



EDITED BY

JAMES R.

LEWIS

INGA B.

TØLLEFSEN

≡ The Oxford Handbook of  
**NEW RELIGIOUS  
MOVEMENTS**

VOLUME II

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

# NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

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*Edited by*  
JAMES R. LEWIS  
*and*  
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by Chris Partridge (under the title “Alternative Spiritualities, New Religions,  
and the Reenchantment of the West”)

“The North American Anti-Cult Movement”  
by Anson Shupe

“The Mythic Dimensions of New Religious Movements: Function, Reality Construction, and Process”  
by Diana Tumminia

# CONTENTS

|                             |    |
|-----------------------------|----|
| <i>List of Contributors</i> | ix |
|-----------------------------|----|

|                                      |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Introduction                         | 1 |
| JAMES R. LEWIS AND INGA B. TØLLEFSEN |   |

## PART I SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC APPROACHES

|  |    |
|--|----|
| 1. Categorizing Religious Organizations: In Search<br>of a Theoretically Meaningful Strategy | 17 |
| DAVID G. BROMLEY   |    |
| 2. Conversion  | 25 |
| GEORGE D. CHRYSSIDES   |    |
| 3. Charisma and Authority in New Religious Movements   | 36 |
| ERIN PROPHET   |    |
| 4. Disaffiliation and New Religious Movements  | 50 |
| SEAN E. CURRIE   |    |
| 5. Seekers and Subcultures   | 60 |
| JAMES R. LEWIS   |    |
| 6. Quantitative Approaches to New Religions  | 72 |
| MARGRETHE LØØV   |    |
| 7. Psychology and New Religious Movements  | 84 |
| JOHN A. SALIBA   |    |
| 8. As It Was in the Beginning: Developmental Moments<br>in the Emergence of New Religions    | 98 |
| DAVID G. BROMLEY   |    |

## PART II CONTROVERSY

9. The North American Anticult Movement 117  
ANSON SHUPE
10. The Christian Countercult Movement 143  
DOUGLAS E. COWAN
11. Legal Dimensions of New Religions: An Update 152  
JAMES T. RICHARDSON
12. Brainwashing and “Cultic Mind Control” 174  
JAMES R. LEWIS
13. From Jonestown to 9/11 and Beyond: Mapping the Contours  
of Violence and New Religious Movements 186  
REBECCA MOORE
14. Conspiracy Theories and New Religious Movements 198  
ASBJØRN DYRENDAL
15. Satanic Ritual Abuse 210  
JAMES R. LEWIS
16. Cult Journalism 222  
NICOLE S. RUSKELL AND JAMES R. LEWIS

## PART III THEMES

17. Invention in “New New” Religions 237  
CAROLE M. CUSACK
18. Children in New Religions 248  
SANJA NILSSON
19. Media, Technology, and New Religious Movements: A Review  
of the Field 264  
SHANNON TROSPER SCHOREY
20. New Religions and Science 278  
JEREMY RAPPORT
21. Gender and New Religions 287  
INGA B. TØLLEFSEN

22. Sex and New Religions 303  
MEGAN GOODWIN
23. Occulture and Everyday Enchantment 315  
CHRISTOPHER PARTRIDGE

## PART IV RELIGIOUS STUDIES APPROACHES

24. Rituals and Ritualization in New Religions Movements 335  
MIKAEL ROTHSTEIN
25. The Mythic Dimensions of New Religious Movements: Function, Reality Construction, and Process 346  
DIANA G. TUMMINIA
26. Religious Experiences in New Religious Movements 358  
OLAV HAMMER
27. New Religious Movements and Scripture 370  
EUGENE V. GALLAGHER
28. Material Religion 380  
JESSICA MOBERG
29. Hagiography: A Note on the Narrative Exaltation of Sect Leaders and Heads of New Religions 392  
MIKAEL ROTHSTEIN
30. Millennialism: New Religious Movements and the Quest for a New Age 401  
JEAN-FRANÇOIS MAYER

## PART V SUBFIELDS OF STUDY

31. What Does God Need with a Starship? UFOs and Extraterrestrials in the Contemporary Religious Landscape 417  
ERIK A. W. ÖSTLING
32. Late Modern Shamanism in a Norwegian Context: Global Networks—Local Grounds 431  
TRUDE FONNELAND
33. Modern Religious Satanism: A Negotiation of Tensions 441  
CIMMINNEE HOLT AND JESPER AAGAARD PETERSEN



|  |     |
|--|-----|
| 34. Western Esotericism and New Religious Movements        | 455 |
| HENRIK BOGDAN  |     |
| 35. The New Age  | 469 |
| LISELOTTE FRISK, INGVILD SÆLID GILHUS, AND SIV ELLEN KRAFT |     |
| 36. The Study of Paganism and Wicca: A Review Essay        | 482 |
| KAARINA AITAMURTO AND SCOTT SIMPSON                        |     |
| 37. Native American Prophet Religions                      | 495 |
| JAMES R. LEWIS AND ELLEN DOBROWOLSKI                       |     |
| <i>Index</i>   | 517 |

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VOLUME II



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# INTRODUCTION

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JAMES R. LEWIS AND INGA B. TØLLEFSEN

THE first volume of *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements* appeared in early 2004. We decided that there were a number of issues raised in the original Introduction worth revisiting in this second volume. For the first volume, we began with an overview of a cover story focused on CESNUR (Centre for Studies of New Religions), an annual conference of new religion scholars. In that article—“Oh, Gods!”, which appeared in the February 2002 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*—the author, Toby Lester, observed that “The study of new religious movements—NRMs for short—has become a growth industry.” Similarly, he further asserted that “The NRM field is only a few decades old, but already it has made its mark” (p. 38).

To refer back to that original Introduction, we said at the time that the appearance of an article like “Oh, Gods!” was an indicator that the study of NRMs had achieved the status of a recognized academic specialty. This development was rather surprising when one considers that “in 1970 one could count the number of active researchers on new religions on one’s hands” (Melton 2004). What accounts for the meteoric growth of this field of study? The short answer is that it arose in response to the cult controversy of the early 1970s and continued to grow in the wake of a series of headline-grabbing tragedies involving religious groups like the People’s Temple and Heaven’s Gate. The long answer is somewhat more complicated.

As a field of scholarly endeavor, NRM studies had actually emerged several decades earlier in Japan in the wake of the explosion of religious innovation following the Second World War. Even the name “new religions” is a direct translation of the expression *shin shukyo* that Japanese sociologists coined to refer to this phenomenon. Although the generation of new religious groups has been an ongoing process in Western countries (not to mention in the world as a whole) for millennia, the study of such groups and movements was the province of preexisting academic specializations in the West until the seventies. Thus, to cite a few examples, the

Pentecostal movement (which did not begin until the early twentieth century) was studied as part of church history, and phenomena like cargo cults were researched by anthropologists.

However, when a wave of nontraditional religiosity exploded out of the declining counterculture in the late 1960s and early 1970s, academics perceived it (correctly or incorrectly) as representing a different phenomenon from prior cycles of religious innovation. Not only did most of these new religions represent radical theological departures from the traditionally dominant Christian tradition, but—in contrast to movements like Pentecostalism—they also tended to recruit their adherents from the offspring of the middle class. Such characteristics caused these emergent religions to be regarded as categorical departures from the past, and they initially attracted scholars from a wide variety of disciplines. It was at this juncture that NRMs began to develop as a distinct field of scholarship in Western countries. And it should be noted that this development took place shortly *before* the cult controversy had begun to heat up. Two academic anthologies representative of this era are Glock and Bellah's *The New Religious Consciousness* (1976) and Needleman and Baker's *Understanding the New Religions* (1978). As reflected in many of the articles in these collections, the overall focus at the time was to attempt to assess the broader social significance of the newest wave of NRMs.

This academic landscape changed over the course of the seventies. By the latter part of the decade, it had become clear that new religions were *not* indicative of a broader social transformation—or at least not the kind of transformation observers had anticipated. Also during the seventies, issues raised by the cult controversy gradually came to dominate the field. Because social conflict is a bread-and-butter issue for sociology, more and more sociologists were drawn to the study of new religions. By the time of the Jonestown tragedy in 1978, NRMs was a recognized specialization within the sociology of religion.

It took much longer for new religions to achieve recognition as a legitimate specialization from the religious studies academy. This was partially the result of the expansion of religious studies and its own quest for legitimacy within a mostly secular university system. During the early 1970s—precisely the same time period when new religions were becoming a public issue—religious studies was busy establishing itself as an academic discipline. As members of a discipline sometimes perceived as marginal, most religion scholars were reluctant to further marginalize themselves by giving serious attention to what at the time seemed a transitory social phenomenon, and as a consequence left the study of new religions to sociologists. Consequently, it was not until a series of major tragedies that took place in the 1990s—specifically, the Branch Davidian debacle, the Solar Temple suicide/murders, the AUM Shinrikyo gas attack, and the Heaven's Gate suicides—that the field of NRMs was truly embraced by the religious studies establishment.

To return to a discussion of the present volume: The first volume of *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements* was well received, winning a *Choice* "Outstanding Academic Title" award in 2005. Since the appearance of the first volume, the

field of NRMs has continued to explode. There are multiple indicators of this ongoing expansion:

1. High-prestige academic presses such as the Oxford University Press and the Cambridge University Press are “list-building” in the NRM area.
2. There are currently at least five book series focused on NRMs—published by de Gruyter, Ashgate, Equinox, Palgrave-Macmillan, and Brill.
3. In addition to the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* and *Nova Religio*, two new NRM journals have appeared: the *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review* and the *International Journal for the Study of New Religions*.
4. This latter periodical is the official journal of the new International Society for the Study of New Religions (ISSNR), the first membership organization in the NRM field.
5. Certain subfields have already constituted themselves as distinct fields of study with their own periodicals—Western Esotericism, Masonic Studies, New Age Studies, and Neo-Pagan Studies. In 2009 and 2011, there were academic conferences held in Norway and Sweden focused specifically on modern Satanism, indicating that even tiny subfields are coming into their own.

The reasons behind this ongoing expansion are relatively simple:

1. Similar to circumstances that gave rise to the expansion of Islamic Studies in the wake of 9/11, NRMs continue to be viewed as potentially threatening, controversial phenomena. Because of this, more and more universities are offering classes on NRMs, prompting university libraries to build their collections in this area. And, of course, this is a topic about which other kinds of professionals as well as educated nonspecialists tend to purchase books.
2. The study of NRMs is intrinsically interesting, prompting more and more researchers to specialize in this field, more doctoral students to write dissertations on NRMs, and more universities to offer NRM courses.

In the interest of broader coverage, for this new volume of *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements* the number of chapters—roughly corresponding to the number of topics—has been expanded from twenty-two to thirty-seven. Some of the new chapters cover “traditional” religious studies topics, such as “Scripture,” “Charisma,” and “Ritual.” Additional new pieces apply newer theoretical approaches to NRM topics, such as the chapter on “Material Culture” approaches. Yet other new chapters cover topics that have been unstudied or understudied, such as pieces on the patterns of development in NRMs and on subcultural considerations in the study of NRMs. The reader will also notice that many new contributors are from Nordic countries—nations that have a particularly active culture of NRM scholarship. Finally, the present volume has a thematic focus; readers interested in specific NRMs are advised to consult James R. Lewis and

Jesper Aagaard Petersen's edited volume, *Controversial New Religions* (published by the Oxford University Press in 2014).

## SURVEY OF CONTENTS

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### Part I—Social-Scientific Approaches

The majority of early scholarship on contemporary new religions was social-scientific, particularly sociology. Social scientists still contribute a significant portion of NRM scholarship. It thus seemed appropriate to begin this Handbook with a series of chapters on social-scientific approaches.

The concepts of church and sect, along with the related terms of denomination and cult, have been central to religious group classification and theorizing about religious group organization by religion scholars. This classificatory system has been particularly problematic for scholars studying new religious movements. In “Categorizing Religious Organizations: In Search of a Theoretically Meaningful Strategy,” David G. Bromley rehearses the origins and development of these concepts and then considers some of the newer and more inclusive relationally based typologies that address the ongoing critiques of the church–sect model.

George D. Chryssides' chapter on “Conversion” explores explanations for conversion to NRMs. Rather than sudden episodic conversion, joining an NRM can be attributed to self-discovery, following a schism, or pursuing a special interest within a religious organization. There are definite patterns of conversion in NRMs, and notably a disproportion of Jews who join. It is argued that key factors include availability for the requisite lifestyle and the gaining of “compensators” that the NRM offers. A further factor is offering religious experience and a forum in which to discuss it. The author explores the role of the Internet in conversion, arguing that it accounts the rise of “invented religions” but otherwise has limited bearing on gaining new members. Finally, the religions themselves undergo change as new converts espouse them.

Using examples from NRMs ranging from the Children of God to Sahaja Yoga, Erin Prophet's chapter on “Charisma and Authority in New Religious Movements” takes a multidisciplinary approach, reviewing insights from sociology, psychology, anthropology, and management theory. It focuses on charisma as the authority to lead and transform religious traditions, reviewing not only identified qualities of leaders but also the role of followers in creating and maintaining a collective myth, as well as the importance of the situation and culture in which the relationship develops. Key concepts include legitimization strategies, charismatization, and the role of the “charismatic aristocracy.” Attention is paid to factors contributing to instability and violence, particularly related to the institutionalization of charisma known as routinization, as well as optimal conditions for “benevolent” and “diffuse” charisma.

In “Disaffiliation and New Religious Movements,” Sean E. Currie examines the academic literature on disaffiliation from an interdisciplinary perspective, most notably

scholarship in sociology, psychology, and religious studies. He begins briefly with deconversion, due to its close—and often conflated—association with disaffiliation, followed by an overview of key disaffiliation literature, including the development of causal and role theory approaches. He then discusses the “cult controversy” phenomenon and postinvolvement attitudes of former members that featured prominently in early NRM scholarship. He concludes with a discussion on methodological prospects for future research on disaffiliation and NRMs.

The notion of the religious life as being a quest or a journey is quite ancient. Nevertheless, traditionally the average believer has not usually experienced her or his religion in these terms. Rather, religion is typically a part of everyday life that is, for the most part, taken for granted. However, as early as the eighteenth century, a new spiritual subculture had begun to emerge in Western nations within which a number of people with interests in alternative religious ideas and practices adopted a posture of seeker-ship, pursuing various alternative spiritual interests from Spiritualism to certain Asian religions and Asian religious practices. In “Seekers and Subcultures,” James R. Lewis surveys these developments.

Margrethe Løøv’s chapter, “Quantitative Approaches to New Religions,” provides an overview of existing quantitative research on NRMs, the New Age, and Neo-Pagan movements. Covering demographic studies of specific groups, studies conducted in a specific locality, and census data, the chapter draws a broad and comprehensive outline of quantitative approaches to alternative spiritualities. It also addresses areas and questions that require further scholarly attention. There is a general lack of longitudinal studies, and many groups have yet to be studied. Local variances and adaptations constitute another lacuna. Furthermore, the “common knowledge” about NRMs tends to naïvely echo findings from the earliest wave of NRM studies conducted in the 1970s. A call is made for further and more systematic quantitative investigations and for interdisciplinary cooperation.

In “Psychology and New Religious Movements,” John A. Saliba begins by contrasting psychology/psychiatry’s traditional antagonism toward religion with the newer, more positive approach reflected in the fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (1994). After a brief survey of relevant studies, he then explores the problems involved with psychological approaches to members of new religions through the example of studies of followers of Bhagwan Rajneesh. He concludes by outlining a series of unresolved issues regarding the psychology of NRM membership.

The study of NRMs is particularly valuable to the study of religion as it offers a window into the process by which religious organizations develop. David G. Bromley’s chapter, “As It Was in the Beginning: Developmental Moments in the Emergence of New Religions,” draws on insights in the rich set of case studies of NRMs and on the organizational startup literature to fashion a prolegomenon to a theory of the first-generation development of NRMs. The basic premise is that all new organizations encounter similar developmental challenges. The objective is to identify factors that influence alternative levels of development and developmental trajectories during the first generation. The process is described in terms of three nonlinear, sequential developmental moments: initial discovery, public sphere entry, and expansion/consolidation.



## Part II—Controversy

Unquestionably, the primary factor that put studies on alternative religions—and, by extension, NRM studies—on the map was the very public controversies evoked by some of these movements. In fact, conflicts have been such a major aspect of the NRM phenomenon that we are able to devote an entire section of the Handbook to these controversies.

The modern North American anticult movement (ACM), a countermovement, has been researched both conceptually and historically/organizationally. In the “North American Anticult Movement,” Anson Shupe proposes to accomplish two tasks: first, to place the understanding of countermovements such as the modern ACM in a sociological social movement context (foreign as that may have seemed to its activists during the 1960s through the 1990s), and second, to provide an overview of this current incarnation of a very old social movement theme in American history.

Douglas E. Cowan’s “The Christian Countercult Movement” discusses the Christian countercult movement, which, along with the secular ACM, is one of two major oppositional forces to the emergence of NRMs in modern society. Following a few concrete examples, it considers the Christian countercult in terms of (a) its fundamental differences from the secular anticult; (b) the constituencies of the Christian countercult; and (c) the sociological importance of the countercult movement as a mechanism for reality maintenance among conservative Christians. While Roman Catholicism has seen minor countercult activity, this is primarily a conservative Protestant movement. The secular anticult has gained considerably more media coverage since the so-called cult wars of the 1970s, but the Christian countercult predates it by nearly a century and continues to influence far more people in their view of NRMs.

Of the various dimensions of the “cult” controversy, the legal arena is the most significant in terms of its direct impact on the organizational functioning of NRMs. In “Legal Dimensions of New Religions,” James T. Richardson provides a concise yet comprehensive overview of NRM-related legal developments in the United States and a survey of efforts to control new religions around the world. These developments are also analyzed in terms of the sociology of law, and Richardson points out that an important factor fueling anti-NRM sentiment in at least some countries derives from antagonism to American cultural influence.

Unable to comprehend the appeal of NRMs, many observers concluded that the leaders of such groups has discovered a special form of social control that enabled them to recruit their followers in nonordinary ways and, more particularly, to short-circuit their rational, questioning minds by keeping them locked in special trance states. A handful of professionals, mostly psychologists and psychiatrists with sentiments for the ACM, attempted to provide scientific grounding for this notion of cultic brainwashing/mind control, in part by referring back to studies of Korean War prisoners of war who had been “brainwashed” by their captors. In his chapter “Brainwashing and ‘Cultic Mind Control,’” James R. Lewis revisits anticultism’s implicit ideological assumptions and

the empirical studies indicating that conversions to contemporary new religions result from garden-variety sociological and psychological factors rather than from esoteric “mind control” techniques.

Rebecca Moore’s “From Jonestown to 9/11 and Beyond: Mapping the Contours of Violence and New Religious Movements” examines violent outbursts perpetrated by NRMs and considers the competing and complementary theories that have arisen to explain them. It argues that theories about cult violence change as new data become available. Public perceptions of cults and a shifting religious-political landscape also shape theoretical considerations of religion and violence. The chapter notes that prior to the mass murders-suicides in Jonestown, Guyana, and immediately following, theories of violence focused on inwardly directed coercion and control. The demise of the Branch Davidians in 1993, along with other eruptions of violence in the 1990s, challenged this perspective, and a theory of interaction between external and internal forces arose. The events of September 11, 2001, internationalized considerations of religious violence and returned attention to the influence of apocalyptic worldviews. A pressing problem that has emerged most recently is the violence perpetrated against NRMs, particularly state-sponsored repression.

In “Conspiracy Theories and New Religious Movements,” Asbjørn Dyrendal describes and discusses some of the central research into conspiracy theories as related to NRMs. The first part outlines the area of conspiracy and conspiracy theory. Thereafter, the chapter considers some general and specific topics related to conspiracy theories *about* and *in* NRMs, with reference to both recent and earlier theories, movements, and research.

The notion of an international Satanist conspiracy became prominent during the so-called satanic ritual abuse scare. This scare—also referred to as the satanic panic—peaked in the late 1980s and early 1990s. During these years, significant segments of the law enforcement community and numerous therapists believed in the existence of a vast, underground network of evil satanic cults sacrificing and abusing children. Although the Satanism scare did not involve an empirically existing new religion, it shared many themes with the cult controversy. Anticultists, for example, jumped on the satanic ritual abuse bandwagon as a way of promoting their own agenda, and NRM scholars spearheaded the academic analysis of the scare. In “Satanic Ritual Abuse,” James R. Lewis presents a systematic survey of this phenomenon.

Nicole S. Ruskell and James R. Lewis’s chapter “Cult Journalism” opens with an examination of the journalism issues surrounding the assault by the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms on the Branch Davidian community outside of Waco, Texas, in 1993. The discussion of news media coverage of NRMs then moves on to James A. Beckford’s analysis of such journalistic treatments and examines several studies that place NRM journalism in a diachronic perspective. This is followed by a short discussion of the relationship between NRM journalism and fictional treatments of alternative religions. Finally, the chapter examines the news media’s role in the moral panic about NRMs in the latter half of the twentieth century.

## Part III—Themes

There are a set of concerns we find in discussions of NRMs that do not fit comfortably under a comprehensive analytic heading, such as the issue of children in NRMs and concerns about sexual practices within NRMs. We have thus brought these issues together in Part III under the heading “themes.”

In “Invention in ‘New New’ Religions,” Carole M. Cusack discusses the concept of invention and applies it to the study of NRMs. Invention plays a part in all religions and is linked to other conceptual lenses, including syncretism and legitimation. Yet invention is more readily detected in contemporary phenomena (so-called invented, hyper-real, or fiction-based religions), which either eschew or significantly modify the appeals to authority, antiquity, and divine revelation that traditionally accompany the establishment of a new faith. The religions referred to in this chapter (including Discordianism, the Church of All Worlds, and Jediism) are distinctively “new new” religions, appearing from the mid-twentieth century and gaining momentum in the deregulated spiritual market of the twenty-first-century West. Overt religious invention has become mainstreamed in Western society as popular culture, individualism, and consumerism combine to facilitate the cultivation of personal spiritualities and the investment of ephemeral entertainments with ultimate significance and meaning.

Sanja Nilsson’s “Children in New Religions” begins by presenting an overview of the history of childhood. It goes on to point out a selection of topics significant to the discourse on children growing up in contemporary NRMs, such as parenting styles and abuse, education and religious freedom, and legal matters and state interventions, through examples from the research field. The discussion highlights the polemic between perspectives in the secondary construction of childhood within NRMs and concludes that although the study of NRMs has turned from first-generation converts to second-generation children, research based on the notion of children as active agents is still much needed.

Since the first edition of the *Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements* (2004), the growing field of media, religion, and culture has moved at a rapid clip. The previous emphases on theoretical approaches that imagined a significant distinction between online and offline practices has been largely replaced by approaches that attend to the entanglement of digital and physical worlds. As Shannon Trosper Schorey discusses in “Media, Technology, and New Religious Movements: A Review of the field,” research within this new analytical turn speaks about the Internet and religion in terms of third spaces, distributed materialities or subjectivities, and co-constitutive histories and locations. Highlighted within these works are the negotiations and intersections of consumer practices, popular culture, information control, and religious pluralism online. As the field continues to develop, theoretical approaches that emphasize entanglement will help disclose the various relationships of power by which the material practices of religion, media, and technology are produced—allowing scholars to trace robust histories of multiplicity by which the contemporary imaginaries of religion, media, and technology are inherited.

Jeremy Rapport's chapter "New Religions and Science" provides an overview of some of the major theories and ideas about the mixing of science and religion among NRMs, as well the cultural context for the development of one prominent example of an NRM that uses science in its discourse. Illustrating these ideas is a case study of American metaphysical religions, which demonstrates the central role of seemingly scientific epistemological claims in legitimizing NRMs. Finally, Rapport suggests that because the role of science in NRMs is removed from the actual practice of science among professional scientists, the centrality of science in establishing epistemological legitimacy is unlikely to change.

In "Gender and New Religions," Inga B. Tøllefsen presents a broad overview of NRM research on gender, and to some extent sexuality. The first section covers early feminist scholarship, Scandinavian scholarship, quantitative approaches, and male majority adherence to NRMs. The second section features examples of gender perspectives on select new religions, ranging from the extremely diverse Pagan movement to "fundamentalist" movements such as the Unification Church and Mormonism, with perspectives on cultural change, gender roles, and the "youth crisis theory."

NRMs have historically been sites of sexual experimentation, and popular imaginings of emergent and unconventional religions usually include the assumption that members engage in transgressive sexual practices. It is surprising, then, that so few scholars of new religions have focused on sexuality. In "Sex and New Religions," Megan Goodwin considers the role of sexual practice, sexual allegations, and sexuality studies in the consideration of NRMs. She proposes that sex both shapes and haunts NRMs. Because sexuality studies attend to embodied difference and the social construction of sexual pathology, the field can and should inform theoretically rigorous scholarship of NRMs.

Debates about disenchantment and secularization have been central to sociological analyses of religion over the past five decades. While it has been widely argued that modernization leads to secular societies, such arguments have been challenged by empirical evidence to the contrary. The persistence of nonsecular beliefs, such as those relating to the paranormal, suggests that theories of progression toward an absolutely secular condition are mistaken. As Christopher Partridge discusses in "Occulture and Everyday Enchantment," the theory of occulture, which highlights the significance of popular culture and everyday life in the construction of enchanted versions of reality, contributes to an understanding of the development and plausibility of contemporary nonsecular lifeworlds.

## Part IV—Religious Studies Approaches

Under its older designation "comparative religion," religious studies researchers examined ideas and practices that cut across different religions, such as myth, ritual, scripture, and the like. Though religious studies arrived on the NRM studies scene later than sociologists, there has, nevertheless, been enough scholarship carried out from this perspective to merit a separate section on religious studies approaches.

NRMs are religions. The fact that they are new is important, but it does not change the fact that they are religions. Similarly, rituals in NRMs are rituals with the same functions and basic structures as those found in traditional religious settings. However, during the formative period of any given religion, the religious emphasis will be of a special kind. Members of NRMs typically consider themselves an elite, they believe that they live in special times, they await great transformations, sometimes their teachings are clouded in esoteric structures, and they position themselves in a more or less outspoken opposition to the prevailing societal and religious order. These traits are all identifiable in the NRMs' ritual lives. Introducing several examples in his "Rituals and Ritualization in New Religions," Mikael Rothstein illustrates some of the more important aspects of these mechanisms.

Mythology refers to sacred narratives that form the basis of a religion's world view. In "The Mythic Dimensions of New Religious Movements: Function, Reality Construction, and Process," Diana Tumminia argues that, despite the significant body of theoretical work that has been carried out by anthropologists and others, the mythological dimension of NRMs has been largely ignored. Using the Unarius Society, feminist witchcraft, and the Movement of Spiritual Inner Awareness as examples, the author observes that NRM myths are not fixed but, rather, change in response to the ongoing process of reality construction taking place within such movements.

Among the basic elements found in older and more recent religions alike are striking experiences such as visions, out-of-body experiences, and mystical union. On the one hand, such experiences are psychological phenomena. On the other, they are also social facts; something as intangible as a personal experience is somehow transformed into the bedrock of a religious movement. In his chapter "Religious Experiences in New Religious Movements," Olav Hammer argues that the "religious" element of an experience is an effect of the way these experiences are categorized and interpreted. Quite a few people have had striking experiences, far fewer insist that their experiences have any validity for others, and fewer yet manage to convince other people of the supernatural origin of these experiences and derive authority from them. An NRM will derive legitimacy from such experiences if they are presented in a narrative that frames them as "religious," and if others are willing to accept this narrative.

In their efforts to establish legitimacy, many NRMs link themselves to an authoritative past by producing interpretations of established scriptures or holy books. In the process, they sometimes produce holy books of their own that can be accorded the same status for their adherents as other, better known and well-established scriptural texts. As they do for established religions, in NRMs scriptural texts serve as vehicles for the expression of fundamental practices and beliefs and support the efforts to gain the attention, approval, and even allegiance of a particular audience. In "New Religious Movements and Scripture," Eugene Gallagher analyzes multiple examples of how NRMs both offer innovative commentaries on existing sacred texts and produce their own, new scriptures.

Jessica Moberg's chapter "Material Religion" introduces material studies, a theoretical field rooted in performance studies, embodiment phenomenology, critical theory,

and postfunctionalist anthropology. It lays out central analytical points and presents four approaches that can be used in the study of NRMs: (1) material mediation—the process by which objects and bodies are transformed into mediators of the other-worldly; (2) material socialization—how practitioners learn religion by acquiring correct ways of relating to objects and material worlds; (3) circulation of artifacts—how religious objects are produced, distributed, and used; and (4) foodways—the process in which food and drink is cultivated, prepared, and consumed, and its importance for the cultivation of religious communities. The chapter includes an example of how material theory can be applied, and a discussion of how such perspectives can contribute to, and further, the study of NRMs.

In “Hagiography: A Note on the Narrative Exaltation of Sect Leaders and Heads of New Religions,” Mikael Rothstein deals with sacred biographies and hagiographies and their function in the formation of religious leaders and ritually venerated persons. It is argued that the status of any master, teacher, prophet, guru, seer, or channel is partly based on sacred biographies and that the narrative construction of religious authority is crucial to our understanding of leadership in NRMs, sects, and so forth. Distinctions are made between doctrinal and popular hagiographies: doctrinal narratives promote the exalted leader according to theologically well-defined standards, while popular narratives cover a wider span, as they seek to draw a picture of the perfected human in many different ways. Counterhagiographies, finally, serve to deconstruct the ideal person and are typically employed by former devotees or members of countergroups. Hagiographies are seen as very ancient social strategies (there are references to old NRMs, including early Christianity and the cult of Christ) but also a very lively and important mechanism in the current make of religious leaders. Examples are derived from Catholic cults of saints, the Mormon church, Scientology, Transcendental Meditation, and several other groups.

In “Millennialism: New Religious Movements and the Quest for a New Age,” Jean-Francois Mayer begins by offering a brief overview of the concept of millennialism, with its Christian roots and its extension to a more generic use. Applying the concept to NRMs, a section of the chapter takes the example of the Millennium ’73 event in Houston in order to draw some observations on aspects of interaction between NRMs and millennial themes: selective use of Biblical themes, aspirations to change the world, general rather than specific views of the future, mobilizing function of millennial hopes, and changes in the intensity and nature of millenarian aspirations. The final part of the chapter lists the various shades of millennialism among NRMs, derived from different religious environments.

## Part V—Subfields of Study

Finally, as NRM studies has grown, certain subfields have constituted themselves as distinct fields of study with their own periodicals, organizations, and academic conferences, including Esotericism, New Age Studies, and Neo-Pagan Studies. In this final section, we examine a selection of these emergent fields.



In “What Does God Need with a Starship? UFOs and Extraterrestrials in the Contemporary Religious Landscape,” Erik A. W. Östling outlines themes and motifs among UFO religions against a historical backdrop of religious ideas regarding contact and interactions with UFOs or extraterrestrial beings. Locating the narratives of the contactees as a development from Theosophy, the chapter discusses the demarcations of the UFO or extraterrestrial intelligence religious landscape and draws examples from such religious groups as Scientology, the Raëlian religion, and the late Heaven’s Gate. In outlining recurring themes and motifs, the chapter first focuses on the practice of naturalizing the purported supernatural into ancient astronauts existing on the same ontological level as ourselves. Second it focuses of the millennial aspirations of a coming transformation of our world with the arrival of savior beings from the stars.

Neo-Shamanism was established in the United States in the late 1960s and came gradually to constitute a key part of the worldwide New Age market. In contemporary society, the words *shaman* and *shamanism* have become part of everyday language and thousands of popular as well as academic texts have been written about the subject. In “Late Modern Shamanism in a Norwegian Context: Global Networks—Local Grounds,” Trude Fonneland discusses the emergence and development of contemporary shamanism in Norway. She focuses on how political and cultural differences affect religious ecologies, highlighting that what was established in the United States is only one part of the whole picture. The article ventures between the worlds of the local and the global and analyzes the religious innovations that occur when a global culture of neo-shamanism interacts with a specific local culture.

Modern religious Satanism is a diverse movement of groups and individuals using Satan as a symbol for their oppositional identity. Translating Satan as “opposer” or “adversary” from the Book of Job, Satanism coopts the Satan myth and reinterprets it as an antinomian critique of traditional mores championing radical individualism, using the language and aesthetics of magic, esotericism, and the occult. As the history of the development of the character of Satan—theologically, politically, socially, mythologically—is one of opposition and conflict, modern religious Satanism is a constant negotiation with its own marginal status and inherent tensions. Satanism’s position on the fringe is a balancing act among its contentious popular reputation, media treatments, academic portrayals, legal status, critique of social conventions, and disagreement among and between self-identified satanic persons and groups. In “Modern Religious Satanism: A Negotiation of Tensions,” Jesper Aagaard Petersen and Cimminnee Holt examine Satanism’s embrace of a symbol of opposition—Satan—as it negotiates the very tensions and challenges of its adopted social marginality.

The study of Western esotericism is a comparatively new field of research that covers a wide range of currents, notions, and practices from late antiquity to the present. Esotericism is often understood as the “rejected knowledge” of Western culture, which often centers on claims of absolute knowledge or gnosis. In “Western Esotericism and

New Religious Movements,” Henrik Bogdan discusses four discourses that can be found in many esoteric NRMs, namely “secrecy and unveiling,” “initiation and progress,” “the higher self,” and “Secret Masters.” In the second part of the chapter, four examples of esoteric NRMs are briefly discussed, Spiritualism, Theosophy, Thelema, and Wicca.

Liselotte Frisk, Ingvild Sælid Gilhus, and Siv Ellen Kraft’s “New Age” provides an overview of the research field of the New Age. After presenting a brief research history, the second part of the chapter discusses undeveloped areas and contested issues in need of future research. Five areas are singled out for scrutiny: (1) the concept of New Age and a general model of religion; (2) the delimitation of New Age and how it relates to religious processes, secularization, and functional differentiation in contemporary societies; (3) the global and the local, especially the historical and contemporary processes of cultural and religious embedding and translation of New Age concepts and practices; (4) mediation, especially how media dynamics are crucial to the overall shape and characteristics of New Age; and (5) the need to analyze social and organizational forms.

In the twentieth century, all across Europe, new religious communities appeared that drew inspiration from historical Paganisms. The Wiccan tradition, first presented in the United Kingdom in the second half of the twentieth century by Gerald Gardner, has been one of the most influential and far-reaching. Well-known currents in the English-speaking world also include Druidry and Germanic Heathenism, as well as many others. Their entrance onto the religious scene has been met with various responses from the media and scholarship. In “The Study of Paganism and Wicca: A Review Essay,” Kaarina Aitamurto and Scott Simpson address selected themes in the development of academic “Pagan Studies.” These include the definitional difficulties in describing a diverse field, the special methodological concerns and approaches that have arisen, and the increasing internationalization of study.

Treatments of NRMs typically focus on a handful of one or two dozen of the most controversial groups that emerged in the wake of the sixties counterculture in Western countries. However, it seemed that including a treatment of certain indigenous millenarian movements would be useful for comparative purposes—hence this concluding chapter on “Native American Prophet Religions” by James R. Lewis and Ellen Dobrowolski. Characteristically, these movements begin with the religious experience of a single prophet and otherwise share certain similarities. It is not until one examines the position that their revelations took on the topic of the non-Indian presence that Native American prophets begin to diverge significantly from one another. The present chapter thus examines contrasting movements, some that accept and that adapt to the presence of European Americans and others that reject the culture of the intruders.

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PART I

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SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC  
APPROACHES

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## CHAPTER 1

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# CATEGORIZING RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

### *In Search of a Theoretically Meaningful Strategy*

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DAVID G. BROMLEY

THE concepts of church and sect that have been so central to categorization of religious organizations and to theorizing about their developmental trajectories trace to Europe and the emergence of Protestantism. Since the Protestant Reformation and the steady erosion of Roman Catholic hegemony in Europe, religious diversity has continued to increase. Initially, Protestant churches formed in various parts of Europe that became national religions closely allied with nation-states. These Protestant traditions then established themselves in European colonies and in new nations that were settled initially by European immigrants. Protestantism proved very prone to schisms and sometimes produced chains of schismatic groups. In one noteworthy case, the Adventist tradition has splintered into over one hundred distinct groups. The Roman Catholic tradition has been less prone to schisms, due in part to its “big tent” approach to religious innovation that accommodated innovative groups, such as religious orders. Nonetheless, there still has been considerable inventiveness (e.g., folk saints, Marian apparitionists, sedevacantists) at the margins. And, although some kindred churches have merged over time, as ethnic, cultural, and nationalistic connections and identities have become less salient, the number of schisms has far exceeded the number of mergers (Finke and Sheitle 2009).

Even within the context of the traditional church–sect model, several macro-social processes have led to continuously increasing religious diversity. The progressive adoption of a secular-rational orientation in the public sphere has yielded an elliptical continuum of religious organizations from “leading edge” (liberal mainline) religious groups, which have accommodated to the modernist impulse, and “trailing edge” (evangelical and fundamentalist) religious groups, which seek to preserve or reinstate traditional social and cultural pathways. The combination of separation of church and state and institutional differentiation, which reduce state control, has created more

open religious economies, particularly in advanced Western societies, that create the potential for the formation of a variety of new religions. As Beckford (1989) has noted, religion has become a resource that can be configured in a variety of ways. The more recent emergence of global social organization has outflanked the traditional church-sect model as once geographically clustered non-Christian religious traditions take root in previously more homogeneous religious landscapes.

## THE EMERGENCE OF THE CHURCH-SECT TYPOLOGY

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The concepts of sect and cult find their roots in the dichotomous categorization system developed by Max Weber. The ideal types (a mental construct that refers to a hypothetical reality) that Weber created were distinguished from one another along a single dimension, *inclusive versus exclusive membership* (Weber 1958, 1963). Churches, in his formulation, were inclusive religious groups that encompassed a broad membership base, with relatively low levels of commitment expected from members. Church membership was sustained primarily through birth rather than conversion. By contrast, sects were exclusive religious groups. They sought spiritual perfection, which required a higher level of adherent commitment to specific doctrines or rituals that was the product of voluntary, individual choice.

The German theologian/church historian Ernst Troeltsch built upon but shifted the focus of Weber's typology in *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches* (1931). Troeltsch identified three types of *religious behavior* (churchly, sectarian, and mystical) that he posited were characteristic of different forms of religious organization. For Troeltsch, churches were religious organizations that accommodated to and preserved the social order and were most strongly associated with upper-status segments of the society. Sects distanced themselves from the established social order, being either indifferent or openly hostile to it, and tended to be associated with lower-status groups. Both types can be logically derived from Christian theology, he contended. Troeltsch's typology became very influential and was the basis for a number of subsequent typologies. The mystical type was never developed in his subsequent writings.

Another major development occurred twenty-five years later when theologian/historian H. Richard Niebuhr applied Troeltsch's church-sect typology to American society in his classic book *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1957). Niebuhr added the category "denomination," which he characterized as a voluntary religious association, the kind of organization most compatible with the pluralistic nature of American society. Distinguishing church and denomination allowed recognition of the different political-religious dynamics that characterize a social order in which there is a single, dominant church, with the Roman Catholic Church during the late Middle Ages often cited as the example, and one in which there is a set of roughly equal denominational

groups that must recognize and adjust to one another, such as the twentieth-century United States. Niebuhr also moved away from describing sect and church as discrete categories in favor of locating them as points on a continuum, which allowed for movement along the continuum. He asserted that there was an accommodation process by sects, with Methodism being an often-cited example, that usually led to more church-like characteristics, particularly after the first generation. The accommodation process then led to the emergence of new schismatic movements. This premise of a continuous process of organizational accommodation and resistance became a centerpiece in sociological analyses of religious organization emergence, development, and transformation (Stark and Bainbridge 1985).

A number of other versions of the church–sect typology have been developed. Howard Becker (Becker 1940; von Wiese and Becker 1932) drew on the Troeltsch typology and expanded the number of types to four: the *ecclesia* (inclusivist national or international groups closely aligned with established institutions), *sect* (exclusivist religious groups seeking to preserve the purity of their root tradition), *denomination* (sectarian groups that have reached some measure of accommodation with established institutions), and *cult* (loosely organized, amorphous groups that offer experiential spiritual benefits such as salvation, healing, and ecstatic experiences to adherents). J. Milton Yinger's *Religion, Society, and the Individual* (1957), published in the same year as Niebuhr's typology, proposed a more elaborated continuum constructed around the inclusivity–exclusivity characteristic: the universal church, *ecclesia*, denomination, established sect, sect, and cult. He also contributed to what quickly became a proliferation of subtypes by specifying three subtypes of sects (accepting, avoiding, aggressive) based on their relationship to the host social order. This relational perspective was to become an important focus of religious group typologies. After Becker and Yinger incorporated the concept of cult into their typologies, the concept was regularly included in what began as the church–sect typology. By the time that Becker and Yinger wrote, then, the major elements of the vocabulary for distinguishing among religious organizations were in place.

While the various typologies that followed Weber and Troeltsch identified different characteristics of church and sect, there was a substantial overlap. Churches are religious organizations that have accommodated in principle and practice to major societal institutions; sects are schismatic groups that stand in protest against the established social order. While sects may use a religious vocabulary to frame their protest, there is at least an implicit rejection of the broader social order given churches' alliance with established institutions. Church membership is "involuntary" in that most members are born into the tradition; by contrast, sect members, during the first generation at least, are predominantly converts. Churches are more inclusive in that they seek to encompass all segments of society; sects are more "exclusive," as they protest the established social order and maintain high boundaries and strict moral standards. Given their inclusiveness, churches are much more heterogeneous than more homogeneous sects. Churches constrain ecstatic expressiveness while sects exhibit more spontaneous ritual expression. Correspondingly, church leadership is more hierarchical and

bureaucratic, with a professional clergy, while sect leaders are more likely to be more charismatic or prophetic.

Given the increased diversity and pluralism that has attended modernism in the West, the concept of church is often supplanted by denomination. Like churches, denominations maintain accommodative relationships with established institutions and with one another. Denominations therefore accept pluralistic relationships and some measure of doctrinal and ritual diversity as equally legitimate religious expression. They also mirror the church pattern of professional, credentialed clergy. Again, like churches, denominational stability is largely dependent on membership by birth, although the availability of comparable alternative organizations in open religious economies is likely to yield denominational switching at individuals' discretion. Denominations likewise draw on a broad cross-section of the population in the middle classes. In many cases, denominations essentially constitute a quasi-monopoly, a set of organizations offering relatively similar understandings and practices relative to the supernatural.

Sects also stand in sharp contrast to denominations. Sects are born out of protest against what members perceive to be pervasive spiritual and moral corruption. Members understand themselves to constitute the elect who must reject compromise and instead withdraw from or transform society to reflect its divinely ordained purpose. Sects derive the energy and purpose they exhibit from the predominance of highly committed converts; born members engage in special ritual acts to demonstrate their high level of commitment. As protest organizations, sectarian energy is fueled by discontents. The combination of a common set of dissatisfactions and higher commitment levels means that sects are more socially homogeneous than denominations and churches and have stronger spiritual and ethical precepts to which members are expected to adhere. In fact, prescribed roles within the sect become the focal point of all member activity. Given the strength of group expectations, deviations can lead to marginalization or expulsion. Sect leaders are more likely to be selected on spiritual grounds than their denominational counterparts, who base their authority on professional training and credentials. Historically, sects have been more likely to draw members from lower social strata, where the continuing development of secular, rational society has been more disruptive.

The concept of cult, which gradually was integrated into the church–sect typology, beginning with the work of Howard Becker, has had Christian apologetic (Bach 1961; Hoekma 1963; Martin 1965; Peterson 1973), popular culture/political (Bromley and Richardson 1984; Bromley and Shupe 1981; Giambalvo et al. 2013; Hunter 1953; Lifton 1963; Zablocki and Robbins 2001), and social science usages. We address only the social science typological use here.

From a social science perspective, cults differ from both churches/denominations and sects in several important ways. Cults are “culture writ small,” the product of either cultural innovation or importation (Bainbridge 2013, p. 214; Stark and Bainbridge 1985, p. 25). They constitute distinctive forms both culturally and socially. Cults are usually described as groups that are relatively loosely organized, lack codified doctrinal systems, exhibit nonauthoritarian forms of leadership, maintain low group boundaries,

and therefore require lesser organizational commitment. Individual members may experiment with a series of cultic groups. By this definition, cults have a very long history and can be traced to popular religious beliefs about individuals and places considered holy. Cults may provoke tension with the host social order, but the absence of the kind of oppositional stance manifested by sects often leads to a public perception of them as simply strange or curious. That is, they are difficult to conceptualize in conventional categorizations of religiosity.

## LIMITATIONS OF CHURCH–SECT–CULT TYPOLOGIES

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Despite its longstanding status, numerous variations, and centrality in religious organization categorizing and theorizing, church–sect theory has been widely criticized (Dawson 1997; Dittes 1971; Eister 1972). Critiques include its historical and sociocultural boundedness; the tendency to reify sect, church, and cult concepts; a continuous proliferation of subtypes and mixed types; misclassification or noninclusion of a range of religious groups; and an inability to include new and emerging religious groups.

First, as originally formulated, the typology clearly was an historically, culturally, and geographically local project of increasingly limited utility. Greater religious diversity simply overwhelmed the typology. Conceptualization of church and sect as a continuum and the addition of denomination and cults were helpful correctives, but they did not address the fundamental limitations of the original typological logic.

Second, even where it is applicable, reification of the core concepts has obscured the complexity of each type and the reality of change in actual religious organizations. For example, denominations do not maintain a fixed point around which sects change but also move along the liberal–conservative continuum in response to societal changes. Further, both churches and sects may contain what the typology would suggest are incompatible organizational characteristics, or churches and sects may exhibit some characteristics of the other type. Finally, some sects (e.g., Hutterites, Mennonites, Amish in the Anabaptist tradition) maintained their sectarian status rather than becoming significantly more churchlike.

Third, in response to the observation of mixed characteristics, there was a tendency to simply add more characteristics and to create subtypes. For example, Bryan Wilson (1970) developed an influential functionalist typology of sects based on their orientation toward achieving salvation that included seven subtypes. Similarly, Stark and Bainbridge (1985) distinguished three types of cults.

Fourth, the sect–church–cult typology excluded some religious groups, miscategorized others, and was not inclusive enough to handle a broader range of religious traditions, particularly new religious groups. For example, the traditional typological categories created no place for indigenous traditions (such as Native Americans);



atheist and agnostic groups; diasporic Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim traditions; and quasireligious groups (Greil 1991). Groups in the Western Esotericism tradition were sometimes treated simply as sects. Many of the miscategorized or excluded groups would now be considered to be new religious groups and central to the research area of New Religions Studies.

## PROMISING ALTERNATIVES

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The numerous critiques of the various versions of church–sect–cult typologies have led to several alternative approaches. We focus here on alternative typologies that are useful in theorizing and researching both established religious organizations and new religious movements. The models developed by Benton Johnson, Roy Wallis, and David Bromley and Gordon Melton are particularly promising in this regard.

In the wake of continuing critiques of the church–sect model, considerable support developed for Johnson’s single-dimension model, which is usually described as a tension model. In a series of articles (Johnson 1957, 1963, 1971), Johnson defined churches as religious organizations that accept and sects as religious organizations that reject the host social order. Stark and Bainbridge (1985, p. 23) summarized acceptance–rejection as “tension.” Because a variety of available data sources can be employed to measure tension, Johnson’s approach has become extremely influential. The church–sect and tension models may not be as dissimilar as they appear. It would seem to be the case that groups exhibiting strong sectarian characteristics are more likely to be in high tension with the host social order and that at some point sectarian and high tension substantially overlap. It may also be the case that mixed church–sect characteristics that are problematic for church–sect theory are simply points along a continuum that would not be problematic for tension theory.

Two typological approaches to the study of new religions resonate with Johnson’s tension model. Roy Wallis’s (1984) “world-affirming” and “world-rejecting” movements typology has become influential for similar reasons: simplicity, applicability, and measurability. In his formulation, new movements are responding to major elements of modern society by affirming or rejecting that social world. Hence, affirmation and rejection are anchored to the specific social formation in which the movement is situated, which means that the model is not dependent upon any specific organizational characteristics or any particular sociocultural context. Like Wallis’s approach, the Bromley and Melton (2012) model is unidimensional and linked to the relationship with the dominant social order. The organizing dimension is alignment, the form and degree to which a group is structurally correspondent with the organizational patterning of dominant institutions, and particularly the religious institution (2012, p. 5). For Bromley and Melton, “dominant tradition groups” are the most legitimate form of religious expression in any social formation, and other new and established groups array around them with varying degrees of alignment. Bromley and Melton also distinguish

between groups that are variably aligned within the dominant tradition and those that represent other cultural traditions so that social and cultural differences can be equally acknowledged. Like Wallis's affirming–rejecting approach, the alignment approach should be applicable across cultures and time periods.

## CONCLUSIONS

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The concepts of church–denomination–sect–cult have a long history in social science scholarship. As criticized as these concepts have been, they have continued to be used in presentational fashion to conceptually organize a broad array of data on religious groups. They remain useful in organizing Protestant Christian groups (Smith 1990). In recent years, relational models have gained popularity relative to organizational characteristic models, but both have articulate supporters. There are several possibilities for continuing to build on the church–sect–cult tradition. One is to simply accept multiple typologies as heuristic devices with specific theoretical and research objectives. A second is to more actively examine the intercorrelation between tension levels and organizational characteristics to determine the extent to which the two approaches might be derivative from one another. Third, basic consensus–conflict approaches to religion might be used to derive types theoretically and thereby connect the study of religion more closely to the larger social science enterprise. Finally, scholars in religion could take the concept of religious economy more seriously by treating religious groups simply as organizations populating a religious economy. One orienting question would be how much understanding of this set of organizations is increased by the insertion of the adjective “religious.” By this alternative logic, parallels would be drawn, for example, between monopolies and churches, franchises and denominations, superstores and megachurches, and startup enterprises and new religions. A number of new directions clearly are available, and the rapid transformation into what has become a global social order and more complex organization of religions mandates a rethinking of received wisdom and traditional typologies.

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## CHAPTER 2

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# CONVERSION

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GEORGE D. CHRYSSIDES

PREVIOUS debate on how people come to join new religious movements (NRMs) has centered on “brainwashing” and “mind control”—explanations that continue to be championed by the media and the anticult movement, despite the overwhelming weight of scholarship, which suggests that such explanations are unhelpful. In this chapter I shall explore the extent to which the concept of “conversion” provides a more promising characterization of the transition that occurs when a person embraces an NRM.

Some scholars have argued that “conversion” only legitimately describes the decision to accept the Christian faith, or even the decision—in the words of contemporary evangelical Protestantism—to accept Jesus Christ as one’s personal savior (Wingate 1999, pp. 232–277; Yates 1998). Most academic studies have focused on Christian mission, or on members of Western culture who have made a decision, often based on a religious experience, to assume a deeper commitment to Christianity. Early studies of the topic, principally by E. D. Starbuck (1899) and William James (1902), focused on the phenomenon of becoming “twice born”—in other words, coming to embrace a deeper commitment within the Christian faith, usually from a previous position of nominal commitment to Christianity. In his *Conversion* (1933) A. D. Nock discusses “spiritual reorientation” in the ancient world, principally with regard to the mystery religions and to Christianity. Nock’s classic work principally relates to religions that involved initiation rites and exclusive allegiance, which are sometimes—but not always—required in today’s NRMs. In many cases it may be questioned whether joining an NRM necessarily counts as conversion. Conversion is popularly construed as involving what David Bromley calls a “transformative moment” (Bromley 2014, p. 108), radical transformation of one’s life, together with the abandonment of one’s previous faith or the acquisition of a faith, if one previously had none. It is questionable whether such a phenomenon typically occurs in conversions to mainstream Christianity, and it is certainly not the norm in the case of NRMs.

The paradigmatic convert in the Christian tradition is Saul (Paul) of Tarsus, who is often portrayed as an active opponent of the emergent Christianity of his time, but who subsequently experienced a vision of Jesus on the Damascus Road, causing him

to reappraise his antagonism and become Christianity's greatest proponent. However, whatever happened in Paul's conversion, the contrast between Christians and Jews was less than has been supposed. Initially they were a Jewish messianic sect, and Paul did not totally leave behind his Jewish identity. He was allowed to continue to preach in synagogues (Acts 13:14–47), although his message proved controversial; he remained an interpreter of Jewish scripture; and he is even recorded as being bound for Jerusalem on one occasion to celebrate the Jewish festival of Shavuot (Acts 20:16). Saul's conversion may not even have been as sudden as is supposed: when telling his own story, he recounts going immediately to Arabia and spending a further three years before becoming acquainted with a few of the early apostles (Galatians 1:16–17).

Conversion is not normally sudden, nor is it fortuitous. In the field of NRMs there are clear patterns of conversion, and it is not necessarily the case that the seeker is someone who is inadequate, needy, "dispossessed," or "vulnerable" to recruitment. Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge suggest that, while a seeker might have personal needs (such as having to cope with bereavement, psychological problems, or ill fortune) or social needs (for example, the desire to be accepted by a community), there are many extremely adequate people with plentiful resources who seek out spiritual communities and become part of them. Further, Stark and Bainbridge observe that personal attributes such as gender, education, and religious background are relevant to allegiance to NRMs. New religions are more likely to attract women than men, although there are exceptions, such as the Latter-day Saints and the Unification Church. Most NRMs have a disproportion of graduates, while sects such as Jehovah's Witnesses tend to contain those working in trades rather than professions (Beckford 1975). Drawing on a number of earlier surveys, in Table 2.1 J. Gordon Melton reports the former allegiance of members of some NRMs in the 1970s (Melton 1985, p. 467):

If uptake of NRMs was simply fortuitous, one would expect the composition of each of these groups to be virtually identical. However, the fact that they have significantly different profiles of membership indicates that there are definite patterns of conversion. It is evident that, compared with the U.S. population, the Unification Church attracted a disproportion of Roman Catholics, while the Hare Krishna organization and the Zen Buddhist Center are disproportionately former Protestants. The Nichiren Shoshu

**Table 2.1 Former Allegiance of Members of Some NRMs in the 1970s**

|                           | Protestant | Roman Catholic | Jewish | Other |
|---------------------------|------------|----------------|--------|-------|
| U.S. population           | 66.2%      | 26.2%          | 3%     | 4%    |
| Unification Church (1976) | 47.1%      | 35.8%          | 5.3%   | 11.8% |
| Nichiren Shoshu (1970)    | 30%        | 30%            | 6%     | 34%   |
| Neo-Pagans (1979)         | 42.7%      | 25.8%          | 6.2%   | 25.3% |
| Hare Krishna              | 35.5%      | 18%            | 14.5%  | 32%   |
| Zen Center of Los Angeles | 52%        | 12%            | 28%    | 8%    |

(now the Soka Gakkai International) no doubt attracts a following from the Japanese Buddhist population, who may not have converted to the organization. Particularly noteworthy is the disproportion of Jews in all of the groups surveyed—a phenomenon to which I shall return.

## SELF-DISCOVERY, SCHISM, AND AUGMENTED SPIRITUALITY

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Part of the difficulty in explaining why some people join NRMs is that these organizations are extremely diverse, spanning nonmainstream versions of traditional religions, UFO groups, human potential organizations, and groups offering alternative therapies and life tools, often categorized as “New Age.” The NRM scholar has access only to a minute proportion of personal testimonies from those who join NRMs, but few seekers recount blinding visions or voices from heaven. Some would be more inclined to view their acceptance of a new form of spirituality as *self-discovery* rather than conversion: in encountering their newfound faith they had simply discovered what they already believed at heart. As the Ven Sangharakshita, founder-leader of Triratna (formerly Friends of the Western Buddhist Order) recounts:

After reading two of the greatest Buddhist scriptures—the *Sutra of Wei Lang* (Hui Neng) and the *Diamond Sutra*—I knew that I was a Buddhist and always had been. (Sangharakshita 1976, p. 1)

Graham Harvey makes a similar claim about Pagans:

Typical responses to the question, “How did you become a Pagan?” usually assert that at some point the respondent realized that they were Pagan, that the name applied to them, or that they accepted the appropriateness of the name. Narratives of conversion (“testimonies” or “bearing witness”) do not occur in Pagan discourse. Pagans do not speak about realizing the correctness of Pagan beliefs, or of experiences which require rapid changes of world-view. More typically they discover that the name for that existing sort of spirituality is Paganism. (Harvey, in Lamb and Bryant 1999, p. 234)

Other new religious organizations may result from a schism within an existing one, for example sedavacantist movements—groups of ultraconservative Roman Catholics who hold that Pope John XXIII and subsequent pontiffs have been too liberal, and hence forfeited their right to the papacy, and who have appointed their own antipopes as leaders. Similarly, the Continuing Anglican Movement has emerged in opposition to recent liberalizing tendencies, such as the ordination of women, liturgical reforms, and the liberalization of attitudes to sexual morality, particularly LGBT issues. Those

who join such movements are not undergoing conversion but rather are affirming their existing convictions. They may well claim that it is their former organization that has changed—in their opinion for the worse—rather than themselves.

Again, a number of Christian-related NRMs view themselves as an expression of Christianity more widely, or seek to reconcile different forms of the faith. Members of The Family International and members of the Unification Church frequently worship within mainstream Christian churches, either regarding themselves as part of the worldwide Church, or perceiving themselves as an organization that can bring different forms of Christianity together. Other movements that are frequently classified as NRMs are special-interest groups within a broader faith. Organizations like Opus Dei or Jews for Jesus are ways of either deepening one's faith or expressing it in a specific way, and do not necessarily require abandoning one's previous spiritual life. Some NRMs claim compatibility with one's existing faith—examples are Transcendental Meditation (TM), Scientology, and Soka Gakkai International—and hence deciding to join such organizations can be viewed as augmenting one's previous spirituality rather than renouncing one's religious past. The idea of the "jealous God" who brooks no rival is characteristic of the classical Abrahamic traditions but is not typically found in Eastern faiths, where it is acceptable to use a variety of religions for the particular services that each purports to offer.

While, as Barker suggests, some seekers may join a new religion as a result of a sudden experiential conversion, there are other factors that characterize the uptake of NRMs (Barker 1989, p. 30). In particular, I shall highlight two concepts to which previous scholars have drawn attention: Lorne Dawson's notion of "structural availability" and the idea of "compensators," which Stark and Bainbridge have suggested (Dawson 1999, p. 308; Stark and Bainbridge 1985, pp. 6–7).

## STRUCTURAL AVAILABILITY

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Various conditions must be satisfied for religious allegiance to take place. Espousing a religion typically involves becoming part of a religious community and, particularly in the case of new religions, meeting their expectations for belonging. Many NRMs are "high demand" organizations, requiring considerable commitment of time and energy to the movement. Eileen Barker has characterized the first-generation convert as displaying a degree of enthusiasm considerably in excess of those who belong to a conventional religion by birth (Barker 1989, p. 11). This is partly due to the fact that new converts have made a conscious decision to join, and hence positively want to take on board the commitment involved, but it is also due to the fact that NRMs are often inherently demanding of time and effort. Many of the so-called youth religions, which gained a foothold in the West in the 1960s and 1970s, typically involved communal living apart from mainstream society, for example the Children of God (now The Family International), the Unification Church, and the International Society for



Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). Early Unification Church members were expected to become part of mobile fundraising teams, often selling flowers and candles for up to eighteen hours a day, in addition to the spiritual life that membership entailed. An ISKCON devotee is expected to undertake sixteen rounds of mantra chanting, occupying up to two hours daily.

Such lifestyles are not live options for the majority of people, and hence, as Lorne Dawson puts it, the seeker must be “structurally available” for conversion to be possible. This entails a number of factors. Converts themselves must be in a position to join, in terms of the way their lives and social relationships are structured. Although there have been examples of professional people abandoning their occupations and families to join an NRM, this is uncommon, and the controversial new religions of the 1960s and 1970s tended to attract youth rather than older people—not because young people are less experienced and more gullible, but because they were more readily available for the NRM’s lifestyle, having few commitments, perhaps being in a gap year, or being willing to interrupt or abandon their education. Reciprocally, the way in which various NRMs of the 1960s and 1970s were structured tended to be more conducive to single young people, who were in a position to move in to a communal group. Hence, joining as an individual—or possibly with a friend—was typical. By contrast, religious organizations like the Latter-day Saints and Jehovah’s Witnesses do not require seekers to quit their jobs or abandon their families—unless, of course, their employment is incompatible with the organization’s tenets. Such differences are reflected in the forms of evangelism in which different spiritual groups engage. Thus, the Unification Church was initially more inclined to invite single seekers to join a residential community, while the Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses, by house-to-house visitation, are more likely to encounter householders, and encourage the conversion of entire families rather than individuals. That is not to say, of course, that joining an NRM would make no difference to one’s family life or lifestyle. A Jehovah’s Witness would be expected to find the time for house-to-house evangelism and to cease celebrating festivals such as birthdays and Christmas, which may well be a source of deep regret for the children in a household.

Conversion cannot be solely an individual decision. By its nature, religion is communal, as Émile Durkheim recognized (1915/1971, p. 47); hence, just as the seeker must be available to join, the religion must make itself available to the seeker. Contrary to popular belief that NRMs want to recruit as many converts as possible, there are considerations that militate against accepting just any seeker. First, and most obviously, the religion must be accessible. It would have been impossible, for example, for a Westerner to convert to Buddhism in the early nineteenth century, when the religion was barely known. One book from this period that purports to deal with world religions (Hurd 1812) manages to explain the religions of Burma and Laos without even mentioning Buddhism. As global communication improved, the religions of the East became more of a live option for Westerners. This was a two-way process: initially a number of teachers—principally from India, Tibet, and the Middle East—made their way to the West, facilitating the spread of Vedanta, Tibetan Buddhism, and Sufism. At a later



point, seekers were able to travel to countries such as India to seek out spiritual teachers for themselves.

Second, the religion in question must allow converts. While evangelical Christianity may welcome all, anyone wishing to become a Zoroastrian, or to belong to an aboriginal religion, would be unlikely to be successful. Belonging to a religion may be related to ethnic identity and may either bar entry completely or allow engrafting only through marriage.

Third, a religion may present barriers to accessibility where its members are of a particular color or caste, conduct their ceremonies in a foreign language, or dress in a way that could be considered culturally inappropriate. Thus, there might be a strong disincentive for a white person to join a black Pentecostal church, to become a Rastafari, or to be converted as a white turban-wearing Sikh. While such conversions do occur, there is a strong psychological disincentive to the majority of spiritual seekers. Organizations like ISKCON, by contrast, being English-speaking, caste-free, and with Western swamis have opened up access to Westerners.

Again, a religious organization may impose criteria for membership that make joining difficult. Although the Jehovah's Witnesses desire everyone to be in "the truth," in order to become a witness one must undergo an extensive course of Bible study (as defined by the Watch Tower Society), attend meetings conscientiously, lead an appropriate lifestyle, and satisfy the congregation's elders, who will put around 120 questions to the candidate before he or she has to undergo public baptism. Only then is one judged to be a full member of the organization. Some NRMs require members to assume recognizable features to mark their initiation. Religions that require rites such as circumcision or other forms of bodily mutilation present formidable barriers to anyone who might otherwise be drawn to them.

Other physical ways of identifying with a religious group can include wearing special dress, as in the case of ISKCON, or assuming a spiritual name, as occurs in Western Buddhist organizations such as Triratna. In the case of the Jehovah's Witnesses, after baptism one is typically referred to as Brother Smith or Sister Jones at congregational meetings. (The issue of names may or may not be a problem, depending on the extent to which they are used publicly.) At times there can be difficulties in complying with such obligations. Some years ago ISKCON devotees in Hungary informed me that many young seekers wore leather jackets and shoes, which presented particular problems when visiting a temple in the Hindu tradition, where leather is normally prohibited. In this instance the Society was prepared to compromise, since new seekers would otherwise have been involved in considerable financial outlay and might have reconsidered their commitment.

Not all NRMs are as accommodating, however. The Jehovah's Witnesses are renowned for their exclusivity, claiming that they are the only organization that possesses "the truth" and that all other forms of religion form part of Babylon the Great, from which one is enjoined to come out. At one point in the Watch Tower Society's history converts were asked to write "letters of withdrawal" to the clergy who presided over their former congregations, making it explicit that they had transferred their allegiance. In

more recent times, Raël—the founder-leader of the Raelian Movement—advocated “de-baptism”: because of his antagonism to Christianity, and to Roman Catholicism in particular, Raël recommended members to revoke their baptism, by writing letters to ministers, priests, and bishops, stating that they wished to reverse the practice of the baptism and any effects deriving from it.

## THE ROLE OF THE INTERNET

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In the above discussion, emphasis has been laid on the availability of NRMs. Since the late 1990s the Internet has made many more spiritual options available to seekers than ever before, although not necessarily as traditional spiritual communities. In 1997, in the wake of the Heaven’s Gate suicides, it was feared that the Internet might have been a powerful factor in the disaster. At that time the Internet was only in its infancy, and its powers were not well understood, thus enabling much media scaremongering. In reality, the Internet has been more instrumental in the creation of new NRMs rather than as a recruiting tool. The so-called invented religions (to use Carole Cusack’s term for NRMs that exist principally in cyberspace [Cusack 2010]) initially arose as a result of material posted on the Internet. Examples include Jediism, which arose from a 2001 Web campaign to persuade people to write “Jedi” as the declared religion in the national censuses in Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster resulted from a webpage that was posted as a parody of Intelligent Design theory, as taught in parts of the United States. In both cases the Internet facilitated the dissemination of the material, and these soon came to be taken up as serious expressions of religion.

The Internet certainly has the function of ensuring that NRMs can show themselves in the best possible light, unfiltered by media reports or anticult comment. It has also the practical function of indicating the times and venues of meetings to enquirers. The Jehovah’s Witnesses, initially wary of using the Internet because of its risk of harmful associations to members, now positively encourage seekers to access its resources. Recently, stands in public places such as stations and shopping centers display QR codes, which enable those with smartphones to access the Watch Tower Society’s website and read their recent publications online. Although such innovations help to give the Society an up-to-date image, there is no firm evidence that they have boosted congregational numbers in their Kingdom Halls.

## COMPENSATORS

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In terms of “structural availability,” the most readily available form of religion in the West is normally one’s local church, but those who choose to join NRMs are clearly

unsatisfied by the forms of spirituality that it offers. There must be something in their chosen spiritual movement that offers them some alternative benefit. In Stark and Bainbridge's terminology, there need to be "compensators." In our everyday existence society offers unequal rewards; some rewards are simply unavailable (for example, immortality) and others may not be available through our own direct action (for example, health, success, and well-being). To attain such benefits, people may turn to the supernatural in the belief that a better distribution of rewards is achievable in the future through following a spiritual path. Some of these compensators are specific and are attainable through "client cults"—Stark and Bainbridge's term for spiritual organizations or movements that offer services such as alternative healing or guidance for life to seekers who are effectively clients, usually paying a substantial fee for a one-to-one consultation. In contrast with the client cults, "audience cults" are followed collectively, with less specific and more enduring benefits (for example, salvation and eternal life), and the cost is likely to be more modest, normally a voluntary contribution. The former tend to occur as part of wider movements, such as the New Age, where there are practitioners rather than leaders, while the latter conform more closely to Durkheim's concept of a religion, which he viewed as essentially communal.

The disproportion of Jews in NRMs can be accounted for by Stark and Bainbridge's compensator theory. In Roger Kamenetz's *The Jew in the Lotus*, which records the dialogue between some Jewish rabbis and the Dalai Lama, the disproportion of Jews converting to various forms of Buddhism is noted. One of the discussants, Rabbi Zalman Schacheter speculates that one reason for leaving the Jewish faith is the lack of access to its mystical traditions. The typical synagogue is uninviting, with uninspiring worship and its main emphasis often an invitation to contribute to the building fund. There has been, he believes, an overemphasis on Jewish suffering, often amounting to paranoia, and associated with Jewish particularism. The idea that the Jews are the chosen people, he claims, has led to an ethnic pride that contradicts the universal prophetic message of its scriptures. There is "a sense of being special that has no content" (Kamenetz 1994, p. 156). Most of the Jews who convert to Buddhism have long since abandoned any such allegiance: mostly, Jewish Buddhists come from secular backgrounds. In terms of compensators, therefore, the Jewish converts find little compensation in their former Jewish faith and much greater benefit within Buddhism.

Stark and Bainbridge make similar observations regarding Christianity. Evangelical Christians with firm faith are less likely to convert to an NRM, while Episcopalians are more likely to be converted than Baptists. This can be explained by the nature of Anglicanism, whose adherents often lack firm theological convictions in the wake of demythologization and radicalized versions of the Christian faith, such as John Robinson's *Honest to God*, and whose practices have made concessions to secular values. They note that "cults thrive where conventional faith is weak" (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, p. 404). Several decades earlier J. K. Van Baalan made a similar claim that "the cults are the unpaid bills of the church" (Van Baalan 1938/1962, p. 12).

As Eileen Barker suggests, NRMs frequently provide the seeker with an opportunity to discuss religious experiences and to raise questions about life's meaning, why we

are here, why there is suffering, and so on. Although mainstream religions purport to answer such questions, Barker suggests that clergy can seem remote or unapproachable or else cultivate a “trendy” image that conveys the idea that they would not wish to discuss anything supernatural (Barker 1989, pp. 134–135). NRMs often encourage such enquiry and deliver definite answers. Barker identifies the phenomenon of religious experience as an important explanation offered by those joining NRMs. One’s friends and acquaintances, and even those in mainstream religious organizations, tend to be disinclined to discuss their spiritual lives. Particularly if someone claims to have had a vision, or even some lesser spiritual experience, it is not considered socially acceptable to raise the matter in normal conversation. Barker writes:

It is not always easy in modern society for people who have had such experiences, or wish to examine religious questions, to find a group of people who will “give them permission” to be religious. . . . There are NRMs that offer such people an environment in which it is “safe” to have such discussions—indeed, where it is the norm for such discussions to take place. (Barker 1989, p. 30)

Compensators need not be particularly spiritual, however, and they are not always self-centered. Church of Scientology members cite improved confidence and occupational and educational gains as benefits (Church of Scientology 1998, pp. 466–467). One Unificationist author mentions the international atmosphere and her desire to help to change the world as motivators (Corales 2003, p. 15). Another Unification Church member known to the author was said to have joined only because his wife had previously done so, in the belief that this would promote a better marital relationship; other members described him as “not very spiritual.” Compensators come in various kinds and degrees of importance.

## CONVERTING THE RELIGIONS

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There is a further, final point to make about conversion. Just as a seeker may be changed by a new religion, conversely religions can be changed by their converts. Particularly in the case of Hindu-derived and Buddhist groups, the brand of religion that is propagated is delivered through spiritual teachers and through books. This tends to have the effect of promoting an intellectualized and highly spiritualized form of the religions in question. Melford E. Spiro (1971) suggested that there were three layers of Buddhism: the dhammic, the kammatic, and the apotropaic. The first is the quest to seek the ultimate goal of nirvana through spiritual practice, the second the endeavor to make progress through the religion and attain a better rebirth, and the third the attempt to fend off evil and seek pragmatic benefits. It is particularly this third element that is ignored or avoided in Western versions of Eastern religions. Western Buddhists will frequently insist that magical practices, placating spirits, and fending off the evil

eye are not genuine parts of Buddhism, despite the fact that this is what the majority of indigenous Buddhists seek from their religion. The phenomenon of the Westernization of Eastern faiths is a topic in its own right, but it is important to note that in the conversion process it is not merely the seeker who is the subject of spiritual change.

In conclusion, my discussion has shown that the decision to belong to an NRM is not normally sudden, episodic, a break with one's spiritual past, or an abrupt turnaround of one's personal life. It can involve self-discovery, intransigence within a tradition, or a desire to enhance one's expression of spirituality within one's tradition. Decisions to join spiritual groups are certainly not random but depend on the extent to which the structures of a religious organization match the structures of the seeker's life and the extent to which the compensators offered by the group appear to be more appealing than those of a previous faith or of following no faith at all.

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## CHAPTER 3

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# CHARISMA AND AUTHORITY IN NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

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ERIN PROPHET

New religions, protean by nature, offer an opportunity to observe charisma in situations rare in established religions. Although most new religions have some connection to previous traditions, they serve as laboratories for development of religious authority. With Max Weber's sociological observations about charisma as a starting point, scholars have taken a multidisciplinary approach to developing working models of charisma and authority.

Although some have argued that religious charisma and political charisma are fundamentally different, and that neither one is related to corporate leadership, most agree that there are similarities, and that insights from one field can inform another. Early work was driven by attempts to make sense of the twentieth century's disastrous experience of charismatic leadership in a political (but quasireligious) context, with Hitler and Mao, as well as a religious context (with political overtones), as in the 1978 Jonestown murder-suicides and the 1999 Aum Shinrikyo subway gas attacks (Bromley and Melton 2002). In the twenty-first century, the line between political and religious charisma has become further blurred by terrorist attacks widely seen as religiously inspired.

## THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

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Important questions are why people obey charismatic leaders, what makes a group more likely to follow a leader along a disastrous course, and how charismatic authority both transforms religious traditions and meets deep individual and societal needs by providing powerful and immersive experiences. *Charisma in this chapter refers to the attribution to an individual of extraordinary, superhuman, or supernatural powers by*