to join NRMs. And now, of course, there is a growing number of persons who have been born into an NRM. Two thirds of the current membership of the Family are second- or even third-generation members.

### **Temporal differences**

The first thing that might be noted arises out of what I have already intimated: NRMs change over time. Merely the fact that time has passed means that founders have died, that young, idealist converts with few dependents or other responsibilities have grown into middle-aged parents - and a new 'born-into' generation, demanding the allocation of such resources as time and money, will have to be socialised and accommodated. Thus, like all new religions before them, the present wave of NRMs

have, during the past quarter of a century, undergone changes which are all too often forgotten when the media, the anti-cult movement and, as a consequence, members of the general public talk, write or merely think about NRMs.

In a special edition of *Social Compass* that Jean-François Mayer and I recently put together to highlight changes that have occurred in NRMs over the past 20 years,<sup>xiii</sup> I argue that such changes tend to result both in the movements becoming less like each other, and, at the same time, in their becoming more like the wider society - the apparent paradox resting on the fact that modern society is a pluralist society into which the movements may merge in a number of different forms.

But it is not only the individual NRMs that change with the passage of time. Given that the structures and cultures of society are continually altering, we would expect, and do indeed find, that the 'cult scene' *as a whole* will change. The balance of public attention and the popularity of particular *kinds* of NRMs will vary at different times. Furthermore, these shifting scenes differ in different parts of the world.

### **Spatial differences**

In discussing the incidence of NRMs in Europe, Stark and Bainbridge draw a distinction between sects (schisms of mainstream traditions) and cults (innovative groups). They argue (and claim that the evidence supports the argument) that sects are likely to appear when traditional religions are strong, while cults emerge only when the traditional religions are weak.<sup>xiv</sup> Other contributors to this book provide international data, but let me, for comparative purposes, offer three very brief sketches.

#### *(a) England*

In England (and I am referring to England rather than to Britain or the United Kingdom), the emergence of a youth culture after the Second World War did not immediately translate into a new religious scene. Indeed, with a few exceptions such as young black males who became Rastafarians,

the youth culture of the working class was and remains notable for its lack of religious manifestations - unless we were to extend our definition to include Teds, Mods, Rockers and, later, Punks and Skinheads.

Middle-class youth roughly followed the paths that their peers in North America were treading. It was not until the 1960s, towards the end of the period of militant student unrest, that a religious - or spiritual - alternative became visible to any but the few who were already involved in such an alternative. The demos faded into squats in the inner cities, into communes in sacred centres such as Glastonbury, and along the lay lines of the UK. Then the Hippies started to move into more structured, but none the less religious or spiritual (rather than political), organisations - some of them of a strictly authoritarian nature. The dawning of the Age of Aquarius mingled into the Human Potential movement, which has continued to flourish - reaching into those parts of mainstream society from which other religions have been increasingly banished since the onset of a desacralization of society - or secularization, in the Bryan Wilson meaning of the concept.<sup>xv</sup>

Then we could observe the rise of enthusiastic religion (the charismatic, neo-pentecostal and/or restoration movements) filtering into mainstream Churches, thereby increasing the supply of one of the scarce resources - religious enthusiasm - that NRMs such as the Family or the Unification Church were offering in the 1960s and '70s when many of the young people who were to join such movements were typifying the Churches as cold, hypocritical, apathetic and dominated by old-ladies. It is, however, not without significance that the Holy Spirit used an NRM - the Vineyard movement - as its medium for the introduction of the 'Toronto Blessing' to certain sections of the more evangelical wing of the Church of England - a phenomenon that has become decidedly controversial in other, more conservative, sections of the Evangelical church.<sup>xvi</sup>

*(b) Japan*

As is well known, the Japanese had its modern 'Rush Hour of the Gods'<sup>xvii</sup> some time before the West

had its - the former's influx of new religions occurring immediately after the Second World War, while the latter's did not really take off until the mid-1960s. There are numerous historical reasons for the differences between Japanese and Western NRMs.<sup>xviii</sup> Furthermore, since the 1970s, Japan has witnessed a new wave of movements, commonly referred to as the New New or Neo-New Religions. Aum Shinrikyo is one such NNRM, typical of the NNRMs in so far as it seems to have appealed disproportionately to young, well-educated people rather than to the less educated, lower-middle class and/or, especially, housewives who have been attracted to many of the earlier, post-war NRMs. The general shift, according to Shimazono, is that, while the former new religions were concerned with salvation and good community living in this life, the new new religions have been less concerned about practical and *communal* problems (such as poverty, disease and family conflicts), and have placed less emphasis on altruistic ethics, concentrating more on the transformation of, and control over, the *individual's* mind and body. In order to attain further salvation for the soul in future lives, the process of enlightenment may be pursued with the help of mystical knowledge and magical practices.

But while Shimazono typifies Aum Shinrikyo as an NNRM, he also classifies it as a somewhat atypical 'isolationist' movement, and argues that the most significant development in contemporary Japan is the emergence of a magico-religious popular culture that is disseminated not through religious organisations so much as through comic books, magazines and computer games which can be read or played at any time - 'producing an instantaneous private space'.<sup>xix</sup>

*(c) Eastern Europe and the traditionally Christian Former Society Union*

There were NRMs in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union before 1989. Frequently they were more or less underground, and, when exposed, they sometimes suffered quite severe consequences. Several Krishna devotees were imprisoned and a couple died in Soviet jails. On the other hand, several Buddhist and New Age/Human Potential groups, while not exactly flourishing, were able to meet and practice quite freely in Poland, and I even managed to meet two Transcendental Mediators in the middle of the main square in Tirana before Albania's socialist regime collapsed.

But, of course, the incidence of NRMs was minute - until, that is, the Wall came down. And when it did come down the NRMs were there - several of them literally there, handing out literature with all manner of offerings. Since then, the movements have been particularly successful in Russia, and have not done badly in East Germany, Hungary and the Ukraine. There are quite a few to be found in Poland and the Czech Republic, several in Romania, Slovakia and Byelorussia, and a few in Bulgaria and in the Georgian and Armenian Republics. Some intrepid members of NRMs have been found offering humanitarian aid along with salvation in the war zones of Croatia and Ngorno Karabagh.

Although there are indigenous new religions and revivals of older folk, pagan or esoteric religions to be found in Eastern Europe and the FSU, the majority of the NRMs are from the West, many of them offering as many capitalist as spiritual wares to anyone who will listen: Unificationists offer English language classes and travel to the West, Scientologists offer management courses; but it would seem to be some of the new evangelical groups, such as the Churches of Christ planted from Boston, the Word of Life from Sweden, the Vineyard Church in the Czech Republic, or the amazingly successful Faith Church in Hungary that are really thriving.

Yet while it looked at first as though the new-found freedoms of Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union were presenting the new religions with a field day, whatever success they have enjoyed has generated increasing antagonism from the traditional Churches who see the movements as one of the main reasons for their lack of success in retaining what they consider to be rightfully their flock. New laws have been introduced or are in the process of being proposed to curtail the activities and, in some cases, to forbid the presence of foreign, non-established small religions.<sup>xx</sup>

One of my doctoral students, Marat Shterin, who is comparing the NRMs in England and in Russia, is finding the difference between the reactions of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Church of England one of his most significant variables. None the less, both his and my own observations suggest

that the development of the movements in Eastern Europe and the FSU differs in a number of ways from their development in the West. Perhaps this is not altogether surprising, given that they are now more experienced and, in several cases, it is a second-generation membership that is trying to establish a foothold in what are totally different surroundings. And, of course, the fact that so many of the potential converts have been brought up in an atheistic socialist state obviously has a considerable effect on what seekers are seeking.

### *Cultural Adaptability*

The interplay between an NRM and the culture in which it originates is a familiar subject of study. A more recent interest has been investigating the way that particular movements 'travel'. In some respects, the transported NRM might appear only marginally different in whatever country it is operating. When, for example, I visit a community-based group such as the Unification Church, the Hare Krishna, or the Family (all three of which I have stayed with or visited in a dozen or more different countries), I sometimes find it difficult to remember where I am, apart from being in a Moonie centre, an ISKCON Temple or a Family Home - in this respect, staying with a particular NRM is rather like staying in, say, the Tokyo, Lagos or Washington Hilton - one is in a Hilton hotel - and Tokyo, Lagos or Washington just happen to be outside. One might, perhaps, notice that *some* of the other residents happen to speak a different language or have skin of a different hue - but one finds that also in the London Hilton, the Lancaster Gate Centre, the Soho Temple and the Dunton Bassett Family home.

But clearly the different social contexts do, to a greater or lesser degree, affect the movements' *modus operandi* and the reception that they are given. Some manage to preserve their original beliefs and practices pretty well in tact world-wide; others succeed only to the extent that they adapt - more or less - to the host culture. I have been told that there are Unificationists who are allowed to keep more than one wife in some African countries with Islamic influences.

It has already been intimated that some movements of Japanese origin are relatively successful in the West - S\_ka Gakkai International provides one such example - while others make less of an impression on the natives. Louis Hourmant attributes changes in the Japanese NRMs he has observed in France, such as a playing down of the magical-religious component in Reiy\_kai, to responses to the differences between Western and Japanese society.<sup>xxi</sup> However, Jean-François Mayer, in a Swiss context, notes that the adjustment of Mahikari has not been accompanied by a parallel diminution, although the integration of values and of the ideology promoted by Mahikari seems to be a very lengthy process for its Swiss followers.<sup>xxii</sup> Interestingly, just as the New New Religions in Japan incorporate a negation of some modern values, Mahikari members in Switzerland tend to think that their new religion brings them the sense of the sacred which they feel the conventional Churches in the West have lost.

### **The Significance of NRMs for individuals**

#### *Members*

It is obvious, but none the less worth mentioning, that the significance of an NRM - the scope and the intensity of the experience for its membership - will obviously vary from individual to individual and from movement to movement. It will also vary according to the position that individuals occupy in the movement - whether, for example, they are new converts or seasoned leaders - or, perhaps, whether they are male or female.<sup>xxiii</sup> For some, joining an NRM will become and will remain the most important thing to happen in their lives - they may find direction, meaning, the hope of salvation, a sense of belonging to a like-minded community, the opportunity to develop a relationship with God, to develop their spirituality, to find their true selves or all manner of other possibilities that they felt they were denied in the 'outside world'. For others, the experience may have seemed wonderful at first but has since soured through disappointment and, perhaps, disillusionment. A few will have extremely unpleasant experiences and feel that they have been deceived, manipulated, exploited and/or robbed not only of money and material goods but also of their time and, perhaps, their innocence and, maybe, their faith in God and/or in humanity.

*Members' relations and friends*

Sometimes it seems as though NRMs have an even greater significance for the relatives and friends of members than for the members themselves. While there are friends and relatives who rejoice in converts' finding a new happiness, contentment or fulfilment in an NRM, there is also a significant number of people who have had their lives profoundly and adversely affected by a friend's or relative's joining a new religion - and some of these people have become involved with the anti-cult movement. The metaphor of death has frequently been employed by parents who talk about feelings of bereavement; a few have even claimed that they would prefer their son or daughter to be dead rather than in 'the cult'. Husbands or wives have talked about an NRM coming between them and their partner, producing a rift that cannot be breached. One partner taking on new interests that exclude the other is not, of course, a phenomenon confined to NRMs, but it should be recognised that it can be as fraught a situation as that which arises when people discover that their partner is being unfaithful and intends to remain so.

**The significance of NRMs for the rest of society**

A dozen or so years ago, I edited a book called *New Religious Movements: A Perspective for Understanding Society*.<sup>xxiv</sup> Had I the time, I would like to bring out a second Volume for we have learned so much more in the intervening period about the ways in which NRMs can contribute to our understanding of society. Some of the points have already been covered and there is no space here to discuss many others. But I would like to conclude by introducing some of the ways in which sociologists of religion may be alerted to features of the wider social context in which the movements flourish or wither.

*The NRMs of the Gaps*

One of the ways NRMs have been seen as being of significance is that they may occasionally function as a barometer of what at least some members of a society feel they need but is not being supplied by other means.<sup>xxv</sup> This is not so much a God of the Gaps theology as a movements of the gaps sociology. Such a perspective could - indeed has - sensitised us to perceived lacunae. There are, however, methodological problems. First, in pluralist societies, it would be foolhardy to generalise too much from particular innovations in particular NRMs. However, a rush to NRMs which are offering, say, enthusiastic rituals of worship, healing, interpretations of religious experiences might suggest a significant perceived need, rather than a chance gap or even acceptance of something because it is there rather than because it is sought. Secondly, while the movements might want to offer alternatives in more totalitarian societies, it would be difficult to argue that it was the positive suggestions of the NRM, rather than the repressive nature of the regime, that was responsible for the attractiveness of the 'offer' - which could, equally well, come from any dissident source - including those of a purely secular nature. But none of this is to deny that NRMs can have a significant role to play as a dissenting force in society. They can.

*Media and Anti-cultists*

An enormous amount of work has now been done on the ways in which the media and the anti-cult movement (acm) have responded to the NRMs and the significance of the interaction between the various institutions. Melton explores this subject in further detail, but I would like to take two recent examples to illustrate the significance that members of a society may attach to NRMs *as the result of media and anti-cult constructions of their image*. In other words, what I want to highlight is the *significance of the significance* that the media and the acm attach to the movements.

The first example illustrates how a democratic society (in this case England) can give 'permission' to its citizens to carry out a criminal attack on a person *merely* on the grounds that s/he is the member of

a 'cult'. It is the case of Kathy Wilson, a 23-year old member of the Church of Scientology whose erstwhile friends decided that she had been brainwashed and needed rescuing. They took matters into their own hands and tried to grab her, taking a knife and a Rottweiler to assist in the kidnap. Kathy screamed. There ensued some ugly and violent exchanges as passing Scientologists came to Kathy's rescue. Despite the fact that Kathy maintained - and still maintains - that she is happy and wants to remain a Scientologist, in March 1995 a British jury unanimously acquitted the man who admitted that he had intended to 'snatch her' against her will. It was reported that his counsel had argued that: even though she claimed in court she did not consent to removal, it was possible her free will had been removed by the processes she had undergone in the cult and she did not have 'sufficient intelligence and understanding' to decide if she consented.<sup>xxvi</sup>

What is of particular significance for our purposes is that the would-be kidnapper, who maintained that although Kathy's abduction would be 'probably against her will because she's been brainwashed and she'll be on drugs', cited as the sources of his information 'taxi drivers, a local newspaper journalist, others involved in the 'rescue' of members of religious cults, as well as his own investigations.'<sup>xxvii</sup> Furthermore, in a recorded interview with police, just after the incident in November 1992, he declared:

I know I would be liable to criminal prosecution now, but no jury in the country ... would see me guilty.<sup>xxviii</sup>

It would seem that he was right.

My other example is from the United States, and it illustrates how the public image of an NRM can lead not to *ad hominem* but to *ad NRMinem* arguments being employed to judge something as wicked *solely* on the grounds that there is even a very slight NRM connection. It concerns the use of a slide presentation on AIDS that laid emphasis on teen-age celibacy and which was promoted for use (in public and private schools, churches and doctor's offices) by such worthy citizens as a nun, a chapter

leader of Concerned Women of America and a leader of Project Respect. These women then learned, at a meeting of the True Light Educational Ministry (a group `advising people leaving cults'), that the two men who had put together the programme which they had considered so excellent happened to be Unificationists. Despite the fact that there was no evidence whatsoever that the slides had been or would be used to promote any Unification beliefs apart from that shared by the erstwhile promoters - that pre-marital sex is not a good idea - the women immediately started to advise those to whom they had previously promoted the programme that the programme should not be used.<sup>xxix</sup>

Did one of the Unificationists have a point when he suggested that it would be foolish to refuse the use of polio vaccines because one disliked their inventors' religions?

#### *The law*

If one had to select one criterion that might indicate the extent to which a society was `open' or `closed', the legal position of NRMs would be a not altogether ridiculous choice. For somewhat finer tuning, the second criterion could well be the legal treatment of NRMs. I believe that this is an area where NRMs can be of particular significance in both reflecting and affecting the society in which they exist. One might look, for example, at the position of NRMs in Islamic and Soviet countries and the new legislation that is has been introduced and is being contemplated in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union (in Moscow, Kiev and Yerevan); one can examine the mounting number of cases that have gone to the Supreme Court in America, providing a remarkable forum for debate about the nicer points of law concerning the relative balance of freedoms between (a) individuals, (b) groups and (c) society.<sup>xxx</sup>

#### *Mainstream traditions in the West*

There are several different issues that could be pursued so far as the significance of NRMs *vis a vis* traditional religions are concerned. I have already touched briefly on Stark and Bainbridge's theory about the significance of the religious situation to the growth of cults and sects, and I have briefly

mentioned both the positive way in which a tradition may use the 'challenge' of the movements to incorporate changes in their own practices, and the negative reactions of the Mother Churches in Eastern Europe and the FSU. This is, of course, an area which invokes a wide range of questions about the functioning of pluralistic societies.

#### *NRMs as an Indicator of Perceived Vulnerability*

A further, related point of potential significance concerns not only which societies and groups within society get more or less worried about the NRMs in their midst (until recently, Finland was relatively unconcerned - and still is, compared with, say, Bulgaria), but also what aspects of which movements are selected for condemnation. I am not sure what the situation is now, but at one time it looked as though Britain was particularly concerned with brainwashing allegations, France with political intrigue, the United States with the break-up of the family and financial considerations, Germany with social security payments, and Japan with the affect on young people's career prospects. There are ways, as Beckford and others have suggested, in which we can learn about a society by analysing what is seen as particularly threatening.<sup>xxxix</sup> Different perceptions and interpretations of the 'Satanist scare' might prove a fruitful starting point for further study in this area.<sup>xxxix</sup>

#### *The significance of NRMs for the Sociology of Religion*

Finally, the study of NRMs has introduced numerous methodological challenges and has taken not a few sociologists out of the Ivory Tower of academia into a market place of fierce competition in the business of social construction of reality in government circles, in the courts, the popular media and in various other venues in our pluralist society.<sup>xxxix</sup>

#### **Concluding remark**

New Religious movements take a vast variety of forms. They are successful or they fail for a multitude of reasons. Facile generalisations are bound to be wrong. Some of the beliefs that are held by members of the general public are true about some of the movements some of the time but, through their studies

of NRMs, social scientists have found that many of the statements in the popular media are blatantly untrue about the majority of the movements, and others refer to only a tiny proportion of their number. Much more detailed work needs to be carried out to understand the processes that occur within the movements and between them and the wider society. And, possibly more importantly, that knowledge which we have of the movements needs to be disseminated and understood more widely. Not only the NRMs, but societal reaction to them has significantly greater significance than their relatively small numbers might suggest.

## NOTES

i. Susumu Shimazono "New Religions and the New Spirituality Movement: Two types of Religious Movements in Advanced Industrial Societies." Paper given at the Santa Barbara Centre for Humanistic Studies conference *New Religions in a Global Perspective*, Buelton, California, 16 May 1991, p.3.

ii. INFORM (Information Network Focus on Religious Movements) is a charity, based at the London School of Economics, which I founded with the support of the Home Office and mainstream Churches in 1988 in order to provide information that is as accurate and up-to-date as possible about new religions. It can be contacted at INFORM, Houghton St, London WC2A 2AE, England; tel 0171 955 7654, fax: 0171 955 7677; e-mail [INFORM@LSE.AC.UK](mailto:INFORM@LSE.AC.UK).

iii. J. Gordon Melton *Encyclopedia of American Religions* Detroit: Gale. 4th edition 1993.

iv. Shimazono *op cit*.

v. Harold Turner "New Religious Movements in Primal Societies" in John Hinnells (ed) *The Penguin Dictionary of Religions*, Harmondsworth, 1984, p. 232. Second edition: *A New Dictionary of Religions*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995 p. 350.

vi. See Eileen Barker *New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction*, London: HMSO, 1989. Fifth impression with amendments 1995, pp. 104-105.

vii. Colin Campbell "The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization" in Michael Hill (ed.) *Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain*, London: SCM Press, 1972, pp. 119-36.

viii. This is not necessarily a contradiction in terms - there are a number of theologically minded people (often with Theosophical leanings) who see the two concepts as entirely complementary. It is, however, doubtful whether many of the 24% have such well-worked-out beliefs.

- ix. See James T. Richardson, Joel Best and David Bromley *The Satanism Scare*, New York: De Gruyter, 1991
- x. Roy Wallis *The Elementary Forms of the New Religious Life*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983.
- xi. Bryan R. Wilson *Religious Sects: A Sociological Study*, London: Weidenfeld, 1970.
- xii. James T. Richardson "People's Temple and Jonestown: A Corrective Comparison and Critique" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 19/3, 1980, pp. 239-255.
- xiii. *Twenty Years On: Changes in New Religious Movements*. Special edition of *Social Compass* 42/2, June 1995.
- xiv. Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge *A Theory of Religion*, New York: Peter Lang, 1987. Republished in 1996 by Rutgers university Press, New Brunswick.
- xv. 'The process whereby religious thinking, practice and institutions lose social significance'. *Religion in Secular Society: A Sociological Comment*. Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1969, p. 14.
- xvi. See *Religion Report* March 20, 1995, Vol. 9, No. 7 p.1
- xvii. H. Neill McFarland *The Rush Hour of the Gods: A Study of New Religious Movements in Japan*, New York: Macmillan, 1967.
- xviii. See, for example, McFarland *op cit* and Shimazono *op cit* and "New New Religions and this World: Religious Movements in Japan after the 1970s and their Beliefs about Salvation" *Social Compass* 42(2), 1995: 193-206; Susumu Shimazono, M.R.Mullins and P. Swanson (eds) *Religion and Society in Modern Japan*, Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press.
- xix. There are quite a few signs that similar manifestations are beginning to become more prominent in the West. One of my students recently took the members of our graduate seminar on a journey through the Internet 'in search of God'. It was, as one of my other students remarked, 'something else'.
- xx. See Eileen Barker "But Who's Going to Win? National and Minority Religions in Post-Communist Society" in Irena Borowik and Grzegorz Babiński (eds) *New Religious Phenomena in Central and Eastern Europe*, Kraków: Nomos, 1997 pp. 25-62.
- xxi. "Les nouveaux mouvements religieux japonais en France" *Social Compass* 42 (2) June 1995: 207-220.
- xxii. Jean-François Mayer *Social Compass* 42 (2) June 1995: 180-192.
- xxiii. See Susan Palmer *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers: Women's Roles in New Religions*, Syracuse University Press, 1994.

- xxiv. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983
- xxv. Warren Lewis in *NRMs a Perspective for Understanding...*
- xxvi. *Daily Telegraph* 15 March 1995.
- xxvii. *Daily Telegraph* 11 March 1955.
- xxviii. *Daily Telegraph* 11 March 1955.
- xxix. *New York Times* 22 March 1995, pp B1 & B6.
- xxx. James T. Richardson "Minority Religions ('Cults') and the Law: Comparisons of the United States, Europe and Australia" *University of Queensland Law Journal* 18/2 1995: 183-207.
- xxxi. James A. Beckford *Cult Controversies: The Societal Response to the New Religious Movements*, London: Tavistock, 1985.
- xxxii. See, for example, James T. Richardson, Joel Best and David Bromley (eds) op. cit.
- xxxiii. Eileen Barker "The Scientific Study of Religion? You Must be Joking!" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 34/3 1995 pp. 287-310.

## **New Religious Movements: Their Incidence and Significance**

### ABSTRACT

The current wave of new religious movements (NRMs), which became visible in the West after the second World War, differs from the vast majority of previous waves in that the movements come not only from the Judaeo/Christian tradition, but also from other traditions (such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Shintoism and Paganism) and from more recent philosophies or ideas (such as psychoanalysis or science fiction). Although concentrating mainly on the situation in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand, the paper will mention briefly the growth of NRMs in Africa, Japan (where, more recently, we find the new new religions), Latin America, Eastern Europe and the traditionally Christian countries of the FSU. One of the most important points to be made concerns the enormous variety to be found among the movements. Furthermore, although there are some characteristics (similar to those frequently found in any new religion) that have manifested themselves in late 20th century NRMs, many of the movements now have a second or even third-generation membership, and have, accordingly, undergone changes that have diluted their original 'sectarian' characteristics. It will be argued that the statistical significance of the movements is not as great as their social or cultural significance, and that much of this significance lies in societies' reactions to NRMs.

*eb: 21 August 2013*

NRMs:

Challenge

and

## Response

### NRMs: Their Incidence and their Significance

as sor interested in how challenge seen - how is reality constructed?

the fact that it is the Institute that has arranged this conference --- is not without significance

were I a Marxist - which I am not - I might start by saying that a new religion did not really present

much of a challenge - reflection - it is itself a response - statistically insignif - though Japan 10-20%

according to Shimazono - but two things - on

- a. stat insig
- b. reflection pluralism
- c. un-opiate

want to be seen as non-conformist - streetwise - non-predictable

challenge and response

stat not much challenge - but if see sr as process then `goes through' lot of people

sig as reflection and reaction

pluralism - variety is most sig - question - healthy for socirty - sor vlue-free

sig that churches not doing

that people keep wanting

that people offer selves up as followers

that society needs variety

sig for sor

why impnt - show what lacking; what wanted BY SOME - sez wot capabe of tec of brainwashing

group behaviour

cultural adaptation - japanese

changes

authority & control

problems nrm faces not what whole society faces

general (hostility - enthusiasm - urgency etc

particular - new variety beyond J/Xn - capitalism & individual - group and indiv - fam Jp

future NRM & fundamentalism - certainty and fredon - socio-illogics - writ large in NRM where writ

samll

global differences and globalisation of sharing.

europe = 1st generation of 2nd generation

significance - that not material enough - ethics; morality; family' belonging; meaning; direction;

acm - hate - fear - boundaries - where are the weak bits that have to be defended - beckford; hardin etc

bromley on what seen as threatening

law - richardson - what do they say about society

churches responses - where are they weak?

satanism scare - scapegoats - where is the figure pointed?

women- sex- children - range

pluralism = relativism - peter berger - heretical imperative..

why fascinating - `how could they (DON's Diary)

not just range - deeper limits?? how `natural' - taken for granted - can't say more - more or less

bigotry - bulgarian and rest of FSU - how deal with it???

how deal with conflicts between - how co-exist?

cos ok cos bwashed - green light - if brainwashed should contact police/authorities - vigilantes

brw - cos - sgi religion for the modern age.

the relativism of modern pluralism

*eb: 21 August 2013*