

The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements

JAMES R. LEWIS,
Editor

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**NEW RELIGIOUS
MOVEMENTS**

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Edited by

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OVERVIEW

JAMES R. LEWIS

ALTHOUGH new religions have often been the topic of journalistic stories, it is rare that the body of scholars who study them make the news. It was thus somewhat of a surprise when the annual meeting of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), the premier international association of new religion scholars, was the subject of a feature article—"Oh, Gods!" by Toby Lester—in the February 2002 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*. In his piece the author observed, among other things, that "the study of new religious movements—NRMs for short—has become a growth industry." In a similar vein, he also noted that "the NRM field is only a few decades old, but already it has made its mark" (p. 38).

The appearance of an article like "Oh, Gods!" is an indicator that the study of NRMs has achieved the status of a recognized academic specialty. This development is rather surprising when one considers that, as Gordon Melton notes in his contribution to the present volume, "in 1970 one could count the number of active researchers on new religions on one's hands." 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 it continued to grow in the wake of a series of headline-grabbing tragedies involving religious groups like the People's Temple and Heavens Gate. The long answer is somewhat more complicated.

As a field of scholarly endeavor, NRM studies 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 ongoing in West-

ern countries (not to mention in the world as a whole) for millennia, the study of such groups and movements was the province of existing academic specializations in the West until the 1970s. Thus, to cite a few examples, the Pentecostal movement 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 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 began 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. In addition, 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 within religious studies. 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—when new religions were becoming a public issue—religious studies was busy establishing itself as an academic discipline. 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 they left the study of new religions to sociologists. Consequently, it was not until a series of major tragedies took place in the 1990s—specifically, the Branch Davidian debacle, the Solar Temple murder-suicides, the Aum Shinrikyō gas attack, and the Heaven's Gate suicides—that the field of NRMs was truly embraced by the religious studies establishment.

THE CULT CONTROVERSY

Although, as has already been indicated, the cult controversy was not responsible for initiating the new religions field, the development of this area of study almost immediately became tied to the controversy. From the beginning, most mainstream academic researchers rejected the popular stereotype of NRMs deceptively recruiting and “brainwashing” their members. Furthermore, almost all of the studies supporting the notion of “cultic mind control” were so obviously biased that mainstream social scientific journals routinely refused to publish them. Beginning in the mid-seventies, mainstream scholars steadily churned out studies directly relevant to this controversy. At present, a collection of academic books devoted to this controversy, plus books on new religions containing at least one full chapter addressing the controversy, would easily fill several standard library bookcases. This does not include the significant number of relevant articles published in academic journals.

The operative question new religion specialists have asked about mind control is this: How does one distinguish cultic brainwashing from other forms of social influence, such as advertising, military training, or even the normal socialization routines of public schools? Particularly in the 1970s, anti-cultists supported the notion that cult members were trapped in a kind of quasi-hypnotic trance, while others asserted that the ability of cult members to process certain kinds of information had “snapped” (Conway and Siegelman 1979). The problem with these and similar theories was that if cultic influences overrode the brain’s ability to logically process information, then individuals suffering from cultic influences should perform poorly on I.Q. tests or, at the very least, should manifest pathological symptoms when they took standardized tests of mental health; yet when tested, they did not. In point of fact, such empirical studies often indicated that members of NRMs were actually smarter and healthier than the average member of mainstream society (e.g., Sowards, Walser, and Hoyle 1994).

Other kinds of studies also failed to support the view that new religions relied upon unusual forms of social influence to gain and retain members. For example, if NRMs possessed powerful techniques of mind control that effectively overrode a potential convert’s free will, then everyone—or at least a large percentage of attendees—at recruiting seminars should be unable to avoid conversion. However, in her important study *The Making of a Moonie: Choice or Brainwashing?* (1984), Eileen Barker found that less than 10 percent of the people who visited centers run by the Unification Church—an organization many regard as the evil cult par excellence—eventually attended recruitment seminars. Of those who attended such seminars, less than 10 percent joined the Church (a net recruitment rate of under 1 percent). Furthermore, of those who joined, more than half dropped out within the first year of their membership. In another important study, *Radical*

Departures: Desperate Detours to Growing Up (1984), psychiatrist Saul Levine found that, out of a sample of over 800 people who had joined controversial religious groups, more than 90 percent dropped out within two years of membership—not the kind of statistics one would anticipate from groups wielding powerful techniques of mind control.

In these and other empirical studies, researchers asked further questions, such as, Given the lack of empirical support, where does the brainwashing notion come from? And, What is the more fundamental conflict that the cult stereotype obfuscates? The general conclusion of sociologists—as analyzed, for example, in David Bromley and Anson Shupe’s *Strange Gods: The Great American Cult Scare* (1981)—was that the principal source of the controversy was a parent-child conflict in which parents failed to understand the religious choices of their adult children and attempted to reassert parental control by marshaling the forces of public opinion against the religious bodies to which their offspring had converted.

This core conflict was then exacerbated by irresponsible mass media that profited by printing and broadcasting exciting stories about weird cults that trapped their members and kept them in psychological bondage with exotic techniques of mind control. Also, once an industry was established that generated profits by “rescuing” entrapped cult members (via the practice of “deprogramming”), special interest groups emerged that had vested interests in promoting the most negative stereotypes of alternative religions. These special interest groups added further fuel to the parent-child conflict by scaring parents with lurid stories of what would happen to their adult child if they failed to have her or him deprogrammed. In this manner, many otherwise reasonable and well-meaning people were recruited into the controversy.

This, essentially, is the picture of the cult controversy that academic researchers have pieced together over the last three decades. Because of its vested interest in maintaining the conflict, the anti-cult movement was unresponsive to critical studies and proceeded with business as usual, as if these studies were nonexistent. Rather than responding directly to mainstream scholarship, anti-cultists instead conducted research on their own terms, creating alternative publications that featured pseudoscientific studies supporting the cult stereotype.

One of the consequences of this situation was that researchers found themselves forced to work in a highly politicized atmosphere. Articles on controversial religious groups published in specialized academic journals could directly impact people’s lives, particularly when cited in legal briefs and judicial decisions. Thus, in contrast to academics who studied things like the mating habits of insects or the spectrum of light generated by distant galaxies, NRM specialists regularly found themselves the subjects of scrutiny and criticism.

Because mainstream new religion scholars have generally been critical of the cult stereotype (particularly the notion of cult mind control), they have, in turn, been criticized by those interested in perpetuating this stereotype. One counter-

strategy commonly utilized by such interest groups is to refer to academicians whose research tends to undermine anti-cult ideology as “cult apologists,” implying that they are in a conspiracy with—perhaps even covertly accepting money from—malevolent religious groups. The cult apologist accusation is a handy ideological tool because, in the hands of most anti-cultists, it is wielded as a tautology, immune to empirical disconfirmation. In other words, if a cult apologist is defined (usually implicitly) as any researcher producing scholarship critical of the cult stereotype, then anyone whose scholarship is critical of the cult stereotype is ipso facto a cult apologist. This strategy allows anti-cultists to reject any scholarship with which they disagree, saving them from the awkward necessity of taking it seriously.

Anti-cultists adhering to this rhetorical strategy sometimes make it appear that sinister pseudoreligious organizations regularly seek out scholars to legitimate their group and to attack their critics. One of the more absurd examples of this strategy can be found in the introduction to Michael Newton’s *Raising Hell: An Encyclopedia of Devil Worship and Satanic Crime* (1993). Newton takes “liberal” academics to task for criticizing the notion of occult crime—referring to them as “cult apologists” (p. 2) as if they were mercenaries on the payroll of some grand underground satanic conspiracy, or, no less implausibly, as if their souls had been purchased by the Prince of Darkness himself.

In point of fact, only a few groups like the Unification Church—which for many years courted academicians, presumably because of its Confucian-derived understanding of the importance of scholars in society—have believed that academicians wielded this kind of power. The leaders of most other new religions have been far less naive about the social influence of scholars. Perhaps the only area where academic researchers have played a significant role in the cult controversy is in the debunking of mind-control notions and other aspects of the cult stereotype, making this the one area where academic specialists have entered the fray in support of NRMs. The fact that some of the most prominent scholars in the field have testified against the brainwashing thesis in relevant legislative hearings and legal cases has evoked the ire of anti-cultists and is the principal evidence for their contention that such academicians are “apologists.”

BOUNDARY AND DISCIPLINARY ISSUES

In his contribution to the present volume, Gordon Melton has made the task of writing this introduction much easier by dealing with the history of the study of new religions and with some of the prominent issues in the NRM field. With the

exception of a few areas of unavoidable overlap, I will try not to replicate his efforts.

One question I would like to address is why certain categories of new religions are studied while others are not. Like religious studies more generally, NRM studies is, as Melton points out, “defined by its subject matter rather than methodology.” As a field significantly shaped by the cult conflict, the core of NRM studies is constituted by analyses of controversial new religions and analyses of the controversy itself. If everything related to these two topics was subtracted from the corpus of new religions scholarship, relatively little would be left. Like the emergent popularity of Islamic studies since the 9/11 attacks, NRM studies rose to prominence as a direct consequence of the public perception of certain religions as potential social threats. Thus, despite the regular expressions of dismay one sometimes overhears at academic conferences (e.g., as recorded by Lester, “I’m so damn sick of the cult/anti-cult debate, I could just puke!” [p. 41]), it is unlikely that this situation will change in the immediate future.

Because of this focus, it is appropriate to ask what this field of study might look like if not for the cult controversy. Certainly one of the major differences would be that existing scholarship would not be clustered around a couple dozen small groups. There have been more than a few major studies of groups such as the Unification Church that have a relatively small presence in Western countries. In contrast, there have been no monographs written about much larger—but less controversial—new religions like Eckankar. A more comprehensive approach that examined the many NRMs not locked in social conflict would likely provide a much different picture of the nature of these movements. Perhaps certain characteristics shared by the majority of new religions might have been warped or even missed as a consequence of focusing on the controversial groups.

Another issue is that NRM studies is in many ways a residual category. Although the designation “new religions” implies that all kinds of emergent religions are part of this field, in practice NRM scholars have tended to avoid studying movements perceived as the “turf” of other scholarly specialities. I have already mentioned that certain Christian new religious movements like Pentecostalism have for the most part been left to church historians, and that third world NRMs like cargo cults have been left to anthropologists. Similarly, although new religions researchers have occasionally examined black NRMs and Native American NRMs, the tendency has been to leave the study of these movements to scholars of black religions and scholars of Native American religions. And, finally, certain elite movements like the feminist spirituality movement have, with few exceptions, been left to other specialties, such as scholars of women’s religion. Again, the problem with leaving out certain classes of new religions is that it potentially misses or obscures some of the more general traits of NRMs.

One final factor that has shaped the new religions field is that, because of the

historical circumstances noted earlier, sociologists of religion were largely free to lay the foundations for the field of contemporary new religions. Sociology, however, views new religions as arising out of social forces; as a discipline, sociology does not consider religious experience as an independent motivating factor for the emergence of new religious forms. In recent years, as more and more religious studies academics have become involved in the study of new religions, the tendency has been to build upon these foundations uncritically. Little thought has been given to considering what this phenomenon might look like when viewed in terms of some of the other theoretical perspectives utilized in religious studies—such as perspectives that take religious experiences seriously as powerful, independent motivating factors. It should also be recalled that prior generations of scholars were seemingly *obsessed* with the issue of the beginnings of religion. This interest may have been misplaced, but it seems that the ruminations of our academic ancestors should be explored for potential insights into the process of the generation of new religious forms. On the other hand, perhaps studies of current new religions could throw light on such classic questions.

SURVEY OF CONTENTS

The collection's core chapters deal with issues that have consumed the most academic ink—conversion, the role of women, the brainwashing debate, millennialism, and so forth. Other chapters will deal with NRM subfields (e.g., Neopaganism and the New Age movement) that have come to be regarded as subspecialties. Yet another set of chapters will deal with new and emergent topics, such as the cultural significance of new religions and the use of myth in NRM studies.

As indicated by its title, J. Gordon Melton's "An Introduction to New Religions" provides a comprehensive introduction to NRM studies. Melton examines the emergence of this field of specialization from the disciplines of sociology and church history, emphasizing issues of classification and terminology. He concludes by offering a typology that focuses on each religious group's relationship with a specific religious tradition.

The remaining chapters have been organized into four sections. The chapters in section 1 examine the role that the related forces of modernization, science, and technology have played in contemporary new religions. Section 2 looks at NRM controversies from a number of different perspectives. The chapters in section 3 cover a variety of other topics, ranging from issues that have been core

concerns for NRM studies such as conversion to newer issues such as the function of mythology in new religious movements. Finally, section 4 examines a series of subareas within NRM studies that have become identifiable subfields.

Part One

The focus of the first section is on the place of new religions in the modern world. In “Alternative Spiritualities, New Religions, and the Reenchantment of the West,” Christopher Partridge weaves together a variety of different analyses indicating that earlier formulations of the secularization thesis were flawed. Although traditional religion is indeed on the decline in industrialized countries, new forms of deinstitutionalized spirituality have arisen to fill the void.

Similar to Partridge, Lorne Dawson’s “The Sociocultural Significance of Modern New Religious Movements” criticizes approaches to NRMs that view them in terms of reactions to secularization or in terms of certain other understandings of modernity. Instead, he argues, one should draw from more nuanced understandings of the modern world, particularly Anthony Giddens’s analysis of modernity/globalization. Giddens is, however, overly simplistic in his portrayal of religion, and Dawson suggests how globalization theory might be modified to be applicable to the interpretation of contemporary new religions.

One of the engines of modernity is empirical science. Traditional religions generally—though certainly not universally—tended to resist science because of its implicit critique of certain aspects of religion. This has not been the case with most new religions, which have developed various strategies for accommodating science and have even appropriated science’s aura of legitimacy by claiming to be “scientific” in some way. In “Science and Religion in the New Religions,” Mikael Rothstein discusses these strategies through a number of case studies of specific NRMs.

In the final chapter in the first section, “Virtually Religions: New Religious Movements and the World Wide Web,” Douglas Cowan and Jeffrey Hadden examine the various ways in which the Internet has impacted NRMs, as well as the potential of this technology for impacting the generation of new religious forms. The Internet became a focus of interest to students of new religions as a result of the fear evoked in the wake of the Heaven’s Gate suicides that dangerous groups could be recruiting via the World Wide Web, the conflict over the online publication of Scientology’s esoteric teachings, and the use of the Internet by anti-cultists. The authors also explore the issue of online rituals through case studies of the Temple of Duality and of competing branches of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

Part Two

The episodes of NRM-related violence in the mid-1990s that indirectly helped to establish new religions as a field of study also prompted NRM specialists to give greater attention to the issue of violence. In “Violence and New Religious Movements,” David Bromley examines a number of general models that have been developed since the mid-nineties, models that have moved in the direction of taking into account the dynamics between NRMs and the social agencies with which they interact, and the potential for violent acts from either side. Bromley also outlines a number of theoretical and public policy issues that need to be addressed in the future.

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 Richardson provides a concise yet comprehensive overview of NRM-related legal developments in the U.S. and a survey of efforts to control new religions around the world. He also analyzes these developments in terms of the sociology of law and points out that an important factor fueling anti-NRM sentiment in at least some countries derives from antagonism to American cultural influence.

New religions became a major social issue as the direct result of the emergence of the anti-cult movement (ACM) as an organized countermovement. In “The North American Anti-Cult Movement: Vicissitudes of Success and Failure,” Anson Shupe, David Bromley, and Susan Darnell examine the structure and development of the ACM from its *emergent stage* (late 1960s–1970s), though the *expansion/consolidation stage* (1980s), to the *domestic accommodation/international expansion stage* (1990s–present). The authors discuss the ACM in terms of structure, economy, and alliance network—parameters that the authors argue is a productive way of analyzing any social movement.

As noted in both the Richardson and the Shupe et al. chapters, the North American anti-cult movement enjoyed considerable success exporting its peculiar ideology to Europe, particularly following the Solar Temple murder-suicides in the mid-1990s. In “Something Peculiar About France: Anti-Cult Campaigns in Western Europe and French Religious Exceptionalism,” Massimo Introvigne begins by analyzing European attitudes toward NRMs in terms of two types of official reports issued by various nations. He then goes on to discuss France, which alone among European countries seems intent on abolishing all new religions.

Although the Satanism scare of the late 1980s and early 1990s did not involve an empirically existing new religion, it shared many themes with the cult controversy. Anti-cultists jumped on the Satanic Ritual Abuse (SRA) bandwagon as a way of promoting their own agenda, and NRM scholars spearheaded the academic analysis of the scare. In “Satanism and Ritual Abuse,” Philip Jenkins presents a systematic survey of this phenomenon. Jenkins’s discussion is especially strong in

its analysis of the traditional folklore and literary sources for the SRA stereotype of a secretive network of diabolical Satanists.

Because the accusation of deceptive, manipulative recruitment has been at the core of the stereotype of new religions as organizations that “brainwash” their adherents, conversion has been a central issue in NRM scholarship for the past three decades. In “Conversion and ‘Brainwashing’ in New Religious Movements,” Dick Anthony and Thomas Robbins revisit this issue, focusing on anti-cultism’s implicit ideological assumptions and on the many empirical studies indicating that conversions to contemporary new religions result from garden-variety sociological and psychological factors rather than from esoteric “mind control” techniques.

Despite the obvious link between conversion/affiliation and apostasy/disaffiliation, the corresponding chapters have been placed in different sections because, while conversion has been an integral part of the cult controversy, deconversion has not. In the first part of “Leaving the Fold: Disaffiliating from New Religious Movements,” David Bromley discusses a variety of factors precipitating disaffiliation and then analyzes the process in terms of a series of phases. In the second part of the chapter, Bromley indicates that in the future (1) a more integrated model of affiliation/disaffiliation needs to be constructed and (2) more attention needs to be given to different types of disaffiliation.

Part Three

In “Psychology and the New Religious Movements,” John 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.

Although not all new religions are millenarian, many are. In “Millennialism,” Richard Landes surveys millenarian movements and outlines a typology for classifying such groups. He concludes his chapter with a suggestive agenda for future research. One of the more significant aspects of Landes’s discussion is the manner in which he sets his analysis of contemporary movements in the context of a broader analysis of historically prior movements and movements that have arisen in the so-called third world in response to the intrusion of colonial powers.

Mythology refers to sacred narratives that form the basis of a religion’s worldview. In “Mythic Dimensions of New Religious Movements: Function, Reality

Construction, and Process,” Diana Tumminia and George Kirkpatrick argue that, despite the significant body of theoretical work that has been carried out by anthropologists and others, the mythological dimension of new religions has been largely ignored. Using Unarius Society, feminist witchcraft, and the Movement of Spiritual Inner Awareness as examples, the authors observe that NRM myths are not fixed, but, rather, change in response to the ongoing process of reality construction taking place within such movements.

Observers have often noted that NRMs sometimes experiment with gender roles. The position of women in certain new religions has also been a focus of concern for critics. In “Women in New Religious Movements,” Susan Palmer develops a typology of NRM sexual identity and points out that the actual arrangements within different new religions are often quite complex. To illustrate this complexity, she examines women’s roles in the Osho Rajneesh group and in the Raelian movement.

In addition to the role of women, critics have also focused attention on the treatment of children in new religions—to such an extent that comparatively little has been written about children in NRMs not directly linked to the controversy. In “Children in New Religious Movements,” Charlotte Hardman examines the body of literature arising out of the cult controversy. She then goes on to discuss the more general issue of the socialization and education of children in NRMs, pointing out that patterns of socialization vary widely and that much more research still needs to be done in this area.

Part Four

Two of the new religions that made world headlines in recent years were East Asian new religions—Falun Gong (China) and Aum Shinrikyō (Japan)—and an identifiable subfield of NRM studies is East Asian new religions. In “New Religions in East Asia,” Michael Pye surveys East Asian new religions through a discussion of specific NRMs in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. Without diminishing the uniqueness of each culture, these countries share a common cultural heritage from China which makes their attitudes toward new religions different from those of the West. However, like their counterparts in the West, East Asian NRMs embody a bewildering variety of ideals and opposing tendencies.

Another emergent subfield that has come into its own in recent years is the study of Western esotericism. Because this tradition incubated a number of more recent movements—from Neopaganism to the New Age—contemporary studies of esotericism overlap studies of these related phenomena. In “Esotericism in New Religious Movements,” Olav Hammer articulates a concept of esotericism based on five characteristics—social formations, rituals, purported objectives, cognitive

style, and relations to mainstream society. Hammer then analyzes a number of groups and movements—including, but not confined to, the Western tradition—exhibiting these characteristics.

In terms of both the movement's sheer size and the number of scholars and publications it has attracted, perhaps the most significant subfield to emerge out of NRM studies is New Age studies, though many observers object to the designation "New Age." In "The Dynamics of Alternative Spirituality: Seekers, Networks, and 'New Age,'" Steven Sutcliffe surveys the New Age milieu and its "quest culture." He also develops a critique of the adequacy of the 'New Age' label. Toward the end of his chapter, Sutcliffe offers a series of suggestions for future research.

For the most part, UFO religions were not taken seriously until after the Heavens Gate suicides in early 1997. Since that time, more and more scholarly attention has been given to UFO religions as well as to the religious motifs found in the more general ufological subculture. In "Waiting for the 'Big Beam': UFO Religions and 'Ufological' Themes in New Religious Movements," Andreas Gruenschloss discusses the historical emergence of this strain of spirituality out of modern esotericism, the millenarian aspect of ufological spirituality, the quest for a both a new science and a religious technology in UFO religions, and the religious significance of the "ancient astronaut" hypothesis which informs groups such as the Raelian movement.

The study of the Neo-Pagan movement has also begun to emerge as a distinctive subfield within NRM studies. In "Witches, Wiccans, and Neo-Pagans: A Review of Current Academic Treatments of Neo-Paganism," Shelley Rabinovitch and Sian Reid survey this area of study via a literature review of the primary books in the field. This survey leads into an analysis of the movement in terms of the ideas of three theorists of late modernity—Anthony Giddens, Michel Maffesoli, and Jürgen Habermas. These theorists are then brought to bear on a discussion of the issue of Neo-Pagan institutionalization, which is a hotly debated topic among movement participants. This latter discussion brings us full circle to the analysis of NRMs and modernity that was the focus of the initial chapters in section 1.

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CHAPTER 1

AN INTRODUCTION TO NEW RELIGIONS

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PERIODICALLY, the growing field of new religions studies pauses to survey the object of its concern. Unlike the major academic disciplines, it is a field more defined by its subject matter than by methodology. It is, in fact, self-consciously interdisciplinary and welcomes insights from a variety of methodological approaches, in spite of the obvious problems in communication such openness generates. This interdisciplinary approach has, however, also inhibited discussions of some of the basic theoretical questions posed by any attempt to define the subject(s) of interest in new religions studies. The variant emphases in the several disciplines lead to primary concerns being directed toward very different reference groups, as any survey of paper topics at recent gatherings of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (SSSR) reveals. Additionally, at the AAR, questions have continually arisen concerning conflicting claims to hegemony over particular topics which seem to overlap with other fields such as Chinese religions (Yiguandao, Falun Gong), Japanese religions (Aum Shinrikyō), and Islamic studies (al-Qaeda).

This essay attempts to address some issues concerning what is or is not a “new religion.” Some fuzziness at the boundaries of the field has grown out of its peculiar history, the field emerging as it did from the pre-1970 study of “cults.” A different approach to the problem was adopted by European scholars who until recently operated without the joint categories of “sect” and “cult” that were implicit in North America throughout the twentieth century. In addition, the cult/

anti-cult controversy has had a unique (and some would say distorting) role in shaping the academic discussions on new religions.¹

Below, I have attempted to integrate several lines of research and consideration of the new religions to reach a definition of this field of study of fringy religious phenomena. In doing so, I am suggesting that the field of new religions studies are concerned with a groups of religious bodies/movements that, though they do not share any particular set of attributes, have been assigned to the fringe of the dominant religious culture and secondarily by elements within the secular culture, and hence are a set of religious groups/movements that exist in a relatively contested space within society as a whole.

FROM CULT TO NEW RELIGION

New religions studies has its origins in the adoption of the term “cult” in the 1890s as an initial response to an awareness of an emerging religious pluralism in the United States,² and a brief review of the shifting understanding of “cult” provides some initial illumination to present questions concerning the boundaries of new religions studies. The emergence of new religions studies as a separate subdiscipline was occasioned by the sudden visibility of a new generation of new religions in the early 1970s and the controversy they generated.

The term “cult” was originally applied to groups such as Christian Science and Spiritualism, which were viewed as deviations from orthodox Christianity. A series of books written in the first half of the century employing such a definition would eventuate in the 1960s in the Christian countercult community, now embodied in several hundred organizations dedicated to refuting the “errors” of the “cults” and attempting to convert their members to Evangelical Christianity.³ For Evangelical Christians, the issue with “cults” has been religious truth, which they believe is contained in the orthodox Christian tradition and which has been abandoned by the “cults.” Decade by decade, they have placed a growing number of groups under the label “cult,” though the appearance of so many Eastern religions has created its own problem, since they have been difficult to discuss as “Christian heresies.”

In the 1950s, sociologists in America began to use Ernst Troeltsch as a starting point for a discussion of cults. In his *Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*,⁴ Troeltsch attempted a history of European Christianity that was sociologically informed. Among other things, he tried to develop an understanding of the several types of Christian groups that were operating in Europe in the nineteenth century. In so doing he elaborated on the prior distinction of between the large inclusive

“churches” (roughly equivalent to the state churches of most European countries) and the dissenting “sects” (such as the Baptists and Methodists), which tended to be more exclusive, as suggested by pioneering sociologist Max Weber.⁵ Troeltsch also mentioned the mystical groups (by which he meant the small contemplative fellowships in the Roman Catholic orders). He drew no distinctions between those “sects” that would join the ecumenical community and attain some heightened respectability by, for example, joining the World Council of Churches (founded in 1948). Nor, as he was writing about Christianity, did he consider the social role of other European religious groups, most notably the Jewish synagogues.

In their dialogue with Troeltsch, American sociologists merged the older “cult” category from Christian countercult writings to create the now famous church-sect-cult tricotomy.⁶ This effort led to the broad expansion in J. Milton Yinger’s six types of religious groups—universal church, ecclesia, denomination, sect, established sect, and cult.⁷ The first five of these categories also generally referred to Christian groups, with the last category being reserved for a set of leftover groups, including the only non-Christian groups Yinger mentioned. He did not consider the few substantial communities of Jews or Buddhists (Buddhist Churches of America), nor did he attempt to accommodate them in his set of categories.

While American Christianity was the basic reference point for the discussion of church and sect, sociologists did try to expand its usage to other societies and see the church-type as the dominant religious community of any culture. Such a dominant religious body, which may be Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, etc., is seen as deeply integrated into any given society’s social and economic structures, and demands only a nominal degree of regular participation and/or commitment. The sect, however, rises in protest against and offers competition to the dominant religious community(ies) while demanding a relatively high degree of participation and commitment. Over time, sects tended to become churches.

Prior to the 1970s, almost all groups that were receiving more than cursory scholarly attention could be seen as part of the church-sect continuum, and a significant amount of sociological attention would be paid to the movement from sect to church (or denomination). Meanwhile, “cult” remained a catchall term that included all the groups that did not fit easily as a church or sect, and Yinger’s definition of a cult was adopted and used by sociologists.⁸ Cults (and Yinger specifically referenced the Black Muslims and Spiritualism) were relatively small groups built around a charismatic leader. Cults were described as ephemeral, usually fragmenting after their founder/leader passed. They were more concerned with the problems of the individual than those of the society.

However, even as Yinger developed his understanding of cults, alternative directions were being offered. For example, Elmer T. Clark, a Methodist historian, had become interested in all the varieties of religious expression that he saw around him during the years of his doctoral work early in the twentieth century

and spent much of his leisure time in his thirties and forties visiting and corresponding with leaders in the many different groups, especially the Holiness and Pentecostal churches in the American South. His influential *The Small Sects in America* (1949)⁹ classified all of the groups he had located according to their dominant organizational thrust, thus finding sects that were pessimistic (or adventist), perfectionist (or subjectivist), charismatic (or pentecostal), communistic, legalistic (or objectivist), egocentric (or New Thought), and esoteric (or mystical).

In a similar vein, British sociologist Bryan Wilson classified the sects according to the path to salvation they outlined for their members; hence sects were classified as conversionist, revolutionist, introversionist, manipulationist, thumaturgical, reformist, or utopian.¹⁰ For our present purposes, the exact meaning of each category for both Clark and Wilson is not as important as the fact that both operated apart from the emerging distinction between sect and cult and hence included discussions of groups that would later be seen as sects (Salvation Army, Christadelphians) and those now considered cults (Christian Science, Jehovah's Witnesses)¹¹ under the single rubric of sects. Clarke did find some leftover groups (for example, the Self-Realization Fellowship, a Hindu group) that did not fit his system. Wilson saw his categories as ideal types and had little interest in developing a classification system that would or could include all the groups then operating in the United Kingdom.

As scholars in North America and Europe were absorbing Clark and Wilson during the 1950s, a dynamic new scene was developing in Japan, where a century of suppression of religious expression was followed by the introduction of religious freedom in 1945. Suddenly, a number of religious groups appeared as if out of nowhere. Upon closer examination, some were seen to be older groups that had assumed a low profile during the Meiji era, some were groups that had been disbanded but were reformed after 1945, and some were brand new. Additionally, new groups were being formed annually and by the 1960s the first English-language texts appeared describing the *shin shukyo* or "new religions" of Japan.¹²

That term also came to be used to describe an equally dramatic phenomenon, the emergence of so many unfamiliar alternative religions within the counterculture in the San Francisco Bay area at the end of the 1960s. Some of the groups to which the term was applied were older groups that were gaining a new following, and some were relatively new, having arrived in the United States after World War II and after changes in the law (1965) had made significant immigration from Asia possible again. In 1970, Jacob Needleman, a philosopher by trade and an adherent of the teachings of George I. Gurdjieff, authored *The New Religions*,¹³ with specific reference to Zen Buddhism, the followers of Meher Baba, Subud, Transcendental Meditation, Krishnamurti, Tibetan Buddhism, and Gurdjieff, among others. Unlike the purely descriptive work of the Japanese scholars, Needleman's work was both descriptive and normative, in that he invited readers to consider not only the sociological and historical fact of the new religions and their

impact, but also the philosophical and theological questions about genuine religion and his hope that the new religions might inject the cosmic element back into American religion, an element he felt had been lost in the mainline Christian and Jewish communities. He would elaborate on these ideas in subsequent books.

Quite apart from Needleman's opinions, his designation of "new religions" would be adopted by a group of scholars operating in the Bay Area through the 1970s; by the end of the decade, the term "new religions" would virtually replace "cult" to describe all of those leftover groups that did not fit easily under the label of either church or sect.

The term "cult" did not die suddenly. It had become a cherished sociological category by which a set of religious phenomena could be bracketed on the path to discussions of more dominant, widespread, and significant social manifestations of religion. However, the emergence of the secular anti-cult movement, and with it the practice of deprogramming and the brainwashing ideologies that supported it, led many scholars concerned about the impact of anti-cultism on religious liberty to advocate the abandonment of the term. "New religion" or "new religious movement" (NRM), a term introduced from Japan, won out over other suggested terms such as "alternative religion" or "fringe religion."

While many scholars wanted to continue the use of the term "cult" in its narrow "scientific" sociological meaning, public discourse about cults as destructive brainwashing groups additionally encouraged the search for another more neutral term. At the same time, the public controversy over the "cults" was bringing many scholars into new religions studies. By the end of the 1970s the number of papers on the subject had risen significantly at the AAR, the SSSR, the Association for the Sociology of Religion, and their European counterparts. During the early and mid-1980s, those scholars who had studied new religions gave particular attention to the subject of brainwashing and the court testimony of some psychological professionals that cults brainwashed their members to the point that individual freedoms were overrun and suppressed. More than any other factor, this controversy attracted a number of scholars to the study of new religions and hastened its recognition as a meaningful subdiscipline within both religious studies and the sociology of religion. While in 1970 one could count the number of active researchers of new religions on one's hand, by the mid-1980s more than a hundred could be found; that number has steadily grown in the years since.

The brainwashing controversy,¹⁴ while leading to the growth of the field, had its negative effects. A significant percentage of research on new religions was devoted to dealing with the controversy and with the small handful of new religions around which it was focused. The result was that the great majority of new religions were looked at only cursorily, that case studies of a single group (usually one of the most controversial groups) have predominated over comparative studies of a wide range of groups, and that those less controversial groups were little considered in developing overall understandings of the field. Also, as the great

majority of scholars found brainwashing theory lacking and moved on to other concerns, those professionals who had supported brainwashing found themselves shut out and launched a new controversy as they began to direct personal attacks against the major new religions scholars whom they labeled “cult apologists.”¹⁵

PARALLEL STUDIES

The interest in new religions generated by the cult controversy of the 1980s was paralleled by additional research that was to have some measurable affect on altering our view of new religions. First, in stages, Yinger’s definition of cults was dismantled. That dismantling began with Geoffrey Nelson’s work on the Spiritualist tradition, in which he pointed out that new religions were not one-generation phenomena.¹⁶ A variety of subsequent work pointed out that the role of charismatic leaders¹⁷ had been overestimated and that the other elements of the definition did not fit many of the prominent new religions of the 1970s and 1980s.

The dismantling of the working definition of cult/new religion left new religions scholars with little we could truly say about cults in general; there was no single characteristic or set of characteristics to which we could point that new religions shared (not even their newness). What they shared was what they lacked—they were not part of the religious establishment; their status and role in the culture was continually being contested; they were feared, disliked (even hated), and misunderstood by their neighbors; and they were viewed as being out of step with the general religious environment. Yinger had suggested that “cults are fairly close to the sect type.” However, by the 1980s cults were seen as making a much more radical break with the dominant religious milieu. Sects may over time grow into churches. They differ from churches primarily over the level of strictness with which they attend to belief and practice. Cults, however, differ on substantive matters of belief and practice. Most are playing a very different religious game, and even those that operate within the larger Christian tradition dissent on such key issues that prevent them from attaining “church” status. To move along the sect-to-church continuum, they would have to alter very central elements of their belief structure or give up their religion altogether.¹⁸

A second line of research was being pursued by students of American religion, who began to document and quantify the many new and different religious bodies, both cults and sects, that were emerging in America. Periodically since the mid-nineteenth century, handbooks of denominations in America had been published. However, by the 1970s, this had become a challenging task. Through the early

twentieth century, the U.S. Department of Commerce had published a very informative *Religious Census* each decade. However, that task was abandoned following the 1936 edition due to separation of church and state questions. Then, through the mid-twentieth century, one Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod scholar, F. E. Meyer, attempted to carry on, his results issuing forth in various editions of the *Religious Bodies of America*.¹⁹ When Meyer died in the midst of a new edition, the task of completing his work was given to his colleague, theologian Arthur C. Piepkorn, who completed the last edition and then began a massive study that would be fully his own. The effort would consume the last years of his life—he died suddenly in 1973 as he was completing what would become a multivolume work. Unfortunately, only the three volumes covering his writing on Christian groups were ever published.²⁰

It was during the 1970s that I stepped into this rather complex setting, and through the 1970s I began to try to make sense of the data that was being gathered on American religions (a task viewed by my major professor in graduate school as a waste of time) and produce a functional classification system of every religion operating in the United States. While Piepkorn, a theologian, had centered his evaluation on their belief systems, I wanted to combine the insights of various approaches in classifying the different groups utilizing not only theology, but also history, sociology, and anthropology (especially the work on revitalization groups). The result was the classification system that would be embodied in the successive editions of the *Encyclopedia of American Religions*.²¹

In creating this classification system,²² I attempted to first identify major characteristics of a group which an ethnographer might want to consider in attempting to write about a group—its history and origin, its authority structures, its belief system, its ritual life, its dominant behavior patterns. Eventually I isolated some ten relevant characteristics.²³ After looking at the hundreds of groups that had been identified as existing in America in the 1970s, utilizing these characteristics, it became obvious that they fell into a rather small set of clusters. Within the Christian cluster, into which the majority of groups fit, denominational clusters were quite evident, with dissenting (sectarian) groups tending to keep the majority of their heritage while disagreeing with their parent body (churches) on relatively few points. Lutheran sectarian groups tended to look more like Lutheran “church” groups than, for example, Methodist sectarian groups. As large Pentecostal and Holiness groups moved along the sect-to-church continuum, they continued to resemble new Pentecostal and Holiness sects more than Presbyterian or Congregationalist churches.

Of particular relevance to this essay, when it came to those groups that had been at the center of the discussions of “cults” or “new religions,” they also tended to resemble their parent groups more than each other. The International Society for Krishna Consciousness resembled other Hindu groups more than it resembled the Church of Scientology or the Church and school of Wicca. The Church Uni-

versal and Triumphant resembled other esoteric groups more than The Way International or a Zen Buddhist society. At the same time, Japanese scholars were finding that the Japanese new religions could also be fruitfully distinguished by their appropriation of a particular heritage, Shintoism, one of several Japanese Buddhist traditions or Japanese folk religions. The Asian-based new religions in America and Europe were an initial phase of a new missionary movement by Asian religions directed at the West, and even in the 1970s it was evident that they would not act like Yinger's "ephemeral" cults. New religions were serious religious activities and would have a long-term role in North America and Europe, much as Christianity was having in the places it had colonized in the nineteenth century.²⁴

When the *Encyclopedia of American Religions* was created in the late 1970s, there was no separate section for new religions, nor has any been added in subsequent editions. This lack of need for a new religions section grew from the basic observation that almost all "new religions/cults" appear to have evolved from within a readily recognizable religious tradition and now exist as a variant within it. The few that did not fit had scarce information or self-consciously drew on two or more traditions in significant amounts (the Unification Church being the most notable current example).

Thus, almost all of the new religions operating in the West can be seen as more recent versions of an old religion. That is, they draw the majority of their belief, mode of organization, and spiritual practices from the parent tradition. In this regard we can recognize (in the West) some 12 to 15 major traditions—Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Shintoism, Sikhism, Sant Mat, Taoism, Zoroastrianism, and Native American (and other ethno-linguistic religions). We can also recognize the various denominational families of Christianity, which take on added significance given the overwhelming dominance of Christianity in the West.²⁵

Many of the new religions that were initially unfamiliar even to religious scholars came from the smaller of the world's religious tradition—often ignored or covered only cursorily in basic world religions classes—Shintoism, Taoism, Sikhism. Of particular interest is the Sant Mat or Radha Soami tradition of the Punjab, virtually unknown in the West prior to the 1970s. A basic knowledge of Sant Mat would have made such groups as the Divine Light Mission, ECKANKAR, and the Sant Bani Ashram more comprehensible as expressions of an older faith in a new context.

Possibly the least understood tradition has been Western Esotericism, the definition of which has been pursued in the last generation by scholars such as Antoine Faivre, Joscelyn Godwin, and Stillson Judah et al. Collectively, they have put together a picture of an alternative religious impulse in the West (often referred to as "occultism") that, while broken, has had a continuous presence at least since the second century C.E. and has grown steadily over the last four

centuries. In the West, a large percentage of the “new” religions—Scientology, Wicca, New Age, and post-New Age groups—are recent additions to the Esoteric tradition.²⁶

Interestingly enough, of the world’s major religious traditions, the Western Esoteric tradition is possibly the least known by Western religious scholars, to a large extent as a result of its century of persecution by Christianity, followed by its dismissal as serious religion in more recent centuries. Any tracing of it could begin with ancient Gnosticism as a possible starting point and certainly include Neo-Platonism, Manicheanism (and Mandaeanism), the Albigensians/Cathars, Jewish Kabbalah, Alchemy, and Hermetics. It is to be noted that the modern revival of Esotericism can be traced to the same originating point as Protestantism, namely the University of Wittenberg at the beginning of the sixteenth century, where Martin Luther’s Hebrew scholar Johann Rauchlin authored a book on the Christian Cabala. The more recent history is traced through the Rosicrucians, Speculative Freemasonry, Emanuel Swedenborg, Mesmer and the Magnetist movement, Templarism, Theosophy, and Ceremonial Magic to Theosophy and its many offshoots (Alice Bailey, I AM). The New Age movement and the many channeling groups have been the most recent expression of the Western Esoteric tradition.²⁷

FROM RELIGIOUS FAMILY TRADITIONS TO NEW RELIGIONS

If we look at the major religious family traditions, some interesting patterns emerge. For example, within each tradition are those groups that dominate and control it (churches), those that dissent but within acceptable limits (sects), and those that diverge beyond those limits (new religions). From the perspective of the dominant group(s) within any given tradition, some groups are seen to differ to such an extent that they can no longer be recognized as fellow believers. Thus, if we go to Japan, the larger Buddhist groups have constituted the Japan Buddhist Federation. However, there are several hundred Buddhist “sects” in Japan. But among these Buddhist sects have been several groups that were largely shunned by the majority of Buddhists. The Sōka Gakkai and the Aum Shinrikyō, though for very different reasons, immediately come to mind. Through the 1960s and 1970s, the Sōka Gakkai engaged in some unacceptable behavior, especially high-pressure proselytizing, which led to its popular condemnation. As it began to grow spectacularly, much by the acquisition of members from other Buddhist

groups, several books were written against it. And even before its commission of homicidal acts that has turned it into a pariah for everyone, Aum Shinrikyō had been viewed by the larger Buddhist community as something very different and foreign, a group inspired by Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism rather than a variation on Japanese Mahayana Buddhism.

From the perspective of the dominant religious community—and most countries have a single religious tradition to which the majority of the population adhere—all of the representative groups of a particular “other” tradition may be defined as outsiders. Thus, in North America, almost all Western Esoteric groups are defined as cults. In India, Hindu leaders increasingly identify all Christian groups, even some of the older indigenous ones such as the St. Thomas Churches, as unwanted outsiders, the product of foreign influence. In Greece, all but the Greek Orthodox Church (including other Christian groups) have been listed as destructive cults. At the same time, the more pluralistic a culture becomes, the more open its leading religions become to broadening the definition of “legitimate” religious life.

Thus, from the perspective of the various religious traditions operating in the West, we might begin to build a definition of new religions as those religious groups that have been found, from the perspective of the dominant religious community (and in the West that is almost always a form of Christianity), to be not just different, but unacceptably different. At the same time, the list of groups that would be considered under the rubric of “new religions” would differ from country to country and always be under negotiation. For example, in the United States the United Methodist Church is one of the large dominant religious bodies. In Greece it was cited by the government as a destructive cult. Also, group status may change over time, and on occasion change quickly and radically. The Soka Gakkai, considered a new religion in Japan and widely attacked through the last half of the twentieth century, is now part of the religious establishment, as a result of the political party it founded becoming aligned at the end of the 1990s with the ruling coalition in the Japanese parliament. In the United States, the Worldwide Church of God changed its beliefs and practices and moved from cult status to membership in the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE).

Over the twentieth century, Pentecostals moved from being some of the most despised of religious groups to sect status to membership in the NAE. Under the leadership of Warith Deen Muhammad, the original Nation of Islam changed its beliefs and integrated into the mainstream of American Islam. At the same time, other groups have maintained their “unacceptable” beliefs and practices and continue to be condemned as cults—Theosophy, Spiritualism, Christian Science, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Nation of Islam (Farrakhan), etc. A few groups, previously considered to be sects, have, by their actions, moved into the “cult” camp—the Branch Davidians being the most obvious example. The Peoples Temple, until the deaths in Guyana in 1978, had been a noted congregation in the large Christian

Church (Disciples of Christ), part of the dominant Protestant coalition in the United States, but has since become the epitome of a cult.

CHURCH? SECT? NEW RELIGION?

In most of the West, it is helpful to see different religious groups as falling into one of four types, and at this point I will hopefully begin to tie the discussion of religious traditions into the earlier discussion of church-sect-cult. First, we make note of the churches—those Christian denominations that form the religious establishment of the several Western countries. This category would include the Roman Catholic Church, the several Protestant state churches of Europe, the larger denominations in North America, and the member churches of the World Council of Churches and its affiliated national councils. Some of these member churches may be quite small in any given country (numbering members in the few thousands), but by their international associations they find themselves a part of the religious establishment.

With churches (“established religions” might be a better designation) we would also include those religious groups in non-Western countries that dominate the landscape in their own country—Hanafi Islam in Egypt, Wahhabi Islam in Bahrain, Shafiite Islam in Indonesia, Orthodox Judaism in Israel, Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka, or State Shinto and Shin Buddhism in Japan. The dominant established religion has the power to designate the boundaries of acceptable deviation in belief and practice and to identify those groups that fall outside those boundaries.

A second set of religious groups might best be termed “ethnic religions.” Falling under this rubric in the West would be those groups that are not Christian but that serve a particular ethnic constituency. The most obvious examples are the several large Jewish synagogue associations, as well as Asian Buddhist and Hindu groups, Asian and Middle Eastern Muslim groups, and a variety of groups serving the smaller world religions—Sikhs, Zoroastrians, Jains, etc. In contrast, in countries where Islam predominates, many Christian minority groups assume a position as an “ethnic religion,” for example, the Coptic Christians of Egypt or the Armenian Christians in Turkey. In these cases adherence to a unique form of Christianity and ethnicity are intimately interrelated.

Ethnic religions operate outside of the religious establishment and will not become churches, but they are seen by the establishment as somewhat analogous to them, especially as long as they continue to limit their activity to their own ethnic constituency. In many cases, ethnic religions are also separated from the

dominant religious community linguistically. In most instances in the West, other than the older Jewish community, these ethnic religions serve communities that have taken up residence in the West since the end of World War II. In the Middle East, the ethnic Christians have been around for centuries, even predating Islam.

The sects make up a third set of groups. These are primarily Christian and Jewish groups that are seen as resembling the larger churches and the synagogue and mosque associations, but are perceived as stricter on matters of belief, more diligent in practice, and more fervent in worship. Sect groups are seen as existing along a spectrum of movement toward becoming a church, with new sects continually arising to protest the tendency of the older sects to adopt churchlike characteristics (less strict, less diligent, less fervent). In the West, many of the more churchlike sects are affiliated with the World Evangelical Alliance (formerly the World Evangelical Fellowship) and its associated national councils. Less churchlike sects may be associated with one of several fundamentalist associations or, in most cases, free from any ecumenical alignments at all. Churches view sects as different but at the same time affirm a filial relationship. Leaders in the more secularized churches, for example, often admire the sects for the depth of their member's commitment, the spirited worship, and the strength of their affirmation of a common tradition.

Throughout much of the Muslim world, many of the Sufi groups could be seen as Islamic sects (remembering that in part of West Africa they form a significantly large part of the religious establishment). In Japan, many of the smaller and newer Buddhist groups not affiliated with the Japan Buddhist Federation would be considered sect groups (as the term is used here). Within the Jewish community, the many Hassidic groups would qualify as sects.

When one has set aside the established religions, the ethnic religious groups, and the sects, those groups that remain are the new religions. While both ethnic religions and the sects have some recognized legitimacy in the eyes of the religious establishment, the new religions are yet to prove themselves. While they may be granted the minimal guarantees provided by laws on religious freedom, in most ways their status is under constant scrutiny and renegotiation. While the legitimate religious life of ethnic religions and sects is assumed, the "cults" are continually on the defensive to demonstrate that they are pursuing a genuinely religious existence and must periodically defend the authenticity of their spiritual practices.

New religions are thus primarily defined not by any characteristic(s) that they share, but by their relationship to the other forms of religious life represented by the dominant churches, the ethnic religions, and the sects. They are designated as in some measure unacceptable by the dominant churches, with some level of concurrence by the ethnic churches and sectarian groups. Secular organizations and government agencies that have become involved in the opposition to new religions have initially sought the sanction of established religious leaders as allies in their efforts.²⁸

Within the ethnic traditions in the West, there may be some disagreement over whether or not a particular group within their tradition is a sect or a new religion. Thus most Hindus seem quite accepting of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (defined as a cult by the dominant churches) but would tend to disagree concerning the status of the Ananda Marga Yoga Society. In the United States, the Satmar, a Jewish Hassidic group, is considered a Jewish sect, while Belgian authorities placed it on a list of questionable new religions.

In pointing out the role of the dominant, more established religions in the initial definition of those groups that could be considered new religions, I call attention to a lacuna in our understanding of new religions. This lacuna has developed as focus was placed upon the relatively small number of new religions that became the key targets of criticism in the 1970s by the cult awareness movement. Because of the concentration on the brainwashing controversy (the importance of which is undeniable), new religions scholars have tended to ignore the larger role assumed by the established religions and the sectarian churches in the long-term mobilization of support for anti-cult sentiments. This role initially became evident to me in the early 1980s when a rash of anti-cult initiatives were introduced into state legislatures. It became quite evident that the death of the proposed legislation was tied to the opposition of lobbyists representing the more established churches.

Those groups that are considered most unacceptable to the religious establishment, and by extension a range of secular and government agencies, have attained their status not because of any single characteristic or set of characteristics they share. However, there are a number of things a group may do that will cause it to be seen as unacceptable. Acquiring one or two of these negative characteristics is often sufficient by itself to define any religious community as an outsider group, but the more questionable attributes groups adopt the more likely it will be seen as unacceptable.

Topping the list of unacceptable attributes are differences on key beliefs with the religious establishment. In North America, the adoption of a Christian theology that dissents from traditional affirmations (Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Science) or the adoption of a non-Christian religious ideology (Scientology, Tenrikyo) will quickly lead to a group being assigned outsider status. If that alternative belief system includes some unusual (including scientifically questionable or pseudoscientific) beliefs (ufology, mummification, channeling, magic) then the chances of being seen as different are heightened. Theological systems are immensely important in spotting outsider religions, as even the most secularized and established religions are still concerned with the promotion of a particular worldview and jealously guard it against competitors.

The adoption of a different belief system is by itself, of course, not sufficient for the assignment of outsider status. The ethnic churches have a very different worldview from the religious establishment, but they also have a high degree of

acceptance. They are regularly invited to participate in interfaith dialogue. At the same time, some groups, which have a seemingly orthodox Christian theology (International Churches of Christ, Alamo Christian Foundation), have found themselves involved at the center of the cult controversy in the last generation.

Along with a different ideology, new religions invariably also adopt different behavior patterns—logical extensions of their beliefs—that are found to be unacceptable. In the West, few actions will get a group assigned to cult status as quickly as engaging in high-pressure proselytization, almost a prerequisite if a group is to have more than marginal growth in its first generation, especially if proselytizing efforts target older mainline religious groups (a practice known as “sheep stealing”).²⁹ While most of the larger churches have gone through phases in which they used such tactics (and may continue to use them outside the West), the same tactics by other groups are deemed unacceptable. The door-to-door evangelism continued by the Latter-day Saints and Jehovah’s Witnesses, although directly related to their persistent growth through the twentieth century, has kept them in a relatively high tension with their neighbors, in spite of these groups having some acceptance in other realms. The Jewish community, victimized by extreme evangelistic tactics from the Christian community in centuries past, is sensitive to any group attempting to proselytize within the Jewish community and has been concerned about the relatively high percentage of Jewish participation in the new religions.³⁰

Other attributes of groups in the “new religion” category include the adoption of a different sexual ethic (which might include arranged marriages, polygamy, pedophilia, free love, or other minority sexual behavior); violent (homicide, suicide, brutality) or otherwise illegal (fraud, drug use) behavior; separatism; a communal life (which often includes separatism); a distinctive diet (veganism, macrobiotics) or medical restrictions (no doctors, no blood transfusions),³¹ and the espousing of apocalyptic beliefs about the end of the world. Complaints against new religions may also concern conservative approaches to the role of women, a perceived foreignness, racial exclusiveness, or authoritarian leadership.³²

The characteristics that lead to assignment as an outsider group will vary from culture to culture, of course. For example, some forms of Asian medicine would be quite mainstream in parts of the world, while their efficacy is continually questioned in the West. That is, relative to religious practice, what is considered “cultic” in one culture will have a quite different status in another. Also, especially in the West, practices that continue in an ethnic church may be tolerated and even lauded, while groups that advocate the same practice among Western members (for example, ayurveda or acupuncture) may find themselves condemned.

The religious scene in the last century has been in continual flux, and what is acceptable and/or tolerated belief and behavior for the dominant religions has shifted and expanded. At the same time, new religions change rapidly, especially those still in their first generation of life. Newly founded groups, which may adopt

beliefs and practices that set them in a heightened tension level vis-à-vis the establishment, can significantly lower their tension by altering behavior with only minor adjustments to their belief system. Thus, The Family, which became known in the 1980s for creating a promiscuous sexual environment that allowed some pedophilia to occur, lowered its tension level considerably in the 1990s by its adoption of a more conventional sexual ethic that includes strong denunciations of such practices. The Unification Church lowered its tension level once it adopted more conventional methods of support and pulled members who were selling flowers off the streets.

CONCLUSION

This essay has offered a different way of defining the field of new religions studies by viewing the object of concern not as a group of religions that share particular attributes, but as a set of religions that have been assigned an outsider status by the dominant religious culture and then by elements within the secular culture; hence they are a set of religions that exist in a relatively contested space within society. Further, I have suggested that in understanding any particular new religion, it is helpful to locate it initially within its particular religious tradition and then to determine where it fits relative to the mainstream of that tradition, and secondly to determine its relation to whatever tradition is dominant in the particular country in which the group operates (recognizing that in countries such as France a nonreligious ideology may have a significant role in the process of labeling groups as religious outsiders).

Having placed the group on the religious landscape (relative to its own religious tradition and its relationship to the dominant religious community), we can then begin to look for the factors that led to its outsider status, always keeping in mind that those factors will be located both within the group (behavior/belief patterns) and in the larger society (level of religious tolerance, presence of cult-monitoring groups, etc.). From an overview of all the new religions that are operating in any location at any moment, we can then isolate for research purposes those new religions from different backgrounds that might share a particularly interesting attribute (eat a vegetarian diet, home school their children) or set of attributes. Recently, for example, scholars have isolated several new religions that have both been involved in violent incidents and adopted an apocalyptic worldview.³³

Such an approach should direct those of us who study new religions to a greater concern for the relationships developed by new religions within the larger

cultural scene and relative to various interested parties (other religious groups, legal authorities, cult-monitoring organizations, scholars, etc.).³⁴ It should also call attention to the unique complex of attributes (both ideological and behavioral) that any particular group adopts that allows it to be assigned cult status, while some seemingly similar groups are much more acceptable. Looking at such belief/behavior complexes should also assist us in understanding why some groups might adopt a particularly disastrous course of action, such as involvement in violence (homicide or suicide) or illegal activities (from polygamy to various financial schemes).

NOTES

1. This essay concerns an issue to which I have continually returned over the last twenty years. It has also been the subject of many conversations with colleagues whose insights have been integrated into my own thought over the years. To list those from whom I have learned would be, at this point, to list almost all who have worked in this field during this time, both those who thought I have found stimulating and from whom I have borrowed insights and those who have forced me to sharpen my ideas through their disagreement. I am however, especially grateful to Catherine Wessinger, Edward Irons, Massimo Introvigne, and David G. Bromley, who read earlier versions of this essay and offered a variety of helpful comments upon it.

2. See, for example, A. H. Barrington, *Anti-Christian Cults* (Milwaukee: Young Churchman, 1898).

3. On the Countercult movement, see Douglas E. Cowan, *Bearing False Witness? An Introduction to the Christian Countercult* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002).

4. *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, trans. Olive Wyon, 2 vols. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1931; originally published in German in 1911).

5. Cf. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958; originally published in German in 1904).

6. In tracing the creation of the church-sect-cult categories in America, see Gaius G. Atkins, *Modern Religious Cults and Movements* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1923); Louis R. Binder, *Modern Religious Cults and Society* (Boston: R. G. Badger, 1933); and Arthur Huff Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis: Negro Religious Cults of the Urban North* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944).

7. J. Milton Yinger, *Religion, Society and the Individual* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 154–155.

8. See, for example, the recent discussion of church-sect-cult by sociologists Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge in *A Theory of Religion* (New York, Peter Lang, 1987) and the insightful essay by Lorne Dawson, "Creating 'Cult' Typologies: Some Strategic Considerations," *Journal of Contemporary Religions* 12, no. 3 (October 1997): 363–382, a summary of which can be found in *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). Both Stark and Dawson give

consideration to the different types of cults/new religions based upon the looseness of their organization, a consideration that goes beyond the topic of this essay.

9. Elmer T. Clark, *The Small Sects in America* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1949).

10. See Wilson's various texts, including *Sects and Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961) and *Religious Sects: A Sociological Study* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1970).

11. A few of the more recent volumes to treat Jehovah's Witnesses and Christian Science as cults include Steven Hassan, *Releasing the Bonds: Empowering People to Think for Themselves* (Somerville, Mass.: Freedom of Mind Press, 2000); Linda S. Kramer, *The Religion That Kills: Christian Science, Abuse Neglect, and Mind Control* (Lafayette, La.: Huntington House Publishers, 2000); John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 1999); and Philip Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

12. See Harry Thomsen, *The New Religions of Japan* (Rutland, Vt.: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1963), and H. Neill McFarland, *The Rush Hour of the Gods* (New York: Macmillan, 1967). The process of the founding of new religions in Japan, of course, has continued unabated decade by decade to the present, shows no sign of slowing down, and has recently led to the designation of "new new religions," those groups whose founders and converts were born after 1945.

13. Jacob Needleman, *The New Religions* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1970).

14. An overview of the brainwashing controversy was presented in my "Brainwashing and the Cults: The Rise and Fall of a Theory," in J. Gordon Melton and Massimo Introvigne, eds., *Gehirnwäsche und Sekt: Interdisziplinäre Annäherungen* (Marburg, Germany: Dialogonal-Verlag, 2000). It is posted at <http://www.cesnur.org/testi/melton.htm>. Important items highlighting the controversy include Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony, "The Limits of 'Coercive Persuasion' as an Explanation for Conversion to Authoritarian Sects," *Political Psychology* 2, no. 22 (Summer 1980): 22–37; James T. Richardson and David G. Bromley, eds., *The Brainwashing/Deprogramming Controversy* (Lewis-ton, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983); Dick Anthony, "Religious Movements and 'Brainwashing' Litigation: Evaluating Key Testimony," in Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony, eds., *In Gods We Trust: New Patterns of Religious Pluralism in America*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Press, 1989): 295–344; and James T. Richardson, "A Social Psychological Critique of 'Brainwashing' Claims about Recruitment to New Religions," in David G. Bromley and Jeffrey K. Hadden, eds., *The Handbook of Cults and Sects in America: Religion and the Social Order*, vol. 3, part B (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1993).

15. The term "cult apologist" was initially used in presentations at the annual meetings of the now defunct Cult Awareness Network in the early 1990s, following the rejection of brainwashing testimony in the courts. It was implicit in the court cases brought against two professional associations and a spectrum of new religions scholars by Margaret Singer, a psychotherapist most identified with the brainwashing hypothesis relative to new religions, and Richard Ofshe, a sociologist at the University of California, who had also testified on brainwashing in several court cases. Singer and Ofshe had been most effected by the negative court ruling on brainwashing testimony. Following the dismissal of their lawsuit, the term was picked up by representatives of the secular and

Christian movements opposing “cults” whose opinions are primarily expressed in numerous Internet sites. It has most recently been raised as a matter of discussion in 1998 by sociologist Benjamin Zablocki, as part of his effort to revisit the brainwashing concept in his article “The Blacklisting of a Concept: The Strange History of the Brainwashing Conjecture in the Sociology of Religion,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 1, no. 1 (October 1997). Zablocki’s article resulted in a symposium discussion published as “Academic Integrity and the Study of New Religious Movements,” *Nova Religio* 2, no. 1 (October 1988), and Benjamin Zablocki and Thomas Robbins, eds., *Misunderstanding Cults* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

16. Geoffrey K. Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969).

17. See, for example, J. Gordon Melton, “When Prophets Die: The Succession Crisis in New Religions,” in *When Prophets Die: The Post Charismatic Fate of New Religious Movements*, ed. Timothy Miller (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991): 1–12.

18. While unlikely, this is not entirely impossible, as was demonstrated in the 1990s when the Worldwide Church of God abandoned the whole set of its unique beliefs and adopted a mainline evangelical Christian perspective and joined the National Association of Evangelicals.

19. F. E. Meyer, *The Religious Bodies of America*, 4th ed. (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia, 1961).

20. Arthur C. Piepkorn, *Profiles in Belief*, vols. 1–3 (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977–1979). The manuscript of his work, including his entries on the non-Christian groups, were eventually deposited in the library of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California.

21. J. Gordon Melton, *Encyclopedia of American Religions*, 6th ed. (Detroit: Gale Group, 1999).

22. A discussion of this classification system is found in J. Gordon Melton, *A Directory of Religious Bodies in the United States* (New York: Garland, 1977).

23. The ten characteristics were grouped under three headings: history (which included both the group’s self-understanding of its own history and its history as presented by outside observers), its thought world (including both its overall belief system and any particular emphases such as glossolalia, sacramentalism, apocalypticism, etc.), and behavior patterns (including its approach to ethics, unique behavior patterns, worship format, organization, holidays celebrated, and distinctive spiritual practices).

24. In the long run, the acceptance of new religions as serious religious activity has proved a major underlying disagreement between the scholars studying new religions and the anti-cult critics. Critics have often tended to reduce new religions to centers of fraud, insincerity, and/or pathological deviance. Such groups are not seen as valid objects of study, nor would such groups be viewed as possibly making any contribution to the society as a whole. This basic difference can be seen, for example, in the various essays included in Michael D. Langone, *Recovery from Cults: Helps for Victims of Psychological and Spiritual Abuse* (New York: Norton, 1993).

25. Not to be forgotten, of course, are the groups of the religiously irreligious: that is, the groups of atheists, secular humanists, and agnostics who are not just irreligious or unconcerned with religion but who are vitally concerned with organizing and perpetuating a system of unbelief that parallels the religious traditions and assumes many of its functions. In countries like China and France, and to a lesser extent in other Western

nations, secular ideologies assume a controlling role relative to the designation of acceptable and unacceptable religions.

26. Cf. J. Stillson Judah, *The History and Philosophy of the Metaphysical Movements in America* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967); Antoine Faivre, *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition: Studies in Western Esotericism* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2000); and Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994). Possibly the most prominent sociological essay on the Esoteric community is Colin Campbell, "The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization," in *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* 5 (1972), 119–36. Campbell essay is most illuminating about the operation of the Esoteric world but quickly loses its application when applied to the larger world of new religions.

27. On the development of the esoteric tradition in the last generation see J. Gordon Melton, *Finding Enlightenment: Ramtha's School of Ancient Wisdom* (Hillsboro, Ore.: Beyond Words Publishing, 1998), especially pp. 31–44, and chapters 18–20 of J. Gordon Melton, *Encyclopedia of American Religions* (Detroit: Gale Group, 1999). A seventh edition of the encyclopedia appeared at the end of 2002.

28. Religious sanction to the secular cult awareness movement has been given by prominent spokespersons such as Catholic priest James LeBar, Jewish rabbi Maurice David, and Liberal Jewish executive James Rudin (who book attacking cults was published by a major Lutheran publishing house). Protestant church leaders who lent their support to the cult awareness movement include Ron Enroth, Paul R. Martin, and Richard L. Dowhower.

29. When they first appeared, both the International Churches of Christ and the Alamo Foundation were condemned for "sheep stealing," a practice that usually coincides with the adoption of a separatist relationship relative to one's own tradition. They were later also accused of "brainwashing" their members.

30. Cf. Annette Daum, ed., *Missionary and Cult Movements* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1977), and Natalie Isser and Lita Linzer Schwartz, *The History of Conversion and Contemporary Cults* (New York: Peter Lang, 1988).

31. Above and beyond medical restrictions, in the West there are a number of alternative medical practices that remain in contested space and are often associated with Oriental and New Age religious groups, including ayurveda, acupuncture, chiropractic, and naturopathy.

32. To this point in this essay, I have not raised the issue of brainwashing relative to developing a definition of new religions. Like most of my colleagues in new religion studies, I do not believe that a case for the existence of brainwashing (also called mind control, thought reform) has been made. Given the long history of attempts, I remain quite skeptical that such a case will ever be made. I have found that, in use, "brainwashing" has been a contrived attribute assigned to particular religions as a means of seeking government involvement (either through legislation or the courts) in the life of religious groups when they are engaging in minority but otherwise legal behavior. It has been my experience that saying that a group brainwashes its members most often says more about the individual opinions of the person speaking than the behavior of the group itself. While I favor government action against groups and their leadership when they break the law (especially when they commit acts of violence against members or others, engage in sexually coercive practices, or conduct fraudulent business dealings), I do not favor the intervention of legal authorities simply because they have adopted some-

behavior patterns (however intense) not commonly followed in the larger society nor personally acceptable to myself.

33. Cf. Catherine Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven's Gate* (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2000); John R. Hall, Philip D. Schuyler, and Sylvaine Trinh, *Apocalypse Observed: Religious Movements and Violence in North America, Europe, and Japan* (New York: Routledge, 2000); and David G. Bromley and J. Gordon Melton, eds., *Cults, Religion and Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

34. I am particularly indebted to my recent coauthor David Bromley for pushing me in this direction. Without the conversations and his insights concerning the violence issue, this essay could not have been completed.

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PART I

MODERNIZATION AND
NEW RELIGIONS

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CHAPTER 2

ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUALITIES, NEW RELIGIONS, AND THE REENCHANTMENT OF THE WEST

CHRISTOPHER PARTRIDGE

“THE disenchantment of the world” (Max Weber), which can be traced back to the Protestant Reformation, is the result of a network of social and intellectual forces. More specifically, it is arguable that the emergence of particular rationality and individualism have led, on the one hand, to the erosion of religion as a communal phenomenon and, on the other hand, to the implausibility of many of its beliefs. While this secularizing process is deceptively complex, the essential idea is simple: “Modernization necessarily leads to a decline of religion, both in society and in the minds of individuals.”¹ For Weber, the disenchantment of the world (*die Entzauberung der Welt*) is the process whereby magic and spiritual mystery is driven from the world, nature is managed rather than enchanted, the spiritual loses social significance, and institutions and laws do not depend on religion for their legitimation.

While not denying Western secularization, this chapter asks whether it is the *whole* story. Is the West witnessing a *thoroughgoing* erosion of belief in the su-

pernatural? Is the loss of faith in otherworldly forces a linear, one-way, inevitable decline, or are there reasons to believe in the reemergence of religion in the West? On the other hand, if there is evidence indicating that the West is witnessing a gradual “sacralization,” should we abandon notions of “secularization”? Or are we in the midst of a much more complex process in which accurate analysis demands that we take account of both secularization and sacralization, disenchantment and rechantment?

While the current state of religion in the West is complicated and difficult to accurately map, and while simplistic analyses should be avoided, as the title indicates, overall I am persuaded that while disenchantment is ubiquitously apparent in the West, the forces of secularization have never quite been able to stifle the shoots of religion. Although traditional forms of institutional religion have been seriously damaged and do not seem to be able to arrest the process of erosion, cracks are appearing in the disenchanted landscape and new forms of significant spiritual life are emerging. As with all life, new conditions require evolution. Religion in the thin atmosphere of the modern West will necessarily evolve away from what we have become used to calling “religion.” Moreover, as future generations of alternative spiritualities become established, rooted, and increasingly mainstream, they may prove more hardy and resistant to the disenchanting forces that their antecedents were ill equipped to deal with. (Of course, that is not to say that there will not be new antagonistic forces.) Indeed, as Cheris Shun-Ching Chan persuasively argues in her study of the Hong Kong group Lingsu Exo-Esoterics, Western rechantment may be characterized by new hybrid forms of religion which are the result of a dialectical process of the sacralization of the secular and the secularization of sacred.²

THE DISENCHANTMENT OF THE WEST

Looking back over the past couple of centuries, it would seem overwhelmingly evident that religious beliefs, practices, and symbols are gradually being abandoned at all levels of modern society.³ As Steve Bruce commented in 1996, “Sales of religious books have declined. The space given to church and spiritual matters in the popular press is now vestigial; only a sex scandal (for the tabloids) or a money scandal (for the broadsheets) will get the church out of a bottom corner on an inside page.”⁴ Whereas a more scientifically educated, cynical, and less credulous public is an important factor in the process of disenchantment, it is not the only or even the principal factor. To quote Bruce again, “Increasing knowl-