

What Constitutes New Religious Movements?

A Question of Typology

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A Review Essay

[1] Though such an assertion now would be a typological error of the grandest sort, Christian scholars at the time of Islam's rise as a world religion conceived of Muhammad as something of a Christian heretic, a "false prophet," as it were, who had simply deviated from true doctrine rather than formulated his own. Of course, the cultural environment at the time conditioned Christians to think in such a manner. As Richard Fletcher notes, "The idea that Islam might be 'a new religion' was in the strict sense of the term unthinkable: the thought could not have occurred. People can entertain the notion of 'a new religion' only when they are accustomed to the idea of religious pluralism" (17). In the Christian worldview at the time, there were the true believers, the Jews who had rejected the faith, various pagans scattered about, and heretics who had through ignorance or evil design misinterpreted proper dogma. And so into the category of the heretics went Muhammad. After all, Muslims believed in one true God, linked themselves to the patriarchs of the Old Testament, and revered Jesus – that was all familiar enough. In denying the Trinity and the divinity of Christ, Islam no doubt appeared more akin to that ancient enemy Arianism.

[2] These days, we do possess, in American society, a degree of religious pluralism likely not experienced at any time in the world's history, and yet we, too, are sometimes unable to discern what exactly constitutes a new religious movement (NRM). Some of this has to do with our willingness to hold closer to a pan-cultural identity marker than a denominational specific: that is, we are likely to identify ourselves first as Christians, then as Presbyterians, then as Presbyterian Church of America members. In this environment, there exists a wide mainstream that one has to work hard to swim out of – even William Watson's *A Concise Dictionary of Cults and Religions*, published by Moody Press and intended to warn believers of all the

evil cults out there, is more notable for the wide range of groups it leaves out, the ostensibly Christian communities whose theology is usually offensive to one of Watson's fundamentalist stripes. (There is an entry on Seventh-day Adventists, but only to clarify that they are not the unorthodox folk many have thought them for so long.)

[3] But too, we as a nation have seen so many new religious movements form that the notion of starting up a religion already seems cliché. New religious movements that happen under the umbrella of Christianity are already seen as perpetuating that endless desire for reform, for recreating the apostolic church, which has been the hallmark of schism since the days of Martin Luther. Certainly, new groups, new congregations, are being formed all the time, but at what point do they become new movements? At what point is their theology or their praxis different enough that we sit up and take notice? Too, how long does a group or movement have to be around before it loses the label of "new"? As an organization, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has been around longer than the Southern Baptist Convention, but I bet that most Baptists – most Americans, even – think of their Mormon neighbors as the new kids on the theological block. Indeed, standard Baptist theology has a genesis earlier in history, but in the United States, Baptists and Mormons both rose to prominence in the same cultural milieu that emphasized democracy as the fundamental component of faith – i.e., everyone has equal access to the divine – and that denigrated hierarchical and elitist religious systems, such as the Church of England. Indeed, Nathan O. Hatch lumps together Mormons and Baptists, along with three other groups, as mass movements that developed in nineteenth-century America sharing "an ethic of unrelenting toil, a passion for expansion, a hostility to orthodox belief and style, a zeal for religious reconstruction, and a systematic plan to realize their ideals" (4).

[4] Unfortunately, many Americans probably equate new religious movements with the sensational – the strange and bizarre. What usually falls into these categories is what has been making the news here lately, be it Scientologists and their celebrity spokesmen or a sex-obsessed David Koresh and his army of suicidal nymphs. Giving literary voice to this impulse is J. C. Hallman's *The Devil is a Gentleman: Exploring America's Religious Fringe*, which is the sort of book one would be tempted to dub a "noble experiment" – keeping in mind, of course, that, in the laboratory, most noble experiments produce undesired results or end in failure. Included in his survey are UFO religions, Druids, Christian wrestlers, the Church of Satan, Scientologists, atheists, Wiccans, and the monks of New Skete (authors of *How to Be Your Dog's Best Friend*).

[5] However, the reader expecting from Hallman something on par with Margot Adler's *Drawing down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today* will be quite disappointed, for this is less a survey of new religious movements than it is a biography of William James. Hallman states from the outset that the inspiration for this book was James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and throughout the work, he not only frequently invokes Jamesian concepts but also breaks his narrative by introducing brief biographical snippets on James between every chapter on a religious group. Indeed, the better part of the book is probably taken up with James, and while Hallman works to make a convincing argument for the application of a Jamesian perspective to the movements he profiles, his studies of said movements end up feeling a bit abbreviated.

[6] There have been good non-academic works exploring the religious fringe – even personal travelogues not unlike Hallman’s book. Mark Garvey’s *Searching for Mary: An Exploration of Apparitions across the U.S.* comes to mind. Garvey and Hallman are alike in that they are both religious laymen (in the clerical and academic sense) who are drawn toward movements others would dismiss as bizarre. Too, they are both excellent stylists – Hallman, especially, paints very vivid portraits of the people he meets. But where they diverge is in the scope of their books. Garvey limits himself to Marian apparitions, and so the theological background he of necessity occasionally weaves into the narrative feels applicable to every apparition site he investigates. Hallman, on the other hand, profiles everyone from Druids and Scientologists to Atheists and Satanists. While one can certainly appreciate the breadth of his study, his determination to examine everything through the lenses of William James leaves him explaining just a little too much. I cannot help but to feel that, had he limited his work to a few thematically linked groups, he might have carried off this experiment with greater success. His chief problem is that he relies upon an all-encompassing categorization of these movements as “fringe” and so surrenders the opportunity to analyze them in relation to each other. It is, essentially, an error of typology.

[7] Examples of this abound. He has separate chapters on Anton LaVey’s Church of Satan and atheists in general, though admittedly the Church of Satan is an atheist organization, despite its sensationalist name and rituals; how interesting might it have been to consider the Church of Satan and a more mainstream atheist organization together to show that there is not one single face of disbelief – sometimes, it does entail ritual and the like. There is some degree of similar repetitiveness in his devotion of separate chapters to modern Druidry and Wicca. Were this a study solely of the neopagan movement, such would be warranted, but here it seems to be reaching. Finally, his incorporation of Christian wrestling again betrays a focus on the sensationalistic rather than a studied analysis of what constitutes the fringe, for as strange as the concept of Christian wrestling might seem to most, when one considers it in the broader context of the Christian entertainment industry that spawns a great deal of merchandise based on the Manichaean theme of good versus evil (*Bibleman* comic books, the *Left Behind* series of novels, etc.), wrestling is simply part of a larger trend, though one that has not captivated as many people. A true Christian fringe would be something akin to Aryan Nations or the Society of Pius X; however, the reactionary fringe is never as sexy as men wearing masks and beating each other in a ring.

[8] Unlike Hallman’s book, *New Religious Movements: A Documentary Reader*, edited by Dereck Daschke and W. Michael Ashcraft, is structured around a very well thought-out system of categorizing NRMs, though it does not directly address what exactly constitutes “new” but rather seems to make certain assumptions – and debatable ones, too – in that direction. They divide NRMs into the following categories:

1. New Understandings: those that offer a new view as to how exactly reality operates (selections from Christian Science, Theosophy, UFO religious group source material are included in this category).
2. New Selves: those that promote the view that the development of a new self is the underlying greater goal of humanity (Wicca, Soka Gokkai).

3. New Family: religious movements that mimic traditional family relationships for the adherent, often rejecting society at large (the Unification Church, The Family/Children of God, Santiera).
4. New Societies: movements that seek to transform existing societies for the purpose of some transcendent goal (Rastafarians, Nation of Islam, People's Temple).
5. New Worlds: typically apocalyptic groups that anticipate a complete transformation on the planetary or cosmic level (the Adventist Tradition, Jehovah's Witnesses).

[9] Admittedly, there is much overlap among these categories. Some neopagan theology, which is often of service to the "new self" purpose, may imagine a Gaia-wide transformation once humanity as a whole comes into touch with its collective new self. However, for the most part, these are impressively serviceable categories for NRMs. It would be difficult to come up with a movement that exists outside any one of these categories; even the explicitly atheist Church of Satan may be considered as part of the "new selves" typology on account of its desire to create in the non-believer a new man who does not kowtow to any god at all.

[10] I had my doubts as to the feasibility of a documentary reader on new religious movements, but Daschke and Ashcraft quite clearly took a lot of time in their selection of texts that are most representative of each individual group. Their work is especially appreciable when one considers the breadth of variety that exists within some of these NRMs (how many philosophically differentiated covens or associations are there now that fall under the category of Wicca?). However, the reader will likely want to know why certain groups were included while others were excluded. Certainly, Adventism as an organized tradition is fairly new on the historical radar screen, but given that its founding lay in an apocalyptic preoccupation that underlies many Protestant fundamentalist groups, and given that it is, for the most part, not recognized as particularly unorthodox by other Protestant strains of greater historical lineage, what warrants the inclusion of Adventism here over, say, Mormonism? (Perhaps the book simply needs to be longer to include more groups – the thirteen featured hardly scratch the surface as to the variety of NRMs out there.)

[11] I hope I am not slipping into Hallman's typology of "fringe" here, equating the new with the unorthodox and strange (and likely Daschke and Ashcraft were also trying to avoid that), but the editors of this volume acknowledge that there is no scholarly consensus on what constitutes "new" and how long a group must be around before it can shed that appellation and sit at the grown-ups' table. They miss the opportunity to put forth an argument one way or another and get some real dialogue in motion, for it seems that scholars of NRMs are, for the most part, operating from a gut feeling as to what constitutes such a group or movement. This is where the typology applied in this volume fails, for could not old religious movements also be included in such categorizations? Some might demur – for most people throughout history, before religious pluralism was even a possibility, religion rarely offered something new but was rather a part of the culture that infused everything. But the realities of the modern world mean that even an old religion might be new to a particular country, region, or individual. Daschke and Ashcraft's typology covers what NRMs essentially offer to the adherent, which places the whole concept of "newness" on an extremely subjective bearing.

[12] But is there an objective means of classifying just what is new in terms of religious movements? Newness cannot be derived by some factor of a group's self-image (i.e., we dub them new if that is how they see themselves), for the rhetoric of most NRMs implies a return to ancient truths. Newness cannot be seen as a genetic mutation, for under close scrutiny, we recognize that most NRMs are rarely the mutations we suspect but rather have evolved out of a particular social context. Newness cannot simply be the age of a particular incorporated cadre of folks, for just as many new denominations have formed over debates about finances as have formed over theological disputes.

[13] In short, the concept of newness is up in the air, and the academic world would best be served by tackling this issue and putting some guidelines into play, lest many of us, in frustration, side with a certain author of Ecclesiastes about what lay under the sun. Until this issue is dealt with, volumes like the two considered here will continue to feel incomplete, noteworthy more for what they could have been than what they are.

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