

***Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements***, by Lorne L. Dawson. Oxford University Press, 2006, second edition, 272pp., pb. £13.99, ISBN-13: 9780195420098.

Reviewed by Alexandros Sakellariou, Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences of Athens, Greece, sociology.panteion@gmail.com

### Keywords

Lorne Dawson, New Religious Movements

The issue of the New Religious Movements (NRMs) in Western societies has been under scientific examination for more than forty years. Many books and articles have been written and many studies have been conducted with regard to NRMs. Lorne Dawson's *Comprehending Cults* is a succinct, mainly sociological, treatment of NRMs, which is intended to provide lucid answers to vexed questions about the field. The use of the word "cult" could be considered perhaps as a serious defect of this book, but the author uses it in a scientific and sociological context and not under ideological connotations. The book was first published in 1998 and this is the second edition which has been completely revised and updated. The book consists of eight chapters, all of which have a question in their title with regard to the issue of NRMs.

The first four chapters of the book should be examined as a unity of four central questions concerning the NRMs. The first chapter is an introductory one, which gives all the necessary information concerning the social context of NRMs in Western societies and specifically North America. Additionally, in the first chapter is stated the main goal of the study, which is to contribute to a more fact-based public understanding on NRMs and on the awareness of the limits of our knowledge relating to this issue (2). Of course, Dawson clarifies that it is not his intention to offer an apologia for cults. The main question, as a consequence, is: *Why study New Religious Movements?* In this first chapter we are informed that, according to Dawson, a very crucial point of the issue is the way that the media react against NRMs and the way they present the "facts" about NRMs.

In the second chapter, the main question is: What are New Religious Movements? It could be argued that the second chapter exposes the main theoretical background of Dawson. Here we can find a brief but understandable exposure of some theories (Berger 1967, Stark and Bainbridge 1985)

concerning religion, secularization, sects, cults, NRMs etc. and some clarifications on the issue.

In the following chapter, the issue under examination is the reason why NRMs emerged, especially in North American societies. In his conclusion, Dawson argues that the reasons for the emergence of contemporary NRMs are numerous and that no one factor appears to be crucial (70). He adds that their success and influence is based on their ability both to continue and change ancient and not so ancient traditions or esoteric beliefs in response to the novel circumstances of modern society as well as the perennial questions about the meaning of life (70). Finally, part of their success surely lies in their ability to provide satisfactory explanations of the crises buffering people both social and individual and how to move beyond them (70).

The fourth chapter poses the question: Who joins NRMs and why? Here Dawson also exposes the theories of Glock (1964) and Lofland-Stark (1965) in order to elaborate some reflection on the issue. His goal is to look at what the systematic approach can tell us about how people become interested in NRMs and about the social attributes of those who choose to join (71). His conclusion is that we cannot claim to know definitely why people join NRMs (90). Why? Because there is little evidence, that the decision to join an NRM differs significantly from other kinds of decisions in life, such as what university to attend or what occupation to pursue (93). Of course, there are many speculations on that part of the issue, but as Dawson concludes, all these speculations are just that, speculations (93), and no matter how foreign the choices of the people may seem to us, we must continue to respect their religious choices (94).

Lumped together in popular parlance under the pejorative label of cults NRMs have been attacked in the mass media and by the anti-cult movement. Allegations most frequently levelled at NRMs include brainwashing or mind control, the splitting up of families, bizarre sexual practices, the amassing of large fortunes for leaders by exploited followers, tax evasion and political intrigue. In that direction the following three chapters of Dawson's book form another framework, which has as its main subject the allegations that the NRMs have faced since their emergence in Western societies. Consequently, in the fifth chapter, he tries to examine the allegation of brainwashing that NRMs face very often. As he writes, this chapter is not intended as an apologia for NRMs. The question at issue is solely whether the claims of brainwashing made by the anti-cult movement enhance or inhibit our understanding of NRMs (104).

The sixth chapter, which is added in this second edition, focuses on the

issue of sexual accusations against NRMs. Dawson's basic argument on that issue is that through the centuries, defenders of orthodoxy have sought to undermine the credibility of heretical ideas and new religions by suggesting that their beliefs lead to immoral and dangerous behaviour (125). The two main aspects of the issue are on the one hand the accusation of child abuse and on the other hand the accusation of sexual deviance of the adult members. Dawson's position is that we should be very careful about child abuse even though it is not very rare that, when the one of the two parents leaves the NRM, he accuses the organization of child abuse in order to take his child back (141), meaning that these accusations are mainly fictitious. But besides keeping an eye on the way children are treated in these groups, we must accept at the same time that the adult members are free to express themselves in every kind of sexuality under the prerequisite that they are not forced and violated to conduct themselves that way.

The last chapter in this train of allegations deals with violence and its use by NRMs. Here Dawson tries to avoid psychoanalyzing the participants in these groups (144). His main argument consists of two parts. Firstly, he argues that apocalyptic ideas foster extreme behaviour. Secondly, he suggests that only a few NRMs have exercised violence against their members or against others. Dawson concludes that the violence that is presented by the anti-cult movement as intrinsic to NRMs is, in reality, not widespread at all. He also argues that everyone who does not belong in some kind of NRMs, could also react extremely and perhaps violently under some circumstances (176) and this is something which is historically proven very easily.

The final chapter of the book could be considered as a kind of conclusion. As Dawson puts it, we study NRMs because they are intrinsically interesting and because their beliefs and practices are unusual or even fantastic. For that reason we are curious about why people belong to these odd groups, who belongs to them, how they come to belong and what are the consequences of their involvement (179). Following James Beckford, Dawson does not see much advantage in labelling most NRMs post-modern (198) and he argues that we should refrain from continuing to identify most, if not all NRMs, with some anti-modernist stance (197). Dawson's final position, which is quite important, is that we need to learn much more, by way of detailed case studies of individual NRMs, about the connections between social conditions and the presence or the absence, success or failure of certain religious beliefs and practices, before we can do much more than speculate about the cultural significance of NRMs (199).

As it is evident from the above overview of the chapters and the content of

the book, this is a study which examines and analyses all the crucial aspects of the subject of NRMs in Western and more precisely in North American societies. It is a book which actually summarizes and synthesizes the theories and the debates since the emergence of NRMs up to the present. As a consequence, it should be considered as a basic introductory book for everyone who is interested in the issue, even though it leaves out of its examination the NRMs in other societies, e.g. the French or more generally the European, the African, the South American, the Asian. Of course, it could be argued that the main questions on the issue are almost the same in all cases, which is true, but sometimes the differences between the various cases and their details are very important too.