

## An Introduction to New Religious Movements by Eileen Barker

### *What are NRMs?*

New Religious Movements (NRMs), alternative religions, sects or cults all have technical definitions in the literature of the social sciences. In this paper, however, the subject is widely defined as groups which have become visible in their present form since the Second World War, and which are religious in so far as they offer an answer to some of the ultimate questions traditionally addressed by mainstream religions: Is there a God? What is the purpose of life? What happens to us after death? This definition includes atheistic 'religions' and philosophies such as various forms of Buddhism, and part of the Human Potential movement which enjoins its members to search for 'the god within'. While scholars tend to use neutral terms, such as new religious movement, NRMs, minority or alternative religion, the media and the general public tend to employ the word 'cult', which has negative overtones, often implying bizarre beliefs, sinister and deceptive practices, mind control or psychological coercion and, perhaps, sexual abuse and violent tendencies. Among the better-known such movements frequently referred to as 'cults' in this more popular sense are the Unification Church (the 'Moonies'), the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (the Hare Krishna), Scientology, the Rajneesh movement and The Family (once known as the Children of God).

### *Diversity among NRMs*

New religions have, of course, appeared throughout history – early Christianity was a new religion, so were Zoroastrianism, Islam and Methodism at their conception. It is, therefore, not surprising that many of the characteristics nowadays associated with new religions were manifest in these religions also. What is, perhaps, most remarkable about the contemporary NRMs is the enormous diversity that is to be found among them. Earlier waves in the West, such as the Great Awakenings in America, or sects such as Christian Science, the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons, which emerged in the nineteenth century, nearly all shared something with the Judaeo-Christian tradition; the present wave, however, includes not only movements containing aspects of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Shinto, but various combinations of these, plus a motley assortment of ideas from such sources as psychoanalysis, science fiction, NeoPaganism and Satanism.

Not only is there diversity in the traditions from which the NRMs came, there is also an enormous diversity in their practices, organisation and the effects they can have on individuals and society. Leaders may be rich or poor, and they may be seen as gurus, prophets, teachers, messiahs, gods, goddesses or God. Members may be old or young, black or white, rich or poor. Some live in communes in remote rural areas, some in semi-detached houses in the suburbs, and others in inner-city apartments. They may indulge in sexual orgies or lead ascetic lives of strict celibacy. Practices range from chanting, prayer, meditation or dance to ritual sacrifice. The size of the movement may be hundreds of thousands or no more than a handful - and just as in the Anglican Church one finds priests, devoted believers, occasional worshippers and nominal members, many of the movements have a number of levels of membership ranging from the most committed to the occasional visitor or casual sympathiser. Some of the movements are actually or

potentially harmful; others are perfectly benign. In short, almost the only generalisation that one can make is that they have been labelled an NRM or a cult at one time or other.<sup>1</sup>

### *Characteristics associated with NRMs*

There are, none the less, some characteristics which tend to be found in any movement that is both new and religious. First, almost by definition, the members are first-generation converts, and, like all converts, they tend to be far more enthusiastic and committed - even fanatic - than those born into a religion. Secondly, the membership tends to be atypical of society as a whole, with the movements that became visible around the 1970s appealing disproportionately to young adults from the middle classes who have a somewhat above average education. If one considers for a moment the implications of having a group of young, inexperienced enthusiasts unencumbered by the responsibilities of mortgage payments or dependants such as children or the elderly, one immediately begins to understand some of the behaviours associated with the movements. Thirdly, there is often a founder or leader who wields charismatic authority – that is, he (or sometimes she) will be unbound by tradition or rules, but may be accorded by the followers the right to pronounce on all aspects of their life –whom they marry, whether or not they have children, what sort of work they should do, what sort of clothes they should wear and food they may eat, where they should live, perhaps even whether they should live. Fourthly, new religions tend to have far more clear-cut versions of The Truth than older religions, which have accommodated to generations throughout the ages. Fifthly, there is frequently a sharp distinction made by the group between ‘them’ and ‘us’, the former being homogeneously good and godly, the latter equally homogeneously bad and, perhaps, satanic. Sixthly, there is often (though not always) suspicion and/or antagonism from the wider society to which the group offers an alternative.

### *Changes in NRMS*

It is obvious enough, although frequently forgotten, that new religions are likely to change far more rapidly than older religions. Merely with the passage of a score or so years, second and subsequent generations are going to demand the resources of both time and money, and start to question the movements’ beliefs and practices. Founders will die and the authority structure is likely to become more bureaucratic and predictable. Beliefs, especially empirical beliefs and prophecies such as the arrival of the millennium, may have to be adapted, reinterpreted or changed, and divisions between members and non-members will tend to become less starkly demarcated. Related to such changes and the fact that the movement may become more familiar and thus less frightening to non-members, some of the antagonisms may diminish – although this is by no means always the case.

### *Joining an NRM*

Why, it is often asked, do people join the new religions? Why, for example, would a well-educated young man with a promising career in front of him give it all up, cut off his ties from his close-knit family to work 18 hours a day to make money for a scheming

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<sup>1</sup> For an introduction to both the variety and some of the more common characteristic of NRMs, see Barker, Eileen (1989) *New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction*, London: HMSO (2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1999); Dawson, Lorne L. (ed.) (1996) *Cults in Context: Readings in the Study of New Religious Movements*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press; Melton, J. Gordon (1992) *Encyclopedic Handbook of Cults in America*, Revised and Updated Edition). New York & London: Garland Press; Miller, Timothy (ed.) (1995) *America’s Alternative Religions*, Albany, NY: University of New York Press.

millionaire while he himself lives in a poverty to which he had not been accustomed, married perhaps to someone who does not speak the same language and whom he had never met before she was chosen for him by the leader of the movement. One popular answer which usefully absolves both the convert and his family and friends from any responsibility in the matter is that ‘brainwashing’ or some irresistible and irreversible manipulative techniques were used. It is perfectly true that several of the movements, like most evangelical groups who believe that they must convince others of their Truth, do put considerable pressure on potential members – they may ‘love-bomb’ (overwhelm with praise and affection), isolate and/or induce guilt or employ various other methods, including deception about their true identity, in their attempts to persuade the innocent to join.

It is also true, however, that these methods (a) do not differ from those used in many other situations where members of an institution are trying to control people, and (b) are not nearly as successful as either the movements themselves would wish or their opponents would have us believe. In the late 1970s, when accusations about the brainwashing prowess of the Moonies was at its height, I followed the Unification ‘careers’ of over a thousand persons who had become interested enough in the Unification Church to attend one of the residential weekend workshops where the supposedly irresistible mind control occurred. I found that over 90% of the workshop attendees not only could, but did, decide that they did not wish to join. Furthermore, of those who did join, the majority had left, of their own free will, within a couple of years.<sup>2</sup> This high turnover rate, which other scholars have found to be common to most groups that indulge in intensive attempts to recruit new members, tends to be denied by the group itself (as it does not wish anyone to realise how unsatisfactory the promises it offers turn out to be), and denied by the movements’ opponents (who wish to further the brainwashing thesis – particularly when large sums of money may be involved in persuading parents that if they love their (adult) children and want to save them, then they should pay large sums of money to have them kidnapped and ‘deprogrammed’ or, less violently nowadays, ‘exit-counselled’).

If the brainwashing/mind control explanation is not satisfactory in the light of the evidence, what explanations might we offer instead? Social scientists who have studied the processes of persons joining the groups tend to believe that a far more subtle interplay between the individual and the group needs to be examined, and that, given the wide range of different movements and different individuals who join them, no single explanation will suffice. The vast majority of people would be extremely unlikely to join any alternative religion (I myself have found the fifty or so groups that I have studied all eminently resistible); some might join one or more of a number of groups, while others would be attracted to a quite different range; a few might be persuaded to join almost any group – but such people tend to be rather promiscuous and are quite likely to be discontented and move on to join another group within a relatively short period of time.

The important point to be drawn from the fact that members of NRMs are incapable of recruiting and/or keeping all those upon whom they bestow their time and energy (including some of their own children) is that what they offer only ‘works’ for some

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<sup>2</sup> Barker, Eileen (1984) *The Making of a Moonie: Brainwashing or Choice?*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell; reprinted by Gregg Revivals, Aldershot, 1993.

people. In other words, if we want to understand what is going on, we have to look not only at the purported attractions of the movement, but also at the people who join. It may be that the individual is escaping from something – perhaps from a loving but over-possessive family, an unhappy partnership or an uninteresting or unpromising career. They may believe that the traditional religions are dull, boring, hypocritical and apathetic, and/or that life in the wider society has little to offer them but the opportunity to be a cog in a vast, impersonal and materialistic rat-race. Others may be ‘seekers’ – looking for (or susceptible to the suggestion that they are looking for) a closer relationship with God, or a better world (perhaps they are persuaded that they can play a role in bringing the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth). Perhaps they are attracted to the idea of belonging to a friendly community of like-minded people, sharing values that they believe to be absent in the wider society. Others find attraction in the promise that they can develop their careers or their relationships through discovering their ‘true selves’.

### *Dangers associated with NRMs*

But while the movements offer a variety of attractions to the young and not so young in today’s world, they do not always deliver what they have promised, and there may well be down-sides to membership of a new religion. Before discussing these, a word of caution might be helpful. Since the early 1970s, there has been the growth of an ‘anti-cult’ movement (ACM) which is devoted to controlling, banning or at least warning people about the dangers of NRMs. The anti-cult groups and their members differ significantly, sometimes being parents who have suffered extreme anxiety and frustration at ‘losing’ a loved one to a movement; sometimes they are professionals who have a financial interest in defining the NRMs as unambiguously bad and dangerous.<sup>3</sup> Because of its antagonistic approach towards the movements, the ACM tends to ignore or dismiss their more normal or positive aspects, and select only the most negative stories about NRMs, frequently feeding these to the media, which have a vested interest in printing the more sensational or unusual stories which most of us find more fascinating than stories about every-day, normal phenomena. The consequence is that we frequently assume that criminal or anti-social acts we hear about are typical of NRMs and atypical of the rest of society as unacceptable actions by members of an NRM are much more likely to be reported than the same actions by non-members. While one may see a headline ‘*Cult member kills himself*’, one is very unlikely to see one announcing ‘*Anglican kills himself*’ - despite the fact that the rate of suicides among the general population could be twice that of the cult in question.

There are undoubtedly instances when members have been murdered or committed suicide (the media constantly remind us of the tragic examples of Jonestown, the Solar Temple, Aum Shinrikyo and Heaven’s Gate). But it should be noted that the vast majority of NRMs do not indulge in such horrible behaviour, and that many deaths have been brought about in the name of old religions.

None the less, when NRMs exhibit characteristics such as insisting that they, the chosen ones, alone have the truth; when the leader lacks any accountability and there is an authority structure requiring unquestioning obedience and encouraging a growing dependency upon the movement for material, spiritual and social resources, and/or

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<sup>3</sup> Bromley, David G. and Jeffrey K. Hadden (eds) (1993) *The Handbook on Cults and Sects in America*, (Parts A & B). Greenwich CT & London: JAI Press.

(especially) the group cuts off from the rest of society (geographically and/or socially), these should be recognised as signs of potential danger. Actual problems may vary from movement to movement – one may demand its members' money, another exploit their labour power; one may expect its members to lead a life of celibacy, another that they indulge in sexual orgies. Some NRMs induce fear and feelings of guilt, others remove all sense of responsibility. And, occasionally, an NRM might lead its members into a life of deception, cruelty and crime.

### *The challenge of NRMs?*

How might those with responsibilities for young adults prepare them for encounters with NRMs? Neither ignorance nor over-sensationalised 'atrocities tales' are helpful. The most effective preparation is education – to ensure not only that people are aware of some of the potential problems that are associated with some NRMs, but also that they are aware of the attractions that the movements might have to offer. The attraction might be no more than an all too rare chance in a secular world to talk about theological and/or moral questions; it might be the opportunity to make the world a better place, or to develop better relationships. Teachers and youth leaders might like to organise group discussions in which some of the questions raised by NRMs are seriously considered. Most people would like the world to be better, but is giving up one's career to serve a guru necessarily the best way to achieve this goal? Are there alternative means of developing one's potential or creating better relationships with one's fellow beings than those being offered by the group? There could also be discussions (which might include role-playing) that could lead to a heightened awareness of the sorts of ways in which one might become unduly influenced – not so much by strange mind-control techniques as by, say, the idealistic enthusiasms of one's fellow believers.<sup>4</sup>

### *What if a student, relative or friend does join an NRM?*

Perhaps the most important thing that relatives, friends and those concerned about someone who has joined an NRM should do is to keep in touch with the convert, thereby enabling him or her to have access to alternative versions of reality. While one does not have to agree with the convert's decision, it is not helpful either to cut off all communication or to bombard him or her with accusations and/or dire warnings about the evils of the 'cult'. Lack of information and misinformation can both result in inappropriate action and it is sensible to get as much knowledge and understanding as possible about both the particular movement and the individual concerned - his or her fears, aspirations, current situation etc - and thus, perhaps, be able to suggest an alternative to life in the movement. Very occasionally it might be advisable to elicit the help of the social services or the law. It is, however, also necessary to recognise that in a democratic, pluralist society adults have the right to make their own choices about what they believe and how they should live their lives – so long, of course, as they do not offend against the laws of the land.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See E.Barker *New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction* for further information and questions that might be raised.

<sup>5</sup> Further information may be obtained from INFORM, a charity based at the London School of Economics (Houghton St, London WC2A 2AE; telephone 0171 955 7654), which, with the support of the Home Office and the mainstream Churches, was founded in 1988 to supply enquirers with information about the new religions that is as objective and up-to-date as possible.

**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

Eileen Barker, FBA, is Professor of Sociology with Special Reference to the Study of Religion at the London School of Economics and founder and Chair of INFORM. Research interests include new religious movements, changes in the religious situation in post-communist society, and pluralism in Europe. Over 160 publications include the award-winning *The Making of a Moonie*, and *New Religious Movements*, now published in a variety of languages around the world.

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