
Book Review

COWAN, Douglas E., and David G. Bromley. 2008. *Cults and New Religions: A Brief History*. Malden, MA: Blackwell. xii + 260 pp. ISBN 978-1-4051-6128-2 (pbk).

Cults and New Religions is a short introduction to new religious movements (NRMs), eight of which are given extended coverage: Scientology, Transcendental Meditation (TM), Ramtha, The Unification Church (UC)—now known as the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU), The Children of God—now The Family International, Waco’s Branch Davidians, Heaven’s Gate, and Wicca/Witchcraft. Some other groups receive more limited coverage, for example ISKCON and the Raëlian Movement.

The book is a readable introduction, suitable for the novice undergraduate, and the authors are to be commended for bringing out each group’s distinctive worldview, rather than mere social trends, such as patterns of recruitment, the relationship with the 1960s’ counter-culture, or profiling of members. Cowan and Bromley go beyond mere description of a group’s ideas: successive chapters link each organization with an apposite issue. Thus, Scientology is used to raise issues of what a religion is, and the authors assess its claims to be authentically religious. Conversely, TM denies a religious identity, and the books raises questions about the relationship between its ideas and its claimed scientific-therapeutic functions. Inevitably, Sun Myung Moon’s UC/FFWPU raises questions about “brainwashing,” and The Family International controversies about sexual behaviour. Violence is a further theme: the authors argue that the Waco siege was exacerbated by the media portrayals, and that Heaven’s Gate only acquired a violent image through media stereotyping, being a peaceable, although unconventional, organization: its only associations with violence related to its end-time expectations. Wicca and witchcraft raise issues of cultural stereotypes, reinforced by the Christian Church since mediaeval times. The controversial issue paired with Ramtha is the “dangerous cult”: however, while the authors used this example to explore cult typologies, such as Stark and Bainbridge’s distinctions between audience cults, client cults and cult movements, Cowan and Bromley say little about the allegedly dangerous elements. Do they mean its incursions into the paranormal, or its channel JZ Knight’s teaching that the seeker is God?

In addition to the case studies, an introductory chapter comments on the range of NRMs, and the popular stereotyping that is found. A summative chapter comments on the competing terms “cult” and “NRM,” and the authors conclude that the new religions are best described as the latter. However, the application of the term “religion,” they argue, does not mean that they merit approval: religions can be bad as well as good, and a religion is no more than—in the words of William James—“the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto” (p. 10).

Any volume that selects eight organizations out of 2,500 (J. Gordon Melton’s US estimate, endorsed by the authors) will raise questions about the choice of coverage. I would personally have liked to see greater coverage of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, since it is widely known, and raises a host of controversial issues, spanning world-accommodation, its claim to authenticity as an expression of Hinduism, adaptations in western society, and—more recently—schisms. The omission of a Buddhist NRM is disappointing: the Soka Gakkai

might have been used to raise issues about pragmatic uses of spirituality, world-peace or high-level commitment—although, in fairness to the authors, levels of commitment are discussed elsewhere in the book. Other examples of controversial Buddhist groups might have been the New Kadampa Tradition (raising questions of sectarianism), or the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, challenging concepts of heterosexuality and family life, as well as being a conscious attempt at adaptation of eastern ideas in western societies. The inclusion of both Waco and Heaven's Gate in a short volume arguably results in a preponderance of "killer cults," although the inclusion of the latter as an example of a UFO-religion is certainly appropriate, since the UFO-religions have now become a serious subject for research in the study of religion. In the intervening years since Heaven's Gate's demise, however, it is the Raëlians more than any other UFO-religion that have attracted public attention, with recent claims to have accomplished human cloning. Again, there is no shortage of contentious issues that relate to Raël—sex and sexuality, attitudes to conventional religion, and the relationship between religion, science and technology.

Being a general survey of selected NRMs and salient related issues, *Cults and New Religions* is not the direct result of targeted fieldwork. Substantial use, however, is made of recent empirical studies of these new religions—for example, Eileen Barker on the UC/FFWPU, Susan Palmer on the Raëlians, and Kenneth Newport's recent study *The Cult Davidians of Waco* (Oxford, 2006), to name but three. Cowan and Bromley, of course, have considerable direct acquaintance with adherents of NRMs. The one explicit reference to "fieldwork" is in the chapter on Ramtha: apparently "fieldwork" is this movement's name for a set of practical exercises, which form part of "Consciousness and Energy" (C&E®), said to be the "cornerstone" of JZKnight/Ramtha's teachings. The practice involves creating an image of what the seeker desires for his or her life, and then re-finding it on a fence, after being blindfolded in a field.

New religions are subject to rapid change, and any book on this area is likely to be overtaken by events even before its publication date. *Cults and New Religions* has succeeded in keeping well up-to-date with recent developments in its selected NRMs. However, the book went to press too early to include the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's death in February 2008, or Sun Myung Moon's nomination of his successor in April of the same year. However, the book includes details of the UC/FFWPU's recent developments of the Blessing ("mass marriage"), including its availability to non-members and to those in the spirit world.

As well as concluding that the organizations discussed in the volume are genuine religions, the authors claim that the existence of NRMs demonstrates continued public interest in religion and spirituality, and that the study of new religions might shed light, not only on the origins of NRMs, but on the origin of religion itself. These claims are more contentious, however. Despite the continued existence of new religions, there appears to be less discernible evangelizing, and considerably fewer new NRMs in recent years. It would be interesting to explore the reasons for this, although any such discussion would necessitate a much more substantial volume. While the origins of religion itself as shrouded in mystery, the origins of NRMs are not, and their sources are at least superficially different, coming largely from existing traditional religions rather than some pre-religious societal state, whatever that might have been.

No doubt other scholars will take up such issues. In the meantime, students who wish to embark on the study of NRMs, or to update themselves on the phenomenon, can be safely recommended to Cowan and Bromley's new book.

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