Book Review


The remit of the INFORM series published by Ashgate is ‘Minority Religions and Spiritual Movements’ and the series is distinguished by the inclusion of insider voices from the movements under examination. This new volume, edited by Eileen Barker (the founder of INFORM and Editor of the series), focuses on ways in which new religious bodies and related organisations change over time, due to various pressures, external and internal. The book has fifteen chapters treating specific groups, bookmarked by Barker’s ‘Revision and Diversification in New Religious Movements: An Introduction’ and David G. Bromley’s ‘Changing Vision, Changing Course: En-Visioning/Re-Visioning and Concentration/Diversification in NRMs’. Barker argues that change is a constant in the study of new religious movements (NRMs) yet has been insufficiently taken into account. The variety of approaches in the volume is evident; there are a majority of academic authors, current members of NRMs, ex-members of groups sometimes termed ‘terrorist’, and a chapter co-authored by three members of the anti-cult movement.

Burke Rochford’s chapter on ISKCON is a fascinating study of how the group’s outreach to sub-continental Hindus has resulted in a two-way change process. First, white Hare Krishnas feel that Prabhupada’s teachings have been sidelined and they have become uncomfortable as members of the religion, whereas the presence of Indian worshippers at temples has ‘normalised’ ISKCON as a form of Hinduism (with statues of deities other than Krishna being displayed, regular holy days being observed, and so on). Michael L. Mickler’s study of the jockeying of Rev. Sun Myung Moon’s four children for a position of predominant leadership in the Unification Church is also deeply interesting, as it tackles the ways NRMs react to the loss of charismatic leaders, and also examines the particular image and type of leadership that each younger Moon has advocated. Hugh B. Urban tackles the changes that have occurred within the Church of Scientology: first, from Dianetics (a therapy) to Scientology (a religion) and in recent years, the emergence of the Freezone, as apostate Scientologists have affirmed the power and effectiveness of the ‘tech’, while rejecting the leadership of David Miscavige.

Rather less well-known are the Quebecois movement La Mission de l’Esprit-Saint and the Orthodox Church of the Sovereign Mother of God (also known as the New Cathar Church). The chapter on the former (founded in 1913) by Susan Palmer focuses on leadership (revered and reviled), schism (the formation of the Lavaltrie Mission), and the remarkable fact that in 1975 about 1,200 members left the Mission to join the Jehovah’s Witnesses. A connection between this NRM and the New Cathar Church, which features in a chapter by J. Eugene Clay, is that the founder, Eugene Richer dit la Fleche, received visions of the Virgin Mary, as did Father John (b. Veniamin Iakovlevich Bereslavskii in 1946). Clay says of John that ‘[a]lthough his movement grew out of the Russian Orthodox Church, he has openly associated with Catholics, Zen Buddhists, Naqshbandi...
Sufis, and the Unification Church’ (p. 93). Clay’s chapter apparently did not find favour with Father John’s followers, who have appended a brief statement to the chapter.

Other chapters deal with controversial groups such as Aum Shinrikyo (Erica Baffelli’s ‘Aum Shinrikyo and Hikari no Wa’), the Branch Davidians of Waco (Eugene Gallagher’s ‘Present Truth and Theological Revisionism Amongst the Branch Davidians’), the Family, formerly the Children of God (Claire Borowik’s ‘The Family International: Rebooting for the Future’), the Latter-day Saints (Massimo Introvigne’s ‘When History Fails: Mormon Origins and Historical Revisionism’), and Falun Gong (James W. Tong’s ‘The Re-invented Wheel: Doctrinal Revisions and Control of Falungong, 1992–2012’). Of notable interest is the chapter by anti-cult members, Carol Giambalvo, Michael Kropveld, and Michael Langone, ‘Changes in North American Cult Awareness Organizations’, which adopts studiedly neutral language and attempts to dispel any impression of hysteria or even, in fact, negativity. The remainder of the chapters cover the New Age use of crystals (Gordon Melton), intentional communities (Timothy Miller), Hizb ut Tahrir (Shiraz Maher), and Mujahedin e Khalegh (Masoud Banisadr).

Revisionism and Diversification in New Religious Movements is an admirably clearly written and well-conceived volume, with a high degree of coherence. It is a useful update on many classic studies of movements that are now somewhat dated. It is also a timely reminder of the flexible and changeable nature of new religions (and indeed, old religions). It is recommended to students and scholars of new religions, contemporary social trends, and religious studies in general.

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