



*Routledge Inform Series on Minority Religions and Spiritual  
Movements*

# MINORITY RELIGIONS IN EUROPE AND THE MIDDLE EAST

**MAPPING AND MONITORING**

Edited by  
George D. Chryssides



# Minority Religions in Europe and the Middle East

Minority religions, not only New Religious Movements, are explored in this innovative book, including the predicament of ancient religions such as Zoroastrianism, 'old new' religions such as Baha'i, and traditional religions that are minorities elsewhere. The book is divided into two parts: the gathering of data on religious minorities ("mapping") and the ways in which governments and interest groups respond to them ("monitoring"). The international groups examine which new religions exist in particular countries, what their uptake is, and how allegiance can be ascertained. They explore a range of issues faced by minority religions, encompassing official state recognition and registration, unequal treatment in comparison to a dominant religion, how changes in government can affect how they fare, the extent to which members are free to practise their faith, how they sometimes seek to influence politics, and how they can be affected by harassment and persecution.

Bringing together debates concerning the social and political issues facing new religions in Europe and the Middle East, this collection extends its focus to Middle Eastern minority faiths, enabling exposition of spiritual movements such as the Gülen Movement, Paganism in Israel, and the Zoroastrians in Tehran.

**George D. Chryssides** studied at the Universities of Glasgow and Oxford, and has taught at various British universities. He was Head of Religious Studies at the University of Wolverhampton, UK, from 2001 to 2008 and is now Honorary Research Fellow in Contemporary Religion at the University of Birmingham and York St John University. He has published extensively, principally on new religious movements, and is a series editor for the Routledge New Religions series. His books include *Historical Dictionary of Jehovah's Witnesses* (2008), *Heaven's Gate: Postmodernity and Popular Culture in a Suicide Group* (2011), *Christians in the Twenty-First Century* (with Margaret Z. Wilkins 2011), *Historical Dictionary of New Religious Movements* (2012), *The Bloomsbury Companion to New Religious Movements* (co-edited with Benjamin E. Zeller, 2014), and *Jehovah's Witnesses: Continuity and Change* (2016). He was made an honorary member of the British Association for the Study of Religions in 2009 and is a Governor and Co-Vice-Chair of Inform.

## **Routledge Inform Series on Minority Religions and Spiritual Movements**



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**Edited by George D. Chryssides**

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# 1 Religious minorities

## Setting the scenes

*George D. Chryssides*

This collection of chapters on minority religions originates from a major conference sponsored by Inform (Information Network on Religious Movements) to mark its twenty-fifth anniversary, held at the London School of Economics in 2014. Two earlier volumes in the Routledge/Inform series drew on presentations given at this event and were edited by Eugene V. Gallagher: *'Cult Wars' in Historical Perspective* (2016) and *Visioning New and Minority Religions: Projecting the Future* (2017). The quality of the papers was such that Eileen Barker, the series editor, felt that a third volume was justified, and a common theme that ran through many of the remaining contributions was the issue of how minority religions were received in countries within Europe and its close neighbours. While most of the material in this volume stems from the conference, a few additions were sought in order to ensure a sufficiently broad spectrum of geographical areas and religious communities. These additional chapters are the ones by Holly Folk on Scientology; Alain Garay on the French legal situation; Inez Schippers on the Gülen Movement, which originated in Turkey; and my own chapter on Jehovah's Witnesses in the Middle East.

This collection of chapters does not seek to be comprehensive, which would be an impossible task, but rather to provide a portrait of how new religions fare in Europe and the Middle East, how they arise, how they are received within the dominant culture, and the religious, societal, and legal responses to them. The subtitle "Mapping and Monitoring" reflects a twofold objective: to provide some indication of the identities and locations of new religions (the mapping) and how they are received (the monitoring).

The theme of the conference was "Minority Religions: Contemplating the Past and Anticipating the Future". It should be noted that the focus was on minority religions and not simply new religious movements (NRMs), and this is reflected in the contents of this anthology. Particularly in its earlier years, Inform's focus was on new religions, but the concept "new religious movement" has proved notoriously difficult to define and has often been equated with the more pejorative term "cult". Inform receives enquiries not merely about new religions but also about a wide range of minority religions that could have existed for centuries or even millennia, and it is an



information network rather than a “cult monitoring” organisation. In line with its aims, as well as the conference theme, the material in this volume spans both old and new religious minorities. Although Inform initiated this series, it should be obvious that this collection is not intended to define its position on the communities discussed, but – as with all academic writing – the volume reflects the interests and opinions of the individual authors, some of whom may have or have had a personal connection with the religion on which they are writing.

### **Religious freedom and minority religions**

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights reads,

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.  
(United Nations, 1948)

This apparent conferment of the right of religious freedom might seem to imply equal rights to everyone who follows a religion or who wishes to have none. The implication appears to be that whether one’s religion is old or new, or whether it is the dominant or a minority community, one should have the right to believe and practice, to meet communally for worship, to disseminate their religion’s message publicly, and to attract – although not coerce – converts. Notwithstanding the United Nations (UN) Declaration, however, such freedom is not found throughout Europe and the Middle East, where the majority of countries do not confer equal rights of religious liberty to all communities, and where certain religious communities, particularly NRMs, are frequently regarded with great suspicion.

It is no doubt inevitable that the societally dominant religion receives preferential treatment. Historically, religion has been bound up with government, and it is only in recent times that theocratic rule has given way in the majority of advanced societies to a separation of religion and state, with secular rather than religious rulers in authority. However, even the secularisation process does not prevent religion from being bound up with the affairs of the state. Even in the United States, where church and state are officially separate, dollar bills continue to proclaim, “In God we trust”, and many government and public buildings still display the Jewish-Christian Ten Commandments. Satanists who have proposed erecting statues depicting Behemoth have certainly encountered opposition and have met with great difficulty, even when they have successfully gained permission. The dominant religion can still make its mark, endowing itself with privileges that are not always shared by religious minorities.

There are various ways in which a religious community finds itself existing as a minority. Often a minority religion has set itself up as a new organisation, as in the case of the Church of Scientology, the Unification Church, and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), and scholars have come to use the term “new religious movement” to collectively describe such organisations. As Alain Garay argues in Chapter 8, however, the term “new religious movement” is not altogether satisfactory. Certainly, as I have argued elsewhere, many groups that are regarded as NRMs are not particularly new, are not unarguably religions, or are not movements but firmly organised institutions. This is not the place, however, to rekindle terminological controversies, and readers who wish to pursue such matters can find them debated elsewhere (Chryssides 2004; 2012). Unsatisfactory though the term has turned out to be, it is a piece of terminology that is intended to be neutral, not pejorative like the term “cult”.

It is not only newness that can cause religion to be in the minority. Religions can decline, and even die, and what was once a country’s dominant religion can become marginalised, as in the case of the Zoroastrians in Iran (see Chapter 15). Religions migrate, and diaspora communities tend to be minorities in their host country. New religions can also arise as a result of schism, as has happened with the nonconformist churches in England, the Adventists in the United States and the United Kingdom, and subsequently with groups such as the Latter-day Saints and Jehovah’s Witnesses, both of which have had their own splinter groups. Diaspora communities can be the subject of racial prejudice, and sectarian groups are frequently defined in terms of the presumed heresy they have espoused, thus proving themselves unpopular with their parent religion. Prejudice can readily give rise to persecution, and it is perhaps not surprising, although it is regrettable, that groups such as the Baha’i have suffered greatly, particularly in Iran, in addition to being the victims of prejudice elsewhere.

Minority religions raise issues about the relationship between themselves, the state, and the dominant religion. The salient issues go beyond questions of toleration and prejudice, and freedom to worship and assemble. Being judged acceptable by the state can involve privileged treatment regarding taxation and tax exemption. There are issues relating to whether religious communities can provide their own schools for their children and if so on what terms they can provide religious education. Legal issues such as the validity of marriage can impinge on minority religions. Is the state prepared to authorise a minority religion’s premises for solemnising marriages, and are marriages conducted within certain religious communities recognised as legally valid? There are issues, too, regarding religious holidays and festivals. In the workplace, members of minority faiths may wish to have leave from work on festival days that are not celebrated by the dominant faith or culture. There may be times also when one’s faith is judged to be inconvenient in terms of societal expectations: one striking example is the issue of military service, in which certain religious minorities, such as Quakers and Jehovah’s

Witnesses, refuse to participate. To what extent can the state accommodate non-compliance? Freedom of conscience, it should be noted, is specifically mentioned in Article 18 of the UN Declaration, yet governmental policy requires conformity in order to achieve common purposes and goals, and to avoid anarchy; of course there are also those who falsely claim to belong to a religion in order to avoid service in the armed forces.

No doubt for historical reasons, states can have laws that work in favour of the dominant religion but do not offer equal benefits to religious minorities. One recent example in Britain has been its historic blasphemy laws. Until 2006 it was still possible to impose sanctions against blasphemy – but blasphemy was exclusively defined as causing offence to the Church of England. This not only left Muslims without equal sanction against those who insulted Islam but also left other Christian denominations on an unequal footing.

Religious communities themselves can contain their own minorities. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people are one obvious example: only recently has it been possible for gay and lesbian couples to be legally married within certain – not all – churches in the United Kingdom, and this right has been won only as a result of a long struggle. Disability is another issue: religious communities have typically been led by secular legislation rather than taking the lead in accommodating the disabled. Women, although numerically a majority whose affiliation to religious communities usually surpasses that of men, are often reckoned to be a minority from a sociological point of view on the grounds that their power is weaker than that of their male counterparts. This is certainly reflected in the attitude of most religious communities, which continue to be patriarchal and male-dominated, apart from Islam, where men typically have greater involvement than women. Within the Christian faith, women's rights to preach and to be ordained have been hard fought and are still not recognised within a substantial number of religious organisations. In some of these examples, the state has had a role in shaping religious attitudes. In Britain, legislation to legitimate same-sex couples as civil partners paved the way for religious same-sex marriages since, without legal recognition, religious marriage rites would have been no more than a declaration of commitment on the part of the couple. On other issues, such as women's ordination, the state remains impartial, not wanting to interfere in religious matters, even if religious communities discriminate against women.

Where a religious community is a minority within a country, issues of toleration and the limits of tolerance not infrequently arise. Governments are called upon to decide whether religious minorities should receive the same benefits as the dominant religion, whether they are genuine religious communities (rather than business companies or political organisations seeking privileged status under the guise of religion), and whether any lack of conformity to societal norms can be allowed. New religions in particular have come to be regarded with suspicion for a variety of reasons. Because of their novelty the public initially have had little reliable information about them

and have relied on media portrayals, which are often inaccurate and unflattering. Some of their early activities provided genuine cause for concern: for example the high demands placed upon seekers and new converts, lectures of lengthy duration, long hours spent evangelising and fundraising with little remuneration, poor living accommodation, or barely adequate diet.

Academics were perhaps unduly slow to recognise the validity of these criticisms, partly because of the tendency to ensure that the study of religion was value-free and partly because their quest for fair and accurate portrayal sometimes led to overreaction, both to the inaccurate media representation and to the emergent anti-cult movement, which were influenced by the now widely discredited brainwashing theory and statements by self-styled or meagrely qualified “cult experts”, who could make instant pronouncements about any “cult”, often creating undue panic without accurate information. The UN Declaration’s insistence on the right to convert, of course, implies a permission to criticise and dissuade, but at times sectors of the anti-cult movement went beyond the bounds of legality when “deprogrammers” were employed to forcibly abduct members, isolating them from the community and bombarding them with propaganda designed to bring them back to “normal” society. As I shall argue later, there were times when the anti-cult movement made attempts to influence politicians, demanding state intervention to curb the activities of NRMs.

Political involvement in constraining unpopular religions goes back to ancient times and continues to be widespread. Particularly when a government is theocratic, its laws cannot be separated from those of its religion – a phenomenon that is perhaps most recognisable in an Islamic country like Saudi Arabia, which is governed by Shari’a law, and which does not allow conversion away from Islam. The Iranian persecution of the Baha’i – discussed later in this volume (Chapter 15) – provides another illustration of discrimination, indeed persecution, by the dominant religion. Currently the Iranian government officially recognises four religions – Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism – but not Baha’i, whose followers are seen as an affront to the fundamental Islamic teaching that Muhammad is the true and final prophet, and there can be no subsequent prophets, such as the founder-leader Baha’u’llah. On three occasions the House of the Báb (the herald of Baha’u’llah) has been forcibly demolished, and members of the Baha’i faith are denied access to higher education and to governmental positions. A final chapter (Chapter 17) provides an overview of the situation in numerous European and Middle Eastern countries regarding the relationship between the state and religious communities, and the religious freedoms that are enjoyed or in many cases withheld.

### *The nature of religious minorities*

As mentioned earlier, religious minorities exist due to a variety of causes. Some may arise through religious creativity, where a charismatic leader introduces some new form of spirituality which secures a limited following. Other

religious minorities are diaspora communities – major, or even dominant, religions in their country of origin, which find themselves minorities when they migrate to a different environment. A number of these traditional religions can attract a new following by proselytising, sometimes giving rise to mutations of their original forms of spirituality. Examples of these are “white Buddhism”, which tends to be propagated through literature and emphasises meditation and the quest for nirvana, and forms of spirituality derived from the Hindu tradition, ISKCON being the most widely known. Other types of minorities arise through schism, where certain members actively resist innovation in the parent body or where a number engage in beliefs and practices that are judged heretical. There are numerous such organisations in Western Christianity, such as the Continuing Anglican movement and the Sedavacantists in Roman Catholicism; the question of disciplic succession in ISKCON has caused some members to splinter off, using the previous generic name of Gaudia Math. A fourth and final factor leading a majority religion to become a minority is decline: a religious community may fail to replenish itself, either through members losing interest; displacement by missionary activity of an incoming religion; or refusal to allow conversion, as in the case of the Zoroastrian faith.

Religious minorities can encounter a variety of problems stemming from their position. Traditional religions may historically have been linked with the state and continue to receive privileges as a result. Social practices tend to be defined by the dominant religion, and minority religions may find themselves endeavouring to observe different days of worship and festivals. Initially unfamiliar within the dominant culture, new religions can find themselves victims of prejudice, and those who adhere to a culture’s traditional faith may be concerned about their spirituality becoming eroded. New and emergent religions have aroused suspicion: anyone who is at all familiar with the study of NRMs will of course be acquainted with the accusations of brainwashing, splitting up families, and deceptive fundraising, among others. In some cases the tenets of a religious community may conflict with state law, one obvious example being Jehovah’s Witnesses’ refusal to accept military service.

Such concerns have given rise to a variety of measures designed to control religious minorities, even in countries whose constitution affirms the freedom of religion. Such measures may include the registration of religious organisations; restrictions on freedom to worship and evangelise; and legislation relating to rites of passage, children and education, and a variety of other issues that are explored throughout this volume.

### ***Introducing the chapters***

Many of these issues are taken up by the various authors of this anthology. The collection of statistical data on religious affiliation is of course vital to any discussion of the position of religious minorities. In Chapter 2 Ringo Ringvee analyses the historical background to religion in Estonia and the information afforded by the various population censuses between 1922 and 2011.

Ringvee offers important insights into the revival of Estonian Paganism, and the role of the New Age Movement, showing how new religions have grown during the period 2000–2011.

While Estonia collects data on religious affiliation, other states do not, and Brigitte Knobel and Camille Gonzales highlight other methods of collecting such information, with special reference to Geneva, where the Inter-Cantonal Information Centre on Beliefs (CIC) has the role of mapping religions. Their chapter explores the relationship between religion and state, highlighting a pluralist society in which there is no real distinction drawn between major and minor religious communities.

Milda Ališauskienė discusses the role of minority religions in Lithuania, where Roman Catholicism is the dominant religion, resulting in difficulties for NRMs and issues surrounding their attempts at registration. Commenting on data from a 2012 survey of minority religions, Ališauskienė discusses the causes of prejudice and discrimination, and how the state's position can remain intransigent despite some change in public attitudes.

Turning to Portugal and Greece in Chapter 5, Eugenia Roussou examines how alternative spirituality, principally the so-called “New Age” variety, manifests itself in Lisbon and Athens, respectively, arguing that those who are drawn to these alternative spiritualities seek their own spiritual paths, in contrast to the traditional forms of Christianity in both countries. Paulina Niechcial focusses on the ancient rather than the new in Chapter 6, discussing how the Zoroastrian community in present-day Tehran succeeds in defining its distinctive identity in contrast to the related Indian Parsee community and Islam.

The Middle East is the homeland of the Abrahamic faiths, and my own Chapter 7 illustrates the way in which the Jehovah's Witnesses have progressed historically within Israel/Palestine and its surrounding territory. The chapter outlines its history in the region, its organisational structure, and its attitudes to the region's sacred sites.

Part I of the anthology principally relates to mapping, while Part II focusses on how minority religions are monitored and public and state responses. It begins with the controversial legal situation in France, and Alain Garay, a French lawyer, defends some of the recent legal decisions, questioning the usefulness of sociological terminology – particularly the concept of “new religious movement” – in legal decision-making.

In Chapter 9, Claude Proeschel discusses how religious minorities receive unequal treatment against the background of Spain's Roman Catholic heritage, arguing that, while there is in principle a commitment by the government to equal rights for minorities, and while public attitudes have become more positive towards minority groups, the situation continues to fall short of equality.

Chapter 10, by Titus Hjelm, Essi Mäkelä, and Jussi Sohlberg, takes up the issue of registration of religious groups. The authors focus on two Pagan groups which are little known outside Finland – the Finnish Free Wicca Association and *Karhun kansa* (People of the Bear) – and examine the reasons for the latter achieving successful registration but not the former.

J. Eugene Clay's ensuing chapter takes us into Eurasia, focussing on Russia and the situation of nontraditional religions in the wake of the 1997 Law of Freedom of Conscience. The author illustrates how the country's traditional religions are favoured and how unpopular communities like Jehovah's Witnesses can experience violations of their religious freedom by being labelled "extremist".

Holly Folk focusses on one specific minority religion, namely Scientology (Chapter 12), which has sought to establish a presence in Hungary, following the demise of communism there. Folk comments on the ways in which government policy has affected the organisation and how Scientology, while being transnational, has sought to "glocalise".

Belonging to a global movement has also helped neopaganism in Israel, as Shai Feraró highlights in Chapter 13. Despite Orthodox Jewish opposition, which invokes scriptural arguments against "paganism" and "idolatry", the author demonstrates that Pagans are beginning to feel able to "come out" amidst prevalent hostility while remaining small in numbers.

The final three chapters explore the position of religious minorities in Islamic states. Turkey's Gülen movement received much public attention when the failed coup occurred in 2016, for which President Erdoğan blamed Fethullah Gülen and his supporters. Inez Schippers's chapter (Chapter 14) was substantially written before the coup and the subsequent witch hunt for those who had in any way been associated with Gülen or organisations connected to his movement. Schippers's discussion remains useful, nonetheless, in providing exposition of the movement's basic ideology and how it has been expressed in its attitudes to modernity, education, and interfaith dialogue.

The penultimate chapter (Chapter 15) by Kishan Manocha and Saba Tahzib focusses on the Baha'i in Iran. The authors here go beyond simply cataloguing the persecution of this minority faith and commenting on human rights violations. By declining to assume a confrontational stance against Muslim opposition, Baha'i continue to offer service, experiencing their religion as a way of defining their identity and providing unique access to spiritual truth.

Finally, in Chapter 16 Stephen Suleyman Schwartz examines three other heterodox Muslim communities – the Albanian Bektashi Sufi order, the Turkish and Kurdish Alevi-Bektaşî movement, and the Iranian-Kurdish Ahl-e Haqq. These are not NRMs but minorities with a long history of persecution, demonstrating the pluralistic nature of Islam and the attempts of the dominant religious culture to impose uniformity of practice.

Collectively, the chapters in this volume paint a series of portraits of the religious landscape of parts of Europe, Russia, and the Middle East. The various contributors to this anthology highlight the issue of the extent to which minority religions may go against the grain of the society in which they are situated. The authors do not, of course, present a united view on the issues under discussion, but at least we hope we have provided some reliable information and contributed to further debate.

**Part 1**

# **Mapping the minority religions**





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## **2 What do the censuses tell us about minority religions? Some reflections on Estonia**

*Ringo Ringvee*

### **Introduction**

There are different ways to gather statistics on religious affiliation. Representative surveys and polls give some idea of religious affiliation in a society. However, in many of the surveys the minority religions become either under- or over-represented, and the reliability of affiliation numbers presented by religious communities can often be questioned. One valuable source for data on minority religions is a population census (Lewis 2014).

In many countries population census questionnaires include a question on religious affiliation. Although census data on religious affiliation may be criticised for various reasons (for example if there is only one option to be selected), and it does not give information on the content of the population's beliefs, census data do give insight into the composition of religions in a particular society by showing the number of people who are willing to identify themselves with some particular religious or spiritual tradition. The population censuses give us not only the number of religiously affiliated people but also their gender, age, ethnicity, education and whether they live mostly in urban or rural areas. From census data, longitudinal trends concerning religion in general or some particular tradition can be observed.

Population censuses also give a reference point for other surveys and polls as well as for the statistical information provided by religious communities themselves. It could well be claimed that censuses reflect 'believing in belonging', and this observation is also applicable to minority religions (Day 2011; Ringvee 2014a). Conrad Hackett (2014: 400) from the Pew Research Center has noted that where there are two-step questions in population censuses whereby respondents who define themselves as religiously affiliated have to go on to define themselves by a particular religion, this tends to filter out people with a weak sense of belonging. This chapter focusses on minority religions (both traditional and new) in population censuses in Estonia, paying particular attention to changes between the 2000 and 2011 censuses.

### **Some statistics**

In the beginning of the twenty-first century the three least religiously affiliated areas in Europe – according to different surveys, polls and censuses – are Estonia, Eastern Germany and the Czech Republic (Hamplová and Nešpor 2009; Jaanus 2012; Pickel, Pollack, and Müller 2012; Ringvee 2014a). While one of the least God-believing peoples in Europe according to Eurobarometer polls (15 percent in 2005 and 18 percent in 2010), Estonia has at the same time one of the highest proportions in Europe of believers in a ‘spirit’ or ‘life force’ since half of the respondents considered the claim that ‘there is some sort of spirit or life force’ closest to their beliefs (Eurobarometer 2000 and 2010). Religious freedom is protected by legislation and practice, and Estonia is among those European countries where discrimination on religious grounds has been rare (Eurobarometer 2008). David Václavík (2014: 29) has used the term *apatheism* (indifference to God) to describe Czech society, and this could well be applied to Estonia also.

In March 2015 there were 559 religious associations registered as legal entities in the Estonian Register of Religious Associations. Most of the registered religious associations belong to larger congregational unions or churches. There are also independent associations: for example the Estonian Congregation of Krishna Consciousness (the local association of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)), the Estonian Congregation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Estonian Islamic Congregation, the Estonian Jewish Congregation, local neo-Pagan Taara-faith and Buddhist associations, as well as several different Charismatic Christian associations. The majority of the religious associations and movements in Estonia started their activities during the last twenty-five years.

### **Some historical background**

Estonia became Christianised during the Northern Crusade in the thirteenth century, which also meant foreign rule in political terms. The Protestant Reformation reached Estonia in the sixteenth century, and from then on Estonia has been part of the Lutheran North Europe. In the 1720s the Moravian Brethren mission arrived in Estonia and had particular success among native Estonian peasants. In 1739 the first Estonian Bible translation appeared in print. From 1743 until 1764 the foreign Moravian Brethren were banned from the Russian Empire, and the Brethren movement became organised solely by native peasants. The Brethren movement maintained its importance in Estonian religious and social life until the mid-nineteenth century. In the nineteenth century, the Russian Orthodox Church began its outreach activities in Estonia. In the 1840s and 1880s two waves of changing affiliation among Estonian peasants from the Lutheran Church to the Orthodox Church took place. Becoming a member of the Orthodox state church of the Russian Empire was accompanied with hopes of