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**Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Barker, Eileen (2004) *What are we studying? A sociological case for keeping the "Nova"*. *Nova religio*, 8 (3). ISSN 1092-6690

DOI: [10.1525/nr.2004.8.1.88](https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2004.8.1.88)

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Available in LSE Research Online: August 2013

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Perspective:
What Are We Studying?

A Sociological Case for Keeping the “Nova”

Eileen Barker

ABSTRACT: The objective of this article is to encourage scholars of religion to retain an awareness of the significance of new religious movements (NRMs) being new. It arises as a response to three propositions made by J. Gordon Melton in this issue. The first of these is that NRMs have more in common with their religious traditions of origin than with each other. The second is that NRM is a residual category—it is not a church, a sect or an ethnic religion. Melton’s third proposal is that NRMs might best be defined as religions that are greeted with antagonism by significant elements of the wider society, including traditional religions. My response is, first, that however related or unrelated they are to their respective traditions, NRMs are likely to share certain characteristics with each other merely because they are new. Second, these characteristics are deserving of attention in their own right and cannot be reduced to their not being various types of other religions. Third, rather than being used as a defining characteristic, the antagonism with which NRMs are met can be more usefully thought of as a consequence of their newness.

Nova Religio is, its name suggests, a journal that is written by and for those who are interested in new religions. It is true that its subtitle (*The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*) and the initial introduction to the journal make it clear that it has always been intended that new religions should be broadly defined.¹ But this does not detract from the contention of this article, which, basically, takes issue with the implication in J. Gordon Melton’s article, “Toward a Definition of ‘New Religion’” (this issue), that the “new” of new religious movements (NRMs) is irrelevant to our understanding of what it is that we are studying. My argument is that it is the very fact that NRMs are new that explains many of the key characteristics they display. If we ignore their newness we are in danger not only of not recognizing the existence of such characteristics, but also of not understanding the ways in which the movements function (including how and why they undergo such radical changes within a short period from their inception), and the ways in which the wider society reacts to their existence.

I would, however, like to stress from the start that although I am in some ways contesting the position Melton adopts in his article, it is not that I think he is ill informed or wrong in his approach. On the contrary, few scholars know more about old and new religions than he does, and I have long had the greatest respect for his scholarship. However, while I am a sociologist of religion, Melton describes himself as an American religious historian, and he has both a Master of Divinity degree in Church History and a Ph.D. in the History and Literature of Religion; and

¹ Phillip C. Lucas, “Introduction, Acknowledgements and Announcements,” *Nova Religio* 1, no. 1 (October 1997): 6-9.

although our interests certainly overlap, they draw us in somewhat different directions—we ask somewhat different questions, use somewhat different approaches and are interested in somewhat different aspects of religion. I believe (and I suspect Melton would share this belief) that the differences between us can enrich rather than impoverish our knowledge. What follows is, thus, intended to complement rather than contradict his position.

DEFINITIONS

Before proceeding with my argument, it might be helpful to make a few points about the role of definitions in order to underline the fact that those we use tend both to reflect and to promote our interests. Definitions allow us to identify phenomena so that we can communicate about them. They isolate a characteristic or cluster of characteristics and, thereby, exclude other characteristics from the label we employ. Furthermore, those characteristics we have selected enable us to discover what other characteristics are likely to be associated with the phenomenon in question. The boundary that defines something (be it an object, an act or a religion) is a human creation, not a Platonic truth. The way that boundary is drawn can alert us to some features but, in so doing, it can blind us to others. Although it can lead to confusion if we are not explicit about what we are doing, there is no need to stick to one definition—for some purposes a substantive definition but for other purposes a functional definition of religion can be useful.²

One of the most important distinctions between definitions is that between reportive and stipulative definitions.³ When social scientists present a reportive definition they are claiming that this is the way in which the word is used by the population they are studying—thus: “By ‘cult’ the media mean ‘a bad religion.’” This statement is more or less true. When, however, social scientists produce a stipulative definition they are clarifying what they themselves mean by the term—thus: “The term ‘cult’ will be used to refer to a religion with a charismatic leader.” This statement is not making a claim that is true or false; the definition is, rather, more or less useful as a descriptive and/or analytical tool.

Clearly a stipulative definition cannot by itself tell us what the world is actually like; what the definition includes and what it excludes is the result of nothing more than the stipulator’s decision. It is a label that has been placed on a phenomenon to identify it according to a particular characteristic or variable (such as having a charismatic leader, or, alternatively, as having a first-generation membership), thereby enabling us to see what other characteristics or variables are or are not *as a matter of fact* related in one way or another with that phenomenon. If “cult” is *defined* as a religion with a charismatic leader, it would be impossible to find a cult without a charismatic leader for it would not then be a cult. If, on the other hand, “cult” had been stipulatively defined as “a religion with an apocalyptic worldview,” it would then be possible to *discover* that, say, the majority of cults (religions with apocalyptic worldviews) have (or do not have) a charismatic leader.⁴

² A functional definition is based on what a religion *does* for an individual or group (such as providing meaning), whilst a substantive definition is based on what the religion *is* (such as a set of beliefs about superhuman beings). See Meredith B. McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context*, 5th ed. (Belmont, Cal.: Wadsworth, 2002), 8-13.

³ For a fuller discussion about these distinctions, see John Hospers, *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 1990), 116-19.

⁴ This distinction between definition and discovery is similar to the philosophical distinction between analytical statements, in which the relationship between the subject and the predicate is necessary, and synthetic statements in which the relationship is contingent.

Obviously enough, the larger the number of characteristics included in a definition, the less opportunity there is to make claims about what is actually going on “out there.” For this reason, it is often useful to concentrate on one defining characteristic, and then investigate what, if any, relationship phenomena with this characteristic have with other variables. But it is important to be aware that the defining characteristic(s) that are selected will influence the questions we ask and, perhaps more importantly, the questions we do not ask. Thus, asking questions about characteristics one might expect to find in religions that “have been assigned an outsider status by the dominant religious culture and then by elements within the secular culture,” as Melton recommends, will produce a different, though possibly overlapping, set of answers from asking questions about the characteristics of religions made up of first-generation converts, as I shall recommend.

TRADITION AND/OR NOVELTY

An explanation that draws on the concept of tradition usually involves a claim that the phenomenon in question now exists because it has been handed down from the past. Just as reportive and stipulative definitions are not the same thing, so explanations offered by practitioners or believers are not necessarily the same as those offered by scholars. Indeed, scholars may be skeptical about the extent to which a particular belief or practice *was* practiced or believed in the past, and they frequently note the selective nature in which some beliefs/practices are taken up while others are forgotten. There are, furthermore, plenty of instances when, despite claims to the contrary, so-called religious traditions owe far more to a culture than to any original tenets or doctrines. Not only is change a more or less constant feature within any religious tradition, there is also the tradition of inventing tradition.⁵

It would, of course, be ridiculous to deny that the beliefs and practices of NRMs will owe at least something to the religious traditions from which they emerge—movements that have evolved from Eastern traditions are, for example, likely to believe in reincarnation, while those from Christian traditions are more likely to be preoccupied with salvation involving the resurrection of the body. Melton, however, tells us that the new religions he wanted to classify in his world-renowned *Encyclopedia of American Religions* “tended to resemble their parent group far more than each other.”

Maybe. Yet I know of no unit of measurement that would allow us to make scientific comparisons for similarities and differences between parent and peer religions without risking the selection of a question-begging criterion of analysis. I suspect that by looking at an NRM through the glasses of an historian of religions one might more readily focus on the beliefs and, perhaps, the institutional claims of both old and new religions, whereas employing the glasses of a social scientist might encourage one to concentrate more on the actions of believers, their life style, leadership patterns and organization.

To repeat, I do not wish to deny for one instant that locating an NRM in its tradition is a useful, even an essential part of our understanding of the movement. But there are, nonetheless, ways in which the movements differ radically from their co-traditionalists, while sharing aspects of their beliefs and (more obviously) their practices with each other and with other NRMs from other traditions. First, there are the differences within any one tradition and the large number of overlaps between traditions. The fact that many NRMs are syncretistic adds to the complexity.

⁵ See Michael A. Williams, Collett Cox and Martin S. Jaffe, eds. *Innovation in Religious Traditions: Essays in the Interpretation of Religious Change* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1992).

We can, for example, find Theosophists embracing both reincarnation and resurrection. The very fact that a new religion has emerged is likely to mean that at least some beliefs differ (sometimes only in emphasis, but often quite radically) from the mainstream tradition. There are, furthermore, NRMs that it would be hard to fit into any recognizable tradition. Melton mentions the Church of Scientology, and there are, for example, various assortments of contemporary UFO groups that may or may not owe something to an esoteric tradition or to Christianity—and while the growing number of “virtual religions” may owe something to diverse traditions (religious and secular), innovations related to the medium can render them well-nigh unrecognizable to mainstream traditionalists.

But my argument does not rest on the problems of relating NRMs to a parent group; more positively, I want to suggest that there is a significant amount (although obviously not everything) that NRMs may hold in common, and that this can be traced to their newness. In other words, the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), the Brahma Kumaris and Ananda Marga certainly share Hindu roots, just as the Twelve Tribes, the Jesus Army and The Family can claim Christian roots, but the very fact that they can all be called new religious movements should alert us to the fact that they might also share certain characteristics with each other.

BEING NEW

It can be claimed that there is a sense in which nothing is new; nothing is ever completely *ex nihilo* if only because it will be constructed by socialized human beings and it will encompass, at least in part, some pre-existing components. It can equally well be claimed that there is another sense in which everything is new; social reality is an on-going process that is mediated through individuals who bring new perspectives and understandings as they continually recreate even the oldest of traditions.⁶ However, while it may be necessary to be aware of these truisms they will not by themselves get us very far in understanding the newness of new religions. We need to ask: “In what ways are NRMs new and in what ways are they traditional?”

New Combinations

Newness implies change—difference from what was “there” before—but what makes the difference might have been *somewhere* before. Most obviously, an NRM may be *new within a particular tradition*, involving some sort of innovation or novel interpretation of an ancient rite or Scripture, such as the Children of God’s radical interpretation of the “Law of Love.”⁷ But this is by no means the only kind of innovation one finds.

Sometimes, because it consists of a new combination of pre-existing beliefs from two or more ancient traditions (such as one finds in Unification Church theology in the *Divine Principle*), a movement is considered to be not “really” new. This, however, could be to commit the fallacy of assuming that two olds make an old, which is not necessarily true. Just as water (H₂O) has

⁶ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: Everything that Passes for Knowledge in Society* (London: Allen Lane, 1967).

⁷ This involved the widely publicized practice of “flirty fishing” between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s. See J. Gordon Melton, “Sexuality and the Maturation of The Family,” in *Sex, Slander, and Salvation: Investigating The Family/Children of God*, ed. James R. Lewis and J. Gordon Melton (Stanford: Center for Academic Publications, 1994), 71-95.

different properties from those of either hydrogen (H) or oxygen (O₂) in gaseous form—and, indeed, from hydrogen peroxide (H₂O₂), which is made up from a different combination of the same two elements—so can syncretistic combinations of religious traditions have unique, emergent properties. On the other hand, a combination of two erstwhile separate religious groups does not necessarily lead to radically new characteristics. Take, for example, the creation of the United Reformed Church in 1972 through the union of the Congregational Church in England and Wales and the Presbyterian Church of England. In this instance there were no radical changes in beliefs or practices, and members of the congregations went on believing and practicing pretty well as they had done before. To extend my analogy, it was as if the elements of oxygen and hydrogen had been mixed together, rather than combined into a new compound.

New Locations and Structures

As Melton points out, religions may be *new to a particular society* although they had thrived for centuries, even millennia, in another society. This is clearly the case with many of the religions that have traveled with immigrants or been introduced by missionaries from one part of the world to another, whether it is Shinto in Brazil, Hinduism in Pennsylvania, Zoroastrianism in England, or Christianity in parts of nineteenth-century Africa. This might or might not give rise to antagonistic reactions from the host society (see below).

Alternatively (or concurrently) the *institutional organization* of a religion may be new. A movement such as ISKCON objects strongly to being called an NRM, pointing out that when His Divine Grace A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (who, interestingly, is referred to as the *Founder-acharya* [teacher] of ISKCON on the official website and elsewhere) came to the West he brought with him a centuries-old tradition that traces its lineage back through the sixteenth-century saint, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, to the teachings of the Bhagavad-Gita—in fact, it has been claimed that ISKCON's tradition has no beginning as Vedic civilization existed from at least the start of recorded history.⁸ Those who classify ISKCON as an NRM will, however, argue that it took a fundamentally new form when it was established in 1966, and, as a result, displayed fundamentally new features.⁹

A further complication arises when one looks at the membership of ISKCON. In the early days of the movement the devotees were nearly all young and white, and often drawn from the hippie culture. Today, the vast majority of worshippers and attendees at festivals in the West are of first, second or even third-generation Asian descent. In Britain, these immigrants and their families (just like Indian disciples of Sathya Sai Baba) are not considered by themselves or by most Britons to be members of a new religion, while devotees from white families are.

New Members

Thus far it has been suggested that “newness” can apply to various aspects of NRMs, such as their beliefs, practices, organization and/or geographical or social location. This kind of

⁸ Mukunda Goswami, “NRM Is a Four-Letter Word: The Language of Oppression,” *ISKCON Communications Journal* 3 no. 2 (1995): 75.

⁹ Interestingly, the anthropologist Charles Brooks, who studied the growth of the movement not in the West, but in Vrindaban (where, Hindus believe, Krishna played as a child some 5,000 or more years ago), uses Anthony F. C. Wallace's term “revitalization movement” to describe ISKCON. Charles R. Brooks, *The Hare Krishnas in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 72-3.

complexity might lead some to say the label of “new” is too messy to be of any use. However, one might equally well argue that it is because we use the concept “new” that we are forced to unpack such important differences between pertinent applications of newness.

But it is newness of membership that I want to concentrate on for most of the remainder of this essay. What, I want to ask, are some of the questions we could be encouraged to address when we start from a definition of NRMs as religions consisting predominantly of first-generation members? Or, to put it another way: What characteristics are more likely to be associated with a religion comprised of first-generation converts, than with a religion comprised of people born and raised within it?

Of course, few if any characteristics will *always* be present, and several will not be exclusive to NRMs. Anyone who has studied them would agree that to generalize about NRMs is a decidedly risky exercise; they differ from each other in almost every conceivable way. There are, nonetheless, some variables that do have a tendency to be associated with first-generation religions wherever and whenever they have emerged, be it early Christianity, Islam, Oomoto, Subud, Unarius or Scientology. And, of course, to start with a first-generation orientation towards NRMs does not mean that we cannot ask what happens when the second and subsequent generations appear on the scene, or when there is a mixture of both converts and members who were born into the movement. On the contrary, these are some of the very questions promoted by such a perspective.

Converts, Boundaries and Dichotomies

Converts, having decided to accept a new faith (be it an old or new religion) rather than continuing in the one into which they were born and/or which is the norm in their society or subculture, tend to be considerably more enthusiastic about their new beliefs and practices than those brought up in their religion.¹⁰ Furthermore, converts frequently want to share their newly found Truths and will engage in zealous proselytism, especially with relatives and friends. In many respects they exhibit the characteristics that Bryan Wilson lists under the general heading of “voluntariness”;¹¹ they have made a commitment, they take their religion seriously—they care.

At the same time, converts tend to be more vulnerable than “born into” members. They are unlikely to have internalized their new faith to the extent those raised in their religion will have internalized it. Conversion involves *secondary* socialization. Under such conditions, information and arguments from non-members can challenge faith and raise doubts—the more they learn, the greater the possibility they may discover facets of the religion that do not fit the image to which they had originally been attracted. This means that converts may need to be protected from outside influences that could undermine their new faith, and not infrequently NRMs will erect social and/or geographical boundaries to keep their members “separate.” Alternative ideas and questioning may be discouraged, and the movement’s position will be laid out unambiguously, free from qualifications or shades of grey that could lead to confusion. Thus, while the *content* of

¹⁰ I do not want to enter the brainwashing/mind control debate, although thirty years of studying several of those NRMs that have most frequently been accused of employing brainwashing techniques have persuaded me that those who use such terms tend to be concerned about the content of the beliefs and practices that the convert adopts, rather than the methods by which the convert arrives at those beliefs. See Eileen Barker *The Making of a Moonie: Brainwashing or Choice?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984).

¹¹ Bryan Wilson, *Religious Sects: A Sociological Study* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1970), 28.

beliefs may differ radically between NRMs, the ways in which they are portrayed and the intensity with which they are held may display some resemblance.

A related tendency one finds in many NRMs (even in some of those that promote holism) is a dichotomous worldview in which beliefs are seen as true or false; people as good or bad; actions as right or wrong—with all three (beliefs, people and actions) being defined as godly or satanic. An individual's identity is defined primarily according to whether s/he is or is not a member of the NRM, with any other role or status being of secondary importance. The sharp division between “them” and “us” is not easily permeated, and to cross the boundary can be seen as both treason and heresy—not only a betrayal of God, the leader and one's friends, but also a dangerous and possibly satanic act that can result in severe and terrible repercussions.¹² Time also can be seen in terms of sharp divisions between the “now” and a “then” (which can be past or future)—there was the time before conversion when, in all likelihood, the converts now remember themselves as miserable sinners; and the time after conversion when the converts were born again and started to lead a “new life.” There may also be the expectation of a dramatic change in the future, which could be welcomed or feared as the New Age or the battle of Armageddon.

Atypical Membership

NRMs do not appeal to converts equally across the demographic spectrum. Each one is likely to attract certain types of people but to repel, or at least hold little attraction, for others. There have been times and places throughout history when new religions have appealed to the poor and the oppressed.¹³ The wave of NRMs that hit the headlines in the West in the 1960s and 1970s attracted a membership that consisted disproportionately of young, white adults from the better educated classes, although there were exceptions, such as the Rastafarians that have attracted black unemployed youth, and some of the human potential movements, which have drawn a slightly older, fee-paying clientele.

This characteristic of disproportionate appeal can result in a variety of related characteristics. If, for example, an NRM has a membership consisting predominantly of young, well-educated converts, it is likely to follow that the membership will be: (a) healthier than the general population; (b) unencumbered by dependents—be these young or old; and (c) enthusiastic but inexperienced. These three characteristics alone can explain a not inconsiderable amount of the potential and limitations of such a movement. Similarly, movements consisting of a disproportionate number of the dispossessed are likely to have little status, money or power. In other words, recognition of the fact that the membership is unlikely to reflect the general population can alert us to look for its peculiarities and thus be aware of some of the consequences of these for the movement and its relations with the rest of society.

Charismatic Authority

¹² Here social control is promoted by means of a strong “group” structure as defined by Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (London: Barrie & Rockliff, 1970). It should, however, be pointed out that this does not apply to all NRMs, but is most commonly a feature in those that Wallis, following Weber, termed “world-rejecting movements.” Roy Wallis, *The Elementary Forms of the New Religious Life* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 9ff.

¹³ See, for example, Vittorio Lanternari, *The Religions of the Oppressed: A Study of Modern Messianic Cults* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1963).

Insofar as an NRM is new in the sense that it consists primarily of converts, it is unlikely to have been formed by a committee or democratically organized group. There is likely to be a leader who is considered to have some new revelation or insight. This may well (though does not always) result in his or her wielding charismatic authority in the Weberian sense. The authority may be accorded to the leader by the followers as much as it is a characteristic of the leader,¹⁴ but, for whatever reason, the end result is that the leader is seen to embody what the followers consider to be a legitimate right to tell them how to live all aspects of their lives, and to change this at a moment's notice. Such leadership is not bound by tradition—the movement has no tradition (although it may employ a rhetoric that appeals to the leader's depiction of a timeless tradition); and it has no rules—or, rather, no established rules beyond those that the leader makes and breaks. To the degree that authority in the NRM is charismatic, the leadership will demonstrate neither predictability nor accountability. As a point of comparison, movements that are new because they have moved to a new location or because they have come together (as with the United Reformed Church) are unlikely to have a charismatic leadership and are more likely to rely on traditional or rational-legal authority. Schisms, however, frequently do have some sort of charismatic leadership, as was the case with the Branch Davidians or with several of the splinter groups that have broken away from the Worldwide Church of God.

External Antagonism

Given that new religions are offering an alternative to the status quo, it is not surprising that they are frequently greeted with ignorance, suspicion, fear, and hostility—even when they have not offended against any law or, indeed, done anything that would be considered harmful were it performed in a traditional religion.¹⁵ There is an abundance of evidence that NRMs have been and continue to be discriminated against disproportionately on account of their being new. “Ordinary people” are prone to suspect that the new beliefs and practices pose a danger to individuals and their families, and, perhaps, will undermine the very fabric of society.¹⁶ Such an attitude is quite likely to reinforce and be reinforced by negative perceptions of several of the characteristics mentioned earlier—converts adopting “incredible” beliefs, indulging in unusual “abnormal”/“unnatural” practices and lifestyles;¹⁷ cutting themselves off socially if not geographically from the rest of the world (apart from procuring new members and money);

¹⁴ Eileen Barker, “Charismatization: The Social Production of ‘an Ethos Propitious to the Mobilization of Sentiments,’” in *Secularization, Rationalism and Sectarianism*, ed. Eileen Barker, James Beckford and Karel Dobbelaere (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 81-202.

¹⁵ The chapters in David G. Bromley and J. Gordon Melton, eds., *Cults, Religion and Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) repeatedly point out that the vast majority of NRMs do not indulge in criminal behavior. Clearly there are exceptions, Aum Shinrikyō and the Solar Temple being two of the widely publicized examples. Of course, members of traditional religions have frequently fallen afoul of the law, the thousands of allegations of child abuse brought against clergy provide but one topical example.

¹⁶ I discuss some of the ways in which NRMs are discriminated against because they are new in Eileen Barker, “Why the Cults? New Religions and Freedom of Religion and Beliefs,” in *Facilitating Freedom of Religion and Belief: Perspectives, Impulses and Recommendations from the Oslo Coalition*, ed. Tore Lindholm, Bahiyih Tahzib-Lie and Cole Durham (Dordrecht Netherlands: Kluwer, 2004), forthcoming.

¹⁷ This may be particularly upsetting for middle-class parents who see their “children” abandoning the lifestyle that they (the parents) had fought for them to enjoy.

unquestioningly following a leader who ignores and/or denounces the rules and traditions of “normal” society—and so on.

The extent to which hostilities are played out in the relationship between the NRM and the host society varies from NRM to NRM and from society to society, and antagonism toward the movements is by no means evenly spread throughout society. It is certainly true that, as Melton points out, some traditional religions oppose new religions quite forcefully—sometimes with violence; but other traditional religions, while not agreeing with the new beliefs, are prepared to tolerate or even cautiously celebrate the diversity in their midst.¹⁸ Furthermore, it should be stressed that not all NRMs are visible to the public—some Gurdjieff groups, for example, are incredibly difficult to track down and there are hundreds of other NRMs that few, apart from the members, their relatives and friends, are likely to have heard of. It tends to be the *concept* of a new religion that causes antagonism rather than the thousands of NRMs that actually exist, with the media constantly reinforcing an association with the dozen or so atrocities that have hit the headlines (such as Jonestown, the Solar Temple, Aum Shinrikyô and the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God). INFORM has over 3,000 different groups on file, yet in an average year it receives enquiries about fewer than 150 different groups, the vast majority being for information about either a score or so “favorites” or general categories of movements (such as the New Age or Paganism).¹⁹

Change

A final characteristic I would like to put forward as associated with *new* religions is that they undergo transformations and modifications far more radically and rapidly than the vast majority of older religions under normal circumstances.

Rodney Stark has estimated that

[a]lthough it is impossible to calculate the actual rate of success, probably no more than one religious movement out of 1,000 will attract more than 100,000 followers and last for as long as a century. Even most movements that achieve these modest results will become no more than a footnote in the history of religions.²⁰

Whether or not this is an accurate assessment, it is clear that Stark is correct in pointing out that most NRMs have been little more than one or two-generation movements. This is not the

¹⁸ Although individual members of the Anglican communion have expressed antagonism, some even leading anticult and countercult groups, the Church of England as an institution has not expressed antagonism but has supported the dissemination of an academic approach to understanding NRMs. See Eileen Barker “INFORM: Bringing the Sociology of Religion to the Public Space,” in *Frontier Religions in Public Space*, ed. Pauline Côté (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2001), 21-34. For an example of further Anglican support for other faiths, see James Beckford and Sophie Gilliat, *Religion in Prison: Equal Rites in a Multi-Faith Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

It might, however, be noted *en passant* that the Church of England was responsible for the bloody persecution of other faiths, most notably Catholicism, when it was relatively new, having been established, disestablished and re-established by kings and queens during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

¹⁹ INFORM is a registered charity that I founded in 1988 with the objective of providing information which is as balanced and up-to-date as possible about NRMs. It is based at the London School of Economics and receives support from the British government and mainstream Churches. See <<http://www.inform.ac/>>.

²⁰ Rodney Stark, “Why Religious Movements Succeed or Fail,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 11, no. 2 (1996): 133.

place to discuss the variables that determine why some survive and others do not;²¹ but survival is clearly a legitimate issue for scholars of NRMs to investigate, and, perhaps, one that is more likely to be evoked by a curiosity about newness than about continuing traditions.

Assuming, however, that a first-generation movement is to survive, it will, *necessarily* undergo a number of changes due to the fact that its newness becomes less new than it was. These changes will originate both internally and externally; some (such as demographic changes) will be inevitable; others will be the result of more or less necessary, and more or less conscious, decisions (such as how to educate children born into the movement and how to deal with them if they rebel). Comparing it to the first-generation movement, the arrival of the second generation might result in what could be termed an “inverted disproportionality,” with a high percentage of children, very few young adults and a “bulge” of middle-aged members—the original converts having aged, and (as a consequence of devoting resources of time and money to childrearing) having had relatively little opportunity to attract new members.²² Generally speaking, however, the greater the number of generations a movement is from its beginnings, the less significant the demographic discrepancy between it and the general population is likely to be. Nonetheless, minority religions are likely to continue to cater to a “specialist clientele,” and movements such as the Shakers that discourage sexual relations are likely to acquire an ageing profile unless they are successful in attracting a steady flow of new converts.

As I have discussed elsewhere,²³ inevitable internal sources of change also include the death of the founder, which, in all likelihood, will result in greater accountability and predictability. Internal decisions will need to be made on how to communicate with (and control) the membership if it expands beyond a size where primary, face-to-face contact is possible. Externally, not only are attitudes towards the movement likely to change (perhaps relaxing as the movement itself relaxes and the sharply drawn “them” versus “us” boundary becomes permeable), but changes throughout society in general may also have an effect on NRMs—the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989,²⁴ and the introduction of the Internet being but two examples.²⁵

In short, other things being equal (which, of course, they rarely are), first-generation movements have a tendency to become increasingly similar to, and decreasingly in tension with, the host society with the arrival of second and subsequent generations. Practices and lifestyles may become more negotiable and beliefs may become more flexible as they accommodate to successive generations and wider pools of potential converts, especially if they have had to deal with the passing of endtime dates—all of which taken together adds up to a process Niebuhr identified as denominationalization.²⁶

²¹ See, however, Phillip Lucas, “Social Factors in the Failure of New Religious Movements: A Case Study Using Stark’s Success Model,” *Syzygy* 1, no. 1 (1992): 39-54; Rodney Stark, “The Rise and Fall of Christian Science,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 13, no. 2 (1998): 189-214; Laurence Iannaccone and Rodney Stark, “Why the Jehovah’s Witnesses Grow so Rapidly,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 12, no. 2 (1997): 133-57.

²² This is a pattern I have observed with changes in The Family. See Eileen Barker, “Plus Ça Change...” *Social Compass* 42, no. 2 (1995): 168-70.

²³ Barker, “Plus Ça Change...” 165-80.

²⁴ Eileen Barker, “But Who’s Going to Win? National and Minority Religions in Post-Communist Society,” in *New Religious Phenomena in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Irena Borowik and Grzegorz Babinski (Kraków: Nomos, 1997), 25-62.

²⁵ Eileen Barker, “Crossing the Boundary: New Challenges to Authority and Control as a Consequence of Access to the Internet,” in *Religion and Cyberspace*, ed. Morten Højsgaard and Margit Warburg (Aarhus: University of Aarhus Press, 2004), forthcoming.

²⁶ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1929).

Some religions, however, (such as the Amish, the Hutterites, the Bruderhof, and the Exclusive Brethren) will feel the need to maintain a sharp social and/or geographical boundary to preserve their separateness from the rest of the world, and they may develop into “established sects.” Interesting variations can be found in situations such as the Former Soviet Union in the 1990s where there was a large influx of converts to what were by then second-generation NRMs from the West.²⁷

The point being made here is that, although there may be important overlaps between sects (and cults) and NRMs, there are also important distinctions due in large part to NRMs—though not necessarily sects—being comprised of first-generation converts. Although the NRM may exhibit some sectarian characteristics, if it is to evolve into an established sect it *cannot* stay unchanged: it *has* to change (in certain respects) *in order to* remain the same (in crucial respects).

CONCLUSION

Let me end as I began, by stressing that I am not advocating that first-generation membership is the only useful way of defining NRMs. Paradoxically, I believe that it is also useful to talk about second-generation, third-generation and even fourth-generation NRMs—and, indeed, to alert scholars to important differences that can be found in movements that have a mixture of converts and “born intos.” Let me also repeat that I do not take issue with most of what Melton has written in his article—apart from his implication that newness may not be as significant as I, possibly because I am a sociologist, believe it to be.

Of course there are problems with the term “new religious movement”—far more than have been touched on in this essay. One of the most obvious questions that remains (and perhaps has to remain) unanswered is: “When does a new religion stop being new?” Clearly this is not merely a question of time—yet it is to some extent a question of socially constructed time. Each generation (a similarly inexact but useful concept related to time) will have a different vision of the new. In the first century, Christianity was new, in the seventh century Islam was new, in the eighteenth century Methodism was new, in the nineteenth century the Seventh-day Adventists, Christadelphians and Jehovah’s Witnesses were new; in the twenty-first century the Unification Church, ISKCON and Scientology are beginning to look old. The confusion caused by the various generations of Japan’s new religions is striking,²⁸ but this very fact has prompted

²⁷ Barker, “But Who’s Going to Win?”

²⁸ Some have dated Japan’s new religions from 1729; others place the starting point a century later with the emergence of Kurozumi-kyô (1814) and Tenrikyô (1838). Sometimes new religions that emerged after the Meiji Restoration (1868), such as Oomoto (1892), or between the World Wars, such as Reiyûkai (1925), Sôka Gakkai (1930) and Risshô Kôsei Kai (1938) are referred to as the old new religions (these movements, which were suppressed during World War II, have also been labeled sectarian Shinto or quasi-religious movements); but others prefer to refer to those that emerged after World War II, such as Shinnyoen (1951) and Mahikari (1959) as new religions, and those founded after 1970, such as GLA (God Light Association, founded 1970), Agonshû (1978) and Aum Shinrikyô (1989) being referred to as new new religions. It was around 1960 that the actual term new religion (*shin shûkyô*) came into popular usage. See Nobutaka Inoue, *Recent Trends in the Study of Japanese New Religions* (Tokyo: Kokugakuin University, 1997).

scholars to examine how the movements have responded to changing social circumstances in systematically different ways.²⁹

This essay has been written with a modest objective: to alert scholars to the (surely indisputable) fact that there are some characteristics which are liable (not certain) to be found in many (not all) first-generation movements *because* they are first-generation movements. If we wish to understand better the enormous diversity of religions that have appeared on this planet, we should not forget that there are some exceedingly interesting questions raised by applying the very concept of *nova religio*.

²⁹ See, for example, Susumu Shimazono, "New New Religions and This World: Religious Movements in Japan after the 1970s and their Beliefs about Salvation," in *20 Years On: Changes in New Religious Movements*, ed. Eileen Barker and Jean-François Mayer, Special Edition of *Social Compass*, 42 (1995): 193-205.