Chapter 7

New Religions and Movements

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Chapter Overview

In this chapter, Roy C. Amore challenges us to critically reflect upon the assumptions which surround the use of terms such as “religion,” “sect,” and “cult.” Amore explains how the term “sect” has historically been used to describe a group that has broken off from an established religious tradition in order to pursue a more intensive practice, or apply a different interpretation of a pre-existing set of beliefs. Amore contrasts the understanding of “sects” with the often misunderstood term “cult,” which despite its original neutral use as a synonym for “worship” or “religion,” has in the modern West come to be associated with religious groups perceived as bizarre and even dangerous. Amore points out that the lines between a “sect,” a “cult,” and a “religion” are highly dynamic and depend mainly upon the ways in which a given religious movement is received within its social context. In an effort to present examples of the different characters of new religious movements in the west, and the degrees to which they have successfully integrated themselves within the cultural, Amore explores a variety of different new religious movements that have established practising communities in the modern West.

A careful study of these new religious movements will inevitably prompt students to compare these movements to the traditions which we have already encountered in the previous chapters, as many of the specific dynamics that can be seen directly in the context of these movements have parallels in the development of the mainstream Western religious traditions. For instance, the composition and canonization of Mormon and Baha’i scriptures, which developed within the Protestant Christian and Shi’a Islamic contexts (respectively), bear some strong similarities to the composition and canonization of the Christian Gospels, which emerged in a Judaic context but offered a challenging reinterpretation of many key Jewish doctrines (such as the idea of Christ as Messiah, the characterization of God as a Trinity, etc.). Likewise, the succession struggles that plagued the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) offer some interesting parallels with the disputed claims to leadership of the *ummah* after Muhammad’s death, which led to the division of the Islamic community into the Shi’a and Sunni factions.

In this way, it can be argued that a study of the histories of these modern-day movements sheds light on the general processes by which religious movements can make the transition from small idiosyncratic groups to well-established religious communities. As well as reminding us that religious thought and innovation are not restricted to history, but constitute dynamic aspects of contemporary human thought and activity.

In terms of its specific contexts, this chapter details various new religious movements, dividing them into three categories: those inspired by Eastern religions now established in the West, those inspired by Western (Abrahamic) religions, and those based on other forms of spirituality. In so doing, Amore outlines the primary beliefs and practices of the following groups: Soka Gakkai and Falun Dafa (two religious groups with clear Buddhist roots), the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (which draws upon Vaishnava Hinduism), the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (which builds upon the prophetic, Abrahamic tradition), the Baha’i faith and the Nation of Islam (both of which drew inspiration from Islam), the Kabbalah Centre (which offers an inclusive, modern reinterpretation of Jewish mysticism), Wicca (which is inspired by pagan practices and rituals; especially Goddess spirituality), and, finally, Scientology and the Raëlian movement (both of which base their teachings upon their respective founders’ convictions regarding the relationship between humans and extraterrestrials). After describing these various movements, the chapter concludes with a detailed discussion of the nature and character of the New Age movement, a catch-all category used to refer to an inclusive, non-denominational set of loosely defined practices aimed at self-improvement (both physical and psychic), drawing inspiration from a wide variety of both conventional and unconventional sources.

Learning Objectives

In this chapter, you are encouraged to

* realize that the “cult” label has less to do with the nature of the movement itself, and more to do with how the movement’s ideas and practices are received within the mainstream culture of a given society;
* identify both Falun Dafa and the ISKCON movement as examples of new movements in the West that have ancient roots in the East;
* identify both Falun Dafa and Soka Gakkai as examples of movements that have personal empowerment and social justice dimensions, rooted in contemporary historical experiences;
* know that the Baha’i movement asserts the unity of religions and is unusually open to dialogue with other faiths;
* know that the early theological framework of the Nation of Islam is an example of a syncretic tradition combining Islamic and Christian elements in its overarching conceptual framework;
* understand that the Kabbalah Centre’s rift with traditional Kabbalah practitioners is an example of how a source text can be approached in radically different ways, and how notions of authenticity and legitimacy arise as socio-historical context changes;
* realize that open access to positions of authority for women within Wicca, as well as its strong feminine symbolism, is an example of how gender equity can play a factor in the emergence of new religious movements;
* identify both Scientology and Raëlism as examples of movements that suggest the influence of scientific and technological innovations on modern religious thought;
* understand that the New Age movement is a thoroughly eclectic category, and often those labelled as practising a New Age religion may not identify as such themselves.

Key Terms

Baha’i Faith The religious tradition of those who call themselves Baha’i, meaning “adherents of Baha (‘u’llah)” (pp. 398-401)

Cult Term for a new religion, typically one which demands loyalty to a charismatic leader. (p. 386-387)

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints The formal name of the largest Mormon organization, abbreviated as LDS. (pp. 396-398)

Falun Dafa “A “law wheel” said to be acquired through Dafa practice*.* (pp. 389-391)

ISKCON International Society for Krishna Consciousness. Members are informally known as Hare Krishnas (pp. 391-395)

Kabbalah Traditional Jewish mysticism. (p. 404-406)

Nation of Islam An African-American movement that originated in Detroit in 1930. Its practice of Islam has become more aligned with the Sunni tradition in recent years. (pp. 401-404)

New Age A vague term embracing a diversity of religious or spiritual movements providing alternatives to mainstream Western religions. (pp. 419-422)

Raëlian Movement A new religion originating in France in the 1970s, based on the belief that an alien revealed previously unknown information about the creation of life on earth to a man named Raël. (pp. 415-419)

Scientology A new religion devoted to clearing mental blockages, founded by L. Ron Hubbard. (pp. 411-415)

Sect A sociological term for a group that breaks away from the main religion. (p. 387)

Soka Gakkai A lay movement that originated in the 1930s among Japanese adherents of nichiren Shoshu Buddhism; now an independent new religion teaching the power of the *Lotus Sutra*. (pp. 388-389)

Wicca A name for witchcraft or the Craft, neo-pagan and Goddess based religious movement. (pp. 409-411)

Study Questions

See below for answers with page references.

1. What ideas and beliefs are generally associated with a millenarian religious movement?
2. What were some of the underlying reasons for the banning of the Falun Dafa movement by the Chinese government?
3. What prophetic element central to the Baha’i faith precipitated its rejection by mainstream Muslims and why?
4. In which ways might the practices of the Kabbalah Centre be described as new in relation to the centuries-old study of Kabbalah?
5. What has been the general reaction in India to the ISKCON movement?

Reflection Questions

1. How would you describe your initial reaction upon encountering members of a new religious movement, such as Hare Krishnas chanting on a street corner? After completing this section of the text, do you think you would now have a different reaction?
2. Who, if anyone, should decide whether or not Mormons are legitimately Christian? Or whether Baha’is are Muslim? On what grounds might these judgments be justified? Or, indeed, are they unjustifiable?
3. There seems to be a great deal of focus in the public discourse regarding the financial affairs of new religious movements. Do you think they are subject to closer scrutiny than traditional religions when it comes to money matters? If so, why might this be the case?
4. Do you think the popularization of yoga in the contemporary West can be included under the category of New Age movements? Why or why not?
5. Does the participation of pop cultural celebrities in new religious movements add or detract from their perceived legitimacy?

Research Paper Topics

1. Identify a contemporary scandal involving a new religious movement that garnered large-scale media attention. Describe the religious movement’s structure and theology, the nature of the scandal, and the character of the media coverage. Advance an argument, based on your analysis, suggesting how misunderstanding, misinformation, and stigmatization—on all sides—may have played roles in the events of the case. (Note that you need not defend or prosecute the groups involved.)
2. On what basis can ISKCON be called a new religious movement? Does it differ in a substantive fashion from traditional Vaishnava Hinduism? Include a consideration of authenticity in your discussion; that is, are Western ISKCON devotees legitimate Hindus, and are ISKCON devotees in India practising a new religion?)
3. Describe and analyze the initial public reaction to the rapid growth of ISKCON in the West. Focus on elements within the reaction tied to cultural, as well as, religious differences.
4. In which ways might the Mormon religious movement be perceived as fitting within the model of Abrahamic religions? Does Mormon scripture compliment, or clash with, the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic canons? Present a clear argument along with specific examples.
5. What roles did political unrest and the eschatological character of Shi‘ism play in the development and spread of the Baha’i movement? Present a coherent analysis of the historical context within which the Baha’i movement emerged.
6. Under what socio-historical circumstances did the early theology of the Nation of Islam develop? What concerns did it reflect? Did it express a political dimension? Advance both an analysis of the NOI theology and a clear argument supporting your conclusion regarding the existence of a political dimension.
7. Describe and analyze the possible underlying factors that have led to the popularization of Wicca among a largely female demographic. How does the position of women within the Wiccan movement differ, broadly speaking, from the position of women within the Abrahamic traditions? Support your conclusions by citing particular examples.
8. Is the use of the category “New Age” helpful for studying new religious movements—those which exhibit non-traditional influences, such as a belief in extraterrestrials rather than in the Abrahamic God? Advance a coherent argument that considers what aspects of this categorization might be deemed either helpful or problematic and why. This is an open discussion question, thus your response will not be judged on the position you take, but rather on how well you establish and explain your position.
9. Compare and contrast the structure of millenarian beliefs across two distinct religious movements—one new movement and one established tradition. Focus on differences and similarities, and advance a conclusion stating to what degree these respective belief structures might be deemed compatible or not.
10. Describe and analyze the use of iconography and symbolism within a new religious movement of your choosing. Focus on how the aesthetics of this movement compare with those of traditional religious traditions. Also, discuss to what degree non-religious Western popular cultural elements may have influenced the aesthetic style of the movement.

Additional Resources

PBS film *The Mormons*: an in-depth documentary exploration of the Mormon movement: <http://www.pbs.org/mormons>

*Friends of Falun Gong USA*: an organizational website which promotes and defends the practices of Falun Dafa/Falun Gong; very critical of the Chinese government. <http://www.fofg.org/index.php>

X, Malcolm. 1973*. The Autobiography of Malcolm X.* New York: Ballantine Books.

A first person account of Malcolm X’s (later known as El Hajj Malik El-Shabazz) experiences within a new religious movement (NOI).

*International Journal for the Study of New Religions*, Equinox Publishing Ltd:

<http://www.equinoxjournals.com/IJSNR>

Study Questions: Answer Key

1. Religious movements oriented toward millenarian beliefs often understand themselves to possess special knowledge regarding the end of time and/or the beginning of a new age. The themes within millenarian religions present a varied field of concepts regarding how the end of time will play out; some subscribe to apocalyptic notions of a violent confrontation between good and evil, while others believe that through their own devotional activities they will usher in a new age of peace and social justice. In most cases these groups perceive the end of time as imminent and feel secure in their position as saved, special, or chosen. (pp. 387, 402, 419 )
2. The rapid growth of participation of Chinese citizens in the practice of Falun Dafa and rise in profile of the movements main popularizer, Li Hongzhi, caused the Chinese government a great deal of concern. By 1999 membership in Falun Dafa in China outpaced membership in the Communist party; this, coupled with the popularity of the practice among some young Communist party members, lead the central government to perceive the movement as a political and ideological competitor and a threat to government authority. The peaceful, silent demonstration organized by Falun Dafa members in 1999 (the goal of which was to prove that the movement posed no danger to social harmony) had the opposite effect. The government banned the movement as an unregistered religion and systematically jailed, killed, and exiled Falun Dafa practitioners. (pp. 390-391)
3. The main point of contention between Baha’is and mainstream Muslims concerns the place of the prophetic leader of the Baha’is, Baha’u’llah (“glory of God”), in their faith as a new Prophet in the Abrahamic line. Mainstream Muslims reject any possibility of the emergence of a new Prophet, since Muhammad is known in their faith as the “Seal of the Prophets,” effectively concluding the line of Abrahamic Prophets, and delivering the final revelation of Allah. Furthermore, Baha’is assert that the line of Prophets remains open, and thus allow for the appearance of a new prophetic revelation in the future. This is also held as apostasy by orthodox Muslims. (p. 398)
4. Although there are various differences that distinguish the interpretative practices of the Kabbalah Centre from those of traditional Jewish Kabbalah scholars, perhaps the most striking has to do with accessibility. The Kabbalah Centre claims that the study of Kabbalah is open to all, both men and women, Jews and non-Jews, and that no previous Talmudic study is required. This policy stands in stark contrast to the restriction of traditional Kabbalah study to Jewish males over the age of 40 who had devoted considerable time to Talmudic studies. (p. 404)
5. Although ISKCON was established in the United States, its founding figure, the Hindu holy man A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, returned to India to proclaim the success of his mission to bring Vaishnava Hinduism to the West, as well as to revitalize devotion to Krishna in India. ISKCON built temples devoted to Gaudiya Vaishnava devotion throughout India and organized major festivals to celebrate their practice. The response from Indians was positive, and today Indian devotees may indeed outnumber their Western counterparts. ISKCON provides an interesting example of an Eastern-inspired new Western religious movement that has successfully integrated itself within the religious and cultural life of its Eastern spiritual homeland. (pp. 392-395)