

Chapter 1

Cults and New Religions: A Primer

It should be clear from the brief sampling on the previous pages that the debate over what constitutes a “cult” or “new religious movement” is often highly contested and emotionally charged. For some, new religions epitomize all that is dangerous and deviant in the compass of religious belief and practice. For others, they represent fascinating glimpses into the way human beings organize their lives to construct religious meaning and give shape to religious experience. Such differences, however, are only exacerbated by the different agendas that motivate various interest groups.

On the one hand, some groups proactively challenge the legitimacy of new religious movements, seeking to convince adherents to abandon their new religious commitments. Exemplified by the first quote opposite, evangelical countercult apologists such as Bob Larson (1989: 19) consider new religions suspect simply because they either deviate or are altogether different from their own understanding of Christianity. Indeed, new religions are often treated with skepticism when their principal beliefs differ from those of the dominant religious tradition in a particular society. As historian of religions J. Gordon Melton points out, though, this dynamic varies considerably from country to country. “For example,” he writes, “in the United States the United Methodist Church is one of the dominant religious bodies. In Greece, the government cited it as being a destructive cult” (Melton 2004: 79). Thus, what appears as a cult in one context may be one of the most prevalent religious traditions in another. Secular anticult activism, on the other hand, is motivated not by theological conflict or differences in doctrinal belief, but by civil libertarian concerns for the psychological welfare of new religious adherents. Often informed by an ideology that accuses new

religions of such nefarious practices as “brainwashing” and “thought control,” this is illustrated by the second quote opposite (West and Langone 1986: 119–120). For both of these countermovements, however, the same set of salient issues are involved: How do we show that cults are dangerous? How do we warn people against them? And, most importantly, how do we get people to leave them behind? (For detailed histories of the evangelical countercult and secular anticult movements, as well as comparisons between them, see Shupe and Bromley 1980; Cowan 2003a.)

Most people, however, have little direct knowledge of new religious movements. While a relative few may know someone who joined a group colloquially regarded as a “cult,” in reality most people get the majority of their information about new or controversial religions through the media. And, though there are occasional exceptions, “cult” has become little more than a convenient, if largely inaccurate and always pejorative, shorthand for a religious group that must be presented as odd or dangerous for the purposes of an emerging news story. Indeed, news media tend to pay attention to new religions only when something drastic has taken place – the mass suicide of Peoples Temple in Guyana in 1978 (Hall 2004); the BATF/FBI siege of the Branch Davidian residence in 1993 (Tabor and Gallagher 1995; Thibodeau 1999); the 1995 and 1997 murder/suicides in Switzerland and Canada of members of the Order of the Solar Temple (Mayer 1999); the 1997 suicides of the Heaven’s Gate “Away Team” (Wessinger 2000: 229–252); other preparations for the end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it by groups such as the Church Universal and Triumphant (Whitsel 2003); raids by a variety of official agencies on groups such as the Twelve Tribes and the Children of God/The Family (Palmer 1999; Chancellor 2000; Bainbridge 2002); or the 2000 murder/suicides of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God in rural Uganda (Mayer 2001). Since media representation of virtually any topic is governed first by the principle of negativity – which, in popular terms, means “if it bleeds, it leads” – the only information people generally have of new religious movements occurs in the context of what sociologist James Beckford calls the “threatening, strange, exploitative, oppressive and provocative” (1994: 143). Because of this, though the vast majority of new religious movements never cross the threshold of a “dramatic dénouement” (Bromley 2002), many are caught up in this kind of negative characterization.

Each of these definitions, however, presents its own set of problems. Arguing, as members of the evangelical countercult often do, that any religious group other than their own is by definition a cult demonstrates little more than the theological hubris by which many exclusivist religious

traditions are marked. Indeed, even in the United States, a number of well-known fundamentalist Christian groups could easily be caught in the net cast by the evangelical countercult's definition. Relying on a variety of "thought control" or "brainwashing" metaphors to explain why people join new religions, the secular anticult often contends that cults display a stereotypical set of negative organizational characteristics and practices. The International Cultic Studies Association – which was formerly known as the American Family Foundation, one of the largest of the secular anticult groups that emerged in the 1970s – has listed 15 characteristics it believes are often found in suspect groups. Among other things, these "cultic groups" have a "polarized us-versus-them mentality"; they use "mind-altering practices (such as meditation, chanting, speaking in tongues, denunciation sessions, and debilitating work routines) to excess"; they are "preoccupied with making money" and "with bringing in new members"; and active "members are expected to devote inordinate amounts of time to the group and group-related activities" (Lalich and Langone 2006). Scholars have challenged the usefulness of this kind of checklist on three principal grounds: (i) there is no indication how many of these "characteristics" must be present in order for a group to be considered "cultic"; (ii) it does not adequately define what constitutes "excessive" or "inordinate" devotion, practice, or behavior, nor does it demonstrate that these are by definition harmful; and (iii) it does not satisfactorily discriminate between those very few religious groups which may actually be dangerous and the vast panoply of other religious and social groups that display similar characteristics but pose little or no threat to either their members or society at large. Finally, given that new religious movements are almost always presented in the media through the lens of controversy, two major problems emerge. First, with little or no countervailing information readily available, media reporting comes to represent the cultural stock of knowledge about those groups. However biased and inaccurate, those reports become the foundation for "common knowledge about cults." Second, because a significant part of "what makes an event news is its ability to galvanize public attention quickly and unambiguously" (Cowan and Hadden 2004: 75), the negative portrayals of one new religious movement are often quickly, easily, and once again inaccurately generalized to describe all new religions. What the media represents as the case with one group is very often presented as the case for all.

Conversely, scholars of new religious movements have long countered that many of the groups that are labeled "cults" often closely resemble a variety of conventional organizations in which these same characteristics

are accepted as legitimate or necessary: communes and intentional communities, convents, monasteries, and other high-commitment religious societies, multilevel marketing organizations, and armed forces training and elite combat units, to name just a few (cf. Bromley 1998). This confusion has led members of the secular anticult movement to qualify its usage rather dramatically. Margaret Singer, for example, one of the principal movement intellectuals behind the secular anticult, once wrote: "I have had to point out why the United States Marine Corps is not a cult so many times that I carry a list to lectures and court appearances" (Singer, with Lalich 1995: 98). If this is the case, then it is not so much a problem with the audiences to which Singer spoke, but a fundamental weakness in the anticult definition she employed. More recent statements of the secular anticult movement have acknowledged the weakness of its earlier positions and moved closer to the formulations of scholars of new religions (Giambalvo, Kropveld, and Langone 2013).

Unlike the evangelical countercult, the secular anticult, or the mainstream media, most social scientists and religious studies scholars are interested in understanding new religions in their social, cultural, and historical contexts. Where do they come from? Why do they emerge at particular times and in specific places? How do they develop, and what contributes to their evolution, success, and, not infrequently, their decline? Rather than convince adherents to change their allegiances, these scholars want to understand the processes of recruitment and defection, of experimentation and maturation, and of affiliation and disaffiliation. Why do people join and why do they leave? Are new religious movements, in fact, as dangerous as they are often portrayed in the mass media? When social scientists address these kinds of issues, the important distinction is that their statements are the conclusions rather than the premises of their work.

Over the past few decades and in a variety of ways, social scientists have tried to rehabilitate the term "cult" for scholarly and analytic purposes. These attempts, however, have met with only limited success, and in common usage the word still carries unrelentingly negative connotations. Failing that, a number of alternatives have been suggested. While "new religions" or "new religious movements" (NRMs) have become the most common, others include "alternative religious movements," "emergent religions," "controversial new religions," and "marginal (or peripheral) religious movements." None of these is ideal, either. When has a group been around long enough to stop being considered "new"? To what is it "alternative"? What about groups that are both new and alternative, but

relatively uncontroversial? And what does it mean to be “marginal” – is that merely a function of group size, or does it involve a more distinctive social stigma? While “emergent religions” seems to address some of these issues, many new religions pass largely unnoticed in society, and this begs the question whether they can be said to have really “emerged” at all. There is no perfect answer.

All these differences and questions notwithstanding, though, it is important to remember throughout this book that members of the groups we discuss never consider themselves part of a “cult.” A few new religions, such as the Raëlians, will admit to being a “cult,” but in doing so they are actively redefining the term to strip it of its negative connotations. While adherents of some groups are content to be regarded as members of a new religion, others, such as practitioners of Transcendental Meditation (TM), contend that theirs is not a religious movement at all. Members of the Church of Scientology, on the other hand, insist that theirs is a bona fide religion, despite widespread media and countermovement criticism that it is not. Still others, such as Unificationists, Branch Davidians, or members of the Children of God/The Family, are clear that their faith is not new at all, that they are in fact devout Christians and full members of the largest single religious group on the planet.

In this book, we take the position that members of new religions want (and ought) to be taken as seriously as any other religious believer. Any preconceived notions that new religious adherents are brainwashed, spiritually deceived, or mentally ill are not only problematic from an empirical standpoint, but erect significant barriers to understanding these fascinating social movements more fully. This is why we believe that recognizing new religions as sincere (if occasionally problematic) attempts to come to terms with what adherents regard as the most important issues in life is a far more productive endeavor than simply dismissing them as theological imposters, attacking them as social deviants, or capitalizing on them only when they appear newsworthy.

The Range of New Religious Movements

However we define new religions or new religious movements, they remain an important if somewhat elusive set of social entities and organizations. As sociologist of religion Lorne Dawson points out, not only are they “intrinsically interesting,” their beliefs and practices often “unusual or even fantastic” (2006: 179). More than that, they have the potential to

reveal significant things about the societies in which they emerge, occasionally flourish, and not infrequently decline. More than a generation ago, Christian minister Jan Karel van Baalen called cults “the unpaid bills of the church” (1960: 420). Although he meant this in the most negative possible terms – that new religious movements were appearing as a result of something the Christian church was not doing, or was doing incorrectly – his comment speaks to the larger issue of new religious emergence in late modern society. What kind of societies allow for the appearance of new religions? How does the response of a particular society to new religions in its midst affect the growth and development of those groups? How has the presence of new religious movements changed the shape or direction of a society, and vice versa? These are some of the questions we address in the following chapters.

New religions have appeared throughout history. In one sense, every religious tradition was “new” or “alternative” at some point in time and some place on the globe. For example, there was a time when Christianity did not exist in any form, and when it did emerge as a self-aware social organization, it was treated with much the same fear and skepticism as many new religions today. Moreover, though it had been the dominant social and religious power in Europe for more than a millennium, by the time it was brought to North America by zealous Catholic missionaries, Christianity could hardly have appeared anything but new, alternative, and more than a little dangerous to the indigenous peoples on whom it was eventually forced.

In the United States, new religions have been produced for hundreds of years, and the number of groups we know about continues to expand. According to Melton, there are approximately 2500 different religious groups in the United States, about half of those what he terms “non-conventional” (1998a: 9). Further, the number of new groups is now growing by about two hundred each decade. Among other things, this makes the United States one of the most religiously diverse countries both in the world and throughout history. The vast majority of these “nonconventional” groups are very small, and most pass with little or no notice in society. A few, however, have generated controversy in ways that far exceed their relatively small size.

Although alternative, sectarian religious movements such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and a variety of Spiritualist and New Thought movements have been around in the United States since the nineteenth century, 1965 marked the advent of exceptional growth in new religions. One of the most common

explanations for the emergence of this broad array of NRMs in the 1960s and 1970s was the social and cultural ferment characterized by countercultural rebellion among young people, the civil rights movement and the deep wounds in American society it revealed, the Vietnam War and popular opposition to it, and the Watergate scandal and the weakening of public confidence in the government it provoked. In this view of events, the period was characterized by a profound crisis of meaning and identity, and new religions became the conveyors of alternative meaning structures and new identities. In this, they are popular successors to the countercultural movements of the 1960s (Glock and Bellah 1976). With the relaxation in 1965 of American statutes limiting immigration from a number of Asian countries, this growth was particularly true of groups claiming some kind of Eastern religious origin. As people looked away from their various Western heritages, many “turned East” (Cox 1977), hoping for a more meaningful religious experience.

Contrary to the rather simplistic and reductionist ways in which they are often presented by the evangelical countercult, the secular anticult, and the media, new religions are extraordinarily diverse, theologically, behaviorally, and sociologically complex, and most either emerge or are formed from a broad range of source traditions. Some, such as the Unification Church, the Branch Davidians, and the Children of God/The Family have set themselves apart from their parent tradition – in this case Christianity – by virtue of their particular sectarian teachings and practices. Other NRMs are not “religious” in what we might loosely call a traditional sense. The Church of Scientology, for example, combines contemporary forms of technological innovation, psychotherapy, and health management techniques, as well as economic enterprise and global organization in ways that often make it difficult to locate the “religious” aspect of the movement. Indeed, in contrast to religious movements that developed in the nineteenth century, contemporary new religions are much more likely to make conscious, pragmatic decisions about whether to define and present themselves as “religious,” and whether to seek legal or governmental legitimation as religious organizations. Other groups, such as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (Hare Krishna) and the Transcendental Meditation movement, are more accurately described as cultural transplants, often of Asian origin, and are new only in the sense that they are new to the West. These groups may display the institutional characteristics of their societies of origin, but, in order to succeed in their new surroundings, they often adapt their teaching methods, simplify their parent mythologies, and relax requirements for participation. Finally, some groups are so

novel in their beliefs that they defy characterization according to a source tradition. UFO groups, for example, such as the Unarius Academy of Science, Heaven's Gate, the Raëlians, and the Aetherius Society, combine late modern mythologies of extraterrestrial contact with a wide variety of spiritual and devotional practices to produce new religious movements that seem almost unique.

There are, however, a number of models that scholars have developed which help enormously to chart the landscape of new religions in late modern society. A concept that we will follow throughout this book is that of the "unseen order." In his famous Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh in 1902, William James defined "the life of religion" as "the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto" ([1902] 1994: 61). This definition has three principal benefits. First, it does not limit "religion" to those traditions that believe in a supreme being of one kind or another, but allows for a greatly expanded understanding of religious belief and practice. Second, this expanded understanding sets aside issues of "authenticity" that have so exercised stakeholders in the cultural discourse around new religious movements. It precludes the temptation to establish whether something is "true" or not. Third, and perhaps more importantly, it avoids what we call the "good, moral, and decent fallacy," the popular misconception that religion is always a force for good in society, and that negative social effects somehow indicate false or inauthentic religious practices. The "unseen order" of the Aztecs, for example, postulated the existence of a war god, Huitzilopochtli, who fought eternally with a number of other gods to ensure the prosperity of the people who worshiped him. To maintain his ability to fight, Huitzilopochtli needed a steady supply of blood, hence the Aztec practice of human sacrifice. While this was almost certainly also a mechanism of social control, in order to maintain a "harmonious adjustment" to the "unseen order" as the Aztecs understood it, as many as 20,000 men and women per year had their hearts cut out with an obsidian knife.

In any religious tradition, the vision of this unseen order does two important things. First, it motivates the development of particular explanatory narratives, religious myths and beliefs that describe the nature of the unseen order, interpret its relationship to the everyday world, and explain the path to realizing one's supreme good within it. Second, these mythic narratives are reflected in prescribed behaviors, religious rituals and practices that connect adherents to the unseen order in such a way that its reality and power are manifest, meaningful, and, for the practitioner, undeniable. What distinguishes new religious movements from established

religious groups *culturally* is the specific emphases in their myths, beliefs, rituals, and practices – how significantly they differ from those of the dominant culture.

In many cases, new religious myths stand in opposition to the legitimating beliefs of the larger society and to the dominant social conventions that govern human relationships. While Unificationism accepts the Bible as true, for example, it challenges traditional Christianity through its assertion that the divine revelations received by Sun Myung Moon unlock hidden truths that remain unavailable to non-members. In the theology of the Children of God/The Family, all established churches – to which David Berg referred derisively as “churchianity” – are considered illegitimate because they turned their backs on God, and accepted instead a material, corrupt, and satanic existence. The Raëlians treat the traditional Christian interpretation of the biblical creation myth as the product of profound misunderstanding. They believe that humans were created not by God, but by an advanced, extraterrestrial race called the Elohim, which they translate as “those who come from the sky.” These Elohim developed the capacity to create life from DNA and selected Earth as an experimental laboratory. This oppositional stance is also evident in the emphasis various new religions place on the ways in which humankind has become separated from its original purpose, a separation that has led to all the evil, corruption, and suffering in the world. Our willful disobedience to God’s plan, for instance, and the contemporary moral decay and rootlessness that result from it, are prominent themes for both Unificationists and members of the Children of God/The Family. Other groups, such as the Church of Scientology and Ramtha’s School of Enlightenment, believe that humans have lost touch with their own godlike qualities and have become trapped in a material world that separates them from their essential divinity.

Each of these visions of the “unseen order” manifests in practices through which practitioners seek to realize their own “supreme good.” Like their myths, new religious rituals and practices are often oppositional in nature. Scientologists believe that the practice of auditing helps them overcome the debilitating effects of traumatic experiences, most of which have accumulated over a multitude of lifetimes. Recognizing Sun Myung Moon and Hak Ja Han as their “True Parents,” and acknowledging the Rev. Moon as Lord of the Second Advent, brings Unificationists into harmony with God’s original plan for humankind. Members of the Children of God/The Family believe that by reinterpreting many of the Christian Church’s longstanding positions on human sexuality they have brought themselves closer to Jesus’ mandate to make love the basis of all human relationships. And, for

advanced practitioners of Transcendental Meditation, TM-Sidhi and yogic flying brings the material world around them into balance with the unseen order of Natural Law.

In many (arguably most) traditions, religious community is organized around the dictates of mythic and ritual systems. In the specific organizational means through which they seek to harmoniously adjust themselves to their vision of the unseen order, new religions also differ *socially* from established religious groups. Although new religions are rarely “new,” but almost always constitute contemporary rediscoveries, recombinations, or reinventions of beliefs, practices, and rituals embedded in much older traditions, certain of their social characteristics are distinctive (cf. Barker 2004; Bromley 2004; Melton 2004). Since the movement *organizations* are new, for example, converts constitute the majority of first-generation membership and provide the primary source of passion and zeal in the movement. Usually, converts to new religions are not representative of the general population. In the case of the groups we discuss in this book, most draw on the same general segment of the population: white, middle-class, well-educated young adults. The movements are often led by charismatic figures whose revelations self-consciously challenge the established social order, and whose charismatic authority is a primary unifying force within the movements. Because they are new, there is no established organizational tradition, and groups often change organizational form rapidly and frequently as they adapt to the variety of pressures and challenges encountered over the course of their life cycles.

From this perspective, new religious movements can be viewed as experiments in building consensus for a new or improved version of the unseen order, in promoting advanced or more efficacious techniques for accessing and interacting with that order, and in persuading others to participate with them in establishing an organized social presence based on “harmoniously adjusting” to that particular vision of the sacred. Typically, controversy ensues when new religions begin to apply their vision of the unseen order, when the experiments they conduct challenge established social arrangements – in some cases in relatively minor ways, but in others dramatically and fundamentally. Sometimes, opposition is small and scattered, but more foundational conflicts with the established social order can lead to powerful oppositional coalitions that bring dominant institutions into direct conflict with new religious movements. It is under these conditions of high tension and conflict that opponents most often refer to new religions as “cults,” a term that expresses their unwillingness to grant them any kind of social or cultural legitimacy. Used thus, “cult” becomes little

more than a propaganda term – a means of discrediting new religions from the outset, and obviating any need to learn more about them. Following a lengthy class discussion on the ways different interest groups define the term, one of our students caught this point, commenting rather wryly, “So, Professor, what you’re really saying is that ‘cult’ is just a four-letter word for any religion someone doesn’t like.”

Controversy and the Popular Perception of New Religious Movements

Part of our task in this book is to present a carefully drawn picture of new religions, to demonstrate that each of them has a history (not simply a present), that each has devout followers who choose that religious path of their own free will, and that, like all religious organizations, new religions are subject to change, development, and evolution. It is important to note, however, that these chapters present necessarily brief surveys and these movements are often complex, highly nuanced in their beliefs and ritual practice, and have undergone significant changes over the course of their existence. Indeed, since the first edition of this book, Sun Myung Moon, founder of the Unification Church, has passed away, setting the stage for one of the most important processes in new religious survival: organizational routinization following the death of a charismatic leader. While we have chosen to present these movements in the context of controversies for which each is known, this is only because these controversies have helped define both these particular groups and public response to new religious movements in general.

A controversy, however, is not a point in conceptual space, blinking into existence when some arbitrary line of social or cultural opprobrium is crossed. It is a range of conditions and behaviors, from relatively low-level concerns about whether a group can legitimately call itself a religion to full-blown confrontations between a new religious movement and official agents of the state. Some of what develop into controversies begin within a group – the Raëlian movement’s claim in 2002, for example, that one of its subsidiary organizations had successfully cloned a human being, or the 1997 suicides of the Heaven’s Gate “Away Team.” Others, however, develop as a result of forces that converge from the outside. But for the ill-conceived raid by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (BATF) on the Branch Davidian residence in February 1993, which was aggressively supported by members of the secular anticult movement and apostate Branch Davidians, few people

outside the small Texas community of Waco had ever heard of David Koresh and his followers. Indeed, prior to the raid, 96 percent of those living in and around Waco itself reported that they knew little or nothing about the group (Baylor Center for Community Research and Development 1993: 4). Thus, it is logical to conclude that of the many hundreds of new religious movements in late modern society, the majority exist with little or no fanfare at all. The reality is that many new religions have not risen to the level of public notice as a result of conflict, and any challenge they present to dominant social mores or religious beliefs is low level, at best.

While we have used particular controversies as lenses through which to view specific movements, two aspects of this are important to note. First, these controversies do not define either the history or the totality of the group. Heaven's Gate, for example, is much more than simply the 1997 suicides, just as the Branch Davidians are much more than the 1993 tragedy at Ranch Apocalypse. Moreover, the circumstances of their dramatic denouements make any generalization between them problematic at best. Second, few of the controversies we consider in this book are limited to the groups discussed. For example, while we discuss the issue of brainwashing and deprogramming in the context of the Unification Church, numerous other religious groups – both new, and dominant or traditional – have been accused of brainwashing followers and been subject to attack by coercive deprogrammers, so-called “exit counselors” and “thought reform consultants.” Charges of sexual deviance, sexual exploitation, and child sexual abuse have been a staple of countermovement criticism of new religions for centuries. But, as the recent sexual abuse scandals in the Roman Catholic Church amply demonstrate, these charges are hardly limited to new religious movements.

This is not to say that problems do not occur, that there are not occasionally egregious violations of civil and human rights within new religious movements. The important point, though, is that these violations can (and do) occur within the context of many religious organizations and that new religions should not be unduly stigmatized because of them. New religions should be held accountable when such deviations occur, but the fact that they are new religions should not be a priori evidence that these deviations either will occur or have already taken place – especially on no more solid ground than being called a “cult” in the newspaper or on a blog post. Similarly, distinctions must be made between the leadership in new religions and what we might call the rank-and-file membership. Like any other large and complex organization, only a relative few are in control of the agenda for a particular group. Line workers at an automobile production

plant are rarely if ever privy to the decision-making process about what direction that manufacturer will take. Equally, few rank-and-file Scientologists have any input into the direction the Church of Scientology takes as an organization.

One of the most common battles new religions are forced to fight is for simple recognition as religions. While the first two groups we discuss face similar problems of social legitimacy, each has chosen to establish its credibility in different ways. Because it has no commonly recognized status worldwide, the Church of Scientology is an excellent example of the struggle many new religions face for official recognition. In the United States, the Church of Scientology has been granted (then lost, then won again) its 501(c)3 status, the designation conferred by the Internal Revenue Service that grants religious organizations tax exempt status. In Canada, on the other hand, Scientology is still not officially recognized as a religion, while in France and Germany it has been placed on watch lists developed to identify “dangerous cults and sects.” In 1997, the group was banned in Greece, and a 2003 decision by the Greek government upheld the ban, rejecting the Greek Church of Scientology’s application for official recognition as a religion. In an effort to gain official standing and cultural legitimacy, the Church of Scientology has aggressively employed a number of techniques, including gala events to celebrate one or another of its social reform agencies, carefully orchestrated openings of new buildings around the world, the testimony of celebrity members as spokespersons, and often problematic attempts to win the favor of new religion scholars.

Claiming almost as many practitioners worldwide as the Church of Scientology, the Transcendental Meditation movement has chosen the opposite road to social and cultural legitimacy. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi brought the practice from India after studying for many years with his guru there, and initially organized his practitioners as the Spiritual Regeneration Movement. Once he moved to the West, however, he quickly established a number of different organizations designed to attract practitioners from a wide range of the population. The majority of these represent TM to the public as a scientifically validated meditation practice that produces tremendous personal benefits among practitioners, but which is neither a religion per se, nor affiliated with any particular religious tradition. In fact, while critics disagree, TM practitioners emphatically deny that there are religious components to the practice at all. Thus, if Chapter 2 asks the question “When does a therapeutic practice become a religion?,” Chapter 3 considers whether a meditational practice rooted in an ancient religious tradition can be marketed as a secular therapy.

Chapters 4 and 5 explore the concept of the “dangerous cult,” and the means by which that concept is socially constructed and reinforced. Although there are some dedicated followers of TM who devote most or all of their time to furthering the practice of Transcendental Meditation in late modern society, the vast majority of those who practice do so on their own, often as part of what has been loosely described as the New Age Movement. Though we prefer to consider the New Age a subculture rather than a movement, Chapter 4 examines one (or two, depending on your perspective) of the most prominent proponents of the New Age, JZ Knight and Ramtha, the 35,000-year-old Atlantean warrior she claims to channel. From her residence in the small community of Yelm, Washington, Knight operates Ramtha’s School of Enlightenment (RSE), an “American Gnostic School” that claims more than 5000 students worldwide. Although neither Knight nor her students consider RSE a religion, like the Church of Scientology and Transcendental Meditation, Ramtha’s School of Enlightenment offers its spiritual products on a fee-for-service basis, something for which enthusiasts are willing to pay and from which they appear to gain a greater sense of meaning for their lives.

When people are willing to pay handsomely for spiritual products, however, detractors are quick to question the means by which adherents have been parted from their money. As Chapter 5 discusses, in the popular press and among the secular anticult movement this kind of behavior often results in allegations of “brainwashing” and “thought control.” By the 1970s, Sun Myung Moon’s Unification Church became the lightning rod in the United States for charges of religious brainwashing. Prompted by the concerns of parents and friends of those who had joined the group, an anticult ideology quickly coalesced and forcefully asserted that Moon was only one of a number of unscrupulous religious leaders who used a variety of “mind control” techniques to enslave followers and, among other things, bilk them of their possessions. Arguably the best known of the cult controversies, the brainwashing/deprogramming debate has been at the heart of new religion studies since its inception and provides an excellent introduction to some of the other disputes in which new religions have been involved, and other transgressions of which they have been accused.

Although obvious differences such as devotee clothing (e.g., the Hare Krishnas) and communal lifestyle (e.g., Heaven’s Gate) often set new religions apart, the question of sexuality – particularly accusations of sexual license among adherents and sexual abuse against minors – is common in the social construction of cult controversies. Because of their

sexually idiosyncratic lifestyle, which has involved both “flirty fishing” and open marriage between members, few new religions have come under such scrutiny for the problem of sexuality as the Children of God, now known as The Family International. Of the numerous “Jesus Movements” that emerged from the counterculture of the 1960s, The Family remains one of the best known, and while it considers itself an evangelical Christian movement, many of the revelations claimed by its members place the group well outside the Christian mainstream. As Chapter 6 discusses, of all the innovations generated by these revelations over its nearly 40-year history, The Family’s experimentation with revolutionary sexual practices has had the most impact on its public image and produced a legacy with which the movement continues to struggle.

Public image, and the media stockpile from which that image is most often drawn, can have devastating effects on a new religious movement. From the moment BATF agents attempted a “dynamic entry” at the Branch Davidian residence on February 28, 1993, to the morning of April 19, when that residence went up in flames and took the lives of more than 70 Branch Davidians, the crisis in Waco, Texas held the attention of the world’s media. Throughout the siege, the official version remained (and remains to this day) that federal agents were engaged in the lawful execution of their duties and were met with deadly force by “heavily armed religious cultists.” Chapter 7 discusses how, by misrepresenting the beliefs of marginal religious groups, by relying mainly (or solely) on apostate, anticult, or “official” testimony, and by refusing to consider the views of social scientists whose insights could have defused inflammatory reporting, mainstream media has demonstrated time and again that there is little “good news” for new religions when reporters arrive on the scene.

As we have pointed out, new religions often come to public awareness through the media only when there is some type of violence associated with them. The issue of new religions and violence, however, is far more complex than mainstream media ever report. This was the case in 1997 when 39 members of the Heaven’s Gate UFO group committed suicide in expectation of their resurrection to another evolutionary level. News media and dedicated countermovements were quick to link Heaven’s Gate with other well-known examples of religiously motivated violence. While the 1978 mass suicide of Peoples Temple in Guyana has been interpreted as a desperation response to a crisis situation, and the Branch Davidian tragedy wrongful death at the hands of the US government, the mass suicide in Rancho Santa Fe can be considered a positive response to the group’s belief

that a major prophecy had been fulfilled. Through a discussion of Heaven's Gate, Chapter 8 raises the important question of whether or not all types of religiously oriented violence are comparable.

Following in some ways from the discussions in Chapters 7 and 8, new religious streams of modern Paganism – Witchcraft, Wicca, and Druidry, to name just a few – have also had to contend with the issue of media stereotyping. Building on deeply embedded cultural fears of Witchcraft dating back hundreds of years, the most common form of this stereotyping makes either an implicit or an explicit equation between modern Witchcraft (or Wicca) and Satanism, as though the former were little more than a subset of the latter. Sketching the history of Wicca from its mid-twentieth-century beginnings in Great Britain – though recognizing that modern Paganism encompasses a much broader range of beliefs and practices than just Wicca – Chapter 9 points out how, though covens and ritual working groups are no less susceptible to infighting, personality conflicts, and theological disputes than any other religious community, Wiccan beliefs, principles, and practices demonstrate clearly how distinct Wicca is from Satanism.

With a few obvious exceptions, we have chosen to begin each chapter with a brief biography of either the movement's founder or one of the more important leaders in its development. The reason for this is simple. Though many religious groups and movements are highly institutionalized and often give the impression of being impersonal, it is important to remember that there are people behind and at the heart of each. Without Joseph Smith there would be no Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, without A.C. Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON) would likely not exist, and without L. Ron Hubbard anything resembling the Church of Scientology would remain the stuff of science fiction. We then consider the beliefs and practices of each group, and its organizational development, though, as readers will note, in some cases we feel it makes more sense to reverse this order. Next, we direct our attention to a particular controversy that has come to be associated with that group or movement. Though there are other avenues we could have pursued in this regard, and some readers would undoubtedly have chosen different strategies, these make sense to us in terms of how these specific groups have been conceptualized in wider society. Finally, we consider specific methodological issues that these groups raise for the study of new religions, and each chapter concludes with a list of significant reference works should readers wish to follow up on that particular group.

Further Reading on New Religious Movements

- Daschke, Dereck, and W. Michael Ashcraft, eds. *New Religious Movements: A Documentary Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2005.
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- Melton, J. Gordon, ed. *Melton's Encyclopedia of American Religions*. 8th ed. Detroit: Gale, 2009.
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- Robbins, Thomas, and Benjamin Zablocki, eds. *Misunderstanding Cults: Searching for Objectivity in a Controversial Field*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001.